


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Governing on par with states: Private power and practices of political normalisation

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Abstract

The involvement of private actors in global policymaking has received significant scholarly attention in IR. Existing accounts have shown how entities such as corporations, businesses, and philanthropies build their authority to become legitimate actors and shape global politics. This paper argues that contemporary global dynamics, such as the financialisation of development and the rise of multistakeholderism, have ushered in a trend where private actors are not only seen as legitimate delegated authorities but also embraced as fully fledged political equals indispensable for addressing societal problems. To understand this shift, it is necessary to move beyond an examination of legitimisation strategies to interrogate, instead, how private actors shape what are seen as ‘apt’ or ‘deviant’ ways of knowing and acting upon problems. Through an examination of what I call ‘political normalisation’ in the field of global food governance, I show how through concrete practices – individualising social problems, defining institutional aptness, and cultivating the landscape – private actors not only cultivate a perception of themselves as rightful global governors but also shape the parameters of what rightful governing ought to be. More broadly, this shift invites us to further complicate the public–private divide and assess the novel ways through which private actors ‘do’ politics.

Keywords: corporate power; global politics; multistakeholderism; non-state actors; privatisation

Introduction

In 2021, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General introduced the ‘Common Agenda’, which outlines the course of action for the future of global cooperation. A notable feature of the agenda is its call for a ‘networked’ multilateralism approach, emphasising the importance of inclusive governance frameworks that bring together ‘all relevant stakeholders.’¹ Of particular significance, the agenda recognises the urgent need for increased private–public cooperation and a more systematic engagement by the UN with private actors.

The involvement of private actors in global politics is far from being a recent development. For decades, companies, philanthropic organisations, and profit-driven entities have – directly or indirectly – influenced decision-making processes by assuming tasks traditionally belonging to states.² While performing these tasks and introducing new practices such as self-regulation, these

¹UN, ‘Effective, inclusive multilateralism key to address current interconnected threats, Secretary-General tells Security Council, highlighting new agenda for peace’ (2022).

²Claire Cutler, Virginia Haufler, and Tony Porter, *Private Authority and International Affairs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Thomas J. Biersteker and Rodney Bruce Hall, ‘Private authority as global governance’, in Rodney Bruce Hall and Thomas J. Biersteker (eds), *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.203–22; Deborah D. Avant, ‘Private security’, in Paul D. Williams (ed.), *Security Studies* (London:

actors have been able to legitimise their role in global governance, thereby positioning themselves as authoritative rulers.³ However, in recent decades, the rise to prominence of governance models such as multistakeholderism has brought about a significant shift in the discourse surrounding the engagement of private actors in global politics.⁴ Within these models, private actors are not only provisionally involved in governance in their capacity as contractors or delegated authorities, but, increasingly so, I argue, as states' *political inter pares*. In these contexts, their involvement is not only encouraged but often also deemed indispensable, as they too have a 'stake' in the problem at hand.

The fact that private actors are no longer confined to performing a set of limited tasks but being increasingly embraced as fully fledged political partners is evident both in discourse and practice. Consider the example of the 'Food Action Alliance', a multistakeholder platform where international organisations (IOs) such as The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) or World Wildlife Fund (WWF) make decisions together with some African governments and corporations such as Syngenta, Bayer, and Cargill to 'achieve Sustainable Food Systems.'⁵ These companies, while often criticised for polluting or for producing and marketing unhealthy products, now stand *on par with* governments to 'solve' problems they contribute to perpetuating. Take also the case of the Tropical Forest Alliance: decisions on forest preservation are made on a consensus basis by its Steering Committee, which includes private sector representatives of Unilever – heavily involved in the palm oil business – and state actors such as Norway.⁶

