



Fit for solving the grand challenges? From organization design choices to ecosystem solutions

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Abstract

This *Point of View* article discusses the implications of different organization designs for solving the Grand Challenges. In line with this Special Issue, we view “*organization designs as problem-solving systems*”. However, we are skeptical that contemporary organization designs indeed “*foster collective action that is needed to solve these grand challenges*”. We outline different organization design choices for solving the grand challenges and provide a categorization of how selected types of organizations are fit to respond to these based on organizational goals (social–profit), organizational scale (local–global), and organizational decision making (agile–bureaucratic). In conclusion, we offer ideas on how to harness complementarities in different organization designs to develop collaborative ecosystem solutions.

Keywords Grand challenges · Organization design · Cross-sector collaboration · International Organizations · Ecosystems

Introduction

Achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and addressing the “grand challenges” of this world is a priority for organizations of all kinds. Private and public sector, profit and non-profit, local and international organizations are equally called to action (Ambos et al. 2022; Ferraro et al. 2015; George et al. 2016; Lazzarini et al. 2021; Voegtlin and Scherer 2017). In this context, different organization designs can be viewed as “*problem-solving systems*” (Baumann et al. 2022; Nickerson and Zenger 2002; Tushman et al. 2010). However, we are skeptical about the ability of any of the organization designs to alone “*foster collective action that is needed to solve these grand challenges,*” such as hunger, climate change, or education. These are multifaceted challenges that extend beyond single communities (George et al. 2016) and involve many actors (Ferraro et al. 2015). They are marked by uncertainty that makes outcomes difficult to measure (Kwakkel and Pruyt 2015) and consist of diverging

or paradoxical interests, needs and goals of different societal groups (Jarzabkowski et al. 2019). In addition, they are locally embedded and globally intertwined (Ambos & Tatarinov 2022) and extend over lengthy time frames (Czakon 2019; George et al. 2023).

While many organizations claim that responsibility and purpose are high on their agendas, different organization designs provide unique opportunities and challenges to this kind of problem-solving. Scholars as well as practitioners increasingly call for cross-sector collaboration (Quelin et al. 2017; Stadler 2018; Gatignon 2022) and, more recently, ecosystem-based approaches (Tatarinov et al. 2022) for addressing the grand challenges. However, without a clear understanding of organization design choices across the various sectors, such collaborations are unlikely to succeed and a framework for the effective use of organization designs will be difficult to create.

This *point of view* article views organization designs as opportunities for creating complementarities across organizations and highlights the need for collaboration for the grand challenges. We provide a categorization of how different organization designs are fit to respond to these challenges based on their position on a continuum of design choices: organizational goals (social–profit), organizational scale (local–global), and organizational decision making (agile–bureaucratic). Contrasting different organization design types enables us to explain which strengths and

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weaknesses each type has for solving the grand challenges and how complementarities between organizations can be harnessed. We conclude that organizations may align their strengths in versatile ecosystem collaborations to address the complexities of the grand challenges. A case in point for such a collaborative ecosystem solution is the project Giga,¹ jointly led by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). It engages local and global private companies, governments, NGOs, around a solution to “connect every school in the world to the internet” to allow children in developing countries to learn and fulfil their potential.

Organization design challenges for grand challenges

Despite gaining traction as a major research field, grand challenges have been addressed from different perspectives by management scholars and research is largely agnostic about what type of organization is or should be the main actor. As George and colleagues argue (2021, p. 3f): “Scholars have engaged grand challenges by looking at incumbents (Luo et al. 2016), NGOs (Mair et al. 2016), single-purpose organizations (Cobb et al. 2016), partnerships (Doh et al. 2018), and supply chains (Kim and Davis 2016). Others have engaged communities (Berrone et al. 2016), bureaucracies (Heese et al. 2016), emergent organizations in disaster relief (Williams and Shepherd 2016), and the policy–research interface (Vakili and McGahan 2016).” Most attention in this stream of research focused on the corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities of multinational corporations (MNCs) that seek to integrate a social purpose into a profit logic (e.g., Hahn 2011; Scherer and Palazzo 2011; Wang et al. 2016), and social enterprises that seek to balance social and commercial goals (Seelos et al. 2011) as well as hybrid organizations with dual goals (Ambos et al. 2020). However, our general understanding of the implications of different organization designs on addressing grand challenges is scarce.

