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# Partnership Accountability

**Perspectives on:**

The UN and Business,  
The Global Alliance,  
Building Partnerships  
for Development,  
Tesco,  
Global Action Networks

# Global Action Networks: Building global public policy systems of accountability



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With globalisation comes a new type of organisation that is deeply involved with developing global systems of accountability: Global Action Networks (GANs). Examples include the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI), Transparency International (TI) and the World Commission on Dams (WCD). These are groups of linked multi-national organisations that are addressing a particular global issue by creating consensual knowledge and action among diverse and traditionally separated stakeholders. GANs aim to make globalisation work for all!

Traditional critiques of global inter-governmental agreements like environmental and human rights ones have focused upon the absence of enforcement mechanisms as the key impediment to creating an effective global public policy system. The lack of enforcement mechanisms such as fines and imposition of jail terms is often portrayed as the critical accountability stumbling block to creating meaningful agreements. However, this reflects a rather superficial understanding about systems of accountability in public decision-making. GANs address enforcement as one of several important decision-making tasks that

have been poorly addressed for global issues.

GANs' work can be framed as mimicking a traditional national public policy development cycle. In this cycle there are basically four activities. Citizens (1) express their opinions to their elected representatives, who (2) get together in legislatures to debate what should be done. Legislatures pass laws and regulations that the bureaucracy (3) then translates into programs carried out by multiple organisations to (4) educate, enforce and take other supportive actions. If there is some controversy with this process, citizens are then able to go back to their elected representatives for changes. All of these activities must occur for there to be accountability, and enforcement is just one of the activities in the last category.

Many countries have proved that the national-level processes can be made relatively effective. However, the underlying institutions such as legislatures, political parties, courts and regulatory structures are not present internationally to support accountability. Building upon Critical Choices (Reinicke and Deng 2000), a report to Kofi Annan on the future of global governance, and after spending some time looking at GANs, the Global

“Many countries have proved that the national-level processes can be made relatively effective. However, the underlying institutions such as legislatures, political parties, courts and regulatory structures are not present internationally to support accountability.”

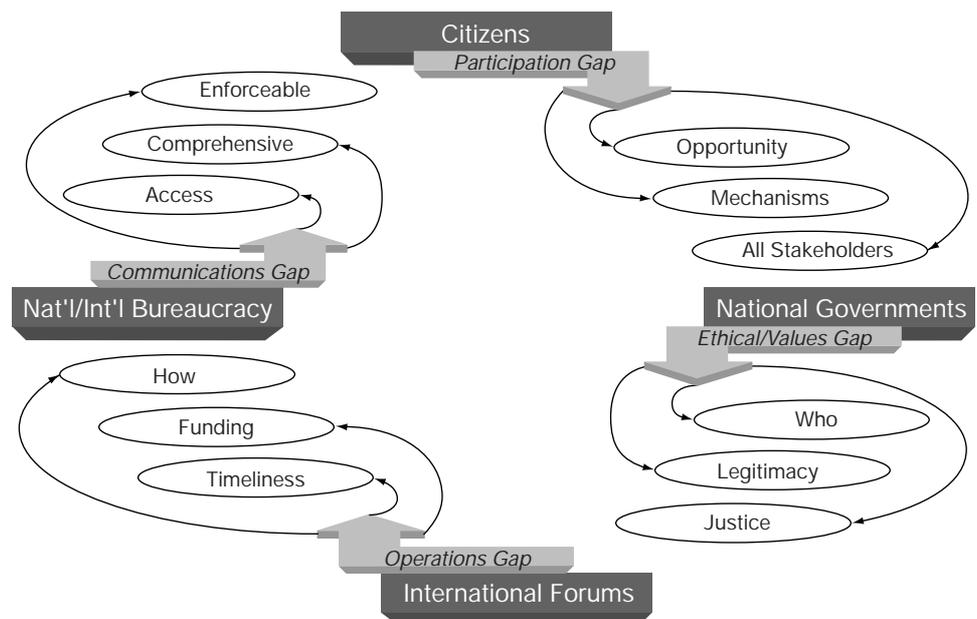
Action Network Net (GAN-Net—until recently called the Global Public Policy Research Group—[www.gan-net.net](http://www.gan-net.net)) identified four “governance gaps” that arise in this under-developed global organisational setting. To build an accountable global public policy system requires addressing these four gaps that are described in Figure 1.