How have private actors transitioned from being treated as those to be regulated to being seen as a necessary part of solutions to global problems? How have entities, largely accountable to shareholders, evolved into essential political 'partners' for addressing global challenges, and what kind of politics does this shift render possible? To shed light on these questions, a rich body of International Relations (IR) scholarship has focused on how private actors have built their authority and legitimacy over time.⁷ Some scholars have examined, for example, how actors such as corporations, firms, and philanthropies connect to normative ideals or align themselves with states and the public sphere to exercise their power.⁸ Scholars have also analysed the role of self-referential practices through which such groups build their charisma and become legitimate global governors.⁹ However, this paper contends that any legitimisation struggle takes place against the background of deeply embedded political parameters – i.e. understandings of what is 'rightful' rule and what is

Routledge, 2008), pp. 462–76; Rita Abrahamsen and Anna Leander, *Routledge Handbook of Private Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016).

³ Matthias Hofferberth and Daniel Lambach, 'Becoming global governors: Self-agentification, recognition, and delegation in world politics', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:3 (2022), ksac018; Tim Büthe and Walter Mattli, *The New Global Rulers: The Privatization of Regulation in the World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac018>}.

⁴ Juanita Uribe, 'Excluding through inclusion: Managerial practices in the era of multistakeholder governance', *Review of International Political Economy* (2024), pp. 1–24, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2024.2362666>}; Jack Taggart and Kavi Joseph Abraham, 'Norm dynamics in a post-hegemonic world: Multistakeholder global governance and the end of liberal international order', *Review of International Political Economy* (2023), pp. 1–28, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2023.2213441>}; Hortense Jongen and Jan Aart Scholte, 'Legitimacy in multistakeholder global governance at ICANN', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 27:2 (2021), pp. 298–324.

⁵ Food Action Alliance, 'About' (2024), available at: {<https://www.foodactionalliance.org/about>}.

⁶ Tropical Forest Alliance, 'Governance Team' (2024), available at: {<https://www.tropicalforestalliance.org/en/about-tfa/governance-and-team/>}.

⁷ Biersteker and Hall, 'Private authority as global governance'; Büthe and Mattli, *The New Global Rulers*; Alejandro Colás, 'The power of representation: Democratic politics and global governance', *Review of International Studies*, 29:S1 (2003), pp. 97–118; Dimitrios Katsikas, 'Non-state authority and global governance', *Review of International Studies*, 36:S1 (2010), pp. 113–35; Elisabeth Prügl, 'Neoliberalising feminism', *New Political Economy*, 20:4 (2015), pp. 614–31; Jan Aart Scholte, 'Towards greater legitimacy in global governance', *Review of International Political Economy*, 18:1 (2011), pp. 110–20.

⁸ Cutler, Haufler, and Porter, *Private Authority and International Affairs*; Jessica F. Green, *Rethinking Private Authority: Agents and Entrepreneurs in Global Environmental Governance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁹ Jennifer Clapp and Doris Fuchs, *Corporate Power and Global Agrifood Governance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Büthe and Mattli, *The New Global Rulers*.

deemed 'normal' or 'deviant'. Only then can actors portray themselves as or claim to be rightful rulers, based on their own self-ascriptions.

The underlying transformation this paper addresses relates to shifts in these fundamental political parameters that a solely focus on legitimisation perspective cannot fully capture. To that end, I argue that we must pay greater attention to how private actors shape the frames of reference, discourses, and meanings of what is seen as commonsensical or valid, or what Foucault referred to as the 'general politics of truth'.¹⁰ This, I argue, requires a more detailed analysis of *processes of political normalisation*, or the extent to which private power is able to shape the processes that determine 'correctness', 'adequacy', and the most appropriate ways of knowing problems and conducting politics.¹¹

I introduce three practices of normalisation through which private networks validate and normalise their political power in global spheres. The first practice is the *individualisation of social problems*, which consists of positioning solutions that drive the demand for a certain product as the only 'evidence-based' options. The second practice, *defining institutional aptness*, refers to how private actors are increasingly involved in determining the 'adequate' loci of power for governing issues, often by discrediting multilateral institutions for their shortcomings in managing the delivery of these 'evidence-based' solutions. The third practice, *cultivating the landscape*, represents a proactive approach by powerful economic networks to plant and nurture small and medium-sized initiatives – ranging from funds and non-profits to consultancies – which, in close partnership with IOs and governments, naturalise market narratives as the best, and even 'only', way forward.

