



**GENEVA
GRADUATE
INSTITUTE**

Reimagining Multilateralism and the Role of International Geneva

**Issues and Options for the
Adaptation of a Global Hub**

Geneva Policy Outlook

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
1. Dealing with the operational and identity crises: Towards a unifying narrative	8
2. What leadership for International Geneva?	12
3. Transitioning from survival mode to shared vision	14
4. Towards a multilateralism beyond the nation state	17
5. Adaptation scenarios: Balancing between inventing new and reforming what exists?	21
6. Overcoming the challenge of communication	24
7. Networked Multilateralism	26
8. Youth participation in International Geneva	28
9. Financing International Geneva	31
Conclusion: Toward a Strategic Pluralism	33

About the authors

Achim Wennmann is the Editor of the Geneva Policy Outlook and has led the strategic development of this initiative as part of his functions as Director for Strategic Partnerships of the Geneva Graduate Institute. He is also a Professor in the Institute's Interdisciplinary Programme, where he holds the Nagulendran Chair in Peace Mediation.

Prathit Singh is the Project Coordinator and the English Language Editor of the Geneva Policy Outlook.

Executive Summary

Geneva, long recognized as a historic hub of international cooperation, faces profound structural and strategic challenges amid shifting global orders. Financial austerity, declining political support, and the rise of transactional politics have exposed both operational and identity crises within International Geneva's dense ecosystem of UN agencies, international organisations, NGOs, and diplomatic missions. This report synthesizes insights from the Geneva Policy Outlook (GPO) community, offering pathways for Geneva's adaptation and continued relevance as a global hub.

Key recommendations for adapting International Geneva include:

- 1. Forge a unifying narrative:** Geneva should proactively articulate its unique value proposition, moving beyond defensive postures to highlight its critical mass of expertise, tradition of neutrality, and role as a laboratory for multilateral innovation. A compelling narrative based on facts and practical achievements is essential to counter populist critiques and maintain legitimacy.
- 2. Foster adaptive leadership:** In the absence of any centralized leadership for International Geneva, its ecosystem should coordinate across differences, leveraging platforms for cross-sector exchange and policy entrepreneurship. Collective impact approaches could provide an overarching strategic framework to guide adaptation.

- 3. Shift from survival to shared vision:** The funding crises is fracturing Geneva – stronger silos, competition, and defensive positioning are the result. To adapt as an ecosystem, Geneva should reimagine international organisations as anchor institutions within dynamic, network-based activities. Shared services, pooled resources, and a shared vision would enhance resilience and operational efficiency.
- 4. Embrace networked multilateralism:** Geneva should strengthen ties with other regional hubs and non-state actors, positioning itself as a moderator between diverse global orders. This includes integrating local governments and youth perspectives, and serving as a “special political zone” for inclusive dialogue and innovation.
- 5. Diversify financing models:** Overreliance on government funding is unsustainable. Geneva must engage philanthropic, private-sector, and innovative financing mechanisms, while safeguarding impartiality and transparency.
- 6. Enhance access and participation:** Lowering barriers for youth, researchers, and civil society is vital for legitimacy and intergenerational ownership of multilateralism.

By embracing strategic pluralism, fostering collective impact, and investing in distributed leadership and adaptive communication, Geneva can reaffirm its role as an indispensable pillar of multilateralism and a platform for addressing collective global challenges.

Introduction

Geneva stands as a historic hub of international cooperation, host to a dense ecosystem of United Nations agencies, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and diplomatic missions. This ecosystem – and the neighbourhood where it is located – is called ‘International Geneva’. Today, this ecosystem faces profound structural and strategic challenges that test its resilience and relevance. Financial austerity, shifting priorities, and a *zeitgeist* of war and transactional politics are factors forcing a re-evaluation of how Geneva views its role as a global hub in a changing world.

The question of the adaptation of International Geneva goes to the heart of the purpose of the Geneva Policy Outlook (GPO), created in 2022 following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a community building and strategic analysis initiative of the Geneva Graduate Institute, with the support of the Republic and State of Geneva and the City of Geneva, the GPO has convened over 50 exchanges, created a network of around 200 professionals across sectors and institutions, and published four annual outlooks – all framed by the guiding question “How can Geneva adapt to changing world orders?”

Given the current pressures on global governance, in general, and International Geneva, in particular, this report draws together the *acquis* of the GPO to contribute ideas to the practical efforts undertaken to adapt International Geneva. The report is structured along

several guiding themes that each draw together a cluster of ideas. These guiding themes are:

1. Dealing with the operational and identity crises: Towards a unifying narrative
2. What leadership for International Geneva?
3. Transitioning from survival mode to shared vision
4. Towards a multilateralism beyond the nation state
5. Adaptation scenarios: Balancing between inventing new and reforming what exists?
6. Overcoming the challenge of communication
7. Geneva's role in a networked multilateralism
8. Youth participation in International Geneva
9. Financing International Geneva

The paper concludes with a reflection on Geneva as a platform for strategic pluralism in the service of addressing collective challenges. It also features three observations in dedicated boxes, including on Geneva as a “special political zone”, on the current alliance that aims to stimulate a UN Charter Review Conference, and on the challenge of access to International Geneva for youth. The Annex includes a thematic compilation of all articles published in the four annual editions of the Geneva Policy Outlook to highlight the emerging analytical foundation for a reimagination of multilateralism.

