



Task Force 8  
**Multilateralism and Global Governance**

**Policy brief**

# **BUILDING A MORE INCLUSIVE, PEOPLE-CENTERED MULTILATERALISM**

SEPTEMBER 2021

**Richard Wike** Pew Research Center

T20 NATIONAL COORDINATOR AND CHAIR



T20 CO-CHAIR



T20 SUMMIT CO-CHAIR



Università  
Bocconi  
MILANO





# ABSTRACT

Recent calls by scholars for more multi-stakeholder approaches to international cooperation are a welcome effort to make international politics more inclusive, however even these approaches sometimes ignore or downplay one very important stakeholder: ordinary citizens. Public perceptions that multilateralism and global governance are dominated by elites, and therefore reflective of elite priorities, is one factor driving populism and political resentment around much of the globe. Unless this trend is reversed, international organizations will increasingly lose legitimacy, and people will increasingly lose faith that international cooperation can effectively address the problems they care about most.

To address this challenge, multilateral institutions need to make international cooperation more inclusive and people-focused. To do this, they should consider employing survey research and deliberative democracy. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners have demonstrated that both of these approaches can be effective means for amplifying and including public voices. This policy brief outlines a proposal for multilateral institutions such as the UN and G20 to incorporate survey research and public deliberation into their annual cycles, providing ordinary citizens with a more robust voice in multilateral conversations about key international issues.



# CHALLENGE

## MULTILATERAL ORGANIZATIONS LACK INCLUSIVITY, CITIZEN INPUT

The coronavirus pandemic, climate change, a global economic crisis, cybersecurity and digital privacy, and many other challenges over the past few years have highlighted the need for stronger and more enduring multilateral solutions to global challenges. Survey research generally shows that publics around the world broadly support the principles of international cooperation and believe in the values and objectives that guide multilateral institutions. However, these same surveys find that many ordinary citizens feel distant from multilateral organizations and uncertain about the ability of these organizations to deal effectively with global problems. At a time when international cooperation is badly needed, publics often lack confidence that institutions can deliver. If leaders and organizations are going to successfully mobilize public opinion to back multilateral approaches, they will need to show that they are listening to citizen voices and that multilateral efforts can have a real impact on everyday lives.

Public opinion surveys by organizations such as the Pew Research Center, Edelman, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs highlight the degree to which publics around the world broadly support the ideals of international cooperation (Wike and Poushter 2021). For example, across 34 nations surveyed by Pew Research in 2019, a median of 65% said nations should act as part of a global community to solve problems, with majorities or pluralities expressing this view in nearly every country surveyed across sub-Saharan Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, as well as the United States and Canada. A 2020 Pew Research survey among 14 of the top 20 donor countries to the United Nations found that a median of 58% across the nations polled said they believe nations should take other countries' interest into account when making foreign policy, even if that means making compromises, rather than acting purely in their own national interest (Bell et al. 2020).

Most of those surveyed in 2020 also believed more international cooperation could have mitigated the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. A median of 59% across the 14 nations believed cooperation with other countries would have reduced the number of infections in their own country, while only 36% said that no amount of cooperation would have reduced infections.

Survey research has also generally found that international publics have positive views about multilateral institutions. Across the 14 countries surveyed in the 2020 study, a median of 63% expressed a favorable opinion of the UN. Majorities in every nation except Japan rated the organization favorably, and in Denmark, Sweden, the UK, South Korea and Canada, roughly seven-in-ten or more gave the UN a positive review.



However, while people see multilateral organizations in a positive light, they often question whether those same organizations really listen to their needs or are effective in their actions. In the 2020 survey, majorities in every country praised the UN's promotion of human rights and peace. But far fewer, and in some cases only minorities, said the UN cares about the needs of ordinary people or deals effectively with international problems.

