

# Book Review: Divided Nations: Why Global Governance is Failing and What We Can Do About It

by Blog Admin

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Humanity today faces a number of international challenges which spill over national boundaries: climate change, finance, pandemics, cyber security, and migration. It is becoming increasingly apparent that bodies created to assist in global governance – those such as the UN, the IMF, and the World Bank – are inadequate for the task of managing such risk in the 21st century, writes **Ian Goldin**, in his exploration of whether the answer is to reform the existing structures, or to consider a new and radical approach. **Martin Hearson** feels that **Divided Nations** offers some sage advice for reflection on shifting global power dynamics, but its case would be much more powerful without such a strong dose of globalisation hyperbole.

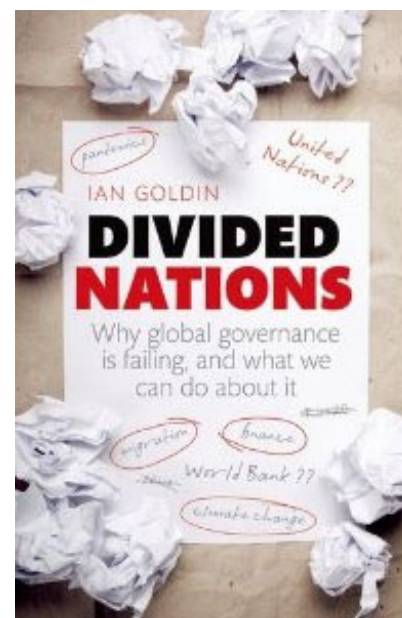


**Divided Nations: Why Global Governance is Failing and What We Can Do About It. Ian Goldin. Oxford University Press. March 2013**

Find this book:

[Listen to a podcast of Ian Goldin's launch at LSE](#)

In 2007, as today, the world was braced for a potential bird flu pandemic emerging from Asia. With more deaths than any other country from the virus, Indonesia wanted guarantees that it would be able to access to any vaccine produced from the virus samples it shared internationally. Access is an issue of cost, but it's also a matter of priority, because in the event of a pandemic, global vaccine production capacity will not match the urgent demand. This might seem like a fairly reasonable request, but talks at the World Health Organisation reached a stalemate, and [Indonesia decided to withhold virus samples, effectively holding the world to ransom](#). When it comes to a national security crisis like an influenza pandemic, all states take on a certain 'realist' character.



This is a problem for Ian Goldin's thesis in *Divided Nations: Why Global Governance is Failing and What We Can Do About It*. Goldin wants us to believe that the "WHO and the international health system have been remarkably successful in the prevention of pandemics." It's an example, he suggests, of an issue-specific network of government officials and technical experts, able to overcome the obstacles of national intransigence through negotiations and a bit of 'soft power', to resolve the kind of transnational problem that characterises the era of globalisation.

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Yet his example is curious: the world is woefully unprepared for the inevitable pandemic. That recent instances turned out to be false alarms is down to lucky biology, not the strength of our surveillance systems. When pandemic influenza does hit, the broad contours of the response will follow customary developed/developing country lines, a function of national capacity. [The distribution of the world's 34 million people living with HIV](#), also cited by Goldin, tells us all we need to know about how the world deals with a pandemic.

The book's central argument is that these "21<sup>st</sup> century problems" are not like those faced in the past. These new "dangers posed by hyper-connectivity" have created a "need for urgent collective decision-making" and a "gap between yesterday's structures and today's problems," such that "the treaties and other agreements that global governance structures have spawned are at best able to deal with a number of key challenges from the past," although they often fail here, too.

Goldin should know. [With a CV](#) that includes stints at the OECD, two regional banks, and as Vice President of the World Bank, he has, as one of the reviews on the cover states, "been in the kitchen sink, at a senior level, of national and international policymaking." The book is most convincing in its analysis of bureaucracies of international organisations, and its prescriptions for improving them. I was struck, for example, by some reflections on the composition of staff in international organisations.

The final chapter lays out five core principles that are worth reflecting on: a 'principle of subsidiarity' that restricts the use of global governance only to issues that need it, 'selective inclusion' that keeps involvement to only those actors affecting or affected by an issue, 'variable geometry' that matches the form of governance to the content of the issue, a principle that Goldin calls 'legitimacy' but I think is more about the perceived authority of an institution, and finally the thorny matter of 'enforceability', where pressure from NGOs is already a common element.

As well as insights, a career as an international civil servant brings with it a particular perspective. Governments, it seems, are an obstacle to solving many problems, and so international organisations should instead seek to develop "a stronger connection to their constituency" of citizens. This is not only because of the constraints of national interest, but because democracy just doesn't work very well. It's easy to see how the problem-solving official behind a desk in Washington DC might feel this way, but it made me uncomfortable.

At several points in an authoritative section on the strengths and weaknesses of major international organisations, for example, Goldin seems to argue that one such strength lies in these entities' ability to think and act outside of the constraints of national democracy, with its four or five-year terms, lobby groups, and the temptations of populism. It is telling that he makes this case using as a positive example the World Trade Organisation, probably [more castigated by civil society groups than any other global governance institution](#) for undermining democratic governments and furthering the interests of business lobby groups.

While some of the book's examples, such as cyberattacks, have a genuine 21<sup>st</sup> century feel to them, I was less convinced by others. For all that air travel has increased, it's hard to feel that an influenza pandemic would wreak much more havoc now than the Spanish flu that [may have killed as many as 50 million people](#) in 1918. Conversely, perhaps the World Health Organisation's greatest success was decidedly 20<sup>th</sup> century: the eradication of smallpox in the 1970s. One could make a similar argument about many of Goldin's other examples: financial crises in the 1930s and 1970s, successive waves of migration, even climate change has a precedent – in nature if not scale – in the banning of CFCs to protect the ozone layer in the 1980s.

If Goldin made a mistake, it's in couching his reflections in a hyperglobalist 'crisis of global governance' narrative. The turn of the millennium may well be a moment of opportunity to reflect on and improve global governance, in the light of shifting global power dynamics and the appearance of the internet. *Divided Nations* certainly contains some sage advice for such reflection. But its case would be much more powerful without such a strong dose of globalisation hyperbole.

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