



INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

“The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on multilateralism and the International Geneva” by Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 28 May 2020

Panellists:

Ambassador Socorro Flores Liera - Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva

Mr Alexandre Munafò - Director of Strategic Partnerships & Communications - Interpeace

Dr Beatrice Ferrari - Director of International Affairs, Canton of Geneva

Mr Stéphane Bussard - Journalist, Le Temps, Geneva

Dr Stephan Davidshofer - Acting Director of the Leadership in International Security Course in 2020

Moderator:

Dr Jean-Marc Rickli - Head of Global Risk and Resilience at the GCSP

The Moderator started the meeting by saying that Geneva constitutes a central hub of global governance. It is home to 38 International organizations, hundreds of NGOs, and 178 country representations and provides workplace to 34,000 civil servants. Geneva hosts around 3,000 meetings and conferences on a yearly-basis, that attract 300,000 annual visitors including 4,400 prominent figures. This webinar aims to analyze the current challenges which International Geneva is facing both at the strategic and operational levels. Is Geneva’s multilateral ecosystem in danger? Can the current technological solutions provide a reliable solution for the numerous international meeting normally held in Geneva? How will evolve diplomatic and multilateral practices if they stop relying primarily on human interactions?

Stephan Davidshofer: In Geneva there looms at present an all-pervasive uncertainty and generalized anxiety in Multilateralism. At the **strategic** level, the rise of populism, US-China rivalry with resonances of the cold war, is lowering the importance of Multilateralism but not irreparably. For Multilateralism is not just a diplomatic practice, it is also a society, comprising various forms of informal discussions which go beyond inter-state relations. Covid has impacted on the ability to continue to practice Multilateralism in all these dimensions.

At the **operational** level, Geneva is a bubble of Multilateralism, currently undermined by fund-cutting and job losses. However, international organizations and large NGOs are no longer exclusively dependent on public funding. Large-scale private funders are stepping in, giving rise to **hybrid funding**.

In terms of practice, digitalisation has not replaced but provided an efficient and valuable alternative to the forced abandon of face-to-face meetings and discussions. Here, Geneva has proven its ability to bring together effectively **coalitions and alliances on-line**.

There has always been some competition between international places. But Geneva has been a “global” multilateral city even before globalization. Apart from that, Geneva is unique, because local population here can vote on the questions related to global governance.

Béatrice Ferrari: the main **challenges** for “International Geneva” are in the domains of Governance, Scale, New actors, Trust, Information. Geneva International is the nexus between the local and the multilateral and both face similar challenges. The entrance of new actors into governance, such as the scientific community in the Covid crisis, who heavily influence decisions and directives, brings up the question of whether they can be trusted by the population.



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Regarding the **situation of the NGOs** in Geneva, they suffered some impact but so far it has been rather moderate. There remains an uncertainty for the future in what concerns their work. NGO representatives miss interaction with other actors, but adjust their activities to make them sensitive to the new context.

Geneva represents a **laboratory** for developing resilience and coping with crises. It is an ecosystem, characterized by co-presence, co-operation, co-creation between different entities, which is its strength. The major challenge under Covid is to manage, to bridge distance, mobility, presence, include more stakeholders, find better ways to leverage tech opportunities, explore new fields for discussion and regulation, and support relevance, resilience and sustainability. This is how Geneva international could prove its relevance for the future.

Alexander Munafó: the impact of the crisis comprises two dimensions - De-materialization and Informality. Regarding **the first**, today Skype, Zoom are not just in support of Multilateralism but represent the unique means to practice it. This has been done successfully. Furthermore, Multilateralism is no longer linked to a geographical place but has evolved into an international brand, ex. ArtBasel. This approach could also apply to Geneva international, which could thus come to increasingly represent a certain way of conducting Multilateralism diplomacy.

In terms of **informality**, Covid has deeply and perhaps lastingly impacted on the Member State-centric model and process. **Soft governance** is rapidly increasing in influence and results. Geneva provides an opportunity to further this in an innovative and more efficient way, in addressing the challenge of better connecting the formal and the informal. And with regard to the classic Member State model, there is no need to dismantle it but rather to transform it in the light of priorities that need to be more clearly identified and accepted. Micro-Geneva hubs can be created around the world, e.g. in Brussels.

Socorro Flores: the vital **person-to-person** dynamics of multilateral diplomacy have been heavily affected by Covid and the international community is not yet prepared to address this challenge and seek viable solutions. Furthermore, Covid has come at a time when Multilateralism is already facing major challenges, such as the lack of world leadership, the rise of nationalistic populism, the growing concentration on immediate priorities. In addition, Covid has exacerbated **existing short-comings** with regard to Agenda 2030, particularly in the fields of health, gender, nutrition, equality. Trust is vital to uphold the edifice of Multilateralism.

With regard to the use of **technology**, no international organization has used it as the main form of work. **Rules of procedure** of different bodies such as the UN Security Council, General Assembly, ECOSOC, are not meant to be adapted to on-line methods. International Geneva has nevertheless evolved, through **flexibility and innovation**, to cope with these impacts and find workable solutions, but many questions remain on the table, including the setting-in of 'zoom fatigue'.

Stéphane Bussard: Covering meetings on Zoom is not sufficient, journalists need informal meetings to understand what is going **behind the scenes**. Perhaps some **hybrid way** of functioning will become a new norm. The readership needs trust, the media recovers people's **trust** by exercising criticism towards institutions. Covid-19 exacerbates multilateral crisis, a good example of that is a violent geopolitical confrontation between the US and China. This confrontation can be detrimental to Geneva's ecosystem. In terms of **funding**, a lot of international organizations and NGOs will inevitably struggle. WHO Foundation was recently established, an independent grant-making entity, that will support the Organization's efforts to address the most pressing global health challenges.

