LEGITIMACY IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE. A CORNERSTONE FOR MANAGEABLE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

A major difficulty for predictable and manageable global development is the weakness of global regulatory institutions. Global governance can greatly promote order, stability and directed change regarding planetary problems. We see this, for example, when global health regulation combats transboundary epidemics and when global environmental governance repairs the ozone layer. In contrast, developments in issue-areas with weaker global institutions, such as arms control and migration, tend to be much less predictable and manageable – and to that extent potentially more harmful.

On the whole today's global regimes tend to be fragile. Institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the Group of Twenty (G20) struggle with shortages of resources, policies, and authority. As a result, the problem-solving capacity of contemporary global governance is severely constrained. How will we – without stronger global regulation – be able adequately to address climate change, cybersecurity, financial stability, peacebuilding, and so on?

A possible partial remedy for this predicatment could be increased legitimacy, understood here in a sociological sense as a situation where people regard a regime to exercise its authority in an appropriate manner. A legitimate governing arrangement attracts confidence, trust and approval from the people who are governed. With such endorsement the regulatory body may find it easier to attract resources, to reach decisions, to obtain compliance, and generally to tackle policy problems.[1]

This is not to suggest that legitimacy is a panacea for successful global policy. Faith in a regulatory regime is not enough by itself to handle global challenges. Still,

[1] Thomas Sommerer and Hans Agné, 'Consequences of Legitimacy in Global Governance', in Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand and Jan Aart Scholte (eds), *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

significant degrees of legitimacy would seem necessary – even if by themselves not sufficient – for the management of planetary problems.

This paper explores from where global governance institutions can get legitimacy. What are the sources, the grounds, the causes of legitimacy beliefs toward regulatory authorities that operate beyond the state? The paper examines these questions theoretically, mostly summarising work done by the Legitimacy in Global Governance (LegGov) programme in Sweden, especially as published in its recent book, *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences*.[2] LegGov also currently undertakes empirical research using this framework of analysis, drawing evidence from around the world.[3]

Below the paper first offers some general comments about legitimacy. Then the possible drivers of legitimacy in global governance are discussed sequentially in terms of *institutional* sources, *individual* sources, and *societal* sources. The paper's concluding suggestion is that we might look to a combination of these three types of sources in order to build up greater legitimacy for global governance – and thereby to gain more predictability and manageability for global development.

As already mentioned, legitimacy as understood here involves a belief and perception that governors exercise their authority (i.e. their power to rule) appropriately. When audiences regard a regime to be legitimate, they have confidence and trust in this regulatory arrangement. As such, legitimacy involves underlying approval of a governing apparatus.

From Max Weber onwards, modern political theory has explored legitimacy mainly in relation to the state. However, contemporary governance involves much more than

[2] Tallberg *et al*., esp. chs 3-5.

[3] E.g. Lisa M. Dellmuth, Jan Aart Scholte and Jonas Tallberg, 'Institutional Sources of Legitimacy for International Organizations: Beyond Procedure versus Performance', *Review of International Studies*. Available under First View at http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S26021051900007X

the state, including substantial elements of global regulation. Not surprisingly, then, scholarship of recent decades has increasingly enquired into the workings of legitimacy beyond the state, in regional and global institutions.

Legitimacy can be understood normatively and sociologically. Normative legitimacy is established by evaluating a governance arrangement against certain philosophically developed moral standards. In contrast, sociological legitimacy is established by observing and seeking to explain the attitudes and behaviours of the subjects of a given regime. The present paper is concerned with sociological legitimacy, since such research can reveal how legitimacy in global governance actually functions, rather than how philosophers argue that it should function.

Regarding the dynamics of legitimacy – how it operates – key questions concern its sources. Where does sociological legitimacy come from? What circumstances make subjects extend (or withhold) their confidence and approval from a given regime? The literature on legitimacy suggests many possible grounds, which this paper categorises under the headings of institutional, individual, and societal sources. Much theoretical reflection and most empirical investigations on legitimacy emphasise one or the other of these three types of sources.

Institutional sources of legitimacy are connected with features of the governing organisation itself.[4] Various theorists have highlighted different institutional qualities as drivers of legitimacy in global governance. Here we distinguish four categories of institutional sources: purpose, procedures, performance, and personality.

With regard to purpose, subjects may accord legitimacy to a regulatory institution because they believe in the function or mission that the organisation serves. For example, people may regard the UN as legitimate because of its aim to advance

[4] Jan Aart Scholte and Jonas Tallberg, 'Theorizing the Institutional Sources of Global Governance Legitimacy', in Tallberg *et al.*, pp. 56-74

peace, even if in practice the regime may often struggle to realise that goal. In this situation it is the rationale of the global institution that counts for legitimacy, rather than its actual operations.