Political normalisation should not be interpreted as an affirmation that private actors *are* equal to states, but rather as an attempt to critically examine the practices they deploy to *strive for* political equivalence, not always successfully. Numerous instances exist where social movements have resisted and contested private power, and, as such, the influence of private actors in global politics should not be treated as an a priori assumption but assessed empirically. Additionally, practices of political normalisation do not happen in isolation but are facilitated by a permissive neoliberal and financialised context that has granted private actors significant structural and instrumental power.¹²

The fact that private actors are assuming novel political roles and shaping what the boundaries of political 'normalcy' are points to the increasing blurriness of the public–private nexus. In my analysis of practices of political normalisation, I do not propose to revert to the private–public dichotomy or to amalgamate them into a single category, but to interrogate their novel entanglements. Amidst discourses around the 'necessity' to bring in the private sector to solve global problems, the aim of this paper is thus not to outright reject their presence, but to render discourses around their political equivalence 'awkward'.

Empirically, this paper focuses on global food and nutrition policy. Since the early 2000s, efforts to tackle hunger and malnutrition have largely adhered to market dynamics, prioritising technical and isolated 'solutions' like vitamin capsules, micronutrient powders, and fortified foods produced by the food industry, agribusinesses, and pharmaceutical companies. These solutions, along with their supporting institutional structures, have been touted as the most 'cost-effective' and 'proven',¹³ despite evidence from food sovereignty and agroecological approaches showing that structural dimensions – such as land concentration, industrial agriculture, intensive farming, and marketing practices – play a key role in sustaining hunger.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in C. Gordon (ed.), 'Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977', (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp.109–33.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78* (London: Springer, 2007).

¹² Jennifer Clapp, 'World hunger and the global economy: Strong linkages, weak action', *Journal of International Affairs*, 67:2 (2014), pp. 1–17; Daniela Gabor, 'The Wall Street consensus', *Development and Change*, 52:3 (2021), pp. 429–59.

¹³ Richard Horton, 'Maternal and child undernutrition: An urgent opportunity', *The Lancet*, 371:9608 (2008), pp. 179; SUN, 'Scaling up nutrition: A for Action' (2011).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: in the first section, I review different accounts that help us understand how private actors do politics and legitimise their role as governors. Drawing inspiration from Foucault, the second section discusses the concept of normalisation and explores what it adds to the study of private power in contemporary global governance. The third section delves into the empirical material of the paper. After providing an overview of the long-standing influence of private actors in the global food and nutrition landscape, the section proceeds with an in-depth empirical analysis of political normalisation. I show how private actors such as the Gates Foundation, in collaboration with multilateral donors and some IOs, individualised hunger and malnutrition by framing them as problems to be solved through nutrient consumption or individual ‘awareness’ measures.¹⁴ The next section examines the ways in which private networks, which coalesced around the World Bank, contributed to marginalising the United Nations as the main loci of global nutrition governance. Instead, they called for allegedly more apt and agile institutional architecture besides the UN called the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement (SUN), operating under a market-led focus and including food manufacturers such as Cargill and Unilever as part of its core political constituencies.¹⁵ In the final section, I explore how private networks such as philanthropies, hybrid initiatives, and funds – together with donors and governments – initiated a plethora of medium-sized initiatives dedicated to spreading a discourse promoting product-based solutions to malnutrition, further entrenching the normalisation of private power in global politics.