Given the stocktaking nature of this document, this report synthesises the ideas shared by the GPO community. The authors have made every effort to remain faithful to the original ideas. However, consequently, the report may not read as a single, coherent argument but rather as a collection of reflections. In a sense, these

reflections represent ‘local’ voices – meaning voices from senior professionals from all over the world working in International Geneva, reflecting jointly on the evolution of the international footprint of this city. From these locally informed perspectives, the report connects outward – piercing the ‘Geneva-bubble’ – while assuring open ears to listen to the voices from the outside.

The authors would like to thank the GPO community for their generous engagement in the exchanges organized over the last four years. The commitment to international cooperation runs in the DNA of Geneva and the many committed individuals who dedicate their lives to it. Decades of working in and out of Geneva have forged a community that is committed to upholding Geneva as a global hub, despite the current challenges, because there is still a belief that what this city has to offer is comparatively speaking, unique, including its density, freedom of expression, cross-sectoral innovation, the moderation capabilities between different global orders, and infrastructure. A first version of this report was discussed during the GPO annual retreat in August 2025, and we are thankful for the comments we received.

1. Dealing with the operational and identity crises: Towards a unifying narrative

In the face of shifting national priorities in many countries, the foundations of the post-Second World War multilateralism are shaking. Given Geneva's central role in this multilateral order as the United Nations' European Headquarters and home to several specialized international agencies, the impact is severe, not just because of budget cuts but also because of a lack of political support for issues such as humanitarian aid, health diplomacy, global trade, inclusion and diversity, and climate change. The result is an operational crisis in which 'less is done with less' affecting millions of people worldwide, but also an identity crisis.

Over decades, there was comfort in Geneva serving as a diplomatic platform in a world order based on transatlantic priorities, supported by Switzerland's host state role, enabled by a reputation of neutrality and firm commitment to international law, human rights, and multilateralism. However, as political centres of gravity shift, Geneva's identity is challenged – they shift inward *à la* America First – and towards Asia and Africa as global economic engines and sources of stability. There is also more tension in Swiss politics between isolationist, Europe-focused, and globalist constituencies.

Amidst such a flux, the question emerges, “What is International Geneva in this new context?”

This question should be posed not as rhetoric but as a genuine inquiry, since Geneva is not a single institution,

nor does a central governance mechanism steer it. It is an ecosystem of actors – UN bodies, NGOs, academic actors, philanthropic foundations, local and cantonal authorities – all functioning in parallel, sometimes in harmony, often in isolation from or in competition with each other. The result is not a coherent system but a complex landscape of agency for international cooperation and global governance.

In the absence of a central coordinating authority, there is a persistent question of “who is in charge” of managing Geneva’s ecosystem.

As a result of the crises of 2025, budgetary and political pressures have made each organisation its own island, fighting for survival. This attitude resulted in short-term fixes and contradictory measures that could prove costly in the future, both financially and operationally, as well as politically. The delocalisation agenda stimulated by the United Nations Secretary General illustrated the lack of commitment from some managers of international organisations towards the location of International Geneva, and the short-term attitude exhibited in the efforts of about two dozen countries to relocate units, departments, or entire organisations to their own countries. As the fight in December 2025 over the attempt to delocalise the International Labour Organization has shown, the diplomacy behind relocation has been intense.

This experience highlights an important operational issue with respect to the maturity of the ecosystem of International Geneva as a collective whole. When ‘Geneva’ is asked to “respond,” who is expected to act? And who takes responsibility for proposing and implementing solutions? In the absence of a central coordinating authority, there is a persistent question of “who is in charge” of managing Geneva’s ecosystem. Who responds when International Geneva is called upon to respond? In practice, each institution answers to its own governance board or member states, leading to siloed decision-making. The absence of any centralized coordination for Geneva’s myriad actors represents a systemic gap in its multilateral setup.

In times of the current crisis in Geneva, each organisation fights on its own and does not operate under one identity. This has challenged the identity of Geneva as a global hub.

This situation is not uncommon for systems that have grown organically, especially – one might add – in highly federal political systems such as Switzerland that are wary of too much centralization. What is known from collective impact research – an approach developed to tackle complex social problems – is that in an environment with multiple anchor institutions it is important to align stakeholders across different sectors, around a common agenda, shared metrics, and mutually reinforcing activities, all of which is supported by a dedicated “backbone” organisation that does all

the aligning, coordinating, measuring, and convening.¹ There would be a significant prospect to reinforce Geneva through the lens of collective impact – backed up by over a decade of research and lessons learned.

In sum, in times of the current crisis in Geneva, each organisation fights on its own and does not operate under one identity. This has challenged the identity of Geneva as a global hub, especially since the two biggest issues – humanitarian and global health diplomacy – are the two sectors most affected by the crises. This environment of uncertainty has made strategic planning challenging, as organisations are uncertain about which changes will be politically or financially mandated in the near future. This is why proactive efforts to construct a unifying narrative or plan for International Geneva would be the best protection against short-term and reactive reform initiatives, and the collective impact approach might offer a tested framework to shape such efforts.

1 For more information on social impact see Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective Impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(1), 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.48558/5900-KN19>.

