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Making norms to tackle global challenges: The role of Intergovernmental Organisations

Adriana Nilsson*

Copenhagen Business School, Department of Business and Politics, Steen Blichers Vej 22, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) can play a significant role in the processes of system transformation required by Grand Challenges. The reason is their potential to influence socio-technical regimes connected to policy areas in which they have authority. Supported by mandates, moral standing and technical expertise, IGOs act in two ways: operating with high level of political support, these organisations guide priority setting and norm development through the definition of collective problems and solutions, including STI aspects, establishing a shared vision; involving public and private actors, IGOs implement and protect novel practices that reinforce the new norms, from legally binding agreements to the creation of new spaces for international collaboration. These processes are examined here in the field of global health, where outside pressure directed at the intellectual property rules in connection to access to medicines prompted the WHO to define the health challenge as a need to stimulate innovation and ensure wide access to technology at the same time. Two of the solutions implemented by IGOs to achieve both goals are analysed: the Medicines Patent Pool, designed by UNITAID to fulfil access and innovation needs in relation to HIV/AIDS drugs, and WIPO Re:Search, set up by WIPO to support collaboration and accelerate discovery and product development for Neglected Tropical Diseases, Malaria and Tuberculosis.

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1. Introduction

There is widespread agreement that science, technology and innovation (STI) have a role in helping countries tackle social challenges such as climate change, pollution and public health. Providing comprehensive solutions for these global and interconnected problems, however, exceeds the capacity of single states or market forces alone. By definition, Grand Challenges involve “a need to cooperate worldwide to create public goods (mitigation of climate change, health), or protect the global commons (the environment, fisheries)” (OECD, 2010, p.165), calling for action that goes beyond the conventional role played by governments. For policy-makers, thus, the task is also about how to develop and align new policies and practices to address shared societal problems and enhance the impact of solutions.

The term Grand Challenges was added to the EU policy terminology in the late 2000s (EU, 2008)¹, fuelling scholarly interest in the role of STI in strategic responses to collective problems. Part of this work aimed at defining and understanding their characteristics, with one aspect regarded as particularly important: Grand Challenges are qualitatively different from traditional STI concerns, often considered under the logic of national systems of innovation geared towards economic growth (Gassler et al., 2008; Kallerud et al., 2013). Developing technical solutions to achieve relatively uncontested goals is a far cry from the much messier business of mobilising and integrating different actors and perspectives across policy issues and geographical lines to set priorities and agree on solutions in which STI plays a role.

In other words, tackling Grand Challenges requires a broader perspective and calls for system transformation (Mowery et al., 2010), an exercise that involves not only “innovation as traditionally studied and stimulated, but also novel ways of assembling and re-assembling heterogeneous bits of work (including tradi-

* Present address: University of Liverpool, School of Management, Chatham House, Liverpool, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: adriana.nilsson@liverpool.ac.uk

¹ €31 billion was allocated to the EU's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2014–2020 to address seven Grand Challenges: Health and Wellbeing; Food security; Transport; Energy; Climate Action; Society; and Security.

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tional innovation) into evolving constellations that address a Grand Challenge” (Kuhlmann and Rip, 2014, p.4). When policy-making aims solely at technology-specific change, the connections with policy arenas hosting “other types of policies, actors and discursive spheres” are missed (Weber and Rohrer, 2012). In the same way, when scholarly attention is placed mainly on the role of governments as providers of R&D and funding, complementary actors and initiatives remain under the radar.

This paper aims to contribute to this debate by making a case for Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) as an important actor in processes of system transformation. More specifically, it brings insights from the discipline of International Relations (IR) to reflect on IGO’s contribution. The short answer is that IGOs can aid transition processes by influencing norms and practices in the policy areas where they have authority. Endowed with a rational-legal authority sustained by mandates, moral standing and technical expertise, IGOs operate with high level political support to create rules able to impact socio-technical regimes, defined here as “the semi-coherent set of rules that orient and coordinate the activities of the social groups that reproduce the various elements of socio-technical systems” (Geels, 2011; p.27). This is done in two ways: by defining the challenges and the best solutions to them, including STI aspects, creating a collective vision and direction for action; and, by involving private and public actors in novel practices that reinforce this new direction, ranging from legally binding agreements to the creation of protected spaces that support new transnational instruments.