And of course, it is not just average citizens who voice these complaints – scholars, writers, activists, and policymakers on both the right and left commonly criticize multilateral organizations for being unaccountable, unresponsive, and dominated by global elites. Critics contend that multilateral processes typically lack the transparent deliberation and mechanisms for consent that characterize well-functioning political systems.

Even many strong supporters of international cooperation believe current multilateral organizations need greater inclusivity and transparency. Former Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Secretary General Angel Gurría has written about how multilateralism must become more inclusive, arguing that multilateral institutions should allow a wider range of stakeholders, including actors from civil society, to have influence over their decision making (Gurría 2019).

As Gurría notes, distrust of multilateralism is tied to distrust of globalization – “dissatisfaction with various aspects of globalization – tax avoidance and evasion, local blight associated with offshoring or foreign competition, surges in migration, increased market concentration and the emergence of globally dominant firms – has fed a suspicion that the system is rigged to favour the interests of those with money and power, contributed to an erosion of trust in governments in many parts of the world and fuelled protectionism, populism and unilateralism.”

A five-nation 2018 Bertelsmann survey also highlighted the link between views about globalization and attitudes toward multilateral institutions (Tillman 2018). It found that respondents in Argentina, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States who believe they have not benefited from globalization were less likely to be supportive of international cooperation and organizations.

Concerns about the health of multilateralism thus fit into a broader pattern of concern about the state of politics around the world, as frustrations with aspects of globalization have helped fuel a populist tide that has exacerbated a global “democratic recession” (Diamond, 2015), as well as a decline in the health of the international order (Ikenberry 2020). Some scholars believe roots of the populist wave are primarily economic (Gold 2020), while others emphasize a “cultural backlash” against demographic changes and increasing social liberalism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). While both economic and cultural factors surely play a role, researchers have also identified explicitly political factors, such as corruption and the perception that most politicians are disconnected from ordinary citizens (Wike and Fetterolf 2018; Foa 2021). Angry at out-of-touch political elites, many citizens have lost confidence in institutions and turned to populist leaders, parties, and movements.



These political dynamics often take place at the national level, but there are also clear implications for international politics and multilateral organizations. If anything, since they lack direct accountability to voters and in many ways are more distant from ordinary citizens, multilateral institutions are more vulnerable to populist suspicions, and indeed such institutions are regularly the target of populist rhetoric. Unless these trends are reversed, international organizations will increasingly lose legitimacy, and people will increasingly lose faith that international cooperation can effectively address the problems they care about most.

To combat populists, nationalists, and isolationists, proponents of international cooperation must consider new ways to bolster the legitimacy of multilateral organizations. One path would be to build and institutionalize processes that are more inclusive and people-centered.



# PROPOSAL

## CONDUCT RESEARCH THAT GIVES VOICE TO ORDINARY CITIZENS

To address the trust gap between ordinary citizens and international policy elites, multilateral institutions should consider employing and institutionalizing survey research and deliberative democracy. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners have demonstrated that both of these approaches can be effective means for amplifying and including public voices.

In recent years, many prominent thinkers have called on multilateral institutions to become more inclusive, including several leading scholars who have been involved in the T20 engagement group and its associated networks. For instance, Homi Kharas, Dennis Snower, and Sebastian Strauss have called for multilateral agreements to be more clearly focused on the public interest, and to more clearly promote opportunities for empowered citizens to live “meaningful and prosperous lives in sustainable, inclusive and thriving communities” (Kharas et al. 2020).

In their vision of “effective multilateralism,” Alan Alexandroff, Colin Bradford, and Yves Tiberghien have described how multilateral efforts need to involve a wide variety of sub-national actors, such as foundations and private and public corporations, as well as cities, regions, and provinces (Alexandroff et al. 2020).