2. What leadership for International Geneva?

Given the limits of Geneva's ecosystem identity, Geneva cannot rely on formal leadership structures to reinvent multilateralism. Instead, Geneva's collective of actors must find ways to coordinate across differences, identify shared needs, and invest in platforms that nurture cooperation. Without this, Geneva risks remaining fragmented in a moment when coherence is urgently needed. These efforts can build on an infrastructure of two dozen platforms that have emerged to support a functional environment for cross-sector exchange, community building, and policy entrepreneurship. These represent the 'soft' policy innovation and partnerships dimensions of Switzerland's host state engagement, alongside the support for the 'hard' bricks-and-mortar investment in infrastructure.

Past crises have shown that greater cohesion is possible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when faced with an unprecedented global emergency, Geneva's international community demonstrated a degree of unity and innovation that had rarely been seen before. For example, a self-organized group of Directors-General of the various Geneva-based UN agencies and international organisations began meeting regularly to coordinate responses. Currently, the Geneva Partnership Platform serves as an informal knowledge-sharing network for Geneva-based colleagues from UN agencies and IFIs working on partnerships and resource mobilisation, particularly Directors and senior staff. Similarly, the United Nations system has the UN Chief Executives Board (CEB), where heads of agencies meet; however, its

deliberations are broad and global, not Geneva-centric. At the Geneva level, the Swiss Mission to the UN Office in Geneva and the different UN Agencies play convening roles for diplomatic and protocol matters, but less so for strategic coordination among institutions.

To foster a model of leadership that is both common and differentiated, Switzerland, along with heads from international organisations and other constituencies, could champion a Geneva Strategic Forum, convening leaders across the ecosystem to discuss challenges specific to International Geneva and to drive joint initiatives.

To foster a model of leadership that is both common and differentiated, Switzerland, along with heads from international organisations and other constituencies, could champion a Geneva Strategic Forum, convening leaders across the ecosystem to discuss challenges specific to International Geneva and to drive joint initiatives. With a clear mandate and buy-in from the leadership of Geneva-based organisations, such a forum could facilitate the development of a shared vision for Geneva's future and assist in coordinating responses to external threats – such as funding cuts – and could eventually serve the purpose of a backbone support organisation to shape collective impact. With respect to UN agencies, such an effort would aim to be complementary to the coordinating mandates of the UN Secretary General's Office.

3. Transitioning from survival mode to shared vision

The impact of changing political priorities in the US has had serious consequences on multilateralism, but it also needs to be considered in the context of a broader picture. Other European governments had already reduced support long before this political shift – primarily to prioritize security investments in a new era of deterrence against Russia – while many other governments have expressed their political support for the UN system. What has changed is the visibility and urgency of the funding crisis. In late January 2026, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, underlined the severity of the crisis by saying that the United Nations was at risk of imminent financial collapse due to member states not paying their fees.

Local authorities in Geneva have responded with two types of initiatives: by providing emergency support to NGOs at risk of closure due to sudden financial gaps; and by moving towards establishing a foundation – the *Fondation pour l'Adaptation de la Genève internationale (FAGI)*. This effort aims to provide modest yet targeted support to organisations that require assistance in adapting to a changing environment. It is not designed to replace lost donor funding, but rather to enable actors to transition. The existence of this new foundation is evidence of a commitment to adaptation at the level of the Republic and State of Geneva; the new Host State Strategy is evidence of commitment from the federal level.

In parallel, some organisations are actively exploring shared service models, especially around administrative, financial, and operational costs to reduce overhead. Pooling these resources may allow smaller organisations to continue operating even in a more constrained financial landscape. This federative model of back-end consolidation, especially among smaller actors, is illustrative of an emergent logic: less competition and more ecosystem solidarity.

There is a need to reimagine not just funding models but the very architecture and purpose of international organisations. Financial instability is a symptom, not the root cause of the crisis facing the multilateral system.

Amidst these rapid changes, institutions and actors based in Geneva face the risk of becoming trapped in a survivalist logic. While the financial cuts of the US from key international organisations are undeniably destabilizing, there is a need to reject scarcity-driven thinking. Instead, there is a need to reimagine not just funding models but the very architecture and purpose of international organisations. Financial instability is a symptom, not the root cause of the crisis facing the multilateral system.

The key to this transformation lies in reimagining the mechanisms of international organisations as an activity, not organisations as institutions. This reframing suggests a shift from institution-centric approaches to a dynamic, fluid, network-based approach, adopting a strategic investment logic over a narrow efficiency logic

and leveraging the ecosystem benefits of the city. Here, imagination is not a luxury; it is an operational necessity at a time when the traditional legitimizing structures of multilateralism are no longer sufficient.

4. Towards a multilateralism beyond the nation state

Multilateral organisations based in Geneva are faced with a larger question: what does it mean to be a multilateral organisation today? If the formal architecture of multilateralism weakens, what happens to those actors who were never central to that system to begin with? Several organisations in Geneva are now actively questioning their own roles and responsibilities. Boards and leadership teams are being encouraged to step out of survival mode and ask more fundamental questions about the relevance of their original mandate, the value added in the current moment, and the efficiency of their administration.