Methodologically, the article relies on an in-depth case study and blends different methods eclectically. Through an inductive approach, I identified the different practices leading to political normalisation. To that end, I carried out a discourse analysis of primary sources such as documents, reports, and publications from relevant organisations. Discourse analysis allowed me to capture the frames of reference that underpin private actors’ prevailing discourses as well as to denaturalise the instances that make their role appear natural. I also included secondary sources such as online sources and academic publications to contextualise the findings within the articulation of larger neoliberal discourses. Additionally, I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews between September 2021 and February 2023. This included interviewees from UNICEF, the World Committee on Food Security (CFS) and its Civil Society and Indigenous People’s Mechanism, the former United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN), and one of SUN’s networks, organisations representing private interests such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), agribusinesses, and civil society organisations. The interviews were crucial for triangulating the findings and understanding what is conceived as (ab)normal by key actors in the field.

Private power in global politics

The involvement of private actors in global politics is far from new. As with any other social phenomenon, it has its background conditions. On the one hand, the belief in free markets as the most efficient form of service delivery – a key tenet of the so-called Washington consensus – has facilitated the deregulation of several sectors and paved the way for private actors to emerge as key players in global politics.¹⁶ On the other hand, financialisation dynamics have further amplified the influence of the private sector in key development issues, accentuating the narrative according to

¹⁴ Actors included what Ann Louise Lie has called the ‘investment coalition’ of global nutrition, namely the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, the United States and Canadian aid agencies, global food corporations such as Royal DSM, large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UN agencies such as the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the World Food Program (WFP). Ann Louise Lie, ‘Power in global nutrition governance: A critical analysis of the establishment of the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) partnership’, *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 25:2 (2019), pp. 277–303.

¹⁵ Claudio Schuftan and Ted Greiner, ‘The Scaling Up Nutrition initiative’, in A. C. Bellows, C. Callenius, C. Campeau, et al. (eds.), *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (Brot für die Welt, FIAN and ICCO Cooperation, 2013), pp. 23–8.

¹⁶ Philip G. Cerny, *Rethinking World Politics: A Theory of Transnational Neopluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Susan Strange, ‘States, firms and diplomacy’, *International Affairs*, 68:1 (1992), pp. 1–15.

which private involvement is the sole means of filling the current 'financial' gap.¹⁷ In this context, corporations, philanthropies, and businesses have assumed central roles in global decision-making, mirroring the duties and responsibilities traditionally held by states and IOs, such as the provision of social goods.¹⁸

The category of 'private actors' and its scope have been widely debated in existing scholarship. Traditionally, corporations, firms, and financial institutions have been among the most extensively studied vehicles of private power. Recent accounts, however, have extended the scope of analysis to include actors such as venture philanthropies, hybrid initiatives, and 'business-interest non-governmental organisations' (sometimes [mis]labelled as 'civil society'), as these actors increasingly champion a business-oriented and pro-market ethos. For example, philanthropies increasingly serve as vehicles for capital conversion by channelling their grants to for-profit companies in which their funders or associated companies may have financial stakes.¹⁹ The category of private actors should, therefore, not be limited to encompassing traditional economic entities such as corporations but should be expanded to include those entities that represent private interests, prompt market-oriented frames, and have indirect financial stakes in specific issues.

As private actors become prominent players in global politics, identifying the sources and mechanisms of their authority and legitimacy has been a central focus of scholarly inquiry.²⁰ This stems from a long-standing interest by IR scholars to examine shifts in authority from the public and the national to the private and transnational arenas.²¹ One of the most enduring and analytically challenging questions concerns the conditions under which private actors assert their role as legitimate rulers, despite lacking a 'public' mandate for their activities. According to these perspectives, the legitimacy of non-state actors is tied to their ability to gain public recognition of their right to rule over a particular territory or issue area.²² Private actors may employ different modalities to achieve this recognition. One strand of scholarship has focused on the extent to which private forms of authority can be legitimised in reference to shared normative governance standards.²³ For example, in contentious fields such as security, the legitimacy of private actors often hinges on their connections to the state.²⁴ In other areas, legitimacy is contingent upon how well private actors can emulate democratic norms or adhere to ideals of expertise, efficiency, and rationality.²⁵ Additionally, existing scholarship has demonstrated how instruments of 'soft law' such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or standard-setting play a key role in asserting the legitimacy and accountability of businesses and corporations.²⁶ Through these self-regulatory

¹⁷ Gabor, 'The Wall Street consensus'.