Although there is of course a C20 engagement group for civil society, several writers have argued that civil society organizations (CSOs) deserve a stronger voice within G20 deliberations. Ronja Scheler and Hugo Dobson describe the C20 as the “worst resourced” engagement group, placing it at the bottom of the engagement group hierarchy (the Business 20, which has the most resources, sits atop the hierarchy, according to Scheler and Dobson) (Scheler and Dobson 2020). Helmut Anheier and Stefan Toepler have argued for the establishment of an international civil society task force that would help repair what they characterize as a “strained relationship” between civil society and the G20. The task force would, among other things, work to identify appropriate regulatory models of state-civil society relations and effective models for the role of CSOs in multilateral and inter-governmental systems (Anheier and Toepler 2019).

Scheler and Dobson advance a multi-stakeholder approach to international cooperation that would place non-state actors such as CSOs and private companies at the center of cooperative efforts. “Multi-stakeholder governance,” according to the authors, “assumes that an effective governance of global commons like climate, digitalization, and global health requires cooperation among various groups of stakeholders constituting state and non-state actors.”



As Scheler and Dobson note, their multi-stakeholder approach has some similarities with Andrés Ortega, Aitor Pérez, and Ángel Saz-Carranza's idea of "inductive governance", which emphasizes a "bottom-up mode of organizing global collective action" (Ortega et al. 2018). To Ortega and his co-authors, inductive governance "responds to a change in the way governments interact, and to the new weight gained by IGOs, sub-state units, cities, hybrid organizations and entities, businesses such as multinational corporations, NGOs, trade unions, foundations and philanthropic organizations, and citizen movements, experts in academia and think tanks." Ortega, Pérez, and Saz-Carranza also believe international governance needs to be more responsive to public opinion, and one of the advantages they list for inductive government is that it would make governments more accountable to the public.

While Ortega, Pérez, and Saz-Carranza and others emphasize the importance of public support for the legitimacy of multilateralism, there have been relatively few efforts to systematically integrate public opinion within multilateral decision making. However, embedding public opinion more thoroughly into multilateral processes – along with efforts to incorporate civil society and other non-state actors – could lead to more informed decisions and help boost the legitimacy of multilateral institutions.

There are many ways the public's voice could be more robustly included in multilateral debates over key international issues. Below I outline an approach that would feature survey research and public deliberation, and I also address some practical issues associated with implementing this approach, including funding and the need for an effective communication strategy.

## ***SURVEY RESEARCH***

NGOs, governments, private companies, and academic researchers regularly use surveys to explore public opinion on key international issues. Many of these surveys examine public opinion in a single nation, however a growing number of cross-national research projects also examine major international topics. Still, few are well-integrated into the timeline, agenda, and communication priorities of multilateral institutions.

One recent example of a multilateral institution incorporating survey research into its work is the UN75 campaign. To commemorate the organization's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in January 2020 "the UN launched a yearlong, global initiative to listen to people's priorities and expectations of international cooperation" (UN 2021). The initiative included a variety of research streams, including public opinion surveys in 50 countries conducted by Pew Research Center and Edelman, and a voluntary one-minute survey which was available on the UN's website as well as various other platforms. The findings provided insights regarding attitudes toward the principles of multilateralism, as well as people's immediate and long-term issue priorities. The results were featured on a number of different platforms in advance of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and a final report on the findings was released in January 2021. The UN75 initiative is a good example of a multilateral institution using survey research to help shape its agenda and outreach efforts.



The UN could consider ways to institutionalize this research process within the annual cycle leading up to UNGA, and other multilateral institutions, including the G20, should consider similarly incorporating survey research. The G20, for example, could incorporate an annual survey of publics in G20 member states (plus some number of additional countries, depending on funding and feasibility), and the results could be released in advance of the G20 summit. High-quality cross-national surveys require a considerable amount of planning, which could be done in conjunction with the host nation, although this kind of effort could benefit from the establishment of a permanent G20 secretariat. Other organizations such as the OECD and the Paris Peace Forum could also consider institutionalizing survey research as a means for obtaining input from ordinary citizens about their priorities and concerns. The UN75 research had support from the highest levels of the organization, and to be truly successful, any effort to more formally institutionalize survey research would need similarly strong support from key leaders.

