Mitigating Inequalities of Influence among States in Global Decision Making

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Abstract
International institutions should be as equal as they claim to be, especially since many of them assert superordinate normative authority based on having egalitarian governance structures. However, when defining equality with respect to states’ real-world influence in determining substantive outcomes, it is evident that there is an equality-influence gap between the rhetoric of parity among states and the reality of international politics. This is problematic because it undermines trust in those international institutions that falsely claim to embody equality among states when empirically they do not. Focusing on the United Nations System, this paper identifies three main causes of this disproportional influence among states in global decision making: (a) external imbalances in political capital; (b) internal economic barriers; and (c) surreptitious influence through non-state actors, funding and training. Six pragmatic strategies are proposed for mitigating these inequalities: (1) building capacity for leadership in global advocacy; (2) supporting global networks owned by developing countries; (3) equalizing multi-party partnerships; (4) facilitating evidence-informed global decision making; (5) enhancing accountability and independent evaluation; and (6) encouraging further discussion on institutional reforms. Notwithstanding sovereign equality’s deep flaws, it is hoped that challenging the egalitarian presumptions of global decision making will encourage further debate on this issue among those who can act upon it.

Policy Implications
- Inequalities of influence among states should be mitigated in order to avert the moral fraud and distrust that results from international institutions’ claims of superordinate normative authority based on fictional sovereign equality.
- NGOs can help mitigate inequalities but they can also inadvertently deepen them by prioritizing the interests of the powerful states, wealthy elites and private industries that frequently fund them and to whom they are legally accountable.
- It is both desirable and possible to achieve more equal decision making in global governance, especially throughout the United Nations System which celebrates the principle of sovereign equality and benefits from an institutional architecture that naturally supports it.
- Mitigating this equality-influence gap may help foster better global decision making and a more peaceful, secure and prosperous international society.

Introduction
States and the people they represent are not always equal in the global decision making processes that ultimately affect them. Influence at global forums can be a product of economic strength, military might and a government’s capacity to engage strategically in diplomatic activities. In these highly political environments, science,
altruism and transparency are often displaced by bargaining, trade-offs and national self-interest. The majority share of votes that developing and emerging countries enjoy in many global governance bodies does not guarantee the adoption of policies that benefit them. Indeed, empirical evidence indicates inequitable prioritization and funding for issues that affect the interests of the most powerful countries to an extent that is disproportionate to what these issues’ global burden justifies (Stuckler, et al., 2008). All states may legally be equal in many global forums, but some states are clearly more equal than others.

The extent to which such inequality is problematic depends on our (1) definition of equality, (2) assessment of equality’s value, (3) belief as to whom equality is owed, and (4) views on how equality should be operationalized in the international system. With respect to the first consideration, equality in decision making can be defined either with respect to equal voting power in casting ballots, equal procedural fairness in voicing opinions, or equal influence in determining substantive outcomes whereby decisions reflect the interests of everyone participating in the particular community. On the second consideration, many scholars have argued that equality in decision making has extrinsic value by evoking a sense of ownership in decisions, enhancing political systems’ overall effectiveness, and resulting in better policies (Bhagwati, 1995; Lindert, 2003; Zweifel, 2006). Others have answered with greater equivocality (Majone, 1998; Scharpf, 1999), often referring to the value of technocracy, minority protections and the mitigation of underlying differences in social power (Moravcsik, 2004). For the third consideration, global justice may infer that equality should be conceptualized at the individual level, yet traditional Westphalian sovereignty prioritizes equality of states over equality of people and mostly denies individuals legal personality in the international system. With respect to the fourth consideration, equality can be exercised either directly by individuals or through representatives who are either specially elected for this task or are appointed by existing national governments. While it would be very difficult to finance or coordinate direct elections among all individuals for global decisions (Dahl, 1999), individual level equality could still be operationalized by randomly selecting a representative sample of voters (Stutzer and Frey, 2005) or by recognizing states as the stewards of this equality who consequently exercise influence proportional to their populations.