¹⁸ Avant, 'Private security'; Cutler, Haufler, and Porter, *Private Authority and International Affairs*.

¹⁹ Linsey McGoey, 'The philanthropic state: Market-state hybrids in the philanthrocapitalist turn', *Third World Quarterly*, 35:1 (2014), pp. 109–25.

²⁰ Claire Cutler, *Private Power and Global Authority: Transnational Merchant Law in the Global Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. xc; Büthe and Mattli, *The New Global Rulers*; Katsikas, 'Non-state authority and global governance'; Rodney Bruce Hall and Thomas J. Biersteker (eds), *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Green, *Rethinking Private Authority*.

²¹ Michael Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy, and Contestation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); James Brassett and Eleni Tsingou, 'The politics of legitimate global governance', *Review of International Political Economy*, 18:1 (2011), pp. 1–16; Marie-Laure Djelic and Sigrid Quack, *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Katsikas, 'Non-state authority and global governance'.

²² Rita Abrahamson and Michael C. Williams, *Security beyond the State: Private Security in International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Marco Schäferhoff, Sabine Campe, and Christopher Kaan, 'Transnational public-private partnerships in international relations: Making sense of concepts, research frameworks, and results', *International Studies Review*, 11:3 (2009), pp. 451–74.

²³ A. Claire Cutler, 'The legitimacy of private transnational governance: Experts and the transnational market for force', *Socio-Economic Review*, 8:1 (2010), pp. 157–85; Graeme Auld, Steven Bernstein, and Benjamin Cashore, 'The new corporate social responsibility', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 33:1 (2008), pp. 413–35.

²⁴ Cutler, 'The legitimacy of private transnational governance'.

²⁵ Green, *Rethinking Private Authority*; Cutler, 'The legitimacy of private transnational governance'.

²⁶ Clapp and Fuchs, *Corporate Power and Global Agrifood Governance*; Christopher May, *Global Corporations in Global Governance* (London: Routledge, 2015).

frameworks, these actors, which often lack forms of democratic accountability, set the very rules by which they are governed while simultaneously promoting standards of responsibility.²⁷

An adjacent body of scholarship has paid greater attention to how private actors, and the governance structures supporting them, construct their agency to appear rightful in the eyes of public opinion, despite their non-governmental nature.²⁸ Here, the focus has mostly been on the self-referential practices by which actors such as corporations or venture philanthropists seek support for and consent to their rule. In fields such as global health governance, philanthropies employ specific knowledge-making practices and rhetorical strategies to present themselves as benefactors of humanity and establish themselves as charismatic rulers.²⁹ Private actors may also utilise dynamics of self-agentification – from resource mobilisation to self-justification – to shift their role from mere economic actors to recognised global governors.³⁰ Additionally, ‘backdoor’ approaches such as indirect donations and the funding of scientific research have also helped sectors such as the tobacco, food, and health industries to build a positive attitude towards their associated products.³¹ Together, these processes have allowed corporations and philanthropies to build their credibility and support.³²

While existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into how private actors become authoritative rulers, it has tended to concentrate on how these actors build their legitimacy and authority amid eroding state power. Such analyses imply that private actors can be seen as legitimate governors as long as they embrace normative ideals such as democracy, develop the rules that govern them, or successfully engage in direct or indirect strategies to be perceived as charismatic by a given audience.³³

Building on, but also departing from, existing accounts, I seek to study how private actors do politics in a global context where there has been a notable shift in debates about private power, with corporations, philanthropies, and companies not only assuming a limited set of governmental tasks but being embraced as indispensable political partners.

