

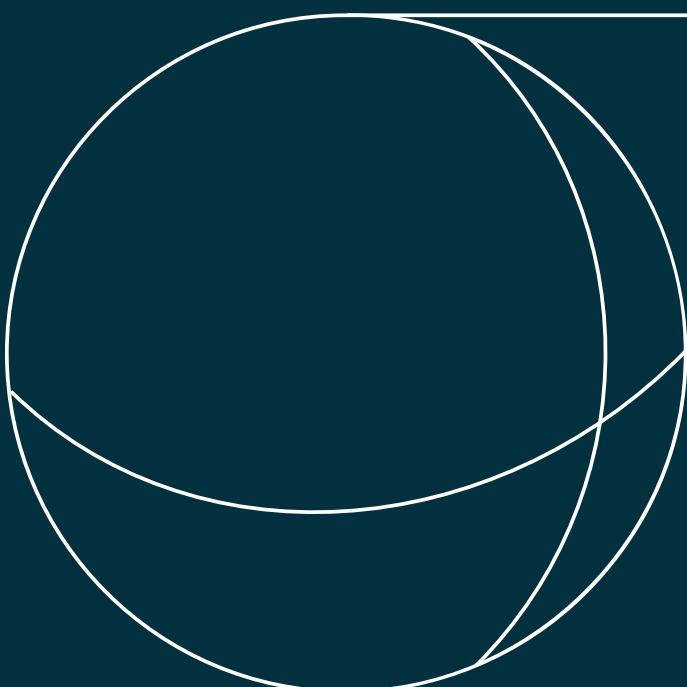
research report

Governing in Complexity: Assessing the Quality of Global Governance Across 15 Case Studies

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January 2026



Abstract

The field of global governance has grown increasingly crowded and interconnected, as an overlapping constituency of formal international organisations, informal forums, and private actors shapes rules across almost every major policy area. This report examines what this growing complexity means for the robustness, effectiveness, and democratic quality of global governance. Drawing on 15 ENSURED case studies, the report relates empirical findings to academic debates on governance complexity and explores the quality of governance across five issue areas: trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation. We find that complexity is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful: instead, its effects depend on the architecture of governance complexes and the political alignment of powerful states. Hierarchical complexes with a recognisable centre that enjoy broad agreement among key states tend to stabilise governance, sustain output, and offer stronger mechanisms for democratic participation. Fragmented and politically divided complexes, by contrast, struggle with incoherent standards, selective implementation, and diffuse accountability. Building on these insights, the report highlights implications for political actors seeking to navigate and shape an increasingly dense global governance landscape.

Citation Recommendation

Schmidtke, Henning, and Stephanie C. Hofmann. 2026. "Governing in Complexity: Assessing the Quality of Global Governance Across 15 Case Studies." *ENSURED Research Report*, no. 25 (January): 1-32. <https://www.ensuredeurope.eu>.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades, global governance has become more crowded than would have been imaginable only a generation ago. Alongside established international organisations (IOs) such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), global governance now features a wide range of regional IOs, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), multilateral but expanding clubs like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), and private transnational standard-setters such as the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB). Many of these actors possess both the will and the power to shape international rules. As a result, very few policy areas are governed by a single IO. Today, global governance is managed by complex webs of actors that overlap in both mandate and membership.¹

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At the same time, the governance problems these actors confront have become increasingly intertwined. Trade disputes spill over into climate negotiations; the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a crisis that left no policy area untouched; and the regulation of cyberspace intersects with concerns around security, trade, health, and finance. In practice, this means that no single IO can solve intersecting global challenges on its own. Cooperation problems increasingly transcend traditional policy areas, and the actors seeking to address them must do the same.

Drawing on the ENSURED conceptual framework (Choi et al. 2024), this report examines how overlapping IOs and intersecting challenges influence the robustness, effectiveness, and democratic quality of international cooperation. It addresses this question by combining recent empirical insights from 15 ENSURED case studies with a systematic review of academic literature to identify long-term trends.² Together, these materials offer a comprehensive overview of how governance complexity shapes the quality of governance across multiple policy areas, including the five major fields studied in the ENSURED project: trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation.

The report concludes that governance complexity is neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental. Outcomes largely depend on the architecture of governance complexes – specifically, whether overlapping actors operate in a structured or fragmented way – and on how political disagreements among powerful states unfold within these structures.

1 While governance complexes bring together many types of actors, this report focuses mainly on intergovernmental organisations, given their central role and because the ENSURED case studies provide the most systematic research on these actors.

2 The case study reports are available on the ENSURED website (<https://www.ensured-europe.eu>). They include Boukal, Janský, Palanský, and Parízek 2025; Bursi and Greco 2025; Choi and Liese 2025; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a, 2025b, 2025c; Hoxtell 2025; King and Pousadela 2025; Kustova, Dietz, Van Hoof, and Karlas 2025; Marconi and Greco 2025; Parízek and Weinhardt 2025; Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025; Petri, Srivastava, Drieskens, and Lameire 2025; Weinhardt, Parízek, and Srivastava 2025.

In this analysis, three patterns stand out. First, governance is most *robust* when governance complexes operate within a hierarchical structure and when major member states agree on overarching goals and principles. Climate governance offers a clear example. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement function as central anchors. Because most leading states continue to share a basic commitment to these frameworks, other bodies can contribute to a stable governance complex. By contrast, robustness weakens when complexes are fragmented and politically divided. Migration governance shows this in practice: in the absence of a central IO and amid profound disagreements among states, regional arrangements have proliferated, but these have not coalesced into coherent governance.

Second, *effective* governance occurs when IOs coordinate their procedures and support each other's decisions. The response to the global financial crisis provides a positive example: faced with the crisis, the G20, the Financial Stability Board, and the Basel Committee reacted swiftly due to their clearly defined roles. Weak coordination or geopolitical competition, in contrast, often leads to adverse outcomes. Trade governance is a case in point: as WTO negotiations stalled during the Doha Round, states increasingly turned to preferential and plurilateral agreements. While this kept rule-making alive, it also generated divergent standards and weakened the foundation for collective enforcement.