But regardless of how we should define, value, conceptualize and operationalize equality in global governance, it seems, at the very least, that today’s international institutions should be as equal as they claim to be. Indeed, it would be very problematic if the world’s leading international institutions claim superordinate normative authority based on having egalitarian one-state-one-vote governance models if in reality these institutions’ decision making processes do not reflect the egalitarian ideals they claim to embody. This includes the United Nations General Assembly and the many United Nations specialized agencies, councils, treaty bodies, conferences of parties, affiliated organizations, funds and other entities with plenary governance structures that have committed themselves to sovereign equality in decision making (United Nations, 1945). For these international institutions, achieving sovereignty equality carries an intrinsic value even if only to the extent that it averts a moral fraud by ensuring that these institutions fulfill their constitutional commitments and deserve the superordinate normative authority they claim. It also carries an extrinsic value in that any obstructions to equality in these institutions’ decision making processes may focus international attention on their limitations and may breed distrust and contempt for them or global governance more broadly.

This paper seeks to assess the truth of these claims, probe the legitimacy of the superordinate normative authority that arguably flows from it, and consider a range of policy options for mitigating any ‘equality-influence’ gaps between the rhetoric of parity among states and the reality of international politics that are identified. The focus will be on the United Nations System because, despite widespread criticism, it is in its aggregate form the single most important part of today’s global governance system. Also, as the global sphere becomes increasingly crowded with the addition of new major players, it will be ever more important that at least one institution has the claimed normative authority to set international standards and priorities on behalf of global citizenry. The United Nations with its various plenary governance bodies is certainly the closest existing proxy to such a forum.

Examining equality claims made by international institutions on their own terms means accepting that states are the unit to whom equality is owed, and the mechanism by which equality should be operationalized. This results in the fairest assessment and has the advantage of deferring these difficult debates to other scholars and to the future. Also avoided is determining the basis on which states should be equal, which could be according to population, economic output or any other indicator, because in the United Nations System it is almost always just statehood and organizational membership. For example, Nauru (with its 10,000 people) may not deserve equality in global decision making with China (with its 1.34 billion people), but it is guaranteed this equality in the United Nations System such that even the smallest Pacific Island state is far from inconsequential (United Nations, 1945). The challenge of granting equality to states that do not themselves guarantee equality among their own citizens is also avoided.
The only consideration left undecided by deferring to international institutions’ own constitutions is the first one, which is the actual definition of equality. Of the three possible definitions that were previously identified, this paper will define equality with respect to real-world influence in determining substantive outcomes. In practice, this means equal participation among states in global deliberations and equal ability to shape decision making, regardless of each state’s size, economic output, or whether individuals within those states have the benefit of democratic governments. While a formal legalistic definition of equality focused on voting would be easier to measure, this would be unsatisfactory because it ignores the political reality that voting is merely one way to influence decisions and does not align with the usual focus on outcomes. Likewise, equality in procedural fairness for voicing opinions is less meaningful to people or states because often there is little chance that merely voicing opinions will influence the decisions about which they care. Defining equality in terms of influence on outcomes has the added advantage of pointing towards pragmatic strategies for enhancing global equality in the short and medium-term in ways that people around the world may find meaningful and from which they may benefit.

To achieve these goals, this paper will first critically examine the major obstacles to full sovereign equality in global decision making, including the external imbalances in political capital enjoyed by particular developed countries, the internal economic barriers faced by those that are less wealthy, and the distortionist role that non-state actors can play. Various factors and incentives mitigating damaging consequences of the equality-influence gap will then be explored and compared to the benefits that may be expected from improving sovereign equality throughout the United Nations System. Finally, tangible opportunities for equalizing global decision making will be proposed that work within existing structures, recognize the political impracticality of wholesale constitutional revision, and build on the system’s success with ‘institutional adaptation without reform’ over the past two decades (Burci, 2005). Ultimately, this paper is about short and medium-term pragmatic approaches for enhancing equality within international institutions that already claim to be egalitarian. Many of the arguments raised will naturally be relevant to the many other international institutions beyond the United Nations System’s core entities whose egalitarian characters have also been challenged, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Charnovitz, 2003; Strauss, 2001). The discussion of mitigating factors and potential opportunities for the future, however, has been specifically tailored to the unique context of global decision making in the United Nations System.

Why some states are more equal than others

There are many significant barriers preventing equal participation and influence on substantive outcomes for developing and emerging countries in the United Nations System and the global policies its entities articulate. These can be divided into three categories: (a) external imbalances in political capital across countries; (b) internal economic barriers to participation; and (c) surreptitious influence through non-state actors, funding and training.