In order to provide high-quality data for decision makers and to have credibility with key audiences, this type of cross-national survey should meet high methodological standards, including methodological transparency, a rigorous translation process, and probability-based nationally representative sample designs that will ensure that all demographic and ideological groups within society are accurately represented.

The topics for such a survey could vary depending on the focus of the multilateral convening. For instance, a survey tied to the G20 could explore issues related to the thematic priorities the host nation has identified for that year. However, certain issues related to major global challenges and international cooperation could be included each year, providing annual trends for tracking changes in public opinion on key global issues. Additionally, the research design should provide opportunities for respondents themselves to make clear their issue priorities, assuring that the issue framework reflects public sentiment rather than being determined in a purely top-down manner.

To complement the public opinion surveys, polls could also be conducted among elite groups to identify the priorities and viewpoints of important stakeholders in the policy making process, as well as to illuminate differences between policy elites and ordinary citizens. A current example of this type of survey is being conducted by the Brookings Institution's Global Economy and Development Program, which, as part of a project on the future of multilateralism, is polling experts around the world on the key challenges and potential reforms of the multilateral system.

Another example is the Teaching, Research and International Policy program (TRIP) at William & Mary, which regularly surveys International Relations (IR) faculties about key international issues, as well as issues within the discipline of political science. TRIP has often coordinated with Pew Research Center to include on its surveys questions that are parallel to those included on Pew Research surveys in the United States and around the world, allowing for a comparison of public and scholarly opinion. Data from 2020, for instance, revealed that IR scholars were more concerned than ordinary citizens in 14 advanced economies about climate change, but relatively less concerned about terrorism (Poushter and Fagan 2020).





Similarly, Pew Research Center has collaborated with the OECD to survey attendees of the annual OECD Forum, asking them several questions that are also asked of general publics around the world, providing an opportunity to compare citizen views with those of a group highly engaged in policy making. A 2020 study found that both OECD Forum attendees and ordinary citizens in 14 advanced economies were supportive of multilateral approaches to foreign policy, although support was especially strong among Forum attendees (Wike et al. 2020).

A regular program involving surveys of public and elite opinion could provide useful data and analytic insights that could inform decision making by political leaders and others involved in multilateral processes. And such a program could help illuminate, and perhaps shrink, the gap between elites and the publics they claim to speak for.

## **CITIZEN DELIBERATION**

Citizens' assemblies, citizens' councils, deliberative polling and other forms of citizen-focused deliberative processes have become increasingly common in nations around the world in recent years (OECD 2020). Some of the most prominent recent examples include Ireland's citizen assemblies on same-sex marriage and abortion, France's Citizens' Convention for Climate, and the Citizens Council in Ostbelgien (the German-speaking region of Belgium). Over the next year, public deliberation will also be an important component the EU's Conference on the Future of Europe.

There are many models of deliberative democracy, but the most common practical applications feature randomly selected "mini-publics" of citizens that are representative of the relevant population, such as a nation or city. Citizens meet (typically face-to-face, although during the pandemic virtual assemblies have become increasingly common), learn about the issue under consideration, hear from subject matter experts, deliberate about the issue among themselves, and devise recommendations which are then shared with policy makers and the broader public. Prior to the convening, participants are usually provided with background materials, and they are also compensated for their time and any associated expenses. The meetings are almost always facilitated by a trained facilitator. The amount of time spent in these meeting varies widely, ranging from a single day to multiple day-long meetings at regular intervals over many weeks.

In part, the growth of deliberative approaches is a response to the discontent many citizens feel about the way their political systems are operating. When done correctly, deliberative processes can give the public a much stronger voice in agenda setting and policy making. And importantly, by incorporating deliberation, these approaches create opportunities for the public dialogue to be enriched by a more deeply considered, more detailed, and more nuanced version of citizen sentiment.