Finally, governance complexity can enhance *democratic legitimacy* through participation and accountability, but it does not automatically lead to more democratic outcomes. Complexity often creates opportunities for wider representation. In the context of migration governance, for instance, Global Compact negotiations involved a range of states, civil society groups, and IOs to an extent rarely seen in global negotiations. However, the impact of this participation was limited. Final decisions were made in smaller, more exclusive venues, where only a few well-resourced actors could remain actively engaged. Similar patterns can be observed in other areas as well: while access to negotiations may expand, actual influence often does not, and accountability becomes harder to enforce when decisions and responsibilities are dispersed across multiple venues.

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The report proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the concept and sources of governance complexity and explains why its effects depend on institutional architecture and political alignment among key member states. The next three sections apply this framework to the robustness, effectiveness, and democratic quality of global governance. Each section begins by clarifying how the respective dimension can be understood under conditions of complexity, before synthesising empirical findings from the ENSURED case studies and the broader academic literature. The report also examines how governance architecture and political alignment shape general tendencies. In conclusion, the final section summarises the findings and offers recommendations for managing complex global governance structures.

Global Governance Complexity

Today, global governance is shaped less by individual IOs than by complex webs of actors that overlap in both mandate and membership.³ This complexity means that decisions taken in one IO increasingly influence outcomes in others. Understanding this new reality is essential for assessing whether global governance is robust, effective, and democratic. This section clarifies what is meant by governance complexity and why it matters for the quality of global governance. It then introduces two key factors that condition complexity's effect on the robustness, effectiveness, and democracy of global governance: the architecture of governance complexes and the political alignment of their key member states.

Drivers of Governance Complexity

Governance complexity is not a new phenomenon, but its scope and scale have expanded substantially since the end of the Cold War. In 1950, fewer than 50 formal IOs managed international cooperation, each focusing on a specific policy area. Today, more than 300 formal IOs operate across multiple domains alongside multilateral clubs, informal IOs, and private actors (Pevehouse et al. 2020; Roger and Rowan 2023). As a result, very few issues are handled by a single IO.

Two trends account for this transformation. First, when states perceive that an existing IO no longer reflects their interests or cannot be reformed, they often create new institutions (Morse and Keohane 2014). Such dissatisfaction may arise from outdated mandates or cumbersome decision-making procedures in established IOs, or it can reflect shifts in global power and the political visions of member states. In other contexts, dissatisfaction responds to unmet demand. Trade governance illustrates this dynamic. Following the collapse of the Doha Round, states increasingly turned to alternative forums to pursue trade liberalisation. As a result, multilateral agreements under the WTO umbrella now coexist alongside numerous preferential agreements, plurilateral initiatives, and regional blocs, leading to conflicting trade rules. A similar story unfolded in development finance: frustration with Global North dominance at the World Bank, combined with persistent funding gaps, spurred the creation of new multilateral development banks such as the Asian Infrastructure

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Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB). These additions did not replace the World Bank but were layered on top of it, creating a complex governance landscape.

A second driver of governance complexity is the growing interconnection of human activities. As economic, societal, and political cross-border interactions become more frequent, issues that were once isolated are now intertwined, so problems and decisions in one area routinely spill over into others. Across the ENSURED

³ In this report, we focus on IOs as the key actors within governance complexes.

case studies, we observe a similar pattern: trade governance intersects with economic development, climate, and digitalisation (Weinhardt et al. 2025); health governance cross-cuts trade, climate, and migration policies (Fernández and Heinzel 2025a); and digitalisation spans domains such as security, trade, and finance (Marconi and Greco 2025). These connections – also referred to as policy nexuses – often drive IOs to expand their activities into policy areas that their founders never anticipated.

The following three sections apply this framework to the ENSURED case studies as well as the broader literature, showing how governance complexity shapes robustness, effectiveness, and democracy across policy areas.

Implications for Governance Quality

Governance complexity implies that the quality of global governance cannot be assessed by examining individual IOs in isolation. Instead, we evaluate whether governance in a given policy area – emerging from the interplay of multiple IOs – is robust, effective, and democratic. While individual IOs are part of the picture, the decisive question is how governance functions across the policy landscape as a whole. Crucially, this perspective does not treat governance complexes as collective actors. Rather, it focuses on patterns of interaction among IOs working within a given policy area.

Robustness, for example, cannot be understood simply as the capacity of a central IO to withstand challenges while continuing to perform its core functions. Although the WTO has experienced prolonged gridlock, trade governance continues through a range of overlapping venues. Conversely, the stability of a central IO does not guarantee robust governance if competing organisations undermine its rules. What ultimately matters is whether governance in a given policy area can sustain stability and problem-solving capacity under pressure.

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Similarly, evaluating effectiveness solely in terms of a single IO's ability to achieve cooperation goals can be misleading. What appears to be a decline in policy output in one IO can actually translate into higher aggregate output because multiple organisations share the work. Development finance illustrates this point. Whereas the World Bank once served as the central multilateral lender, financing and implementation responsibilities are now shared among 27 multilateral development banks. Assessing effectiveness solely on the basis of the World Bank's project count would therefore significantly underestimate joint output across the policy area.

Similarly, democracy cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of the participatory and accountability arrangements of a single IO. While the WTO may seem state-centric and less open to non-state actors, global trade governance encompasses multiple overlapping forums that allow for varying degrees of civil society participation. Conversely, an international treaty may be established through inclusive processes, but accountability could deteriorate when several overlapping IOs are involved in its implementation.

Key Dimensions of Governance Complexity

Although governance complexity is widespread, it does not affect all policy areas equally. Across the ENSURED case studies, two factors consistently shape whether complexity supports or undermines the quality of global governance: the architecture of the governance complex and the political alignment of major member states.

Two factors shape whether complexity supports global governance: the complex's architecture and the political alignment of member states.

First, the architecture of governance complexes influences their robustness, effectiveness, and democratic quality. Some complexes feature a clear hierarchy led by a central IO, whose mandate, legitimacy, or technical capacity grants it an expanded role. Climate governance is structured this way: the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement provide anchors around which other initiatives align (Kustova et al. 2025). Other complexes are more functionally differentiated, with IOs performing complementary tasks, often determined by region or expertise.