External imbalances in political capital across countries

Some states will naturally enjoy less influence in global decision making when other states assert more. While perhaps not as obvious in some international forums (e.g., World Intellectual Property Organization) as in others (e.g., World Trade Organization), states can use their political capital, economic power and centrality in global politics to encourage favourable decisions on matters that would particularly affect their interests. The fact that many developing countries are dependent on friendly relations with powerful states and their foreign development assistance may further exacerbate asymmetries of power and concerns of agency and coercion. Indeed, client-patron relationships that form outside the United Nations, and the imbalances in political capital that result from them (Carney, 1989), clearly contaminate decision making and democratic conduct within this international system.

This challenge of imbalanced political capital is not limited to any one particular policy sphere, although it may affect some areas of decision making more than others. For example, it is well known that the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council dominate that important body (Fasulo, 2004; Klabbers, 2009), and that ‘aggressive negotiations’ often occur privately in ‘green room meetings’ at the World Trade Organization (Footer, 2006; Jawara & Kwa, 2004). The US is particularly known to assert its political and economic influence in the international arena (Stanic, 2004). Past campaigns to remove the leaders of prominent international institutions have even been described as ‘unilateralism in a multilateral disguise’ (Bustani, 2002). While sometimes these exercises of power are successful (e.g., removal of Jose Bustani as Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) and sometimes they are not (e.g., United Nation’s refusal to pre-authorize the 2003 invasion of Iraq), they highlight: (1) the ability of certain states to use their political capital to assert disproportionate influence over a range of international decision making processes; (2) their proclivity for doing so when the affected interests are sufficiently important to them; and (3) the various
opportunities available to use these methods in the absence of international oversight and accountability mechanisms. Another example is the consistent budgetary policy of zero-nominal growth in many United Nations specialized agencies which is likely the result of wealthy states prioritizing their economic interests above the development interests of low-income countries.

Further, unless things change, this concern may only become more omnipresent in the future as global issues are increasingly viewed through a lens of security – a superordinate interest that may provoke all sorts of behaviour (Alvis, 2008; Maclean, 2008; Paris, 2001; United Nations Development Programme, 1994). Indeed, academics, national policymakers and global leaders have already begun framing an ever expanding number of challenges as security issues to raise their public profile and attract funding to them (e.g., Chan, 2009; Frenk, 2009; Peterson, 2002; Tadjbakhsh, 2007; Wise, 2008). Prominent examples of contemporary securitization include food security, health security and climate security. While this advocacy strategy has largely been successful in meeting this goal (Hoffman, 2010), there are consequences to using this rhetoric which include the hyper politicization and militarization of global decision making. When conceptualized as an issue of national security, leaders are more likely to act upon advice from their defence officials in addition to those working primarily in their respective technical fields. Equality in global decision making, in the context of security threats, may not be states’ first priority.

Internal economic barriers to equal participation

The equality-influence gap in decision making at the United Nations is also a result of several economic barriers to equal participation. First, effective diplomacy is expensive and requires trained negotiators, lawyers, support staff and specialized experts (Busch, Reinhardt and Shaffer, 2009). Multiple representatives are needed to attend simultaneous meetings and still others to engage in corridor diplomacy. Simply flying to the host city incurs significant expense; staffing large missions in major diplomatic centres such as Brussels, Geneva and New York cost even more. Wealthier and larger countries that have flexible budgets can afford these costs and support big delegations. For example, in 2008, Canada and the United Kingdom sent 24 and 49 people respectively to the World Health Assembly while Chile and Uzbekistan sent only 6 and 4 people (World Health Organization, 2008). This imbalance was repeated in 2009 (when Canada sent 29, Chile sent 9, UK sent 33 and Uzbekistan sent 6), 2010 (when Canada sent 22, Chile sent 7, UK sent 29 and Uzbekistan sent 4) and 2011 (when Canada sent 20, Chile sent 7, UK sent 29 and Uzbekistan sent 5) (World Health Organization, 2009, 2010b, 2011). Even greater disparities in delegation size were seen at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (COP15), where the Canadian and British delegations had 207 and 111 members respectively while the Chilean and Uzbekistan teams had only 47 and 2 members (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat, 2010a, 2010b). It is doubtful that the influence of Chile and Uzbekistan could match that of Canada or the UK at these global forums.

