



International Organisations and Public Trust in a Multiplex World

Nate Henderson – Adjunct Research Fellow, HADRI

Abstract

International organisations derive their formal authority from member states, yet this state-granted legitimacy is increasingly insufficient to sustain their operational capacity and funding needs. Drawing on literature on multiplexity and on original research into Australian public trust in international organisations, this paper argues that public trust constitutes a distinct and increasingly indispensable foundation of authority for international organisations, separate from but complementary to their legitimacy among states. A comparative case study of UNICEF and WHO shows that organisations that have cultivated direct relationships with publics, whether through fundraising necessity, programmatic presence, or deliberate communications investment, are better positioned to weather the erosion of state-guaranteed legitimacy than those that have relied on intergovernmental consensus alone. The paper concludes that the transition to a multiplex order requires international organisations to recalibrate their accountability relationships in order to embrace those publics whose trust increasingly impacts their ability to communicate authoritatively, deliver programs effectively, and sustain funding.

Introduction

International organisations such as the United Nations (UN) play a critical role in the global governance of international development and humanitarian affairs. The role of these organisations, however, is being tested as the world order shifts and traditional means of raising funding and delivering against mandates are changing. Specifically, state-granted legitimacy alone is no longer sufficient to guarantee the funding, mandates, and operational capacity of these organisations. Public trust is therefore an increasingly necessary second foundation of authority.

This working paper explores the construct of a multiplex world, one where power is diffuse and international organisations need to engage with multiple stakeholders beyond the traditional member states. The article argues that the way international organisations can respond is through a greater focus on public trust beyond their state-led mandates.

The paper presents the case studies of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), to show that international organisations already engage with the public but need to organisationally recognise the support of public trust in delivering against their mandates and maintaining fundings. The case studies are based on original research, including surveys of the Australian public and interviews with UNICEF and WHO staff.

It concludes with the argument that the transition to a multiplex order does not affect all international organisations equally; rather, it amplifies existing organisational tendencies. Organisations that have already cultivated direct relationships with publics – such as through fundraising necessity, programmatic presence, or deliberate communications investment – are better positioned to weather the erosion of state-guaranteed legitimacy. Those that have historically relied on the comfort of intergovernmental consensus face a more fundamental challenge: not simply a funding shortfall, but a relational deficit that no governance reform at the member state level can easily repair. The multiplex world, in this sense, does not merely change who funds international organisations: it changes whose trust they need to earn.

How the multiplex world impacts international organisations

Between 25th April and 26th June 1945, delegates from fifty nations convened in San Francisco for the United Nations Conference on International Organisations. The conference concluded with countries signing the Charter that established the organisation of the United Nations. While the San Francisco Conference itself was structured around a five-power concert of United Kingdom, United States of America (USA), France, China and the Soviet Union (USSR), the underlying erosion of British

and French power relative to the USA and the USSR anticipated the bipolar order that would consolidate over the following years. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, however, a unipolar world emerged, led by the USA. This was a period of great international cooperation with a proliferation of global agreements during the 1990s spanning trade, with the World Trade Organization; environment, with the Kyoto Protocol; security, with START I and START II; and human rights, with the Rome Statute (Ikenberry, 2001).

Yet, this period of American unchallenged architecture of a liberal international order was short-lived. The 2007–08 Global Financial Crisis is widely regarded as the inflection point at which this unipolar arrangement began to give way, marking the transition from the unipolarity that had prevailed since 1989 to what Borrell (2021) terms ‘complex multipolarity’. Yet, it is also argued that a more appropriate term to describe the world from that point onward is ‘multiplex’. A multiplex world is characterised by its de-centralised structure, a decline in the relative importance of great powers, a rise in the interactive capacity of middle and small powers, and the growing significance of cooperation among nations not necessarily geographically proximate to one another (Acharya et al., 2023). As Acharya (2014) argues, the ‘unipolar moment’ of US dominance contributed to the erosion of the very liberal international order the US had built by acting unilaterally against the norms and principles of its own order, starting with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The result, as Zakaria (2022) observed in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war, is a genuinely post-American era.

The crisis facing development and humanitarian organisations in the multiplex world runs deeper than a funding shortfall: it is a crisis in the normative foundations of the authority that bureaucracies such as the World Bank and the WHO have historically derived from their member states (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). The post-war development order rested on a shared understanding among member states that international solidarity, channelled through multilateral institutions, was itself an expression of appropriate great-power conduct. The decline of the US has offered the opportunity for others, such as China, to directly challenge the development finance model with a model that explicitly rejects political conditionality (Dreher et al., 2022). Newly established institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank are not merely material competitors to the US-dominated World Bank; they represent a direct challenge to the human rights conditionality, democratic governance and aid transparency that has legitimised the Western-led development order (Chin, 2016). International organisations are therefore facing more than a funding gap: they are facing early signs that the shared norms that gave rise to these organisations in the first place are themselves being contested.