Development finance follows this model, as many multilateral development banks specialise in providing funding for specific projects or regions (Heldt and Schmidtke 2019). At the other end of this spectrum are fragmented complexes, where IOs overlap without coordination, duplicate work, or promote conflicting standards. Tax governance illustrates this fragmented architecture, with frameworks under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the UN operating in parallel with different memberships and contrasting priorities (Boukal et al. 2025). These differences matter because they shape how states and non-state actors navigate governance complexes and influence whether cooperation among IOs converges or scatters.

The second significant difference between governance complexes is the extent to which key member states share strategic orientations and ideological visions. This political alignment is important because it determines whether actors in a governance complex align or work toward conflicting purposes (Hofmann et al. 2025). When alignment is high, as in climate governance, states are more willing to let a single IO steer the work, while deferring to each other's procedures and collaborating on joint actions (Petri and Karlas 2025). When alignment is low, as in digitalisation, coalitions split into blocs, forum-shopping intensifies, and the creation of rival venues becomes more attractive (Marconi and Greco 2025).

Governance Complexity and Robustness

This section analyses how governance complexity shapes robustness across two central dimensions: institutional stability and rule stability. For each dimension, we present a definition, review empirical evidence across policy areas, and highlight how governance architecture and political alignment shape general patterns.

Under conditions of governance complexity, robustness refers to the ability of a governance complex to withstand pressure within a particular policy area. Robust governance can absorb shocks, maintain predictable rules, and preserve collective capacity for action. In line with ENSURED's conceptual framework, we focus on (1) institutional stability, describing the ability of governance to continue even during challenging times, and (2) rule stability, emphasising the continued acceptance of core rules across governance complexes (Choi et al. 2024; Weinhardt and Dijkstra 2024).⁴ Overall, empirical evidence suggests that the robustness of governance in policy areas managed by governance complexes improves when IOs operate under hierarchical structures and major member states are politically aligned. It declines in fragmented complexes marked by political rivalries.

Complexity and Institutional Stability

Institutional stability describes the extent to which resources can be effectively pooled and mobilised across the governance complex. Complexity can contribute to institutional stability if (1) it provides redundancy that allows dysfunctional actors to be replaced, (2) cooperation and burden-sharing distribute costs across multiple actors, or (3) hierarchical coordination manages conflicts between organisations (Kreuder-Sonnen and Zürn 2020; Morin and Kim 2025). At the same time, these dynamics can undermine institutional stability when duplication fragments resources across competing IOs, when capacity asymmetries prevent weaker actors from contributing to multiple projects, or when forum-shopping generates volatility.

Most empirical evidence, including in the ENSURED case studies, comes from international emergency lending, trade, and climate. These examples show how governance complexes can pool resources, share risks, or reroute functions when central IOs are blocked or under strain (Gehring and Faude 2014; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a). Beyond pooling financial resources and staff, the case studies highlight

Governance complexes can facilitate the pooling of resources, share risks, or reroute functions when their central IOs are blocked or under strain.

⁴ We subsume 'governance autonomy' under institutional stability as its components (i.e., flexible finance, delegated authority, staff secondments) are the mechanisms that keep complexes functioning.

several mechanisms that enable hierarchical coordination and cooperation. IOs may institutionalise cooperation through formal access and observer rights (Tokhi 2022). They may intervene in each other's deliberations – for instance, by mobilising member states or engaging in public contestation – to align efforts across organisations (Margulis 2021). They can establish hierarchies that allocate sub-issues and reduce conflict (Henning and Pratt 2023). Alternatively, they can rely on informal forums, like the G20, to steer agendas across governance complexes (Abbott and Faude 2022).

Despite the importance of these mechanisms, systematic evidence across policy areas remains scarce. Consequently, empirical evidence is limited to a few prominent domains, whereas others, including migration and human rights, remain understudied. Quantitative work that maps and explains patterns of robustness is also limited but growing: as new measurements of governance complexity become available, they pave the way for more systematic analyses (Haftel and Lenz 2022; Reinsberg and Westerwinter 2023). Comparative evidence from development finance and emergency lending suggests that IOs tend to pool their resources and cooperate rather than compete when major member states are politically aligned (Clark 2025). Beyond financial resources, staffing has also been shown to shape institutional stability. When IOs have the leeway to create joint project teams or second staff to cooperative projects, governance complexes have a greater capacity to manage crises (Hoeffler and Hofmann 2024). However, when bureaucracies are too lean, extensive reliance on seconded staff can create vulnerabilities. Complementary research shows that IOs

embedded in governance complexes are more likely to withstand existential challenges, as neighbouring IOs can provide normative support and legitimisation (Reinsberg 2025).

The evidence suggests mixed but traceable effects of governance complexity on institutional stability.

Together, the evidence suggests mixed but traceable effects of governance complexity on institutional stability. In hierarchically ordered complexes, redundancy and resource pooling enable governance institutions to absorb shocks and continue functioning even when some IOs are dysfunctional. A similar dynamic is evident in staff arrangements when sufficient staff is available: when IOs can second personnel to joint projects, complexes are better equipped to respond to crises (Holesch et al. 2025). When bureaucracies are too small, reliance on seconded personnel can create vulnerabilities rather than buffers. The ENSURED case studies confirm these patterns. In human rights governance, heavily earmarked budgets contributed to a fragmentation of resources across IOs. Still, the UN Human Rights Council, to name one example, managed to overcome this volatility due to its relatively strong level of permanent staff (King and Pousadela 2025). By contrast, in financial stability governance, international actors – including the Financial Stability Board and the Basel Committee – depend on lean bureaucracies with many seconded staff members, creating vulnerabilities in times of crisis (Bursi and Greco 2025).

