Popular Legitimacy of Global Multistakeholder Partnerships:
Evidence from survey experiments in Brazil, UK and the US [1]

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Introduction

Partnerships between market, civil society and public actors are a central element of global governance initiatives like the Millennium Development Goals and its successor the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda. Currently, virtually all international organizations (IOs) have partnership programs. IOs' promotion of public-private or multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) – defined as collaboration, networks, or more or less formalized institutions between public, business and civil society actors that emerged in domestic politics– has now become strongly associated with global sustainable development diplomacy and multilateral institutions.[2] MSPs – and *multi-stakeholdernism* have been advocated as governance mechanisms that could potentially solve implementation gaps and address democratic deficits, particularly by including various stakeholders (Gleckman 2018; Scholte 2020). A predominant view is that MSPs – because of their flexible and horizontal governance structure compared to intergovernmental institutions– can increase the legitimacy, accountability and inclusion in global governance. MSPs – alongside private global environmental governance (Neuner 2020) are assumed to create propitious conditions for a more inclusive, effective and efficient global policy environment, strengthen performance and to reduce democratic deficits (Andonova 2017; Beisheim 2015; Bäckstrand 2006). MSPs typifies informal global governance institution that exist in parallel, inside or outside formal intergovernmental or treaty-based institutions (Westerwinter et al 2020)

Despite the growing trend of partnerships in local, national and global settings, we know little about the sociological legitimacy or public confidence in global MSPs. Previous research on the legitimacy of partnerships have focused on normative legitimacy, i.e. to what extent partnerships conform to democratic values such as inclusion, transparence, representation and accountability. However, there is scant research of how MSPs as global governance innovations are perceived by the public and ordinary citizens. Does public legitimacy vary across different types of MSPs and if so, what factors determine their degree of public support? For instance, the Inter-American Development Bank, one of the leading regional development banks, has urged its members/borrowers to initiate partnership projects in order to increase legitimacy and transparency and, thus, promote sustainable development.[3] The World Bank explicitly promotes MSPs as a solution to complex problems. The 2030 Agenda dedicates the 17th Global

[2] For similar definitions, see Andonova (2017:2) and Schäferhoff (2009:455)

[3] Public-Private Partnerships to Promote Transparency (2019). The third CEO Summit of the Americas. The Inter-American Development Bank.

Goal to promote MSPs as a governance option alongside intergovernmental agreements. In other words, the international community has advocated the model of partnerships as an important complementary mechanism for collective-problem solving across various multilateral institutions, such as the Millennium Development Goals, the UN Global Compact and now 2030 Agenda, that attempts to set up a new generation of MSP intergovernmental organizations. Nevertheless, we lack knowledge of how partnerships, with their diverse objectives and features, are perceived by the public. While MSPs have some common characteristics, they are by no means uniform - they may vary across features, functions, and degree of institutionalization that can ostensibly affect citizens' perceptions of legitimacy. For example, we have reasons to assume that citizens' confidence in MSPs vary depending on if the partnership is led by civil society organizations or private companies, if it displays a high or low degree of transparency, inclusion and performance. But what specific features of MSPs actually influence their perceived legitimacy?

The *aim* of this study is to assess the public legitimacy of global MSPs hosted by multilateral institutions. Specifically, we ask which features of global MSPs are preferred by citizens and to what extent specific features increase or decrease the public support of MSPs. The backdrop of this study is the UN 2030 Agenda that highlights the crucial role of MSPs in global governance to tackle global collective action problems related SDGs on health, environment, human rights and development (Beisheim & Simon 2018). Drawing on previous research, we argue that *seven* set of MSP features may influence citizens' legitimacy perceptions. These MPS features relate to partnership *performance*, *transparency*, *inclusion*, *leadership, goal, function and country of implementation*. The theoretical expectation is that some of these features are likely to exert a direct influence on citizens' opinions. For other MSP features, we expect to observe heterogeneous effects, conditioned on citizens' political (left-right) and personal values (GAL-TAN inspired).

We acknowledge that there is a considerable variation among MSPs, from short-term or one-time projects to long-term commitments such as the Global Alliance on Vaccines and Immunization and Global Partnership for Education. Some MSPs are fully-fledged international organizations with a secretariat and governance structures such as the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP). For our purpose, we focus specifically on global MSPs that often involve cooperation between civil society, government, business under the auspices of international organizations (the UN or other multilateral organizations). Global

MSPs are characterized by cross-border and non-state relations, with public policy objectives (Pattberg and Widerberg 2016).