In imagining a reformed system, multilateralism might be best understood as a set of activities, rather than as a set of institutions. This reframing emphasises function over form of multilateralism and opens space for new actors to contribute to the system's evolution. There is therefore a need to push the boundaries of traditional state-centric multilateralism by integrating local and regional governments into international deliberation – a gesture toward the “municipalisation” of global governance that is already so evident in the many city coalitions that are collaborating on global challenges, such as the C40 movement in the realm of fighting climate change. This repositioning acknowledges that the implementation of international norms often falls to a much broader range of actors than just states. It is important to emphasise that it might be exactly at this subnational level – such as in

cities – that the UN’s value system is still popular, given the greater proximity to people that mayors and local administrators have to people, in comparison to national governments.

Geneva can present itself as a Centre of Excellence for prevention and anticipatory diplomacy. This could not only help Geneva position itself as an alternative to other international hubs like New York but could also help break down silos between thematic areas in Geneva.

Geneva can present itself as a Centre of Excellence for prevention and anticipatory diplomacy. This could not only help Geneva position itself as an alternative to other international hubs like New York but could also help break down silos between thematic areas in Geneva. Such a reorientation would also enable Geneva to adapt and lead in shaping a multilateralism grounded in functional cooperation.

International Geneva might have two specific roles: on the one hand, it could play its traditional role to facilitate a state-based, sovereign order by helping assure a functioning United Nations System, and serve to support a regulatory multilateralism that defines and upholds standards, laws and norms; on the other hand, it could help facilitate interactions between the state-based and non-state orders, as well as diplomacy in the non-state world – be it the world of large-scale corporations, of non-state armed actors, or of organized crime – each of which maintains their own orders that overlap and co-exist in their own specific ways. From the perspective

of superpower spheres of influence politics, mediating interaction in zones of contention could be an additional role in which Geneva could play a role as a global hub for diplomacy, negotiations, and dialogue. A stronger moderating role between different orders could give Geneva a unique position globally, especially within a more networked multilateralism, discussed further below.

By strengthening this moderation role, Geneva could expand representation beyond member states to many other actors, including cities, large-scale corporations, or federations. This is already partly the case for large technology firms and pharmaceutical groups that maintain representations in Geneva and other non-state liaisons. As part of an evolution of city diplomacy, one could imagine a representation of cities on issues important to them, be that physically in Geneva or in a virtual international Geneva in which cities can participate in events and exchange in the search for solutions to shared problems.

Box 1: Geneva as a “special political zone.”

Geneva can present itself as a safe and inclusive “special political zone” for NGOs, multilateral actors, or politically exposed groups or personalities. If there are “special *economic zones*” in the global economy, why should there not be “special *political zones*” for global diplomacy? Such a zone could assist in moderating interactions between different world orders, such as a so-called Westphalian order of sovereign nation states, different global economic orders of the legal, illicit, and criminal business, as well as the multiple *de facto* non-state orders holding power over populations, territory, and markets. According to the ICRC, approximately 204 million people live in areas controlled or contested by 380 non-state

armed groups.² Geneva has traditionally been a moderator between all of these different worlds. This competence is one of Geneva's most significant strategic assets, representative of its normative and pragmatic characteristics.

By framing Geneva as a “special political zone”, it could also become an even stronger hub for global think tanks, particularly those representing the intellectual energy of other global or regional hubs. This is important because from India to Brazil to Nigeria to Indonesia, international thinking evolves from think tanks – and not necessarily from the academic sector – and they are influential in shaping a global outlook for their governments. Within this think tank world, Geneva is part of an ‘old world’ reflecting an era of US-focused, transatlantic dominance. Frequently framed by anti-colonial narratives, Geneva is enmeshed with the perception of “the West” and elite-based, exclusive global politics. Without a stronger connection between key think tanks and Geneva's policy kitchen, it will be tough to enable a more positive – and accurate – perception of Geneva's policy kitchen, while at the same time better connecting what emerged from Geneva to the thinking spaces in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America.

As a “special political zone”, Geneva could also revive its old tradition to serve as a sanctuary and incubator for inclusive dialogue on transformational ideas based on a global collective of voices that would be unable to thrive elsewhere. It could, on the one hand, offer refuge to those prevented from innovative reflection in their own countries, while offering a global space for reflection and innovation. International Geneva could reaffirm its position as an innovation lab of multilateralism by drawing on these voices to challenge conventional thinking and propose experimental solutions.

2 Matthew Bamber-Zryd, “ICRC Engagement with Armed Groups in 2025,” *Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog* (International Committee of the Red Cross), October 30, 2025, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2025/10/30/icrc-engagement-with-armed-groups-in-2025/>.

5. Adaptation scenarios: Balancing between inventing new and reforming what exists?

Several GPO exchanges suggest that the energy for reinventing multilateralism will emerge from outside UN agencies and governments, primarily from think tanks and the academic sector. UN agencies and governments focus on reforming the existing systems, but given their entrenchment in the current system, there is little expectation for new grand ideas emerging from within. What is visible already for some time is that many states have opted to open complementary efforts but formally de-linked from the multilateral system, be that under the label of new regional organisations, plurilateral arrangements, mini-lateralism, or club of states, such as the G7, the G20, or the BRICS groups of states.