Coordination mechanisms among IOs display similar dynamics. Institutional stability is strongest when coordination is substantive and sustained, but it tends to erode when coordination efforts spark political backlash or when hierarchies are openly disputed. These findings suggest a conditional

pattern. Governance complexity enhances institutional stability when it generates usable redundancy in staff or budget, or when it enables the effective coordination of IOs; it undermines robustness when it fragments resources or reinforces asymmetries. Overall, these findings have two practical implications: to make global governance more robust, actors should (1) strengthen coordination within complexes to utilise redundancy, and (2) invest in administrative capacity to support joint projects.

Complexity and Rule Stability

Rule stability refers to the extent to which core rules remain accepted across governance complexes. Stability is high when a broad coalition of actors upholds common policy commitments; it is low when states disengage or shift to alternative forums that promote conflicting rules, thereby raising compliance uncertainty and fragmentation (Weinhardt and Dijkstra 2024; Choi et al. 2024). In general, a large number of overlapping IOs within a governance complex tends to undermine rule stability by expanding opportunities for regime-shifting and forum-shopping, increasing the probability of rule collisions and a race-to-the-bottom (Morse and Keohane 2014).

The effects of governance complexity on rule stability are well-documented in ENSURED's research and in other qualitative work. In trade governance, increasing complexity has led to forum-shopping and conflicting obligations (Weinhardt et al. 2025). At the intersection of intellectual property and health, dissatisfaction with the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) obligations has prompted states to turn to alternative venues, including the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and bilateral arrangements (Helfer 2009; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a). In climate governance, the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement serve as central anchors that hold the system together, providing a broad framework that limits fragmentation (Keohane and Victor 2011; Kustova et al. 2025). In migration and security governance, regional IOs are often used selectively when their global counterparts fail to deliver, leading to partial – and sometimes conflicting – standards (Peerboom et al. 2025; Hofmann 2024).

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Research on governance architecture shows that hierarchical relationships among IOs tend to strengthen rule stability. In trade governance, for instance, the WTO has long served as the central organisation. However, this influence has weakened due to the collapse of the Doha Round and dysfunction in dispute settlement processes (Parízek and Weinhardt 2025). In contrast, central IOs in climate governance, such as the UNFCCC, and in emergency lending, notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have largely maintained common baseline commitments (Kustova et al. 2025; Henning and Pratt 2023).

Political alignment among major member states also makes a critical difference. Governance complexes characterised by high alignment tend to exhibit greater rule stability, as illustrated by cooperation between the

IMF and the European Union (EU) during the 2008 Greek financial crisis (Henning 2017). In contrast, political rivalries – such as between a China-led coalition and US-aligned states over digitalisation governance – create fragmented and often conflicting rules (Marconi and Greco 2025; Hofmann and Pawlak 2023).

Overall, the evidence suggests that rule stability tends to decline as complexity grows. Yet this is conditional: rule stability is most fragile in non-hierarchical, loosely coordinated, and politically divided complexes, and most robust when governance complexes are structured and politically aligned. The practical implication is that rule stability in regime complexes requires (1) support for central, coordinating IOs, and (2) building and maintaining political alignment between central member states.

Governance Complexity and Effectiveness

This section examines the impacts of complexity on the effectiveness of global governance across two core dimensions: policy output and outcomes. For each dimension, we present a definition, review empirical evidence across policy areas, and then trace how architecture and political alignment drive the observed dynamics.

Effectiveness in governance complexes concerns whether organisations can jointly deliver appropriate governance within a given policy area. We ask (1) under what conditions a complex produces timely and appropriate decisions (output), and (2) whether states, non-state actors, and implementing agencies adjust their behaviour in line with those decisions (outcome).⁵ Overall, governance complexes are more likely to deliver effective governance when cooperation arrangements align incentives so that each IO's contribution reinforces the others.

Complexity and Policy Output

Policy output describes whether a governance complex generates enough decisions – quickly and with sufficient ambition – to address intersecting challenges (Choi et al. 2024; Sommerer and Liese 2024). In principle, a larger number of IOs can enable faster and more frequent decision-making, as actors can shift to smaller or more agile forums.

Most of our empirical evidence on policy output comes from ENSURED's qualitative case studies on trade, health, finance, migration, and climate governance. This is complemented by the Performance of International Organisations (PIO) dataset, which provides one of the few quantitative studies on the policy output of IOs (Sommerer and Choi 2025). Across issue areas, a broad pattern emerges: a larger number of IOs tends to produce more decisions at a faster pace, but often with lower ambition. Climate governance clearly demonstrates this trade-off. The involvement of development banks, energy agencies, and UN bodies has increased the volume and speed of decision-making, while deep political divisions have constrained ambitions (Hale and Roger 2014; Morin and Kim 2025). Health governance during the COVID-19 pandemic shows a similar dynamic: the WHO, the World Bank, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) moved quickly on the International Health Regulations and the Pandemic Agreement, yet the outcomes remained modest because powerful states could not agree on more substantial commitments (Gostin et al. 2020; Fernández

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⁵ We do not assess impact here, as attribution to a multi-IO complex is methodologically very difficult, resulting in a lack of respective studies.

and Heinzel 2025b). Comparatively, trade governance expanded rapidly through plurilateral deals and preferential agreements, generating rules that exceeded what multilateral WTO negotiations could deliver, while also creating inconsistencies across agreements. Similar dynamics appear in financial stability and migration governance (Faude 2020; Parízek and Weinhardt 2025). At the same time, notable exceptions exist: in global forestry, increased governance complexity has served to raise ambition (Overdevest and Zeitlin 2014).

The architecture of governance complexes can moderate these effects. Central IOs can set a common baseline and orchestrate others, leading to faster decision-making and fewer contradictions. Where no centre exists or where its authority has been eroded, policy production tends to duplicate across overlapping venues, increasing output volume but straining coherence and ambition. Financial stability governance illustrates the positive effects of such architecture. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, this relatively ordered complex – orchestrated by the G20 and centred around the Financial Stability Board and the Basel Committee – produced timely and ambitious policies (Rixen and Viola 2020).