The conventional response to a funding crisis by international organisations is to lobby member states in intergovernmental forums such as the United Nations General Assembly and the World Health Assembly. However, this type of strategy is calibrated for a world where state-granted legitimacy is the only requirement for relevancy. This working paper argues that in the emerging world order, public trust is an additional and critical element for international organisations to ensure they can deliver on their mandates and maintain funding.

Public trust is critical to international organisations

Trust is, at its core, a social relationship that is well captured through Hardin's (1992, p.169) statement "A trusts B to do x". Weigert and Lewis (1985) break trust into three interlocking elements: cognitive trust, which is built on familiarity with an organisation and its work; affective trust, which reflects the emotional bonds people form with institutions based on shared values or care; and behavioural trust, which concerns the expectations a person holds about whether an organisation will actually deliver as anticipated. These elements are mutually reinforcing, with cognitive or affective perceptions impacting behavioural trust, and vice versa. Trust differs from legitimacy, with the latter defined as the right to rule and the duty of the public to obey organisations that wield it (Tallberg & Zurn, 2019). States have provided international organisations this right to rule via delegated authority but have the ultimate power to take it away through temporary means (e.g., not providing funding), formal governance measures (e.g., constitution changes) or simply by ignoring international organisations' decisions—given these do not have any independent enforcement powers (Jackson & Gau, 2016).

Torgler's (2007) comprehensive model of public trust in international organisations makes clear that the relationship international organisations have with states is not uniform or predictable. The factors shaping whether an individual trusts an international organisation include their confidence in domestic institutions, personal political values, views on globalisation, perceptions of corruption, and the degree to which their own country is regarded as a relevant global actor. These factors are largely external to the operations of international organisation, yet they form the conditions upon which a relationship with the public is built. Similarly, Voeten (2013) finds that public support for international courts depends less on their judicial performance than on the broader political and ideological alignment between a court's rulings and domestic public opinion. This does not mean that international organisations do not have a role in establishing their own trust, as will be shown in the next section of this paper, but it does demonstrate that international organisations must engage with the public meaningfully and regularly in order to build trust.

In a multiplex world that sees an increase in the politicisation of international organisations' mandates (De Vries et al., 2021), it is imperative that international organisations have a relationship with the public separate from, but aligned to, its relationship with states. Without it, international organisations can expect governments to dominate the discussion on the role and function of international organisations, sometimes with negative organisational impacts (Bayram & Shields, 2021) such as defunding, inability to deliver programs, and lack of trust in their expertise.

UNIEF and WHO as case studies on trust

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are UN affiliated international agencies that operate globally and have strong brand recognition. In 2024, a survey of the Australian public was conducted with the aim of understanding the public's views on these organisations, focusing on trust. The survey was distributed via social media and through direct engagement with a sample representative of the Australian public, achieving a total of 188 responses. Questions were designed to gauge public trust on UNICEF and WHO, and how this affects organisational capacity to deliver on their mandates and maintain funding. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with UNICEF and WHO staff to triangulate the survey data. A total of 10 interviews were conducted with Australia-based staff of these organisations, working across a range of roles including communications, programs and fundraising. Interview questions were designed to determine the importance that the organisations place on public trust as opposed to legitimacy among member states.

The contrast between UNICEF and WHO is instructive because it illustrates two similar organisations taking different approaches to trust. UNICEF, as a fully donor-funded organisation with different country offices that function as semi-independent entities, has advanced an institutional culture that regards the public as its primary constituency. The interviews held with UNICEF Australia staff demonstrate that this office does not treat public trust as a given, but as part of its mandate. Staff described monitoring social media demographics to tailor content by platform and audience segment, delivering domestic programs with Aboriginal communities to ensure proximate relevance, and tracking how the broader UN brand's reputation in the Australian media affected their own.

The survey results show that Australian public opinion toward UNICEF is broadly positive, with a strong foundation of recognition and trust. Nearly all respondents had some awareness of the organisation, with only 7% reporting unfamiliarity. UNICEF is a trusted organisation, with 86% of respondents trusting the health information it provides. This confidence extends to perceptions of the organisation's character and

competence with almost three quarters of respondents feeling that UNICEF genuinely cares about providing health advice and 60% rating its expert knowledge in international health as high or very high. Assessments of effectiveness were broadly affirmative, with around 55% describing UNICEF as effective on a scale.

WHO presents a counterpoint in some ways. Its governance structure, rooted in the World Health Assembly and the primacy of member state relationships, has produced what Park (2006) calls a “closed” international organisation, which is where decisions and accountability run through states and the public remains a peripheral audience rather than a stakeholder. This was confirmed in the interviews, where WHO staff expressed that the public was not seen as an important stakeholder for the organisation. Although the Geneva Head Office had started to invest in social media to showcase the work of the organisation, it was very transactional and not at all focused on how the public regards WHO.