To illustrate, I examine two interconnected processes: the development of a new vision in public health, in which the promotion of needs-driven health innovation and its equitable dissemination are considered fundamental to address the global burden of disease, making innovation and access two sides of the same coin; and the establishment of two mechanisms designed to achieve these goals. The first is the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP), set up and funded by UNITAID, part of the World Health Organisation (WHO), to accelerate the development and availability of HIV/AIDS drugs at affordable prices. The second is WIPO Re:Search, a consortium developed by the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) to facilitate sharing of intellectual property (IP) assets and know-how in relation to Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs), Malaria and Tuberculosis (TB).

The debate was triggered in the 1990s after a change in international rules: the creation of a standardised and global system of IP protection through the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement. Political pressure, driven by criticism articulated by social movements, led states to reinforce the WHO mandate to explore consequences of the treaty for public health. The initial aim of increasing access to medicines for infectious epidemics in developing countries through TRIPS flexibilities has, since the signature of the Doha Declaration, in 2001, widened to comprise STI practices and a broader range of diseases and technologies relevant for developed nations. Solutions involve different kinds of expertise and depend on interactions between health and other policy domains, including development, IP and international trade.

This article proceeds as follows: the next section reviews the literature on Grand Challenges and introduces the literature on IGOs to make a case for their role in supporting transitions. Section three describes the research design. Section four reviews the access to medicines, IP rights and innovation debate and analyses the IGO-led process of shaping the definition of the problems and solutions. Section five examines the MPP and WIPO Re:Search, and the involvement of IGOs in establishing and supporting new activities aiming to achieve innovation and access.

2. Global challenges and system transformation

The inclusion of Grand Challenges as an important target for STI policy at national and international levels, and the recognition of the different nature of these collective problems (JIPP, 2012; OECD, 2011), have triggered a series of studies attempting to understand and improve their governance. The need to engage heterogeneous actors and manage their interaction has brought the issue of coordination and cooperation to the fore (Edler, 2010; Prange-Gstöhl, 2010), while the governance of transnational programmes have been evaluated on their ability to support priority setting, financing, knowledge sharing, outreach and capacity-building to aid problem solving and diffusion (OECD, 2012).

Part of the academic work on the issue has focused on policy instruments and their potential for addressing Grand Challenges. A whole *Research Policy* special issue was dedicated to the scrutiny of mission R&D programmes in the health, agriculture, energy and defence sectors, including analyses of demand side instruments such as public procurement for innovation, and the use of prizes and regulation (Foray et al., 2012b). These accounts highlight the different problems involved in solving Grand Challenges in comparison to narrower missions and propose a basis for better programme design. This literature, however, has been criticised for not addressing the transformative character of Grand Challenges by confining the role of governments to R&D and funding; giving little consideration to alternative actors; and, focusing on end-goals rather than on open-ended processes (Kuhlmann and Rip, 2014).

2.1. The rationale for a multi-level approach

The problem partly stems from the current logic of the innovation systems approach, which aims at optimising firm-based innovation processes for economic growth (Foray et al., 2012a; Mowery et al., 2010). Weber and Rohrer (2012) argue that policies seeking to stimulate innovation at the micro-level need to be complemented by multi-level, transition-oriented policies able to deal with the more contested and non-linear political and policy processes involved in determining and supporting societal goals. Engaging with the transitions literature, the authors build on the multi-level perspective in which niches, regimes and landscapes interact and align to bring about system transformation. Their argument is that placing emphasis on regimes, defined around societal functions and needs, the multi-level approach can help “highlight the way these needs are fulfilled, the role of demand and use, and the inter-linkage of institutions, technologies and social practices”, complementing the narrower focus of systems of innovation (Weber and Rohrer, 2012; 1039). The combination of the two frameworks leads to the identification of four shortcomings that can hinder system transformation: directionality (identification of problems and establishment of shared visions, including requirements outside the innovation system); demand articulation (enabling the uptake of innovations by users); policy coordination (between national, regional and sectoral actors, but also between STI and sectoral policies); and, reflexivity (ability to monitor and involve actors in self-governance).

Adopting the multi-level approach not only helps unearthing failures that can hinder system transformation, but also highlights the role of regimes, and of regime change, in transformative pathways. As “the semi-coherent set of rules that orient and coordinate the activities of the social groups that reproduce the various elements of socio-technical systems” (Geels, 2011), socio-technical regimes tend to stability and have structuring effects, functioning as inhibiting factors that resist change (Kemp et al., 2001). Because of this stickiness, the transition approach has traditionally traced transformative processes back to activities initiated at niche/micro level (Berkhout et al., 2004), where “it is possible to deviate from the

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