This necessitates a shift in focus from a preoccupation with authority and legitimacy to an examination of the standards, scripts, and frames of reference according to which something appears *normal* and thus potentially rightful in the first place. Thus, my analysis of private power operates at a different level. Instead of concentrating on how private actors directly or indirectly cultivate their legitimacy or the public acceptance of their role, my approximation engages with a second-order analysis. This means that I am less interested in exploring the ways in which private actors ‘emulate’ some standards to become legitimate, than in examining how they shape the processes that delineate what is seen as ‘normal’ from a political perspective. While normalisation processes are not exogenous to legitimacy, they are not entirely equivalent, at least analytically. Normalisation

²⁷ Genevieve LeBaron and Jane Lister, ‘Benchmarking global supply chains: The power of the “ethical audit” regime’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:5 (2015), 905–24; Juanita Elias, ‘Women workers and labour standards: The problem of “human rights”’, *Review of International Studies*, 33:1 (2007), pp. 45–57; Tagi Sagafi-Nejad and John H. Dunning, *The UN and Transnational Corporations: From Code of Conduct to Global Compact* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Fabian G. Neuner, ‘Public opinion and the legitimacy of global private environmental governance’, *Global Environmental Politics*, 20:1 (2020), pp. 60–81.

²⁹ Linsey McGoey and Darren Thiel, ‘Charismatic violence and the sanctification of the super-rich’, *Economy and Society*, 47:1 (2018), pp.111–34; Annabelle Littoz-Monnet and Ximena Osorio Garate, ‘Knowledge politics in global governance: Philanthropists’ knowledge-making practices in global health’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 31:2 (2023), pp. 1–26; Sophie Harman, ‘The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and legitimacy in global health governance’, *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 349–68.

³⁰ Matthias Hofferberth, Tanja Brühl, Eric Burkart, Marco Fey, and Anne Peltner, ‘Multinational enterprises as “social actors”: Constructivist explanations for corporate social responsibility’, *Global Society*, 25:2 (2011), pp. 205–26.

³¹ Martin Caraher and Sinéad Furey, ‘The corporate influence on food charity and aid: The “hunger industrial complex” and the death of welfare’, *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10 (2022), pp. 950955, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.950955>}.

³² Littoz-Monnet and Osorio Garate, ‘Knowledge politics in global governance’.

³³ Clapp and Fuchs, *Corporate Power and Global Agrifood Governance*; Lie, ‘Power in global nutrition governance’.

processes prompt us to empirically focus not on how private actors gain authority or legitimacy, but on how they shape the conditions under which something is deemed legitimate.

Additionally, this paper contends that a focus on political normalisation is well positioned to analytically capture the increasing elusiveness of the public–private nexus in contemporary global politics. In line with a growing body of scholarship that has challenged the notion that public and private act as two independent spheres, this paper seeks to further complicate this distinction.³⁴ Examining how private actors build their legitimacy by mirroring the state or by embracing public standards might seem less meaningful in an era where these actors claim and, at times, govern on par with states under a logic of *political equivalence*. Therefore, rather than simply examining the interactions between the private and the public, a focus on normalisation prompts us to further investigate the politics of the public–private nexus and its effects. I contend that the current hybridity of the public and the private results in a situation of ‘disorganised responsibility’,³⁵ where the consequences of actions become increasingly difficult to attribute to any specific actor. In fact, it neglects distributional dimensions to a point where it is no longer possible to distinguish between rights-holders, duty-bearers, and those who are to be held accountable. The aim here is not to reinstate a firm separation of spheres but rather to critically examine how, within an increasingly ‘stakeholderised’ landscape, they are fused in novel ways.

Practices of political normalisation

In order to better understand how private actors position themselves as political equals and indispensable governors in certain fields, I take inspiration from Foucault’s concept of ‘normalisation’, which refers to ‘positing an optimal model’ and attempting to ‘get people, movements, and actions, to conform to this model’.³⁶ In his lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault mainly discussed normalisation in relation to the disciplining power of states in governing populations. In this paper, I use the concept as a heuristic tool to examine processes not exclusively associated with government institutions. Instead, I use it as a lens to examine how, through their practices, powerful networks can shape normative understandings of what ‘good’ governance should look like, what politics should be about, and what is considered an ‘optimal’ state of affairs.