Organizing for the grand challenges presents several obstacles, such as overcoming what we know and how we value grand challenges problems; the structural difficulties of communicating and coordinating action; problems related to trust; and access and governance issues (George et al. 2023). Another important characteristic of grand challenges is that they are locally embedded (e.g., pollution in urban areas) but globally intertwined (e.g., melting glaciers), making it important for organizations to have a deep understanding of the local context as well as the global perspective

to address issues at scale (Howard-Grenville 2021; Ambos and Tatarinov 2022). Due to the limitations of any single organization design to fully respond to all of these requirements, solutions to the grand challenges will likely rely on cross-sector collaboration, harnessing complementarities of different design choices around the world's most pressing topics, such as climate change (Howard-Grenville et al. 2014) and societal resilience (van der Vegt et al. 2015). Recent research provides some powerful examples: Parente et al. (2019) examine how a Chinese state-owned MNE enters and sustains operations in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in Central Africa by engaging in collective action and coevolving with key stakeholders within its business ecosystem; Gatignon (2022) investigates partnerships between non-profit and profit firms when engaging in supply chains for food in humanitarian situations and uncovers the need for task interdependence to facilitate organizational learning; Busch and Barkema (2022) find orchestration of networks is required in the scaling of social enterprises in the Sub-Saharan African emerging economy context; and Tatarinov et al. (2022) show how United Nations (UN) organizations assemble the cross-sectoral ecosystems of digital solutions as these scale internationally. Such models rely on each individual organization's ability to adapt their decision-making processes and be open to collaboration with other types of organizations.

The Giga initiative, introduced above, built a cross-sector ecosystem combining the strengths of different types of organizations. It aims to map and connect all schools in the world to the internet to provide more equal global education access which is a clear grand challenges mission. Such a project requires goal alignment between the various partners involved. Giga combines UNICEF's experience in education and procurement, ITU's expertise in regulation and policy, and the private sector's ability to apply tech solutions at pace. While the UN and the non-profit partners were keen to roll out this initiative due to its close alignment to their missions (children's education, global connectivity), the for-profit providers had to address different financial goals which needed to come together under the umbrella of the initiative to make it a reality. The implementation requires local knowledge but global scale of technology and vision. The local knowledge is harnessed by working with UN teams, particularly UNICEF field offices that have long-standing relationships with local communities; the global vision is harnessed by the management teams' close access to senior decision makers and government officials in the countries where the initiative is deployed. Born out of two highly bureaucratic and slow moving UN entities that would hamper innovation speed, Giga was able to overcome this by structurally setting up as a new partnership and raising funding (from private sector, government, and foundations) rather than relying on core organizational funding. It also

¹ <https://giga.global/>

works with agile technology start-ups to develop the satellite and AI technology needed to roll out the tool at scale. Since its launch in 2019, this ecosystem approach allowed Giga to map over 2 million schools across 136 countries, connect over 5500 schools in 20 countries, and connect over 2 million students through Giga and partner connectivity initiatives.

Organizational design choices and complementarities

If we view organization designs as problem-solving systems (Baumann et al. 2022; Nickerson and Zenger 2002; Tushman et al. 2010) particularly geared at the nature of grand challenges, organization design choices present different predispositions to address these problems. We propose three central organization design choices related to problem solving for grand challenges: (1) organizational goals: social vs profit; (2) organizational scale: local vs global; and (3) organizational decision making: agile vs bureaucratic.

The first characterization is the extent to which social vs profit goals are in-built into the organization design. In conceptualizing organization designs, profit-driven are mostly contradictory to socially driven goals. A strong anchoring of social goals in the organization and a long-term perspective is clearly needed to address grand challenges, for which there is limited market (Gegenhuber et al. 2022; Grewatsch et al. 2021; Holms et al. 2022; Wright et al. 2012). However, organizations driven solely by social goals often lack the perspective and efficiency to create and implement viable business models. Profit goals usually gear organizations towards short-term orientation which speed up product and technology development for the grand challenges (Bansal et al. 2018; Koteyko et al. 2010; Kroeger et al. 2022; Prahalad 2004). Research on hybrid organizations shows evidence of balancing the two but has recently recognized that the relationship between profit and social goals may be more nuanced, putting these values on a continuum (Shepherd et al. 2019). As grand challenges require a longer time horizon and mostly there are no immediate payoffs, some recognition of social goals is important. Often for-profit firms are portrayed as “bad” citizens due to their bottom-line, short-term orientation. While a short-term focus enables agility, which we get to below, it can hinder embracing a vision of shared value.