But in addition to the simple financial cost of diplomacy, representatives from wealthier countries often have the advantage of specialized Cabinet-level positions and permanent policy units within their respective governments devoted to analyzing a range of global issues and articulating national position statements on them. These political leaders and administrative units, in turn, are further aided by countless civil society organizations, think-tanks and academic institutions that develop new ideas and consider their national implications. The greater staff specialization of delegations from developed countries and the official use of languages native to many of them deepen the inequality in negotiating power, especially given that some of the most highly educated multilingual staff from developing countries are lured away to wealthier countries or international organizations where their personal prospects may be brighter (Southall, Cham and Sey, 2010). Political leaders and experts from developed countries may also have the ability to travel internationally more frequently than their counterparts from developing countries, which allows them to build relatively stronger networks of colleagues and friends that can be accessed to influence global decisions. They also accumulate experience via repeat attendance at forums and benefit from various mechanisms for harnessing institutional knowledge (Cox and Jacobson, 1974; Merry, 2005; Shaffer, 2006).

Interestingly, the fact that developing and emerging countries are often represented by members of Cabinet or other high-level political leaders may actually allow for yet another way for wealthier countries to influence decisions. Whereas technical experts and lower level civil servants may have limited authority to alter their national position and compromise, Ministers or Secretaries will likely have more manoeuvring room and may be pressured rather forcefully to use it so that decisions can be reached by a meeting’s conclusion.

Surreptitious influence through non state actors, funding and training

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become increasingly important players in global decision making and have even been described by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan as ‘the new superpower’ in
international relations (Annan, 2000; Charnovitz, 1996; Matthews, 1997; Spiro, 1996; United Nations, 2004). On one hand, NGOs may offer many comparative advantages, including: economic efficiency (i.e., small, less bureaucratic, low labour costs, utilization of volunteers); social mission (i.e., often help most vulnerable and disadvantaged people); political neutrality (i.e., independent from governments, immune from political interference); and cultural awareness (i.e., knowledgeable of local needs, sensitive to local culture, permanent relationships with community leaders) (Carbone, 2003). They have also been promoted as mechanisms for global democratization (Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu, 2002; Omona, 2008) and have been argued to: facilitate stakeholder participation in decision making and give voice to those who are marginalized; better inform citizenry through public awareness and education; contribute to policy debates by offering diverse perspectives, proposals and dissent; enhance transparency by exposing decisions to public scrutiny; encourage accountability by monitoring and reporting on the implementation and impact of global policies; and challenge legitimacy of existing processes by providing a forum for expressions of discontent and a vehicle for mobilizing change (Scholte, 2002).

But on the other hand, in addition to the fact that these advantages and mechanisms often never materialize, NGOs can also be ‘a mirage that obscures the interests of powerful states, national elites and private capital’ (Kamat, 2003). Indeed, they can and do detract from equality in global decision making in as many ways as they promote it. First, NGOs give voice to interests unequally in the global sphere which can further exacerbate political and structural inequalities. They mostly come from developed countries and their sheer volume can crowd out less established groups from developing countries (Rezlan and Lovald, 2006). Second, even the most South-centric groups are often led by Western or Westernized leaders who may unintentionally marginalize the disenfranchised voices they purport to represent. Indeed, NGO leaders are disproportionately drawn from the most privileged groups, whether analyzed by gender, class, age, race or geography (Scholte, 2002).

Third, despite altruistic goals, NGOs can be vehicles for advancing the interests of their members – which in turn are often linked to those countries that are already among the world’s most powerful. The fact that most such organizations are funded by donors from developed countries exacerbates this challenge, especially given the entire process of donor funding can be seen as an exercise in exerting influence. Decisions on who gets funded to do what are at least partially opportunities to promote values, ideas and interests that originate in developed countries. Applicant NGOs, who then go on to lobby global decision making, know they must frame their activities in line with donor priorities to attract funding and retain it for the future (Merry, 2005). Even the United Nations System is not immune to this pressure given that so much of its budget comes from voluntary contributions. Donors, now more than ever, are able to assert themselves and ensure that their priorities are addressed.