With respect to the UN, a likely adaptation scenario is a succession of efforts by states and the UN to adapt the UN system where possible, while in parallel, new processes and systems continue to grow, especially those based on a stronger multi-stakeholder logic. In this way, the UN will adjoin a broader multilateral system of which a state-based sovereign order is a part, but exists alongside multiple political orders, for which Geneva could act as a moderating force, as noted above.

Several diplomats have shared a vision of adaptation, which separates two avenues for the adaptation of the UN system. The first avenue imagines the US and European states on their dominance of the system and gradually allowing other countries greater influence, be that through a reformed Security Council, or through a more equitable distribution of staff across all levels, but especially in system-relevant and

decision-level roles. This would offer the benefit, especially for European countries, to maintain a degree of power within a system. The second avenue of adaptation has been described as a UN in free-fall until a last-minute saving by a coalition of countries that then rebuild the UN anew, keeping what is useful and shedding the rest. In this scenario, European states would have much less influence.

It is essential for Geneva to make the impact of its work known not only to people who benefit from it but also to those who fund it.

Another reflection touches on the degree of disconnection of new generations from the founding principles and historic achievements of multilateralism. This prompts a deeper anxiety: the steady erosion of institutional memory. This generational amnesia risks transforming Geneva into a museum of relevance rather than a laboratory of innovation. The concern is not nostalgic. Rather, it is a recognition that legitimacy in the multilateral system is not inherited; it must be re-earned. That means telling better stories – not just about outputs, but about why the institutions exist in the first place. Geneva’s institutional archives should be digitized and shared publicly, not simply as records but as civic resources. It is essential for Geneva to make the impact of its work known not only to people who benefit from it but also to those who fund it.

Another ambitious step towards reimagining Geneva can be through a transformative scenarios process for International Geneva. The aim of this process would be to engage a representative segment of Geneva’s ecosystem, state and

non-state actors alike, in a shared, participatory process of futures thinking. This would not be a diplomatic exercise, but a sociological one: mapping imaginaries, surfacing divergent visions, and co-authoring storylines about what the future of Geneva and multilateralism could look like. By convening a ‘microcosm’ of the system to co-develop these scenarios, the process would not bestow authority but create agency. Geneva’s power lies not in its legal status, but in its institutional density, and in the absence of hierarchy, such imagination becomes the organizing principle.

Box 2: Reviving the Normative Core: Article 109 and Beyond

The United Nations being at the heart of Geneva, the city also needs to invest its strategic thought towards the reform of the UN. Efforts are being made towards the invocation of Article 109 of the UN Charter to launch a Charter Review Conference, opening the possibility of rewriting the rules of the international order. While such efforts evoke the spectre of radical transformation, they are tempered by concerns over timing, political will, and the risk of regression. In one reading, Charter Reform is the institutional mechanism that could finally allow for structural reform: revisiting the veto, enabling new forms of representation, and reimagining sovereignty for a multipolar world. In another reading, it risks dismantling the little legitimacy that the UN still retains.

Yet, the proposal is emblematic of a deeper yearning: to move from patchwork reform to systemic redesign. Whether through charter review, the creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly, or mechanisms that limit the veto power of permanent Security Council members, there is a clear appetite for structural realignment. Historical examples of treaties that were developed externally and later absorbed into the UN framework should also be revisited as models for initiating transformational change without relying solely on intergovernmental processes.

6. Overcoming the challenge of communication

The persistent invisibility of “International Geneva” outside Geneva is an issue of concern in Geneva. There is a need to communicate not only what International Geneva does, but also why it matters – and to whom. This is not merely a branding exercise but a fight for public imagination in an era of overcommunication and misinformation. How Geneva is perceived by member states, global publics, and its own staff determines its cohesion and future.

Without a consciously crafted identity, Geneva risks being defined by others, including critics who label it irrelevant or politicians who view it only in transactional terms.

In this context, it is important to understand that the perception of “International Geneva” from the outside is not always positive. A rising populist narrative portrays Geneva’s institutions as elitist, detached from grassroots needs, and staffed by overpaid bureaucrats. This view exists outside Geneva but is also shared by many residents in Geneva or the surrounding French Departments. Overall, populist movements depict multilateral institutions as liberal elites imposing constraints on sovereignty. The result is a questioned legitimacy that threatens mandates and funding. Viewed from the perspective of field operations, Geneva is for many synonymous with everything “bad” associated with headquarters politics. These perceptions erode morale in Geneva, test legitimacy, and fuel calls for downsizing or relocation. Without a consciously crafted identity, Geneva risks being defined by others, including

critics who label it irrelevant or politicians who view it only in transactional terms.

In the face of such criticism, there is a need for a proactive articulation of Geneva's value proposition. This means moving beyond defensive arguments to a positive vision of what Geneva offers the world and highlighting Geneva's unique assets: a critical mass of expertise on issues like health, migration, or human rights; a tradition of neutral territory where adversaries can meet; a hub for "normative power" where international standards are developed and kept; and a long-standing spirit of multilateral innovation, where new ideas have been born. Geneva must be reinvested with a sense of aspiration and hope, not just as an administrative centre. This should involve showcasing success stories where Geneva's ecosystem made a difference and messaging in non-elitist terms: presenting Geneva's work as relevant to ordinary people's lives rather than abstract diplomatic jargon.