Political alignment among key states also shapes the speed and ambition of policy output. When influential countries share a political vision, they can use central IOs to set the agenda, while assigning specialised organisations to work out the technical details. This dynamic tends to produce ambitious governance relatively quickly. Banking regulations after the 2008 Great Recession illustrate this effect, as the G20's coordinating role could build on a strong consensus among powerful states (Viola 2015). On the other hand, conflicting interests among central states often lead to slower, less

ambitious governance: this dynamic can be observed in areas such as cryptocurrency and migration (James and Quaglia 2024; Bursi and Greco 2025).

Overall, ENSURED research shows that, compared to more centralised arrangements, greater governance complexity tends to increase the volume and speed of policy output, while dampening ambition. This, too, is conditional: output is most likely to be slow in fragmented and politically divided policy areas. In structured, politically aligned complexes, output not only occurs more frequently but also with higher ambition. Consequently, policymakers should (1) strengthen the coordination between central IOs and minilateral forums, and (2) build political alignment among key states to maximise policy output.

Complexity and Outcome

Outcome describes whether a governance complex succeeds in shifting the behaviour of its addressees, beyond producing decisions on paper. According to the ENSURED conceptual framework, the focus of outcomes is on implementation and compliance: whether actors actually adjust their behaviour in response to the governance of a given policy area (Choi et al. 2024; Sommerer and Liese 2024). In general, we expect outcome to decline as complexity facilitates forum-shopping and regime-shifting (Morse and Keohane 2014; Alter and Raustiala 2018). Yet complexity

can also have positive effects on outcomes. Under the right conditions, governance complexes can develop complementarities and experimental modes of cooperation that reinforce compliance (Oberthür and Stokke 2011; Keohane and Victor 2011).

Most of our empirical evidence on outcomes comes from qualitative case studies in trade, health, climate, migration, and finance, complemented by a limited number of quantitative comparative studies. In trade and health governance, research shows that complexity enables strategic regime-shifting – for instance, from the WHO to the WIPO and the WTO – thereby weakening compliance with rules on access to medicines (Busch 2007). ENSURED's research on health governance reaches a similar conclusion for the COVID-19 pandemic period. Forum-shopping across the governance complex frequently diluted incentives to comply with commitments on equitable vaccine access, despite agreement on a limited TRIPS waiver (Fernández and Heinzel 2025a). In climate governance, the combination of governance complexity and political disagreement has produced fragmented rules on carbon markets and underspecified reporting schemes, sending mixed signals for domestic implementation (van Asselt and Zelli 2014; Kustova et al. 2025). Migration governance offers another example of how complexity can limit results: ENSURED research shows that the Global Compacts on Migration and on Refugees have had little practical impact on national policy, as their non-binding mandates encourage governments to treat them as dialogue forums rather than binding commitments (Peerboom et al. 2025).

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There are, however, some notable success stories. In the governance of trade in genetically modified organisms and health-related intellectual property rights, regular interaction among overlapping IOs has led to an informal division of labour. The WTO enforces trade rules, WIPO provides technical guidance and assistance, and the WHO highlights public health concerns. This constellation clarifies expectations and facilitates compliance with common standards (Gehring and Faude 2014). In forestry governance, a public-private complex focused on timber regulation has developed multiple coordination mechanisms, prompting exporting countries and firms to comply with norms and procedures (Zeitlin and Overdevest 2021). In the field of financial stability, coordination among the Financial Action Task Force, the Financial Stability Board, and the Basel Committee has yielded several complementary standards and monitoring tools that have helped increase compliance rates, including in recent cryptocurrency regulation (Bursi and Greco 2025; Quaglia 2020).

These findings suggest a conditional relationship shaped by the architecture of the governance complex and the political alignment of its members. First, hierarchically ordered complexes with central coordinators or coordination mechanisms tend to enhance compliance by aligning expectations and monitoring across IOs. During the 2008 Greek financial crisis, the IMF-European Commission-European Central Bank Troika anchored conditionality and iterative reviews across multiple programmes, reducing opportunities for arbitrage even amid internal disagreements (Henning 2017). By contrast, loosely ordered complexes with parallel rule-makers often weaken compliance by enabling states to cherry-pick the

rules that best serve their interests. ENSURED research observes this dynamic in migration, to take one example, where non-binding, state-led Compacts lack effective coordination mechanisms and have produced limited, if any, detectable policy change (Peerboom et al. 2025).

Second, political alignment among pivotal states steers IOs toward coherent implementation. Financial stability governance offers a clear demonstration: ENSURED research shows that the Trump administration's recent attempts to pursue cryptocurrency regulation outside the established multilateral framework reduced prospects for consistent adoption and enforcement, while the EU signalled continued alignment with multilateral standards (Bursi and Greco 2025). In health governance, parallel reform initiatives – including International Health Regulations amendments and a Pandemic Agreement – created overlapping obligations whose implementation will depend on whether leading states align behind coordination within the WHO (Fernández and Heinzel 2025b).

Overall, governance complexity tends to depress outcomes in fragmented complexes, while hierarchy, coordination among IOs, and political alignment can improve compliance and implementation. This implies that compliance with the governance of complexes can be increased by investing in (1) the coordination of overlapping IOs and in (2) alignment among major states. Doing so increases the odds that complexity becomes a source of compliance rather than a license for cherry-picking.

Governance Complexity and Democracy

This section begins by conceptualising democratic legitimacy under conditions of governance complexity. Next, we present empirical evidence on two central dimensions of democratic governance: participation and accountability. Finally, we show how governance architecture and political alignment shape these patterns.

When a regime complex attempts to govern a specific policy area, its democratic legitimacy depends on the interactions between overlapping IOs. In line with ENSURED's conceptual framework, democratic governance requires that a complex (1) enables the fair participation of state and non-state stakeholders, and (2) ensures accountability to all affected actors (Choi et al. 2024; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2024). Overall, we find that governance complexity often creates more opportunities for participation and transparency, but rarely equalises influence or ensures coherent accountability. Democratic legitimacy in complex governance depends less on the sheer number of access points than on how well participation and oversight are coordinated across organisations.