While deliberative democracy is still a somewhat new concept, polls show it is a popular idea. In a recent Pew Research survey of France, Germany, the UK, and the U.S., around three-in-



four in each of these nations said it was important for their national government to create citizen assemblies, while roughly four-in-ten said it was very important (Wike et al. 2021).

Relatively few deliberative efforts have employed a cross-national design, although there are exceptions such as the 2009 Europolis Deliberative Poll, conducted shortly before that year's European Parliament elections (Fishkin 2018). Another example is World Wide Views, a multi-site citizen consultation program initiated by Danish researchers in advance of the 2009 COP15 conference in Copenhagen. Six years later, in advance of the COP21 conference, World Wide Views organized 76 national deliberative panels around the world on the same day, involving approximately 10,000 participants recruited through both random selection and self-selection.

Another method that could be considered by international organizations is a *transnational* deliberative process, which allows individuals from different nations to participate together. For example, in 2019 the Bertelsmann Stiftung partnered with the European Commission to organize the EU Citizens' Dialogue in The Hague, which brought together 120 citizens from Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands to discuss a number of issues regarding the future of Europe. Such approaches essentially go beyond the nation-state to conceptualize cross-national "publics," what the deliberative democratic theorist Hélène Landemore has described as the "de-territorialization" of democracy (2020). The UN is currently including a transnational component in the "global assembly" it is conducting prior to the COP26 summit in Scotland later this year. It is assembling a mini-public of 1,000 people randomly selected to reflect the global population, which will deliberate and make recommendations as part of the COP26 process.

The UN75 initiative did not use deliberative methods, but it did conduct a series of more than 1,000 public dialogues – informal or moderated conversations with members of the general public – in 82 nations. These dialogues explored perceptions of the UN and attitudes toward major international priorities. A key finding from the dialogues is that people around the world want the UN to be more inclusive, listening more intently to the voices of women, youth, local leaders, and CSOs, in particular. And they want the UN to communicate more regularly and effectively with publics across the globe about UN programs and initiatives, while also seeking regular feedback from citizens. If they were to be repeated in future years, it is not hard to imagine these public dialogues evolving into a more deliberative format.

To more deeply involve public opinion and public deliberation in multilateral processes, organizations such as the UN, the G20, and others could consider convening deliberative bodies of ordinary citizens. The format and scale of the deliberations would depend on factors such as funding, timing, and the priorities of the international organization, and the content would vary as well, depending on the particular issue focus of the organization.

Regardless of the ultimate format, these deliberative processes should follow certain guidelines and principles. For instance, they should be cross-national or transnational; they should be representative, meaning participants are selected via random selection, rather



than self-selection; and meetings should involve stages of learning, consultation, deliberation, and decision making. The OECD's 2020 overview of deliberative approaches around the world includes additional guidelines, principles, and best practices that can help shape effective processes.

## **IMPLEMENTING A MORE INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO MULTILATERALISM**

High-quality survey research and deliberative techniques can be expensive, of course, and identifying funding sources would be crucial to the success of this endeavor. While international organizations may be able to provide some support for these projects, much of the financial support would likely have to come from foundations, wealthy individuals, or corporations, or perhaps public sources such as national governments or the European Union. And to be effective, these approaches would need strong partnerships with the institutions in charge of multilateral convenings, such as the UN or a G20 host nation (or at some point potentially a G20 secretariat).

Conceivably, a single well-funded research project could establish partnerships with multiple multilateral institutions, providing an ongoing and evolving portrait of citizen sentiment to inform policy makers and others engaged in international cooperation on key issues.

A comprehensive communications and dissemination strategy for making multilateral processes more inclusive will be crucial for success. Again, the UN75 initiative offers a possible model – the results of the survey research and public dialogues were important components of the UN's communications around the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization, including outreach priorities such as publications and social media. The findings were also incorporated into the communications of key leaders, including the UNGA address of Secretary General António Guterres. For the G20, one possibility would be to feature the findings at the various engagement group summits, as well as the G20 leaders summit.