Citizens have almost no options for connecting meaningfully with global decision-making processes, and this is referred to as the **participation gap**. The WCD produced some innovations in this direction building upon the

traditional model of public hearings, by holding public hearings globally. GANs like GRI and FSC actively engage a broad cross-section of stakeholders in their operations as a way to address this gap.

Simply having formal opportunity to participate is not enough. People in decision-making processes must be seen as representative of those affected by a decision, and outcomes must reflect consideration of participants’ concerns. Participants must perceive that what they are participating in is legitimate. When this does not occur, an **ethical or values gap** arises. The

Figure 1: The Global Public Policy System Gaps



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Climate Action Network (CAN) made an important contribution to addressing the ethical gap during climate negotiations when in the early 1990s it successfully reframed the key problem from population growth to ecological footprint. The latter emphasizes the wealthy countries’ responsibility for addressing the problem. Further, in part through CAN’s activities, wealthy countries agreed to pay developing ones to address climate change issues.

Global public policy issues are typically very complex, involving many inter-acting problems, many legal jurisdictions, great disparities in wealth and capacity, conflicting interests and a world of cultural differences. The difficulty of identifying and organizing an effective response to them gives rise to the **operational gap**. Traditional centralized bureaucratic approaches that are often effective at a national and sub-national level are rarely effective at the global level. GANs do not direct activity, but rather they stimulate action and development of local solutions in the context of a broad global framework—they create a conscious system. For the Ethical Trading Initiative this framework is called the Basic Labour Code. It is being applied throughout the supply chains of the 29 ETI corporate

members in conjunction with the labour organisation members of ETI. Much more successfully than the traditional bureaucratic approach of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), this GAN approach based in collaborative action learning is bringing to life basic standards across a multitude of legal jurisdictions and standards, the gulf between high corporate and developing country labour realities, and a world of cultural differences.

Reflection upon effective national public policy processes suggests that enforcement powers are rarely as important as education and that effective laws must be supported by generally accepted “norms”. Therefore, GAN-Net has labelled the fourth gap as the **communications gap**, to place enforcement procedures in the context of the need to build support for new norms and communicate to the public the public policy goals and the value of abiding by such norms and rules they produce. GANs play a critical role in this regard, since they are made up of large numbers of sub-networks and organisations that translate GAN activity into meaningful language for the individuals connected to them. Also, they are strong advocates for access to information. This is one of the major roles of the International

Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development with respect to the World Trade Organisation, The Access Initiative with respect to environmental information, and the GRI with respect to sustainability reporting.

With respect to enforcement, GRI reflects a classic GAN “social practice” approach: get stakeholder organisations first of all to agree upon what they think is important to measure, measure it, identify and implement ways to improve performance. Then gradually increase the number of participating organisations until improved performance standards become common enough that national governments can integrate them into their regulatory systems. This contrasts with the classic “collective action”<sup>1</sup> approaches of national governments defining standards in an international agreement and then trying to build support for them and mechanisms for their enforcement. This classic approach can work with comparatively “simple” problems when there is substantial political will such as with the ozone accord, but the collective action tradition simply can not handle the complexities of many international issues.

From one perspective, this entire public policy process is an accountability process and therefore how to make the process effective is critical to accountability. Oran Young’s work on “regimes”—a concept similar to GANs but more focused upon intergovernmental mechanisms—has been important for people working with the global network effectiveness question. (Young 1999a; Young 1999b) He has taken a traditional outcome-focused approach, which assesses effectiveness in terms of the original goals for creating a regime.

This approach has several problems. One is that to achieve the goals takes several years of work, and therefore this approach provides little guidance for practitioners in the meantime. Second, there are many variables that influence whether or not goals are achieved and it is usually difficult to discern the contribution of any one action to the achievement of a goal. GAN-Net has developed an approach that contrasts with Young’s in several ways (see Table 1), with the aim of providing more guidance for practitioners by focusing upon process indicators.

This approach suggests that there is value in identifying key questions that must be asked as a network does its

<sup>1</sup> Oran Young makes this useful distinction between “collective action” and “social practice” traditions.