The second characterization is organizational scale—conceptualized as a continuum between local and global. Global scale is important to identify and adequately address grand challenges, but without local embeddedness it will be impossible to act on the ground (George et al. 2016; Ambos and Tatarinov 2022). When focusing on social problems, such as developing education programs or providing technology to detect diseases, organizations face global challenges that

need to be met on a global scale. Yet, the actual solution will only be effective if it is deeply embedded in the local context, such as education coordinated with the national curriculum or technology linked to local medical infrastructure. Few organizational designs allow for these simultaneously and either prioritize a global or local focus in their knowledge, priorities and impact.

The third characterization is the organization’s decision-making process, which we broadly distinguish between agile and bureaucratic. Agility has been praised as a transformative force allowing organizations to adapt to a fast-changing environment (Rigby et al. 2018). This is certainly a quality needed for grand challenges that will only be solved by rapid innovation, which cannot be delivered by traditional slow organizations that are bound by rigid structures and decision-making process (Voegtlin and Scherer 2017; Ambos and Tatarinov 2020). However, as grand challenges often imply ethical questions with wide ranging impact, there is also value in bureaucratic decision-making processes that often provide the guardrails for legitimacy, governance and ethics (Annosi et al. 2020; Lou and Kaul 2018; Quelin et al. 2018). Below we outline how to conceptualize the differences between the organization designs of various organizations, with concrete examples.

The Bad, the Ugly, and the Evil vs the Lame, the Dreamers and the Dinosaurs?

For overview, we conceptualize the three organizational design choices as a continuum and categorize the for-profit sector—in a highly stylized and cynical way—into three main categories of organizations: the (entrepreneurial) firm (“The Bad”), the State-owned-enterprise (“The Ugly”), the MNC (“The Evil”). For the sake of explicating their strengths and weaknesses for addressing the grand challenges, we present these as extreme stereotypes and acknowledge that organizational reality is much more complex. First, we describe the “traditional” for-profit organization building on the idea that a focus solely on profit goals will not enable much progress for the grand challenges. The baseline example here is the entrepreneurial firm (“The Bad”), which we categorize as a basic profit-driven organization that operates in a local market. Assuming a single-minded focus on profit, usually with local scale only, the entrepreneurial firm is often agile and well-positioned to innovate. It needs to show short-term profit gains to investors to stay in business. This provides pressure to drive only solutions which promise to be efficient and effective. However, due to its scope, it is difficult for the local firm to act alone when addressing grand challenges. The State-owned-enterprise, also for-profit, has a primarily local vision, making it well-prepared to address local challenges but not to scale

Table 1 Overview of different organization designs' predispositions for addressing the grand challenges

	Organizational goals	Organizational scale	Organizational decision making
Local (Entrepreneurial) Firms	*****	*	**
State-Owned Firms	****	**	*****
Multinational Corporations	*****	*****	****
Public Sector Organizations	*	*	*****
Non-Governmental Organizations	*	***	***
International Organizations	*	*****	*****
Social Enterprises	***	*	**
Hybrid Organizations	**	*	***
Multinational Hybrid Organizations	***	*****	****

social * - profit *****; local * - global *****; agile * - bureaucratic *****

these globally. These enterprises have a big bureaucratic apparatus, often marked by inefficiencies and corruption. While state-ownership gives legitimacy and power in their markets, it mostly stalls innovation. The role of the MNC (“The Evil”) and its goals have been most examined in the literature. With a global vision, it often struggles to embed locally. It is traditionally profit-focused and responsible to shareholders, which results in collateral damage to stakeholders, such as local communities. The size and international dispersion make MNCs bureaucratic, but there are signs of agility in competitive modern MNCs, which makes them better equipped for grand challenges.

While rooted in social values, the non-profit sector is traditionally seen as slow moving and difficult to enact change, which poses a problem for solving grand challenges. This sector can be broken down into three stereotypes of organizations: public sector organizations (“The Lame”), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (“The Dreamers”), International Organizations/UN agencies (“The Dinosaurs”). Public sector organizations such as governments are often locally bound, extremely bureaucratic but socially oriented. This gives them a strong understanding of their constituency but limits their ability to innovate. In addition, usually, there is no motivation to scale successful solutions globally. NGOs usually have local roots (though there are some International NGOs which resemble International Organizations) and strong social values, often limiting their global vision and efficiency to reach viable solutions. Their structures are more entrepreneurial than bureaucratic due to their small size, but their legitimacy and accountability often prevent them from embracing agility. Finally, International Organizations, in particular UN organizations, are a central actor in addressing grand challenges. Like MNCs, the UN has locally embedded offices, but the global vision prevails. Its social mission paired with global legitimacy requires political and rules-based decision making, which creates a bureaucratic dinosaur—slow moving and struggling to innovate.