The motivation behind our focus on the legitimacy perceptions of citizens also stems from the argument that public opinion has a significant influence on policymaking in global governance (Copelovitch 2019; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Tallberg et al; Zürn 2018; Huber et al 2020; Neuner 2020). In this context, public perceptions are of significance as political elites and bureaucrats increasingly promote global governance mechanisms and make decisions based on citizens' support. Consequently, studying the public support of MSPs – especially in major developing and developed countries– has important implications for the future role of MSPs as new collaborative modes of global governance.

In order to study the impact of MSP attributes on popular legitimacy, we utilize a conjoint survey experiment fielded to 2,000 representative samples in Brazil, the UK and the US (6,000 in total). We have selected these countries because they arguably are the most significant in size and power in their region and prominent actors in global governance and multilateral institutions. The conjoint analysis design allows us to estimate the effect of MSP attributes on popular legitimacy along the various dimensions (Bechtel and Scheve 2013). In our experiments, respondents will be presented with hypothetical MSPs that differ with regard to seven features.

This article makes several contributions to the expanding literature on MSPs in global governance. First, it is the first study that we know of that explores the public legitimacy of MSPs. While researchers recently have evaluated public support for private global governance and standard setting organizations (Neuner 2020), studies on citizens' perceptions of global public-private governance innovations such as MSPs are hitherto lacking. As such, we provide novel evidence on what attributes of MSPs that can increase or decrease their popular legitimacy. Second, we utilize a survey experiment design in three major industrialized and developed countries, which allows us to examine the causal effects that are difficult to identify in observational studies. Third, we theorize and develop hypotheses of how specific features of MSPs may affect public opinion.

Explaining the citizens' perception and support of MSPs

Drawing on previous studies of MSPs, we focus on features that often are invoked when MSPs are either criticized or praised for their role in global governance. The particular features are mainly informed by the MSP literature but also by recent studies of legitimacy in the IO literature. Specifically, we focus on seven features – *performance*, *transparency*, *inclusion*, *leadership, goal, function and country of implementation* – that we summarize in able 1.

Table 1. Institutional design and qualities of MSPs

Attribute	**Attribute value**
[**Performance**] The partnership:	- is effective and solves most problems - is somewhat effective and solves some problems - is not effective and solves few problems
[**Transparency**] The information about the partnership's decisions	- is transparent - is partially transparent - is not transparent
[**Inclusion**] In the partnership's decision-making…	- all stakeholders have an equal say - only the resourceful stakeholders have a say
[**Leadership**] The partnership is led by	- Governments - NGOs - Business associations - IGOs - Universities
[**Goal**] The partnership's goal is to	- Protect human rights Promote public health - Reduce poverty and hunger - Promote trade and business - Ensure peace and security - Protect the environment - Promote gender equality - Protect the climate
[**Function**] The partnership achieves its goals through	- Information and advocacy - Capacity building - Rule-setting - Providing service - Raising money/funding
[Country of implementation] The partnership:	- operates in low- and high-income countries - operates only in low-income countries - operates only in high-income countries

With respect to the *performance*, we expect that the popular legitimacy of MSPs that are effective and solve problems is higher than of MSPs that perform poorly and are ineffective. Moreover, we expect more *transparent* and *inclusive* MSPs to gain more support by citizens than MPS that are less or not transparent and inclusive.

We also propose that the *leadership* of MSPs might affect their popular legitimacy, though conditioned on citizens' political beliefs and personal values. We expect that citizens on the left of the political spectrum would be particularly against private-led MSPs, while citizens on the right of the political spectrum are likely to prefer business-led MSPs. Right-wing citizens might associate business-led MSPs with innovation while left-wing citizens might associate these with privatization and self-interest. Some researchers assume that the involvement of IGOs lends legitimacy and impartiality to MSPs. However, citizens with stronger nationalist preferences – as opposed to globalist – might prefer government-led MSPs over IGO-led MSPs. In contrast, citizens that subscribe to globalist/international values may have stronger confidence in MSPs that are led by IGOs or NGOs.

In line with previous research, we expect that the information provided on the *goal* of MSPs, defined broadly, will have an impact on citizens' legitimacy perceptions of MSPs. Also, here, we theorize that this impact will be conditioned on political beliefs and values where, for instance, left-wing citizens are likely to favor MSPs that strive to reduce poverty and hunger over MSPs that promote trade and business. But the left-right is not the only dimension of interest; we expect that citizens' values in terms of globalist, traditionalist, and environmental also affects the preference for some MSPs over others.