Steps towards this could entail an International Geneva Peace Fellowship to bring new thinkers and change agents to the city, a global campaign to communicate how Geneva's technical outputs, such as Codex Alimentarius or the Stockholm Conventions (with their secretariats in Geneva), directly affect everyday lives and creating a flexible global brand for International Geneva, one that prioritizes simplicity, emotional resonance, and aspirational values.

7. Networked Multilateralism³

Legacy infrastructures of multilateralism, including buildings, staff contracts, and habits, tie organisations to Geneva; however, adaptive pressures following budget cuts are prompting an exploration of moving to other hubs. Against this stands the argument that Geneva's ecosystem benefits outweigh the savings. The city's dense network of diplomatic missions, NGOs, academic centres, and businesses creates an intangible added value, facilitating easy inter-agency meetings, cross-pollination of ideas, and the credibility that comes with being at a historic neutral venue. Relocating piecemeal might save money in the short term, but at the cost of losing these synergies.

The future of multilateralism requires a decentralized yet coordinated architecture; one that values the agency of regional hubs and draws on the strengths of diverse ecosystems.

The future of multilateralism requires a decentralized yet coordinated architecture; one that values the agency of regional hubs and draws on the strengths of diverse ecosystems. Geneva needs to emerge from its siloed infrastructure and actively reach out to regional hubs of multilateralism, exploring how these centres of multilateralism can learn from one another. This approach, known as 'networked multilateralism', involves not only linking institutions but also connecting ecosystems by acknowledging the role of non-state actors, informal knowledge brokers, and civic stakeholders in shaping global agendas. Efforts are underway by the GPO to establish

stronger ties of networked multilateralism between Geneva and Addis Ababa, the multilateral hub of the African Union, while exploring more such multilateral hubs. (See also a GPO Special Report dedicated to networked multilateralism).

3 See Dersso, S. (2025). Networked Multilateralism: A Case for the Geneva-Addis Ababa Nexus. Geneva Policy Outlook 2025. <https://www.genevapolicyoutlook.ch/networked-multilateralism-a-case-for-the-geneva-addis-ababa-nexus/>

8. Youth participation in International Geneva⁴

A further dimension of Geneva's adaptation relates to the question of intergenerational legitimacy. While International Geneva often speaks of the need to engage young people, it has yet to embed their perspectives structurally within its deliberative and policy processes. With nearly 40 per cent of the world's population under the age of 25, and with youth constituencies at the forefront of civic mobilisation, from climate governance to democratic reclaiming, their continued marginalisation from global decision-making processes centred in Geneva constitutes not only a democratic deficit but also a strategic blind spot.

A reimagined International Geneva, seeking to rebuild trust, strengthen legitimacy, and broaden its stakeholder base, will need to move beyond symbolic gestures towards an ecosystem of youth participation.

Existing approaches, often characterised by tokenistic consultations, restrictive access conditions, and a narrow “golden circle” of already-networked youth, fall short of the inclusive and representative participation that a renewed multilateralism demands. A reimagined International Geneva, seeking to rebuild trust, strengthen legitimacy, and broaden its stakeholder base, will need to move beyond symbolic gestures towards an ecosystem of youth participation. This would entail creating

4 See Momal-Vanian, C. & Singh, P. (2026). Towards a Youth Agenda for Global Governance. Geneva Policy Outlook 2026. <https://www.genevapolicyoutlook.ch/towards-a-youth-agenda-for-global-governance/>

intergenerational mechanisms capable of aggregating and representing diverse youth perspectives, lowering material and procedural barriers to participation, and enabling young people to contribute substantively across thematic domains, from digital governance to peacebuilding. This would also mean institutionalising a model of youth participation in Geneva, which can mobilise and engage with constituencies of young people, inculcate their experiences, and make representative claims in decision-making forums.

Box 3: The Challenge of Access: Opening Visas and Access Opportunities

A less visible yet foundational issue for the city is the question of access – who can participate in International Geneva and under what conditions. The difficulty of obtaining visas for researchers, students, and civil society representatives from outside Switzerland and the European Union remains both a moral and strategic failure for Geneva as a hub of multilateralism. In a moment when access to the US is increasingly restricted, Geneva has a window to present itself as a safe, inclusive, and dynamic alternative. This would require a debate about a special visa system for international Geneva that allows for easier participation of young people from all over the world to actively participate in multilateralism from Geneva. Such a new visa could include new visa modalities tailored to post-graduate students, academics, think tank personnel, and other people playing a role in international Geneva. Without this openness, Geneva risks becoming an echo chamber rather than a crucible of pluralistic debate and intergenerational exchange.

Reimagining Multilateralism and the Role of International Geneva

Such an approach aligns with the broader shift in this report toward a functional, networked, and participatory multilateralism, and positions Geneva to serve not only as a hub of institutional memory but also as a laboratory where the future of global governance is co-shaped with those who will inherit it.

9. Financing International Geneva⁵

Amid rising fiscal uncertainty and a growing donor dependency, the financing of Geneva-based international organisations is fuelling the crisis of multilateralism. Global aid from the United States has declined significantly while European governments continue to reduce development aid, implying serious implications for the future of international cooperation. This downturn reflects deeper geopolitical shifts and structural challenges, serving as a stark reminder of the mounting strain on the multilateral system. Unlike past crises, which were mitigated by ad-hoc fundraising, today's cuts appear long-term. Financial austerity is becoming the “new normal,” compelling Geneva to reconsider priorities, eliminate non-essential activities, and seek new funding streams.

