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The book includes:

- Papers by leading international experts and academics
- New perspectives through in-depth analyses
- Numerous maps, charts and tables
- A wealth of ideas for specialists and non-specialists alike: scholars, policymakers, administrators, concerned citizens, development professionals, entrepreneurs, journalists, students and others.

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Today, globalization and the parallel emergence of transnational problems such as financial crises and climate change are causing a shift in authority from states to the international system of governance, the institutions of which are often criticized for their weak democratic legitimacy. While collective decision-making is globalizing, democracy does not seem to change scale. In recent years, innovative consultative practices that give a central place to information and communication technology (ICT), such as the Internet, have been multiplying within the framework of intergovernmental policy-making on sustainability issues. Online citizen consultations organized by the UN in the negotiations on a global development agenda beyond 2015 are probably the most relevant example of these new practices, in part due to their methodological creativity and a wide scope of participation (Figure 1). In this article, we examine whether ICT-enabled citizen consultations in the production of collective decisions are playing a role in increasing the democratic legitimacy of international governance for sustainable development. We base our investigation on both theoretical arguments from the literature and on several specific examples of online consultations on the post-2015 development agenda. We define firstly the concept of legitimacy and briefly review its different forms, and then analyse the effects of online citizen consultations on the legitimacy of decision-making.

Defining legitimacy in global governance

Legitimacy is understood here as the ability of citizens to make decisions by and for themselves regarding the content of the laws that organize and regulate their political association (Nanz and Steffek, 2004). Two forms of legitimacy derive from this classical distinction of government by and for the people: ‘input legitimacy’ requires political decisions to be representative of the will of the people, while ‘output legitimacy’ requires decisions to promote the social welfare of the community (Scharff, 1999). Thus, the first refers to the decision-making process, its actors (representativeness) and its procedures (transparency, access to information), while the second refers to the ability of political decisions to solve collective problems (effective results, mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation). Applied to online consultations, the concept of legitimacy raises two questions: are the modes of governance open to public participation via ICT inclusive and representative of the interests of different actors? And do online consultations enable the design of more ambitious international agreements, with institutional frameworks allowing for monitoring and evaluation (a necessary condition to achieve better policy outcomes)? As intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda will only commence at the 69th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2014, it is impossible here to analyse the impacts of these online consultations on the
legitimacy of policy results. So this article focuses exclusively on the effects of consultations on the legitimacy of decision-making.

**Does ICT include or exclude?**

Since the 1970s, many authors have theorized and empirically analysed the effects of citizen participation mechanisms on the legitimacy of national decision-making processes and their results. At the international level, these processes became a major topic of interest for researchers in the 1990s, a decade which saw the increase and institutionalization of the participation of civil society in international summits on sustainable development, with the creation of the ‘Major Groups’ at the first Earth Summit in Rio. However, few authors have analysed the effects of online citizen consultations on the legitimacy of global governance for sustainable development.

**A wider scope of participation**

Certainly, since the mid-2000s ICT has served as a catalyst that facilitates the use of existing means of participation and strengthens these methods. Indeed, the consultation of citizens via the Internet theoretically allows a broader and more inclusive representation of stakeholders in policy-making. Benefiting from simple and often anonymous access to online forums, these

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3. While membership is required to participate in the interactive platform, which implies the collection of certain social demographic information such as name, country of origin, age, gender and occupation, the members can also, however, anonymously participate in online discussions, use the ‘Voice’ tool and post comments. Also, the vote on MY World 2015 remains anonymous.
new methods of participation provide a counterbalance to pressure groups, whose presence and role often predominate in conventional participatory methods. ICT can also provide better access to and sharing of information, and thus greater transparency. The thematic consultation on environmental sustainability, for example, which took place between November 2012 and May 2013, has resulted in 50,000 page views, 11 online moderated discussions and 1,100 comments and contributions from civil society or individuals from 173 different countries. ICT therefore provides access to active citizenship through the creation of a direct link between citizens and decision-making.

A more representative participation?