The power of normalisation lies in shaping not so much how things are but in *how they ought to be*. Therefore, I am less interested in how normalisation manifests itself legally (i.e. through voting power, rights, etc., at the negotiation table), but politically, through shifts in political meanings, actorhood dynamics, and the delineation of what is seen as ‘apt’ and ‘correct’ ways of knowing and addressing problems. In this sense, normalisation relates to the functioning of a general ‘politics of truth’, which encompasses the ordered procedures ‘according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’. It is thus, only within a ‘politics of truth’ deeply shaped by neoliberalism that the position of private actors acquires political significance and can potentially be recognised as right.³⁷

I propose to explore processes of political normalisation through practices. A focus on practices understood as ‘socially meaningful patterns of action’³⁸ is useful as it allows us to understand the ways in which actors ‘do’ politics. Practices are not homogeneous – they might act at different levels but overall make certain state of affairs possible.³⁹ In the case I examine, practices of

³⁴Jean-Christophe Graz, *The Power of Standards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Anna Leander, ‘Risk and the fabrication of apolitical, unaccountable military markets: the case of the CIA “Killing Program” 1’, *Review of International Studies*, 37:5 (2011), pp. 2253–68.

³⁵Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

³⁶Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*.

³⁷Foucault, ‘Power/knowledge’, p. 132.

³⁸Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, ‘International practices’, *International Theory*, 3:1 (2011), pp. 1–36 (p. 4); Andreas Reckwitz, ‘Toward a theory of social practices: A development in culturalist theorizing’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5:2 (2002), pp. 243–63.

³⁹Vincent Pouliot and Jean-Philippe Thérien, ‘Global governance in practice’, *Global Policy*, 9:2 (2018), pp. 163–72.

political normalisation contribute to the presence and perceived indispensability of private power, thus perpetuating the foundations of neoliberal discourses. In the following section, I outline three main practices of political normalisation through which private power alters the fundamental understandings of how – and by whom – governing *ought to be conducted*.

Individualising social problems

The individualisation of social problems refers to a process through which consumerist solutions gain validation as the only ‘evidence-based’ options, while alternative approaches are dismissed. Individualising social problems is, in that sense, intrinsically connected to the politics of knowledge validation, or the production of evidence and what is seen as authoritative from an epistemic perspective.⁴⁰ For instance, take the global agenda for education which promotes digital appliances, cash transfers, or online training as the most ‘evidence-based’ solutions to educational issues.⁴¹ In contemporary governance, private actors endowed with significant financial resources are key in sustaining the alignment between evidence-based discourses and consumerist rationales. For that, they fund large-scale studies and collaborate with think-tanks and prestigious journals that lend credibility to their approach through discourses that reshuffle the responsibility of a given problem to the individual.⁴² These solutions often encourage individuals or households to buy manufactured products or change their (consumer) behaviour. The embrace of consumer-oriented mechanisms as the most authoritative solutions to global problems is indicative of how private actors not only rearrange knowledge to commodify problems but also normalise the idea that their solutions are ‘true’ and thus, indispensable.⁴³ This does not necessarily suggest that these solutions are inadequate; rather, it points to the manner in which ways of addressing problems that leave their underlying structures intact are disproportionately privileged and presented as the best way forward.

Redefining institutional ‘aptness’

Redefining institutional aptness takes place when private networks are involved in promoting a discourse that devalues extant multilateral configurations as outdated or irrelevant. Through active campaigning and alliances with multilateral banks, donors, and funds, private actors overemphasise the shortcomings or deficiencies of intergovernmental arrangements and instead advocate for multistakeholder models. This practice typically involves pointing to the ‘inadequacy’ of intergovernmental models in delivering the above-mentioned ‘evidence-based’ solutions. Elements such as a lack of agility, speed, or inclusivity are highlighted as needing rectification. Private actors may, at times, fund consultants who publish reports advocating for reforms in their preferred ‘multi-stakeholder’ direction. They may also participate in the strategic leadership meetings and funding of newly established multistakeholder platforms. Importantly, this redefinition of institutional aptness extends beyond discursive discredit and can result in the withdrawal of funding by members of the international community from structures deemed outdated. Resources are then diverted towards hybrid structures, deemed more ‘agile’. Redefining institutional aptness therefore shifts the locus of power through which problems are governed while framing this shift as a ‘functional’ substitute to purportedly obsolete governing configurations. When the architecture of entire governance fields is restructured towards arrangements that are more accommodating to market-driven