Related to this third mechanism is a fourth known as ‘upward accountability’. When NGOs receive money from donors, they are legally bound to perform activities according to the contractual specifications and limitations of the funding agreement. This means that accountability goes up to donors rather than down towards beneficiaries. But even in the absence of legalities, the existential threat of having funding withdrawn can paralyze pro-poor advocacy and prioritize funder interests on the international stage over those of developing countries (Carbone, 2003; Eade, 2007). The fact that most NGOs are regulated to some extent by the (usually powerful) states in which they are based further undermines their equality-catalyzing potential (Scholte, 2002). Governments can even ‘capture’ these organizations either by creating them in the first place (i.e., GONGOs) or fostering a relationship of dependence via funding contributions, personal relationships and/or representation on their governance bodies (Hayden, 2002).

Fifth, just as NGOs are dependent on their funders and regulators, some scholars have argued that they can undermine equality among nations by deepening dependency of developing countries on others and solidifying client-patron relationships (Sorj, 2005). If true, this would cause further imbalances in political capital that can be imported into international negotiations – the consequences of which have been described above – and even, as some have put it, ‘extend capitalist domination’ throughout the global sphere (Reinicke and Deng, 2000).

Finally, NGOs can undermine equality in global decision making by behaving unequally themselves. NGOs often lack democratic governance mechanisms and their leadership often believe such mechanisms for representation are not important (Scholte, 2002). The people they serve frequently have no method by which to hold them accountable.

However, in addition to NGOs’ problems of volume, leadership, funding, upward accountability, dependency, and anti-democratic practices, other non-state actors are also implicated in this challenge. The ideas and values of developed countries may also have greater influence in global decision making processes given that a disproportionate number of international civil servants and prominent academics either come from these countries or were trained at educational institutions located in them. This is particularly important given recent research into the role that language plays in decision making. Indeed, individual
actors or organizations can be ‘discursive entrepreneurs in global policy-making’ that dictate the world’s conceptualization of problems which in turn constrains the possible solutions available. If the dominant global discourses and conceptualizations are drawn exclusively from perceived realities and socialized experiences of developed countries (including their particular beliefs, stereotypes, worldview and history), harmful intersubjective power relations can be established and then persist across countries (Holzscheiter, 2005). These social constructions no doubt have the potential to undermine true equality on the world stage and further widen the equality-influence gap in global decision making.

Mitigating factors and possible incentives

Despite these numerous barriers to equal influence among countries in global decision making, there are at least five mitigating factors that help balance the asymmetries of power. First, many entities within the United Nations System are focused acutely on development issues and allocate a large proportion of their resources to improving the well-being of people in developing countries (United Nations General Assembly, 2000). Given that this orientation is for the most part universally supported, it would be contradictory for developed countries to then overly exert a disproportionate influence over certain parts of the system’s agenda setting and decision making processes. Second, regional commissions and committees serve an important role in the governance of the United Nations and its specialized agencies and often have their own budgets, activities and elections for leaders. Even if developed countries choose to assert themselves at global decision making bodies, they would be less successful at regional meetings due to both the concentration of these countries in the Americas and Europe and their dispersion across the African, Eastern Mediterranean, South-East Asian and Western Pacific regions. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has also played an important role in championing developing country-friendly policies, as have at least four of the five United Nations regional economic commissions, namely those serving Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Western Asia. Third, international civil servants are likely (although not necessarily) to be sympathetic to the needs of developing countries and the importance of equality in decision making given the global nature of their work and focus on improving well-being among people everywhere. The representatives of developed countries to the various entities of the United Nations System may hold similar personal views that could influence the positions they take and the advice they send back to their capitals. Fourth, despite being funded by donors in developed countries, NGOs are known to inform and enhance equality in international forums based on the mechanisms listed above and their ability to both articulate perspectives that transcend national interests and represent the views of diffused majorities and marginalized populations (Charnovitz, 2003; de Tocqueville, 2006; Howse, 2001; Sechooler, 2009). While complicated by the presence of government and business operated NGOs (GONGOs and BONGOs), truly independent groups are capable of acting as ‘mechanisms of democracy’ and can empower individuals in any country to participate in global governance (Boutros-Ghali, 1995; United Nations Development Programme, 1999). Finally, developing and emerging states formally enjoy a voting majority at most governing bodies within the United Nations System such that they can, as a last resort, seize decision making authority and impose equality upon the decision making process if a core issue was ever to arise that urgently affected them. This strategy, however, could not be used regularly given that it would diminish support for the system among those states that currently enjoy disproportional influence and finance the majority of its operations. There would also, no doubt, be consequences for those ‘troublemaking’ countries outside the formalized structure of the United Nations.