Complexity and Participation

Participation refers to the extent to which state and non-state actors can participate in decision-making. It also encompasses fair representation across world regions, genders, and racial backgrounds within IOs' bureaucracies (Choi et al. 2024; Sommerer and Liese 2024). Governance complexity often creates new opportunities for participation, but also makes meaningful influence more difficult. Given their extensive diplomatic and administrative resources, powerful actors often engage in several IOs at once. Weaker actors, in contrast, regularly struggle to find the staff and funding to do so. In this way, complexity may broaden formal access while simultaneously exacerbating inequalities among stakeholders (Alter and Raustiala 2018). Ultimately, the democratic quality of governance complexes depends not only on inclusive participation within individual IOs, but also on whether participation rules and practices function coherently across the governance complex. If only some IOs within a complex provide meaningful access, influence becomes unevenly distributed.

Individual IOs vary considerably in both their openness to non-state actors and the extent to which they fairly represent member governments. Regarding state participation, IOs differ in terms of their membership rules as well as in their distribution of decision-making power. Roughly four in five IOs function as relatively exclusive clubs that limit entry depending on political and economic alignments (Davis 2023). Decision-making rules also vary widely. Today, weighted and majority voting are common among task-

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participation rules function across
the governance complex.

specific, global organisations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In contrast, many regional economic and security organisations, such as the East African Community (EAC) and NATO, remain consensus-based (Blake and Lockwood Payton 2015). Regarding non-state participation, many IOs gradually opened up in the 1990s and 2000s, however this trend has largely stagnated since 2010. Human rights and development organisations tend to be relatively accessible, whereas finance and security IOs remain less inclusive (Sommerer and Choi 2025). Even where formal access exists, participation is skewed: actors from the Global North are more frequently represented, as many Global South actors lack the resources to engage consistently (Vikberg 2024). Representation within IO bureaucracies mirrors these inequalities. Although some organisations have increased the number of women and staff from the Global South, senior positions remain dominated by men trained in the Global North (Parízek and Stephen 2021). When such organisations overlap within governance complexes, the coexistence of open and closed venues may either broaden access through alternative entry points or reinforce inequalities if decision-making shifts to more exclusive settings.

Empirical studies that directly examine participation across governance complexes confirm that complexity expands participation opportunities while also reinforcing inequalities in who actually shapes decisions. In the field of intellectual property and health, for example, governance complexity enabled a coalition of low-income countries and civil society groups to push back against restrictive WTO and WIPO policies. By working through the WHO and the Convention on Biological Diversity, they advanced new norms on access to medicines and biodiversity (Helfer 2009). ENSURED research identifies a similar pattern during the COVID-19 pandemic. Negotiations on vaccine access allowed for broader participation, yet high-income countries and major pharmaceutical companies largely set the agenda within the WHO (Fernández and Heinzel 2025a). In climate governance, overlapping IOs such as the UNFCCC, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), and the Clean Energy Ministerial provide multiple avenues for participation, but influence remains concentrated among well-resourced actors (Kuyper et al. 2018; Kustova et al. 2025). In migration governance, the Global Compacts involved broad

consultations, yet real decision-making power remains limited to a few forums dominated by advanced economies (Peerboom et al. 2025).

When leading powers share a commitment to democratic multilateralism, they can sustain inclusive procedures across IOs.

ENSURED research further shows that the architecture of governance complexes shapes these patterns. Hierarchical complexes with a central IO or coordination mechanism are better able to integrate input from diverse stakeholders. In climate governance, the

UNFCCC plays this coordinating role by linking numerous initiatives through a transparent accreditation and observer system (Kustova et al. 2025). By contrast, loosely ordered complexes without a recognised centre tend to reproduce existing inequalities. In migration governance, for example, parallel dialogues and review processes lack a coordination mechanism, dispersing civil society engagement and weakening the connection

between consultation and decision-making (Peerboom et al. 2025). Similar patterns have emerged in health governance, where overlapping consultation processes during negotiations on the Pandemic Agreement and revisions to the International Health Regulations overstretched the limited capacities of low-income countries and non-state actors (Fernández and Heinzel 2025b).

ENSURED research also suggests that political alignment among key states influences participation in governance complexes. When leading powers share a commitment to democratic multilateralism, they can sustain inclusive procedures across IOs. In Internet governance, for example, cooperation between the EU and its partners has helped support the inclusive Internet Governance Forum (Marconi and Greco 2025). On the other hand, when major powers diverge, participation narrows as negotiations shift to more exclusive IOs. In trade governance, for instance, plurilateral initiatives highlight how alignment among a few large economies can increase decision-making effectiveness while also making it less inclusive (Weinhardt et al. 2025). In health governance, persistent tensions between the Global South and Global North over intellectual property rights and surveillance powers have weakened engagement in WHO consultations and encouraged parallel negotiations that marginalise weaker actors (Fernández and Heinzel 2025a).

On balance, governance complexity opens the door to broader participation, but often makes influence more uneven – particularly when cooperation is fragmented or politically strained. Conversely, ordered architectures with coordination mechanisms and alignment among key member states can turn complexity into genuine inclusiveness. This implies that policymakers aiming to improve the democratic legitimacy of complex governance should (1) strengthen central IOs that can aggregate participation across venues, and (2) ensure procedural transparency across the complex.

Complexity and Accountability

Accountability focuses on whether IOs need to justify their actions, correct mistakes, and accept consequences for misconduct. Such accountability primarily depends on transparency, as effective oversight is challenging without access to information (Choi et al. 2024). Concretely, transparency requires IOs to make their work accessible to the public by publishing reports and meeting records. Accountability further depends on independent oversight and dispute resolution, which can be provided by parliamentary bodies, auditors, or courts that have the authority to investigate and, if necessary, sanction misconduct (Grigorescu 2015). In governance complexes, accountability depends on how these elements operate across overlapping IOs. Strict rules in one venue may not compensate for weak ones in another; forum-shifting can move consequential decisions to less accountable bodies; and joint policies often blur lines of responsibility. At the same time, diffused accountability can also be an asset. When multiple accountability mechanisms interlock, they can enhance democratic legitimacy. In this sense, governance complexity both constrains and enables accountability (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann 2024).