In addition, there is an emerging sub-set of organizations with dual values, balancing profit and social goals. These hybrid organizations are assumed to address the grand challenges best (Battilana et al. 2017). We argue, however, that this is only true for the tension between profit and social values, and they face similar limitations along the global–local and bureaucratic–agile spectrum as their non-hybrid counterparts. We distinguish the social enterprise as a local entrepreneurial firm with dual values (Mair and Marti 2006; Dacin et al. 2011) from other types of “hybrid organizations” with more bureaucratic structures than often emerge from public sector organizations usually showing less agility and less drive by business models than social enterprises (Battilana et al. 2017; Pache and Santos 2013). There is scarce evidence of Multinational Hybrid Organizations, which are MNCs with dual values (Ambos et al. 2020). This critical assessment shows that each organization design has particular strengths and weaknesses for addressing the grand challenges along the criteria: organizational goals (social–profit), organizational scale (local–global), and organizational decision making (agile–bureaucratic).

Table 1 plots these stereotypical organizations on a continuum. While in reality more complex organizational designs with much more nuanced characteristics exist, these polar types allow us to identify organizations' complementarities when they collaborate to address grand challenges. We can visualize each type of organization as a shape with three prongs representing the three design choices (see Fig. 1). Take the example of a typical local IT firm with for-profit goals, good local knowledge of its customers and its environment, which is quite agile in its decision making. It could be visualized as the opposite of an entity with global vision and legitimacy, social values, and bureaucratic, well-established processes, such as an International Organization like the UN. If we view their organizational skills and abilities as complementary these may have the potential for collaboration, such as in the creation of Giga, where UNICEF and ITU



Fig. 1 Organization design complementarities for addressing the grand challenges

worked with both local (entrepreneurial firm) and global (MNC) telecom and technology companies to make the project a reality. Following this logic, organization design complementarities can be harnessed, and deficiencies can be overcome, for addressing grand challenges. Figure 1 shows our conceptualization of such a collaboration.

As we allude to the idea of these organizations working together, we can imagine that each organization is a puzzle piece with three prongs. See Fig. 2 for an MNC with global vision, moderately agile processes, and for-profit mission. For example, NGOs are often the ideal partner for the MNC, because they show complementary characteristics, such as the NGO Conservation International which partnered with the MNC Starbucks to create the "Coffee and Farmer Equity (C.A.F.E.) Practices"² program to improve the livelihoods of coffee farmers and the sustainability of coffee production. Under the program, Starbucks committed to sourcing 100% of its coffee from ethical and sustainable sources by 2020. Conservation International worked with Starbucks to provide training and financial incentives to coffee farmers and adopt sustainable farming practices. Global scale is necessary for innovative initiatives, but MNCs often lack local boots on the ground and know-how; a purely profit mission can resource ideas but lacks the long-term values to enact meaningful change; and an agile organization fast at implementation often lacks the established processes that give it legitimacy to make decisions that will be accepted by all. Partnering with a bureaucratic, local, socially driven NGO, may be beneficial and can be done in any number of

² <https://stories.starbucks.com/press/2020/cafe-practices-starbucks-approach-to-ethically-sourcing-coffee/>

ways to complement each other. In addition, forging interactions between global actors and local actors has often been outlined as a potential avenue (Busch and Barkema 2021; Oborn et al. 2019; Seelos and Mair 2013).

For example, an NGO could provide the MNC the local knowledge necessary, while the MNC could provide resourcing or a global platform to scale a new solution. It also leaves room for other types of organization designs to fill other gaps and culminates in an ecosystem-based approach, where all partners are aligned around addressing grand challenges. Our perspective must shift from the focus on individual organizations to entire ecosystems as networks of actors that can evolve capabilities and align their value creation (Adner 2017; Iansiti and Levien 2004; Moore 1993; Williamson and De Meyer 2012). If the NGO provides the local knowledge and the MNC the global vision, perhaps they may also require an ecosystem player that is even more agile (and innovative), such as a local start-up, to provide solutions that could then be scaled together. Here, the complementarities become multifaceted and could eventually resemble a cohesive ecosystem, as shown in Fig. 3. This portrays the case of Giga as described above, where local start-ups, MNCs, UN and NGOs came together to make the project a reality.