Interestingly, in addition to mitigating factors, there are also at least three considerations that may work to diminish the negative consequences of asymmetrical authority and perhaps even incentivize it. First, forums at which developed countries enjoy disproportional influence are probably more likely to receive their financial support. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund are but two examples where weighted voting has led to relatively higher investments. Second, developing and emerging countries can use flexibility and compromise on global issues in one area to extract other promises that may be even more important to them in other areas, such as bilateral foreign assistance, national security and support for core international initiatives. Third, greater influence for powerful states encourages them to work within the established multilateral system rather than circumventing or bilateralizing it.

While the extent to which these factors actually mitigate or incentivize inequalities in global decision making is unknown, they do not erase the fact that many of today’s international institutions rely on their egalitarian governance models to claim superordinate normative authority, which, if false, would constitute a moral fraud and could breed distrust for these global governance bodies. As such, additional strategies must be found to correct the imbalances in political capital, economic advantages and surreptitious influence through non-state actors that make some countries more influential than others.
Pragmatic opportunities to bridge the equality-influence gap

Total equality among states is probably a fantasy given the unlikelihood of fully insulating global decision making from the expected influence of asymmetrical international politicking. However, if the international community is serious about having a United Nations with the sovereign equality it claims to embody, there are at least several realistic strategies that can be pursued immediately by various actors to improve the current state of affairs (see Table 1). These opportunities for action do not necessarily require new international laws or revisions to the United Nations’ Charter that would likely be politically impractical at this time.

Building capacity for leadership in global advocacy

Successful global advocacy depends on the availability of representatives with a range of knowledge, skills and tacit experiences, as well as a sophisticated support team. A concerted effort to build a counter-aligned advocacy architecture for developing and emerging countries – mimicking that which is available to leaders from developed countries – may go a long way to balancing power inequalities. Such a capacity-building initiative could be modeled after the Ministerial Leadership Initiative for Global Health launched by Mary Robinson’s Realizing Rights and the Aspen Institute with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This project avoids the equality criticisms highlighted above by enhancing technical capacities of Ministries of Health in those areas that the Ministries themselves identify as requiring strengthening (Realizing Rights, 2009). Alternatively, various global advocacy ‘clinics’ could be established to provide rapid assistance and policy analysis services at the request of representatives attending meetings of United Nations governance bodies, which would again be responding to specific needs identified by developing countries themselves. Such clinics could learn from the success of the Advisory Centre on World Trade Organization Law that was established in 2001 to help developing countries defend their interests in that organization’s decision making processes (World Trade Organization, 2001).

Support global networks owned by developing countries

The international community could also support special gatherings of political leaders and technical experts from
developing countries to share experiences and discuss common concerns. This would help participants establish their own global policy networks and formulate common positions that more forcefully articulate their collective views in preparation for meetings of global decision making bodies (Slaughter, 2004). This could work at both the political and technical level, and perhaps even across these oft separated domains. Regardless, these leadership forums and networks should be owned by developing countries and build on past successes, such as conferences of the G77, summits of ministers of finance from the African Union (AU) or Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and high-level gatherings of political leaders and technical experts from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the alternative, strong North-South alliances of NGOs and governments could be organized to empower developing countries and assert greater potential influence (Shaffer, 2006), especially through two-level games that take advantage of entanglement between domestic and international politics (Putnam, 1988). Care would have to be taken to ensure that participating NGOs are neither undemocratic nor anti-egalitarian (Scholte, 2002).

**Equalize partnerships**

Global initiatives are increasingly being governed, financed and delivered via public-private partnerships of various configurations (Gates Foundation, 2002), which in turn are often supported themselves by various ‘meta-partnerships’ such as the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (Andonova, 2010). Some partnerships are loose alliances while others have sophisticated secretariats and/or separate boards of directors or steering groups whose membership often reflects their sources of funding (e.g., Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; Stop TB Partnership; Roll Back Malaria Partnership; GAVI Alliance). Greater representation from developing countries on the governing bodies of partnerships, whatever their structural design, could significantly enhance equality in global decision making. Alternatively, these boards, to the extent they have not already done so, could establish powerful advisory committees that guide partnership activities with members drawn almost exclusively from developing countries (e.g., a strategy pursued by the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research (World Health Organization, 2010a)). The partnerships hosted by United Nations agencies or funded by the United Nations Office for International Partnerships are particularly appropriate targets for encouraging this approach.