Since the 1990s, many IOs have adopted transparency policies, though exceptions for security and commercial confidentiality remain common and differ widely across IOs. Organisations with narrow mandates and democratic memberships tend to provide more publicly accessible information than IOs that address multiple complex problems or are dominated by non-democratic members (Grigorescu 2007). Regarding oversight and redress, formal mechanisms – including audits, inspection panels, evaluation units, and ethics offices – exist in most large IOs but vary in their independence and reach (Grigorescu 2010). By contrast, parliamentary oversight remains limited, as international parliamentary assemblies have expanded in number but rarely hold binding powers beyond consultation and reporting (Schimmelfennig et al. 2020). In short, transparency and accountability rules are highly uneven across IOs. While some have developed strong mechanisms, others provide only shallow information and oversight.

Transparency and accountability rules are highly uneven across IOs.

When moving from individual organisations to governance complexes, the evidence is mainly qualitative and concentrated in the climate, health, trade, and migration policy areas. This research shows that governance complexity reshapes accountability in diverse ways rather than producing a uniform effect. Overlapping IOs often provide multiple sources of public information but struggle to keep such efforts coherent. In climate governance, for instance, the UNFCCC's Enhanced Transparency Framework and the Global Climate Action Portal collect data from hundreds of initiatives, providing visibility that no single organisation could offer. Yet this transparency often increases the volume of available information without helping the public to understand or learn from it, as participants follow distinct reporting cycles and data standards (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014; Kuyper et al. 2018). A similar problem affects accountability in global health governance. The WHO's Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors overlaps with those of the Global Fund and Gavi, resulting in fragmented records that no one actor can verify (Berman 2021; Fernández and Heinzel 2025a). In trade and finance governance, in contrast, institutional overlap allows decision-making to shift from formal IOs with access-to-information rules to informal clubs and partnerships where disclosure is voluntary and uncoordinated (Donaldson and Kingsbury 2013; Parízek and Weinhardt 2025). With respect to redress mechanisms, complexity typically weakens accountability because review, audit, and evaluation mandates stop at organisational borders. Shared authority and funding – as in climate governance – can make it difficult for complainants to identify those responsible and the appropriate venues for their complaints (Berman 2021). This diffusion problem also limits the effectiveness of inspection panels and ethics offices in other policy areas. Development finance, however, offers more encouraging findings. Here, coordination routines, regular meetings, and joint redress mechanisms for co-financed projects have strengthened accountability (Nanwani 2014). Evidence on parliamentary oversight is scarce but points in a similar direction: international assemblies meet frequently and have signed memoranda of understanding. However, these steps remain largely symbolic and rarely translate into joint scrutiny or coordinated follow-up (Cutler 2013).

Two factors moderate the effects of complexity on accountability. First, hierarchically ordered complexes strengthen oversight through cumulative scrutiny, using shared reporting templates, joint audit procedures, and common parliamentary meetings. Examples include the Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and IMF as well as the joint handling of co-financed projects (Nanwani 2014). Similarly, in climate governance, accountability improved where mechanisms explicitly connect oversight across organisations (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Second, political alignment among member states plays a crucial role for accountability. Complexes dominated by democratic and resource-rich members tend to sustain stronger transparency and accountability mechanisms, facilitating the diffusion of democratic practices across organisations (Sommerer and Liese 2024). Conversely, in settings controlled by autocratic countries, confidentiality and selective reporting prevail.

Under such conditions, overlapping accountability mechanisms often generate confusion rather than learning, obscuring responsibility and encouraging blame avoidance (Koppell 2005).

On average, governance complexity broadens transparency but weakens accountability. While complexity multiplies disclosure points and review forums, without proper coordination, information often remains fragmented and consequences diffuse. Redress mechanisms and parliamentary oversight rarely span organisational boundaries, leaving stakeholders with visibility but little leverage. Only when transparency, redress, and oversight are linked across governance complexes does complexity enhance, rather than dilute, democratic control. Policymakers seeking to improve accountability should therefore (1) invest in creating strong linkages across IOs' individual accountability mechanisms, and (2) build coalitions among democratic states to sustain robust oversight mechanisms.

Only when transparency, redress, and oversight are linked across governance complexes does complexity enhance, rather than dilute, democratic control.

Conclusion: Managing Governance Complexity

Over the past decades, the global governance landscape has become increasingly crowded. Almost every major policy area is now shaped by a dense web of overlapping IOs rather than one central authority. This rise of governance complexity has transformed not only how decisions are made but also how the quality of global governance should be assessed. Does governance complexity make cooperation more robust and inclusive, or does it fragment rules and dilute accountability?

Drawing on ENSURED case studies and the broader academic literature, this report provides a systematic overview of how complex architectures and political alignments shape the quality of global governance. The analysis moves beyond individual organisations to assess what happens at the level of governance complexes, showing where complexity strengthens global governance and where it may create new problems. This concluding section brings these insights together. First, we take stock of the evidence across the five key policy areas analysed in the ENSURED project – trade and inequality, climate and biodiversity, global health, migration and human rights, and digitalisation – and summarise how complexity has influenced governance quality in each. Second, we reflect on what these lessons mean for the EU. How can it navigate and shape complex global environments to foster more robust, effective, and democratic governance?

Table 1: Complexity and Global Governance Quality Across Policy Areas

Continued on the next page.

	Trade and Inequality	Climate and Biodiversity	Global Health	Migration and Human Rights	Digitalisation
Current architecture of the complex	Fragmented	Strong hierarchy	Some coordination	Fragmented	Fragmented
Political alignment of key member states	Not aligned	Somewhat aligned	Somewhat aligned	Not aligned	Not aligned
Robustness					
Institutional stability	Mixed: Activity shifts to PTAs/plurilaterals; capacity fragments	Enhances: UNFCCC/Paris Agreement anchor enables usable redundancy	Mixed: WHO plus finance/IP venues sustain work under strain	Mixed: Diffuse venues; limited coordination	Mixed: Persistence across ITU/ICANN/OEWG, but stretched capacity
Rule stability	Undermines: Forum-shopping; Doha/AB crises weaken baseline	Enhances: Paris Agreement / UNFCCC maintains a common baseline	Mixed: IHR amendments and Pandemic Agreement create parallel obligations	Undermines: Partial/competing regional standards; weak global anchors	Undermines: Rival principles yield contested rules

Continued from the previous page.