The core vulnerability exposed is overreliance on government contributions. With public budgets constrained and political leaders increasingly sceptical, Geneva is faced with a slow attrition of programmes disappearing not due to irrelevance, but lack of funding. The central question is whether global public goods can continue to be financed primarily through government aid subject to political and economic cycles.

Diversification is urgent. Philanthropic foundations, high-net-worth individuals, and private sector actors are emerging

5 See also: Silva-Muller, L., Gassman, R., & De Franco, G. (2025). Paying for Multilateralism Amid Global Shocks: Financing of International Organizations in Geneva, 2013-2023. Geneva Graduate Institute. <https://www.genevapolicyoutlook.ch/special-report-paying-for-multilateralism-amid-global-shocks-financing-of-international-organizations-in-geneva-2013-2023-2/>

as vital partners. Structured engagement could channel private funds into thematic areas such as climate action or digital governance, leveraging Geneva's neutrality and convening power. However, safeguards are needed to prevent disproportionate influence and preserve impartiality.

Geneva is faced with a slow attrition of programmes disappearing not due to irrelevance, but lack of funding. The central question is whether global public goods can continue to be financed primarily through government aid subject to political and economic cycles.

Alongside diversification, reforms to the funding architecture are needed. Proposals towards these suggestions include pooled funds combining public and private contributions, innovative mechanisms like global bonds, and outcome-based financing that rewards results rather than inputs. Geneva could also appoint a high-level fundraising envoy to systematically engage major philanthropists and companies.

Operational reforms are equally critical. Cross-agency collaboration should be institutionalised through thematic councils, pooled funds, and flexible funding coalitions that include cities and businesses. Establishing Geneva-based multi-donor trust funds for pressing challenges, such as pandemic preparedness or climate adaptation, would signal innovation while strengthening efficiency. Shared administrative services, joint procurement, and greater transparency can further demonstrate a conscious fiscal ecosystem, making Geneva a more attractive destination for limited donor resources.

Conclusion: Toward a Strategic Pluralism

While Geneva should not have a single centre, it could function as a network constellation. This requires structured dialogues, intentional platforms, and feedback loops that allow thematic communities (peace, health, trade, human rights, and others) to intersect and inform one another. Geneva, by virtue of its diversity, density, and historical gravitas, remains uniquely positioned to serve as the intellectual and institutional laboratory for this transformation of multilateralism. But doing so requires moving beyond crisis management. It demands a strategic pluralism – an ethos that sees strength in the coordination of diverse actors, legitimacy in openness, and power in the ability to imagine not just better institutions, but better ways of relating to one another. Conceptually, therefore, new foundations for International Geneva might be more strongly related to collective impact approaches.

When viewed through the lens of collective impact, it is possible to discern the operational needs to reinvent the city as a global hub to nurture collective impact, including strong strategic and operational coordination, as well as partnership brokerage capacities.

When viewed through this lens, Geneva is an accumulation of institutions that exist to produce a specific impact out of the resources available within the institution. The results are silos, mandate overlaps, and single impacts. Collective impact, in contrast, mobilises the energy for producing resources by coordinating an ecosystem for collective impact. This allows for flexible and adapted operational designs well suited to engage with complexity; however, they require a certain

degree of ability of institutions to engage horizontally through operational partnerships and shared responsibilities. When viewed through the lens of collective impact, it is possible to discern the operational needs to reinvent the city as a global hub to nurture collective impact, including strong strategic and operational coordination, as well as partnership brokerage capacities.

There are encouraging signs of recognition and willingness to change, including discussions of new ideas, nascent cooperation among leaders, and support for new narratives, which indicate that International Geneva is not complacent. This internal momentum needs to be harnessed into concrete reforms and bold initiatives in the immediate years ahead. With strategic foresight, unity of purpose, and support from its stakeholders, International Geneva can transform this moment of crisis into an opportunity to adapt and reaffirm itself as an indispensable pillar of the multilateral system. In doing so, Geneva would not only secure its own future, but also significantly contribute to the renewal of global cooperation at a moment when the world most needs it.

Annex I

List of articles in previous editions of the Geneva Policy Outlook highlighting key issues for multilateralism and International Geneva.

Adapting Multilateralism

- The imperative of courage for sustainability and inclusion – By Marie-Laure Salles (2023)
- Towards a new multilateralism: Lessons from the Global Refugee Forum – By Filippo Grandi (2024)
- Learning Geneva: A platform for planetary human(e) development in the making? – By Eunsoo Lee and Moira V. Faul (2023)
- BRICS: Towards a new era of global governance – By Jamil Chade (2024)
- Nature Needs a Seat at the Table in the New Multilateralism – By Hugo Slim (2025)
- A New Agenda for Sustainability – By Marie-Laure Salles (2025)
- Multilateralism 2.0: Time for Diplomats to Step Up – By Jussi Hanhimäki (2025)
- It's Time for a New UN Charter – By Heba Aly (2025)
- Networked Multilateralism: A Case for the Geneva-Addis-Ababa Nexus – By Solomon Dersso (2025)
- Half-empty, yet Half-full: Reflections for Geneva from the Pact for the Future – By Richard Gowan (2025)