**Facilitate evidence informed global decision making**

In the absence of research evidence, global decisions will be based on rhetoric, ideological values and the political interests of the powerful. For example, until scientists had uncovered overwhelming proof for the contagion theory of disease in 1892, the internationally accepted cause of illness shifted according to political preference with commercial perspectives often prevailing (Arhin-Tenkorang and Conceição, 2003; Cooper, 1989; Howard-Jones, 1975). Researchers, therefore, must seek to conduct robust policy-relevant studies on the most pressing global challenges so that technical decisions can be informed by multiple inputs and thus become less susceptible to unhelpful political interference. Donor agencies, in turn, can fund researchers and think-tanks in developing countries so that they can answer the priority questions relevant to their respective jurisdictions. This is particularly important for highly contested issues, such as agriculture, climate change, family planning and nuclear energy.

**Enhance accountability and independent evaluation**

Equality in global decision making throughout the United Nations System can also be strengthened through enhanced monitoring and evaluation of its global policies, particularly if equality is made an explicit part of an accountability agenda. Such assessments could be conducted by individual researchers (e.g. Godlee, 1994), civil society organizations (e.g. Global Health Watch, 2008), development agencies (e.g. Nahar Kabir and Holmgren, 2005), or even parliamentary committees (e.g. UK House of Lords Select Committee on Intergovernmental Organisations, 2008). An independent evaluation group, like that of the World Bank, could also help bring greater accountability to the activities of the United Nations System and inform decisions of its governing bodies (Dethier, 2007). The impact of this strategy could be further enhanced if it also improves efforts towards evidence-informed global decision making by evaluating and publicizing the use, or non-use, of research evidence (e.g. Hoffman, Lavis and Bennett, 2009; Oxman, Lavis and Fretheim, 2007).

**Further encourage discussion on institutional reforms**

Finally, long-term equality in global decision making can be catalyzed and accelerated through structural and governance reforms throughout the international system. Existing inequalities must continue to be examined, debated and publicized from a multiplicity of perspectives to enable a constructive dialogue on the issue rather than have it present as a hidden factor affecting decision making. Solutions will not be found unless the problem is adequately defined. Leaders of NGOs, international civil servants, research institutions and academic journals may be particularly well-placed to promote such deliberation and actively facilitate the articulation and proposal of solutions.
Global decision making is an area that has seen significant challenges in terms of equality and influence among states. The United Nations System has often been criticized for not sufficiently aligning in favor of equality to generate enough political capital and momentum to overcome these challenges. Whether this is possible has yet to be seen. The lack of progress on wider global governance reform, sadly, is not encouraging.

Challenges for implementation

These strategies for enhancing equality of state influence in global decision making, however, are necessarily limited by the political economy challenge of convincing today’s most powerful players to actually support them. The benefits of a more inclusive international system for those in charge will have to be shown to outweigh any rents accrued by maintaining the status-quo. This will not be easy. The tangible benefits of sovereign equality at the global level have yet to be empirically demonstrated, and even if they were, short-term national self-interest is often placed ahead of even greater long-term national and international welfare. The entrenched political institutions and powerful special interests that benefit from current inequalities will no doubt do everything they can to prevent improvements. Interests will have to be sufficiently aligned in favor of equality to generate enough political capital and momentum to overcome these challenges. Whether this is possible has yet to be seen. The lack of progress on wider global governance reform, sadly, is not encouraging.

Conclusion

The equality-influence gap between the rhetoric of parity and the reality of politics should be addressed so as to avert the moral fraud and distrust that could otherwise result from having international institutions claim superordinate normative authority based on sovereign equality that does not really exist. It is true that most of the United Nations System can already be considered egalitarian if equality is defined in formal legalistic terms given its one-state-one-vote system constitutionally enjoyed by member states in its General Assembly and various other decision making bodies (but infamously not its Security Council) (Simpson, 2004; United Nations, 1945). But when equality is defined with respect to actual influence on decision making – which is usually more meaningful for people – it is clear that equality-influence gaps exist and are caused by imbalances in political capital across countries, economic barriers preventing equal participation, and furtive influence through non-state actors, funding and training. While at least partially mitigated by the United Nations’ development orientation, regional structure, engagement with civil society organizations, and its technically egalitarian constitution, a crisis of inequality still remains. Factors incentivizing the status-quo, such as increased financial support from those with more influence, are unlikely to match the intrinsic ethical value attached to equality in a system that claims to embody it, its ability to induce feelings of ownership in decisions, and its importance to trust in and effective governance of the international system.