Looking forward: versatile and evolving ecosystems solutions for the grand challenges

Figure 3 shows how the different designs can complement each other to address grand challenges. We suggest that cross-sector ecosystems can be configured, drawing on the strengths of each organization and complementarities can be harnessed in each of the three dimensions. While this model is very promising, there are at least two key complications to anticipate.

First, the governance of these ecosystems must be ensured by aligning value creation. Ecosystems encourage collaboration of cross-sector actors including formal or informal governance (Tatarinov et al. 2022) that is geared towards a particular value proposition which requires inputs from all members (Nambisan et al. 2019; Kretschmer et al. 2022). In prior research, most studies on ecosystems covered traditional commercial business ecosystems built around anchor firms, but recent research has emphasized that ecosystems are vital to create social impact: for example, for distributed financial services innovation (Oborn et al. 2019) or for the scaling of social enterprises (Busch and Barkema 2022). This research also highlights the challenge of ecosystem configuration and international scaling, which is much needed for grand challenges and amplified in this context (George et al. 2016; Tatarinov et al. 2022). While the example above is an optimistic scenario, we must be

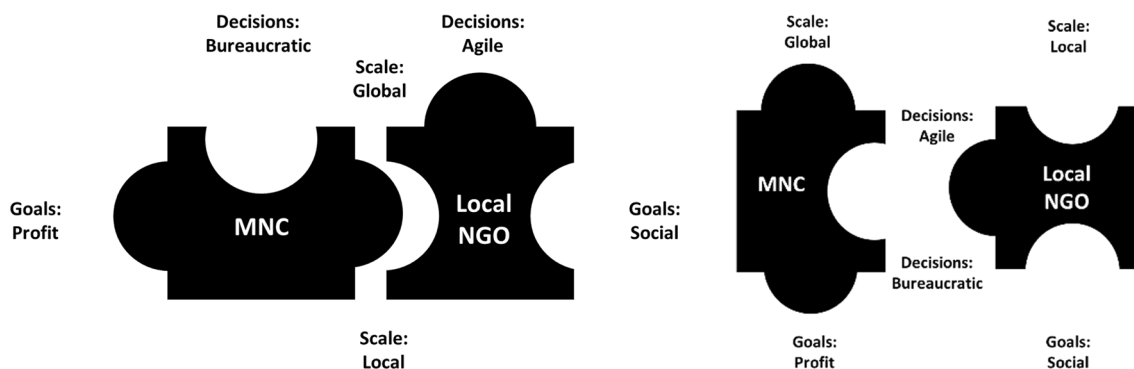


Fig. 2 Complementarities between organization designs

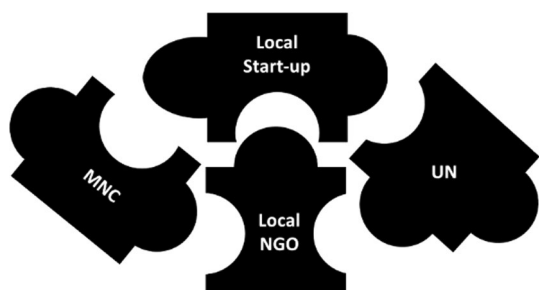


Fig. 3 Organization design cross-sector ecosystem solutions for addressing grand challenges drawing on complementarities in organizational goals, scale, and decision-making processes

aware that cross-sector actors meet with different motivations and behaviors (Buckley et al. 2017). The result in practice may be counter-intuitive and lead to the reinvention of certain entities roles. While organizations are currently tied to their existing designs that may limit motivations for grand challenges problem-solving, a vision towards collaboration can pave the way for organizational learning, re-purposing, and eventually entirely new ways of solving today's global problems.

Second, not all gaps will be closed through the same types of collaborations in each location and over time. The volatile nature of the grand challenges requires that ecosystems are versatile and able to bring in new actors depending on the local environment, the changes within the global environment, and the roles required in each context (Tatarinov et al. 2022). For example, in terms of the local context, the Giga project involves different governments at different levels depending on the country. The changes in the global environment mean that both local and global technology infrastructure and connectivity firms and regulators are involved in the project either at certain points in time or in certain locations. And finally, these actors take on different roles within each context depending on the requirements in that country. In some countries Giga is still identifying

and mapping schools (relying on tech providers for satellite mapping and local UNICEF teams for validation), in others, the project is already providing connectivity (with local and global infrastructure providers and regulators working with ITU), while elsewhere new finance-based components are being considered for the schools to start monetizing their data (involving again different regulators and financial institutions/tech companies). To address the grand challenges, we need to engage different organizational designs to configure ecosystem solutions harnessing their strengths.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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