With regard to procedures, approval of a global governance institution derives from its organisational structure and processes. In a procedural vein, people attribute legitimacy to the way that a regulatory body operates, regardless even of the results of its decisions and policies. For example, audiences might find the World Bank legitimate because they view its modus operandi to be transparent, efficient and/or non-discriminatory. Conversely, constituents might withhold legitimacy on procedural grounds if they feel that a global governance organisation follows undemocratic, incompetent and/or unfair procedures.

With regard to performance, confidence in a global governance apparatus comes from satisfaction with its results. On performance lines, subjects endorse a regulatory institution due to its impacts, regardless even of how it formulates and executes the policies that generate those impacts. Thus actors might find the International Monetary Fund (IMF) legitimate because they see it achieving financial stability or a fair distribution of economic costs and benefits. Conversely, failure to deliver such outcomes could be a performance reason for actors to deny legitimacy to the IMF.

With regard to personality, here legitimacy beliefs are fuelled by the character of one or more individuals who run a global governance institution. Audiences may trust a given regime because they find certain leading figures to be confidence-inducing. So, for example, Kofi Annan arguably enhanced the legitimacy of the UN during his tenure as Secretary-General, to the extent that he was seen as an inspirational and visionary leader.

In practice the various institutional sources of legitimacy – purpose, procedure, performance and personality – operate concurrently and in any number of combinations. Indeed, people often explain their confidence in and approval of a global governance arrangement with reference to a mix of organisational features. Thus while our analytical framework distinguishes four categories of institutional sources, in actual legitimacy perceptions the different qualities tend to blend together.

Whereas institutionalist explanations locate the drivers of legitimacy in qualities of the governing organisation in question, political psychology suggests that beliefs in rightful rule result (also) from circumstances of the individual subject. From this perspective, legitimacy perceptions derive from the perceiver (the individual), as distinct from the perceived (the institution). Possible individual sources of legitimacy include *inter alia* a subject's sense of social identity, calculation of interests, levels of social trust, and political knowledge.[5]

In respect of social identity, a person's perceptions of legitimacy in global governance may reflect the degree to which they feel connected with arenas beyond the nation-state. So individuals with more cosmopolitan dispositions would be more ready to give legitimacy to global authorities, perhaps even forgiving shortfalls in their institutional workings. Conversely, people who focus their social identity only around localities and countries would be less likely to accord legitimacy to global governance, regardless of how well the regime might operate institutionally.

In respect of interest calculation, legitimacy perceptions toward global governance may be driven by the degree to which individuals estimate that they – either personally or through their collective affiliations – gain or lose from the regime in question. These benefits and costs could be economic (e.g. in terms of employment and income), biological (e.g. in terms of health and ecology), political (e.g. in terms

[5] Lisa M. Dellmuth, 'Individual Sources of Legitimacy Beliefs: Theory and Data', in Tallberg *et al*., pp. 37-55.

of status and influence) or psychological (e.g. in terms of learning and friendships). This explanatory logic says that it is not institutional performance per se that determines legitimacy beliefs, but subjects' utilitarian cost-benefit calculations vis-à-vis those outcomes.

In respect of social trust, this individual-psychological explanation suggests that legitimacy beliefs are a function of a person's general faith in the other side of their relationships. On this logic, people who have an overall high trust towards the individuals and institutions that they engage with would be more ready to have confidence in ruling authorities, including global regimes. Conversely, people with a generally mistrustful disposition towards others in society would be less likely to lend legitimacy to (global) regulatory apparatuses.

In respect of political knowledge, the proposition is that having information and understanding about global governance makes an individual more ready to give these regimes legitimacy. On this reasoning, persons who lack awareness of global authorities are unable to form opinions about, or construct bonds of legitimacy with, such regulatory bodies. Knowledge deficits regarding global governance can also more readily fuel feelings of alienation and perceptions of threat that encourage perceptions of illegitimacy vis-à-vis these regimes.

As with the institutional drivers discussed earlier, individual sources of legitimacy beliefs vis-à-vis global governance do not operate in isolation from each other. Thus, for example, levels of political knowledge can impact on levels of social trust. Meanwhile most people's psychology does not operate with either identity logics or interest logics, but with some combination of the two. Research on legitimacy in global governance needs therefore to consider the concurrent workings of several psychological forces.

Whereas psychological accounts root the sources of legitimacy beliefs in the individual, sociological perspectives focus attention on forces related to the social order.[6] On this third line of explanation, legitimacy in global governance derives not (only) from institutions and individuals, but (also) from the social structures in which these actors are embedded. Possible structural forces that could shape beliefs in rightful global rule include *inter alia* a hegemonic state, capitalism, reigning discourses, and social stratifications.