Policy makers would be a key audience, but it would be equally important to reach journalists, think tank representatives, researchers, and the engaged public. The ultimate goal is to use the techniques of survey research and deliberative democracy to represent and amplify citizen voices in important international debates about the issues that affect their lives.



## REFERENCES

Alexandroff A., "Toward 'effective multilateralism' in turbulent times", *Global Solutions Journal*, Global Solutions Summit 2020 Edition, 2020, pp.54-60

Anheier H. and S. Toepler, "Civil society and the G20: towards a review of regulatory models and approaches", T20 task force on social cohesion, global governance, and the future of politics, 2019

Bell, J., J. Poushter, M. Fagan, N. Kent, and J.J. Moncus, *International Cooperation Welcomed Across 14 Advanced Economies*, Pew Research Center, 21 September 2020

Diamond L. 2015. "Facing up to the democratic recession", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, pp. 141-155

Fishkin J.S., *Democracy When the People are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics Through Public Deliberation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018

Foa R.S., "Why strongmen win in weak states", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2021, pp. 52-65

Gold R., "The economic causes of populism", *Global Solutions Journal*, Global Solutions Summit 2020 Edition, 2020, pp. 72-78

Gurría A., "What we need is more (and better) multilateralism, not less", World Economic Forum, 23 January 2019

Ikenberry J., *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2020

Khara H., D. Snower, and S. Strauss, "The future of multilateralism", *Global Solutions Journal*, Global Solutions Summit 2020 Edition, 2020, pp. 78-83

Landemore H., *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2020

Norris P. and R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019

OECD, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2020

Ortega A., A. Pérez, and Á. Saz-Carranza, *Innovating Global Governance: Bottom-Up, the Inductive Approach*, T20 Task Force 8: Social Cohesion, Global Governance and the Future of Politics, T20 Argentina, 2018 <https://www.g20-insights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/TF8-8.4-Inductive-Governance-OrtegaPerezSa.pdf>

Poushter J. and M. Fagan, *Foreign policy experts in the U.S. have much different views about threats to the country than the general public*, Pew Research Center, 23 October 2020

Scheler R. and H. Dobson, *Joining Forces: Reviving multilateralism through multi-stakeholder cooperation*, T20 Task Force 5: The future of multilateralism and global governance, T20 Saudi Arabia, 2020



Tillmann C., *The G20 is turning 20. Time to take stock of multilateralism*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018

United Nations, *Shaping our future together: listening to people's priorities for the future and their ideas for action*, Concluding Report of the Un75 Office January 2021, 2021 [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un75\\_final\\_report\\_shapingourfuture-together.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un75_final_report_shapingourfuture-together.pdf)

Wike R., M. Fagan, and A. Connaughton, "OECD Forum participants express concerns about the economy and climate change - and most want multilateral solutions to global problems", OECD, The Forum Network, 2020

Wike R. and J. Fetterolf, "Liberal democracy's crisis of confidence", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2018, pp. 136-50

Wike R. and J. Poushter, "Citizens want more multilateralism", *Global Solutions Journal*, G20/T20 Italy 2021 edition, 2021, pp. 188-197

Wike R., L. Silver, S. Schumacher, and A. Connaughton, *Many in U.S., Western Europe Say Their Political System Needs Major Reform*, Pew Research Center, 31 March 2021



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Richard Wike** Pew Research Center, Washington DC (USA)

Director of global attitudes research at Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, where he conducts research and writes about international public opinion on a variety of topics, such as democracy, international cooperation, and America's global image. He is an author of numerous Pew Research Center reports and has written pieces for The Atlantic, Foreign Affairs, Financial Times, the Guardian, Politico, Foreign Policy, Journal of Democracy, CNN, BBC, CNBC, and other publications.