

Gurgaon, a suburb of Delhi, India, felt the effects of the 2009 financial crisis. Construction projects were halted, and many lost their jobs and livelihoods.



World of change — A plea for more information Dr. Hans Dembowski

National solutions are now grossly inadequate when it comes to addressing today's global problems. This not only prompts questions about the legitimacy of government decisions but also renders a profound knowledge of global risks and the way they interact indispensable.

Sociologist Manuel Castells notes that, whilst governments are losing power in the course of globalisation, they are at the same time gaining influence. They are losing power because major issues like climate change, the stability of the financial system, migration, infectious diseases and combating terrorism are no longer within their nation-state control.

However, governments are gaining influence because the international agreements to which they are party apply over an area extending far beyond the nation state. Their influence is also increasing due to the absence of the classic separation of powers, legislature and judiciary often having no choice but to accept the agreement that the executive head of their state has negotiated with other governments.

This trend is often criticised as unacceptable from a democratic legitimacy perspective but there is no realistic alternative. Only the USA, the dominant western power, clings obstinately to the concept of indivisible national sovereignty. The citizens of other rich nations have long since grown accustomed to the fact that political decisions on issues like climate stability, rescuing the financial system or dealing with the Taliban are taken at international summits.

Those taking part in such summits use terminology that is difficult to grasp for two reasons: firstly, because the subject matter is indeed complex and, secondly, because vaguely formulated legal terms are more conducive to consensus and compromise. According to this school of thought, the use of jargon is justified on structural grounds and not some fiendish plot hatched by the powers that be. However, this in itself gives rise to another democracy issue, namely the growing use of populist arguments in public debate.

The English language does not have an exact equivalent of the German "Politik". It signifies politics (dealing and trading in slogans), policies (programmes for solving major problems), and polity (the institutional framework within which politics and policy take place).

Ideally, in all democracies, public debate circles around implementation of the most judicious policies. However, the less comprehensible the jargon, the more the polity tends to be guided by politics. In other words, the greater the likelihood that the political decision-making will be dominated by catchwords used in the popular press.

This describes the business as usual of global regulation since the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, the pressure to act is greatly increasing as the individual political areas become more closely entwined. For instance, it is already clear that the migration issue will be further aggravated by climate change. But, on the other hand, with the budgets of many major economies running record deficits due to the financial crisis, less money is available for development aid and environmental protection. At the same time, growing poverty coupled with changing environmental conditions constitute a fertile breeding ground for political crises, with war and violence hastening environmental degradation and forcing people to flee.

We are not used to thinking of global problems in terms of such complex scenarios. Even now, the debate on the Iraq war does not take into account its possible effects on the climate, and Germany's health policy dismisses the possibility that malaria will spread within Europe as a result of climate change as far-fetched.

It is one thing to take complicated scenarios seriously but quite another to design and implement policies of corresponding complexity. Anyone who understands World Trade Organization terminology is unlikely to have a similar grasp of the vocabulary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and basic peace-keeping and nation-building concepts.

The Munich Re Foundation's motto is "From Knowledge to Action". In the light of global challenges, this leitmotif is even more demanding and significant than appears at first sight. For, unless we are informed about global risks and the way they interact, we will not progress towards the change our world so urgently needs.



Dr. Hans Dembowski is Editor in Chief of the international journal D+C Development and Cooperation.

Women hard at work on a farming project at Lake Ruhondo in Rwanda. The project was sponsored by the Danish government.