**“Do the processes by which the GANs operate, adequately reflect the need for participation and ethics, overcoming operational challenges and implementing effective communications programs?”**

**Table 1. Contrasting Approaches to Effectiveness**

<b>Young et al's Approach</b>	<b>GAN-Net Approach</b>
Focus on outcome indicators	Focus on process indicators
Mental model and cases with government as the key actor	Mental model and cases with government as only one of several actors
Utilitarian framework dominant	Non-utilitarian dominant
Dependent/independent variable logic that promotes linear thinking	System thinking logic that emphasizes reinforcing and balancing loops
A-theoretical	Theoretical base where ethical, operational, communications, and participatory gaps are critical
Deductive	Inductive
An institutional focus (with a secretariat playing a key role)	A networks focus (a secretariat—if it exists—is embedded in a network of relationships)
Collective action focus (government-led inducement, rule setting, and enforcement)	Social practice (“Let’s get together to figure out how we can improve the situation by changing our behaviors.”)

work. GAN-Net is developing indicators for practitioners using the gaps as an overall framework. It is based upon questions about how the gaps are being addressed from two angles. One is the question about the GAN processes: do the processes by which the GANs operate, adequately

reflect the need for participation and ethics, overcoming operational challenges and implementing effective communications programs? The other is whether the GAN products integrate concern for the gaps: does the Kyoto climate change accord, for example, adequately reflect ethical concerns

about who was responsible for the problem and ability to pay? These indicators can more rigorously tie theory to practice and vice-versa. To function well, a strong learning and development strategy must support them.

These are two questions that must be used internally in a GAN as well as externally. Those organisations collaborating within a GAN should assess the way they interact to do their work in the context of these gaps. Do the members of a GAN interact in ways that are sufficiently participatory? Do they maintain an ethical perspective throughout their work - or is it something that is gradually eroded as the operational questions are addressed? And how are the GAN participants doing in terms of their own communications among themselves?

As an initial step in developing this framework, GAN-Net has identified a series of questions listed in Table 2. As it now stands, it can be used as a self-assessment framework for GANs and their participant organisation to understand their own weaknesses and strengths. A core part of GAN-Net's on-going action research agenda is to work with GANs to identify and develop new tools, structures and strategies for addressing the challenges

to increase their capacity as public policy accountability systems.

### **GAN-Net.Net**

GAN-Net is an emerging community of researchers, consultants and practitioners (people in GANs) that is working to both build the capacity of GANs and the knowledge and tools to further their development. It aims to be a community of practice and Global Action Network for Global Action Networks.

GAN-Net aims to address the lack of awareness of GANs and their potential, and to create a community that can share lessons that arise from their common organisational strategy vis-à-vis global issues. Typically funders' and GAN leaders' focus and expertise is related to substantive issues such as sustainable forests and develop mechanisms such as the Forest Stewardship Council. They develop these in isolation and relative ignorance of other GANs and what they have in common from an organisational, network and societal development perspective. Consequently, hard and costly lessons are often repeated, and progress in developing GANs as a new organisational form is slow.

GAN-Net represents an action research strategy to develop GANs.

Table 2. Effectiveness Questions		
Participation Determinant Questions	Does the GAN process and product reflect participation concerns about...	Stakeholders being well defined Stakeholder engaged The need for regular, systematic group processes Seeking diversity of perspectives Seeking diversity of representation
Ethical Determinant Questions	Does the GAN process and product reflect ethical concerns about...	Equitable distribution of benefits and costs Equitable opportunity for social, political, economic, environmental health Respect for cultural diversity Respect for human rights Responsibility for causing "the problem"
Operational Determinant Questions	Does the GAN process and product reflect operational concerns about...	Efficient resource allocation Cost assessment: social, economic, environmental Framing timelines Comprehensive action planning and design Impact in changing the situation in a desirable way
Communications Determinant Questions	Does the GAN process and product reflect communication concerns about...	Transparency of process Thoroughness of information Timeliness of information provision Accessibility for all stakeholders Two-way communication channels Enforcement effectiveness

It co-defines projects with GANs that arise from a GANs' strategic priorities, co-complements the projects and extracts the core lessons to share them more widely. For example, GAN-Net worked with the Global Reporting Initiative to address the question: What methodology will most

effectively develop a local GRI network? GAN-Net and GRI worked together in South Africa to (1) initiate a South African sub-network, (2) develop a draft methodology for GRI, and (3) make it available to others. For more on this and other GAN-Net work see [www.gan-net.net](http://www.gan-net.net).

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