The concept of a hegemonic state proposes that legitimacy in global governance arises when a dominant government constructs and upholds rules and regulatory institutions of world order – and exercises this leadership in a way that other major parties in the international system endorse. Thus a hegemonic state sustains global governance not only with a preponderance of resources, but also with widespread approval from others of its role in underwriting world order. Arguments about hegemonic states have usually proposed that the United States Government served as a hegemonic state in global governance during the second half of the twentieth century – and perhaps beyond to the present day.

Capitalism figures as a structural force of legitimacy especially in neo-Gramscian theories of global governance, although many non-Marxists, too, see capitalism as a foremost structural force in modern world politics. These perspectives say that the rules of global governance – especially in areas of production, trade, investment, money and finance – mainly serve to facilitate surplus accumulation. Such regulation-for-capital often helps to produce large material inequalities in world society, gaps which might be expected to fuel political instability. Yet, so neo-Gramscian theory suggests, legitimating ideologies intervene to create mindsets that are positively disposed towards capitalist global governance, in spite of the major inequalities that it generates.

[6] Jan Aart Scholte, 'Social Structure and Global Governance Legitimacy', in Tallberg *et al.*, pp. 75-97.

Like neo-Gramscian notions of ideology, discourse theories maintain that ideational forces are important generators of legitimacy beliefs. A discourse is an ordered arrangement of verbal consciousness: i.e. a pattern of language and communication which forms a framework for knowing the world. The social-structural power of discourse entails that certain forms of meaning are embedded as the 'conventional wisdom' in a given societal context. This dominant knowledge also marginalizes alternative possible understandings of the world. Discursive structures become sources of legitimacy in global governance when they set the linguistic terms and knowledge frames for assessments of appropriate authority. For example, market discourses and technical discourses arguably have powerful legitimating impacts around today's global economic governance. Other prominent legitimating discourses in contemporary global regulation include 'security' and 'accountability'. Such linguistic cues can encourage legitimacy perceptions toward global governance, even when people struggle to articulate what these words actually mean.

A further possible structural source of (de)legitimation of global governance lies with social stratifications: i.e. entrenched inequalities between group categories. Such social hierarchies can relate to age, caste, class, (dis)ability, faith, gender, geography, language, nationality, race, and sexual orientation. In each case the dominant side of the axis (e.g. men, global north, or white persons) has structural advantages of power and resources over the corresponding subordinate side (e.g. women, global south, or people of colour). Inasmuch as people regard social stratifications to be fair or unfair, these structural inequalities can become implicated in legitimacy beliefs. Thus a global governance arrangement could be perceived as illegitimate to the extent that it is seen to produce arbitrary and unjust social hierarchies. Conversely, global regulatory institutions could attract greater legitimacy beliefs insofar as they are seen to resist and reduce social stratifications. For example, critics have often attacked the

IMF for allegedly increasing gaps between rich and poor countries, while the UN has won many plaudits for its efforts to advance gender equity.

Much as the various possible institutional and individual sources of legitimacy in global governance may interconnect with and affect each other, so the different potential societal sources may also interrelate. Thus, for example, a hegemonic state can help to uphold a world capitalist order, and vice versa. Capitalism through its uneven distribution of surplus can fuel social stratifications, and concurrently those hierarchies can help advantaged categories of people to achieve more accumulation. Given this potential multiplicity of social structures and their complex intersections, researchers might be advised not to affirm in advance the primacy of one particular societal source of legitimacy, but rather to explore the possible relevance of several such forces.

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the importance of legitimate global governance as a force for predictability and manageability of global development. The above discussion has argued that, when people have confidence and trust in global authorities, those regimes are better able to generate successful policies vis-à-vis planetary challenges. Conversely, the absence of legitimacy substantially weakens world order. It is therefore vital to understand what circumstances can give rise to legitimacy in global governance, as well as what conditions can undermine approval for global regimes.

It seems most unlikely that the drivers of legitimacy in global governance can be reduced to just one or two of the many potential sources reviewed above. We have already noted that the various institutional sources can have mutual effects, as can the various individual sources and the various societal sources. Moreover, political

sociology teaches that one cannot ontologically separate individual, institutional and structural power in society.[7] One has to consider the three together.

It furthermore seems highly unlikely that each instance of legitimacy in global governance would involve the same combination of institutional, individual and societal sources. Thus the drivers of legitimacy vis-à-vis the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are probably not the exact same as the forces propelling legitimacy at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The dynamics may also shift over time: for example, the sources of (il)legitimacy for the WTO in 1995 may be different from those prevailing in 2019. Combinations of sources of legitimacy in global governance may also vary by country or region, as well as by social sector.

Given this complexity, it is not possible to offer a single, more specific, and fixed formula for explaining legitimacy in global governance. What we can do – as this paper has done – is construct a framework of analysis which encompasses a wide range of possible sources of people's confidence in and approval of authority beyond the state. After that, working out which particular combination of forces operates in which particular concrete setting of global governance is a matter for empirical investigation.

[7] Cf. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).