However, the use of ICT in civil society consultations in the framework of international negotiations on sustainable development has a number of limitations that hinder the legitimacy of global sustainable development governance, in terms of both processes and results. On the one hand, the digital divide, which is defined as the unequal access to computer technologies, has significantly limited the equality of participation opportunities. While online and offline methods have been used for the global survey ‘MY World’, allowing a more inclusive representation of citizens from regions that are most affected by the digital divide, such as Africa, Internet access remained a prerequisite for participation in consultations organized by the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) and the interactive platform ‘The World We Want’. Of the 1,108 responses to the NGLS consultation questions for the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the post-2015 development programme (HLP), about 1,000 were from civil

4. 40% of participants who voted to express their priorities for the post-2015 development agenda as part of the MY World global survey are African. However, the extent of mobilization depends heavily on the United Nations Teams in charge of relaying information in each country: 40% of votes come from only two countries, India and Nigeria.
society, while only 92 came from individuals. In addition, for the second phase of the NGLS online consultation for the HLP (30 January to 2 February 2013), nearly 50% of the responses of civil society organizations and citizens came from countries with a very high Human Development Index (HDI) (> 0.9). This share reaches 60% if one includes responses from countries with a high HDI (between 0.79 and 0.89). This access restriction, coupled with the fact that citizens who participate via the platform are self-selecting and already relatively well informed about the issues, limits the participation of a wider audience, including laypeople and representatives of the most vulnerable populations.

On the other hand, the increased availability and accessibility of information facilitated by the Internet can be off-putting as users can quickly become overwhelmed, not only by the amount of information provided on the consultation pages (Coote and Lenaghan, 1997; McIver, 1998; Lenaghan, 1999) but also by the number of consultations themselves, according to a senior official of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (interview, 27 September 2013). Indeed, the interactive platform ‘The World We Want’ provides participation opportunities that are so numerous and diffuse, and allows access to a level of information that is so unlimited, that the cost of entering the platform is high (for example in terms of the time investment and resources required to become familiar with the available participation tools and for interpreting the necessary information to be able to understand the issues and participate in discussions), which can discourage the participation of laypeople or small organizations from civil society in developing and less developed countries.

Therefore, it is stakeholders with significant financial and human resources, and communication and social mobilization strategies that represent the majority of participants in online discussions and platforms (Downs, 1957; Olson, 1965; Breier, 1993; Gastil et al., 2005): consultations therefore primarily reflect the voices of the powerful. In addition, civil society organizations dedicate their strategies to conventional advocacy activities at the expense of more innovative activities, such as experience sharing between participants. Ultimately, The World We Want interactive platform does not constitute a forum that allows for a real debate, which could enable the collective building of a common vision for the post-2015 development agenda. Beyond these limitations, there is also an issue regarding the way in which contributions are summarized by the organizers of the consultation, a process which remains opaque.

Thus, online citizen consultations organized within the framework of the post-2015 international negotiations show rather mixed effects on the democratic legitimacy of global sustainable development governance. Despite the numerous opportunities for participation, civil society stakeholders remain highly sceptical about the potential impact of their contributions on the outcome of international negotiations (‘Major Groups and Other Stakeholders Briefing Days’, UN Headquarters, 20 and 22 September 2013). Several approaches must therefore be analysed to improve the effectiveness of these innovative instruments. First, it is crucial to systematically combine the means of online participation with offline instruments, such as paper or SMS questionnaires, to ensure the wider representation of smaller civil society organizations from developing and less advanced countries, as well as laypersons and the most vulnerable populations. Second, it is essential that the UN agencies, who are the main consultation organizers, provide mechanisms to feedback information to civil society stakeholders that enable them to track and evaluate the impact of their contributions, and thus to help civil society overcome its lack of faith in the value of consultations.

Beyond its effects on the legitimacy of international governance for sustainable development, ICT also plays a role in the emergence of new methods of citizen participation, which organization and creation of knowledge for participation are increasingly collaborative, and where social networks are widely used to extend discussions and disseminate information. Online consultations thus enable the building, or even strengthening, of the skills of citizens and civil society organizations, which will be better able to claim accountability from both UN agencies and Member States.
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