Achieving more equal decision making is possible and probably desirable, particularly throughout the United Nations System which was designed to foster sovereign equality, but itself forward as egalitarian, and benefits from a governance structure that most naturally supports it. Several opportunities to address this challenge have been identified, including enhancing capacity among national leaders to engage in global advocacy and equalizing multi-party partnerships that are becoming increasingly important. States can also help support networks owned by developing countries, facilitate evidence-informed global policymaking, enhance accountability and independent evaluation, and continue to encourage deliberation on institutional reforms.

While this analysis is limited by its focus on equality (rather than other important attributes), participation of states (rather than individuals), traditional sovereignty (rather than other ways of conceptualizing the international system) and the United Nations System (to the exclusion of other international institutions), it provides a useful starting point to an otherwise neglected area of study. Further research and debate are no doubt necessary to fully explore the equality-influence gap among states and foster even more practical proposals for addressing it. Continued inattentiveness to the potentially undeserved superordinate normative authority claimed by many international institutions, and the short and medium-term strategies for addressing this important issue, will only prevent realization of the type of improved global decision making that is necessary to achieve a more peaceful, secure and prosperous international society. It is hoped that challenging the egalitarian presumptions of global decision making will further promote a constructive and realistic debate on this issue among those who can act upon it.

Notes

1. This imbalance between monetary support and global burden has been well documented in budgetary allocations of the World Health Organization, particularly with respect to communicable disease control which is an issue that affects the national security interests of developed countries (Stuckler, et al., 2008).
2. Infamously, this does not include the United Nations Security Council.
3. The optimistic expectations for global cooperation and an end to international conflict via the United Nations have given way to criticism of this diplomatic system, assumption by civil society of increasingly important roles, greater violence and more emergency situations. Recognized contemporary challenges to the United Nations include widespread cultural diffusion resulting in higher expectations, detachment from global solutions by developed countries, self-interest defined in domestic terms, memories of recent failures (e.g., to contain the global HIV/AIDS pandemic), and greater attention on relieving conflict than promoting development. Finally, the financial importance of the United Nations is in decline: a mere US$5 billion was
disbursed through the system in 1996 as compared with the approximately US$55 billion that was given by national bilateral aid agencies (Walt, 1998).

4 The World Bank and International Monetary Fund are notable exceptions, whereby states are supposed to be equal approximately according to the amount of money they have contributed to the organization.


6 Examples of past American campaigns to remove leaders from international institutions include Jose Bustani as Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Robert Watson as Chair of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Mary Robinson as High Commissioner for Human Rights for the United Nations, and Boutros Boutros-Ghali as Secretary General of the United Nations (Borger, 2002; Fowler, 2002; Lawler, 2002; Monbiot, 2002).

7 For example, in the health sphere there is the American Government's Office of Global Health Affairs, the British Government’s International Health Division, and the Canadian Government’s International Health Directorate. In the trade sphere, there is the Office of the United States Trade Representative, the European Union’s Trade Commissioner, and Canada’s Minister of International Trade.

8 Again in the health sphere, examples include the US’s Institute of Medicine, UK’s Royal Society for Public Health, and Canada’s McMaster Health Forum. In the trade sphere, there is the US-based Council on Foreign Relations, the UK’s Chatham House, and the Canadian International Council.

9 In the case of the World Health Organization, voluntary contributions exceed three quarters of its entire budget (Stuckler, et al., 2008).

10 The Advisory Centre on World Trade Organization Law acts as a quasi-independent agency that provides training on World Trade Organization law to individuals from developing countries. It also provides legal advice during World Trade Organization dispute settlement proceedings. The Centre’s goal, as established in its constituting agreement, is to ensure that all members of the World Trade Organization have full knowledge of their rights and responsibilities and are capable of advocating for their interests (World Trade Organization, 2001).

References


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