The survey, however, did find positive results from the public on this organisation, with recognition of WHO at 94%, and 82% of respondents expressing trust in the health information it provides. WHO is also seen as having stronger expertise than UNICEF, with 72% of respondents rating its knowledge on international health as high or very high compared to 60% for UNICEF. Perceptions of the organisation's commitment are also strong, with 79% believing it cares or cares a lot about providing health advice. Its effectiveness ratings, however, are more cautious with only 36% rating it as “effective.”

Possible pathways for international organisations

UNICEF is an organisation that has learned to construct its authority from the ground up through accumulated social relationships with publics. These are not member states and have no formal governance role, but their aggregate trust determines whether the organisation can sustain itself. In a multiplex world, where no single power bloc can guarantee the political conditions for multilateral funding, this model of distributed, relationally grounded authority is not a niche strategy: it is an adaptive one.

While WHO receives strong trust from the Australian public, this appears to be more by chance than by design, as confirmed also in the interviews. Interestingly, while WHO is focused on its legitimacy among member states, the reality of its funding suggests that it has come to recognise the importance of the role of other stakeholders. WHO's actual funding model has been changing, with assessed contributions from member states declining and with extra-budgetary funding from philanthropies and civil society growing as a proportion of its budget (WHO, 2024). A case in point is the polio eradication campaign that has been funded principally by Rotary International through its PolioPlus programme since 1985, and by the Gates Foundation, a major

donor since 2007, rather than by states who are members of the World Health Assembly (GPEI, 2024). There is, in other words, a widening gap between WHO's self-understanding as a state-legitimated body and the social reality of how it sustains its work. This kind of gap is a normative dissonance the multiplex world produces and accelerates.

Taken together, this comparison between the two agencies suggests that the transition to a multiplex order does not affect all international organisations equally but rather amplifies existing organisational tendencies. Organisations that have already cultivated direct relationships with publics – such as through fundraising necessity, programmatic presence, or deliberate communications investment – are better positioned to weather the erosion of state-guaranteed legitimacy. Those that have historically relied on the comfort of intergovernmental consensus face a more fundamental challenge; not simply a funding shortfall, but a relational deficit that no governance reform at the member state level can easily repair. The multiplex world, in this sense, does not merely change who funds international organisations: it changes whose trust they need to earn.

As Torgler's (2007) model presented earlier makes clear, trust in international organisations is shaped by factors largely external to what these organisations actually do. This means that the political conditions of the multiplex world – such as geopolitical fragmentation, the proliferation of competing development models, and the politicisation of multilateral mandates – structurally disadvantage institutions that rely on state-granted legitimacy alone. The UNICEF and WHO case studies illuminate this fault line. UNICEF's orientation toward the public as a primary constituency, constructed through years of fundraising necessity and programmatic investment in local communities, delivers an advantage to respond to the volatility of intergovernmental politics. WHO, by contrast, has accumulated a widening gap between its self-understanding as a state-legitimated body and the reality of a multiplex world. While WHO can leverage broad good will, its lack of focus on the public risks that standing. The lesson here is that relevance without relational trust is a structurally fragile position in a world where no single power bloc can guarantee the political conditions for sustained multilateral engagement.

Conclusions

In a multiplex world, international organisations need to be more agile and responsive to multiple stakeholders, not simply beholden to key member states. There is arguably a greater role for international organisations in such a world, but the methodology of engagement must change. This is because the transition to a multiplex world redistributes the conditions under which international organisations can claim authority. The normative foundations of the post-war multilateral order, resting on delegated

legitimacy from member states and the assumption of shared liberal norms, are no longer sufficient to sustain the operational and communicative capacity of development and humanitarian institutions.

Overall, there is a need for a recalibration of how international organisations conceptualise accountability in their relationships; not merely with member states through formal instruments of governance but also with publics whose aggregate trust determines whether these organisations can communicate authoritatively, deliver programs effectively, and sustain the funding flows that states alone increasingly cannot guarantee. This does not require international organisations to abandon their intergovernmental mandates. Legitimacy and trust are not substitutes but complements, and organisations that neglect either do so at their peril. It does, however, require deliberate institutional investment in the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of public trust that Weigert and Lewis (1985) point to. This includes investment that builds public familiarity with organisational work, cultivates emotional connections with shared values, and consistently demonstrates that results are delivered. In a multiplex world characterised by what Acharya (2025) defines as a de-centred, pluralistic order the organisations best positioned to maintain or expand their mandates will be those that can construct authority relationally, from the ground up, and across a genuinely diverse and sceptical global public.

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About the authors

Nate Henderson is an international public policy expert and currently is an Associate Director at Investment NSW. Previously, Nate represented Australia as a diplomat at the United Nations in New York where he negotiated numerous international agreements including the Sustainable Development Goals. Nate was the Manager International Program at Family Planning Australia, where he led a team delivering health projects across 11 countries in the Pacific. Nate also worked for UNICEF in Papua New Guinea where he delivered education projects, and for Macquarie University, Sydney. Nate holds a Master of Arts (Research), Master of Business Administration, a Master of International Law, and a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations. Nate's research interests and publications focus on international development, foreign policy, and global trade.

To contact the author: nate1.henderson@gmail.com

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