Effectiveness					
Policy output	Enhances: More/faster via PTAs/plurilaterals, with lower ambition	Mixed: Orchestrated, frequent; ambition varies	Enhances: Speed/volume in COVID-19, with modest ambition	Mixed: Consultations proliferate; ambitious rules are rare	Undermines: Outputs shallow/contradictory across venues
Outcome	Mixed: Selective implementation; conflicting standards	Mixed: Implementation uneven; monitoring/reporting gaps	Undermines: Forum-shopping diluted compliance on equity	Undermines: Compacts treated as dialogue; little policy change	Undermines: Uneven adoption/enforcement across blocs
Democracy					
Participation	Mixed: More entry points; plurilaterals skew inclusiveness	Enhances: Broad, structured observer systems; unequal influence persists	Mixed: Wider consultations; major powers/pharma dominates	Mixed: Broad consultations; power concentrated elsewhere	Mixed: IGF opens doors; influence unequal
Accountability	Undermines: Shift to informal/club settings reduces transparency/redress	Mixed: Transparency expands; oversight fragmented	Undermines: Many disclosure points; weak cross-venue redress	Undermines: Oversight scattered; responsibility diffusion	Undermines: Fragmented transparency; little coherent oversight

The table above provides a compact overview of how complexity shapes the quality of global governance across the five policy fields studied in the ENSURED project. It shows where governance complexity tends to be beneficial—by stabilising cooperation or sustaining policy output—and where it creates friction that undermines robustness and effectiveness or blurs lines of accountability.

No single pattern emerges across policy areas. Instead, the effects of complexity vary depending on the architecture of the governance complex and the political alignment of its central member states. In climate governance, for example, the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement provide a recognisable centre. This hierarchical coordination, combined with relatively broad political alignment, keeps rules stable and output steady even when implementation falls short. By contrast, digitalisation and migration governance are more fragmented landscapes without a clear centre or shared political vision. As a result, these policy areas see a multiplication of standards, decreasing compliance, and weaker accountability. Trade and health governance show a more ambiguous picture. In trade, the breakdown of multilateral negotiations has pushed activity into multiple minilateral and regional agreements. This patchwork keeps the machinery running but erodes a shared sense of purpose: decisions may be fast, but regulations diverge and accountability becomes diffuse. Similarly, health governance during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that multiple IOs were able to react quickly to produce new regulations and partnerships, but not always with high ambition or strong democratic character.

The evidence on democratic legitimacy is sobering. More IOs often mean more formal entry points, but not more equal influence. Climate and health governance offer meaningful opportunities for participation,

but power still gravitates toward well-resourced states and large private actors. Transparency has improved across most governance complexes, yet real accountability – through joint scrutiny, redress mechanisms, or parliamentary oversight – still lags behind. Overall, the evidence shows that complexity is not in itself a problem for the quality of global governance – disordered complexity is. When IOs have a clear hierarchy and member states share a common political vision, complexity can strengthen governance to make it more robust, effective, and democratic. When governance complexes lack this hierarchy and alignment, authority often fragments and democratic legitimacy weakens.

The EU should use its coordination power and diplomatic reach to turn existing complexity into a strength.

As complexity is here to stay, we need to learn how to govern well within it. For the EU, this means using its coordination power and diplomatic reach to turn complexity into a strength. To enhance *robustness*, the first task lies at home. Across EU institutions, mandates frequently overlap in areas such as climate finance, migration, and digital regulation. A regular 'architecture

audit' could make these overlaps visible and designate a clear lead service for each sub-area. Where parallel efforts remain necessary, pre-agreed rules for burden-sharing and staff secondments would ensure that work continues when one part of the system falters. Externally, the same principle applies. The EU should take the lead in negotiating cooperation agreements – practical understandings among overlapping IOs that assign clear lead roles on specific topics, such as the WHO on global health or the International Labour Organization (ILO) on labour rights. Such hierarchies do not weaken multilateralism – they make it more robust. These efforts work best when combined with political alignment among key states.

To strengthen the *effectiveness* of global governance, policy efforts should focus on preserving the momentum of multiple actors while steering them toward shared outcomes. Inside the EU, this means creating small cross-fora teams that cut across directorates-general and ensure that EU positions in bodies like the WTO, UNFCCC, or G20 are developed in a coordinated manner rather than in isolation. Sequencing guidance – who acts first, who aligns next – can prevent parallel initiatives from undermining one another. Externally, the European Commission should double down on orchestration, mobilising other organisations, partnerships, and private actors around gaps when formal negotiations stall. Soft steering through joint calendars, benchmarks, and technical support can sustain policy output and gradually improve implementation, without creating new organisations or treaties. To maximise ambition, these coordination efforts should be paired with coalition-building among key states, enabling central IOs and multilateral forums to advance shared priorities.

Finally, improving *democratic legitimacy* requires more than opening doors. Inside the EU, participation must be not only broad but also meaningful. Civil society networks and local actors can serve as crucial intermediaries if their mandates, roles, and reporting lines are clearly defined and transparent. The Commission, in turn, can make its own orchestration efforts more accountable by setting measurable goals, publishing scorecards, and including renewal clauses in the initiatives it supports. Wherever the EU works with international partners or funds

global programmes, it should promote linked accountability, ensuring that transparency and oversight do not stop at organisational boundaries. Joint portals for public information, shared reporting formats, and common redress mechanisms would help close gaps that allow responsibility to slip through the cracks. In parallel, the EU could prioritise support for central IOs that can aggregate participation across a given complex and work with democratic partners to uphold strong and coherent oversight standards.

Complexity has become a permanent feature of global governance. While it cannot be undone, it can be better managed. The EU's long experience with power-sharing and compromise gives it a head start. If the Commission balances coordination with openness and pragmatism with principle, it can help transform today's fragmented governance landscape into one that actually works together.

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Funded by
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The ENSURED project is funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Call HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01 – Grant agreement n° 101092077. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (granting authority). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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