Reimagining Multilateralism and the Role of International Geneva

- The Reinvention of Progress – By Pedro Conceição (2026)
- Agenda keeping in International Geneva – By Lucile Maertens, Zoé Cheli, Adrien Estève & Lorenzo Guadagno (2026)
- Towards a Youth Agenda for Global Governance – By Corinne Momal Vanian & Prathit Singh (2026)

Reinventing Diplomacy

- New spaces of diplomacy for a complex world – By Peter Maurer and Mohamed Mahmoud Mohamedou (2023)
- Global economic warfare needs new rules – By Hugo Slim (2023)
- Dissolving tensions through water-peace diplomacy – By Mark Zeitoun, Christian Bréthaut and Caroline Pellaton (2023)
- Discreetly tackling climate action through Earth Diplomacy – By Gabriel Gomes Couto (2023)
- Reversing the decline of diplomacy – By David Harland (2024)
- Countering gender trade-offs in multilateral negotiations – By Claire Somerville (2024)
- City diplomacy in action: The Forum of Mayors – By Paola Deda (2024)
- Regressive Gender Politics in International Geneva – By Claire Somerville (2026)

Peace and Security

- Ecumenical peacebuilding: Collision or convergence in Ukraine? – By Peter Prove (2023)
- Human rights and war – By Andrew Clapham (2024)
- Weaponising water in Gaza – By Mark Zeitoun, Natasha Carmi, Laura Turley, and Mara Tignino (2024)
- The quest for peace in Ukraine – By Fred Tanner (2024)
- Winners at a Losing Game: In a Burning Middle East, Peace is a Security Imperative – By Hiba Qasas (2025)

Sustainability and the Environment

- Acting on the new Global Biodiversity Framework – By Sonia Peña Moreno (2023)
- Walking the talk of environmental migration in 2023 – By Manuel Marques Pereira and Ileana Sinziana Puscas (2023)
- Transforming agrifood systems one grain at a time – By Dominique Burgeon (2023)
- Microplastics and Human Fertility – By Aditya Bharadwaj (2025)
- Carbon Finance, Communities and Conflict: The Quest for Peace-Positive Land Restoration in Africa – By Irene Ojuok and Alan Channer (2025)
- Regreening the Global Safety Net: Accelerating FMNR through Faith-driven Movement-building – By Tony Rinaudo, Juliet Bell, and Athena Peralta (2025)

Reimagining Multilateralism and the Role of International Geneva

- Towards Fostering New Agrifood Partnerships – By Shannon Howard (2026)

Global Health Diplomacy

- Determining the course of a global pandemic treaty – By Suerie Moon (2023)
- Towards better rules to govern pandemics – By Suerie Moon (2024)
- Nature Won't Wait, but can a Meaningful Pandemic Agreement get done in 2025? – By Suerie Moon (2025)
- Global Health Governance as a Three Body Problem – By Vinh Kim Nguyen & Ilona Kickbusch (2026)
- The Pandemic Agreement: Adopted but Unfinished – By Daniela Morich & Gian Luca Burci (2026)

AI and Emerging Technologies

- Hacked: Cybersecurity in the humanitarian sector – By Balthasar Staehelin (2023)
- Responsibly mining the “New Gold” – By Anne-Marie Buzatu (2023)
- Beyond techno-solutionism and silver bullets – By Jérôme Duberry (2023)
- The variable geometry of AI governance – By Roxana Radu (2024)
- Technology startups for global impact: How Geneva can cultivate new talent and industries – By Christopher Fabian (2024)

- The Swiss Approach to AI Sovereignty – By Daniel Dobos & Prathit Singh (2026)

Trade, Economy and Finance

- Reforming the reform debate at the WTO – By Dmitry Grozoubinski (2023)
- Reimagining the World Trade Organisation: A blueprint for sustainable trade – By Daniel C. Esty, Trevor Sutton, Joel Trachtman, and Jan Yves Remy (2024)
- Will making money follow impact in sustainable investing? – By Dawid Bastiat-Jarosz (2023)
- Aligning for tomorrow: Capital flows, sustainability and circularity – By Marie-Laure Schaufelberger (2024)
- The GRATK Treaty: Understanding a Triumph of Multilateralism – By Margo A. Bagley (2025)
- Why Peace Finance Matters for Investors – By Dominique Habegger (2026)
- Multilateralism at Work: Getting Mercury Out of Skin Lightening Cosmetics – By Ellen Rosskam & Małgorzata Alicja Stylo (2026)

Disarmament and Arms Control

- Can 2023 break the deadlock on lethal autonomous weapons systems? – By Giacomo Persi Paoli (2023)
- Biological Weapons Convention negotiations – By James Reville and Manon Blancafort (2023)

Reimagining Multilateralism and the Role of International Geneva

- The lay of the stars: Space security today – By Ching Wei Sooi (2024)
- Dealing with the New WMDs – Weapons of Mass Disinformation – By Jean-Marc Rickli (2025)
- Dealing with the Small Weapons of Mass Destruction – By Mark Downes (2026)
- The Case of Nuclear Diplomacy in Geneva – By Luiza Delaflora Cassol & Sarah Ruth Opatowski (2026)