⁴⁰ Annabelle Littoz-Monnet and Juanita Uribe, ‘Methods regimes in global governance: The politics of evidence-making in global health’, *International Political Sociology*, 17:2 (2023), pp. olad005, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olad005>}.

⁴¹ UNICEF, ‘The investment case for education and equity’ (2015), available at: {https://www.unicef.org/media/50936/file/Investment_Case_for_Education_and_Equity-ENG.pdf}.

⁴² See also Littoz-Monnet and Osorio Garate, ‘Knowledge politics in global governance’.

⁴³ Cutler, ‘The legitimacy of private transnational governance’.

approaches, the role of private actors as co-regulators is not only reinforced but also becomes 'normal'.

Cultivating the landscape

Cultivating the landscape refers to a practice employed by private entities such as businesses, philanthropic foundations, and funds to promote and propagate a myriad of small- and medium-scale market-oriented initiatives that actively seek to 'partner' with IOs and governments. Just as a gardener carefully plants and seeds the soil to cultivate plants, private actors seed and cultivate initiatives that further their ways of knowing and addressing problems, often in close collaboration with IOs and governments. This cultivation may involve offering financial support and expertise to initiatives and consultancies that champion the very same individual solutions that private actors advocate for. Typically, these initiatives emphasise the 'evidence-based' nature of such 'solutions', while reinforcing the idea that problems are to be solved through markets. These initiatives can also play a key role in supporting reforms that advocate for models which include the private sector as a 'stakeholder'. By actively planting and seeding these initiatives, which work in close collaboration with IOs' main agendas, private actors steer the trajectory of governance and normalise their role as indispensable governors. What is relevant here is the 'politics of truth' that the discourses of such initiatives help to sustain, in particular, a reinforcement of market interventions and multistakeholder governance models as the most efficient and viable ways forward.

To explore how practices of political normalisation operate in global politics, I focus on the global food and nutrition field, which has been treated as an appendix of food and trade regimes in the IR literature.⁴⁴ While significant attention has been devoted to privatisation dynamics in the field, it has mainly been through an analysis of the financialisation of food and agricultural regimes or with a focus on food insecurity, hunger, and famine.⁴⁵ In IR, global nutrition has rarely been analysed as a field in its own right. This is partly due to the long-standing perception of nutrition either as a 'technical' or 'health' issue.⁴⁶ In order to understand the persistence of such an understanding, I argue that a closer look at the role of private power is necessary step.

Food and nutrition: A goldmine for corporations

For many decades, nutrition has been a neglected priority in global development efforts. Often relegated to the sidelines, as the 'poor sister' of agricultural policies, it was long perceived as an 'afterthought' on the international agenda.⁴⁷ This marginalisation largely stemmed from the fact that nutrition was primarily addressed in the context of emergencies or charity, with food aid and assistance as the main channels for tackling the problem. In this context, discussions about the role of private actors have largely centered on their financial power as significant contributors to food supply, either through donations of food surplus or targeted governmental programmes. However, privatisation dynamics in the food and nutrition sector became more prominent in the years leading up to the 2008 financial crisis, when trends towards deregulation and privatisation intensified. In fact, the main response to the food crisis focused on 'boosting investments',⁴⁸ making

⁴⁴See however Lie, 'Power in global nutrition governance'; Stefano Prato and Nicola Bullard, 'Re-embedding nutrition in society, nature and politics', *Development*, 57, (2014), pp. 129–34.

⁴⁵Matthew Canfield, Molly D. Anderson, and Philip McMichael, 'UN Food Systems Summit 2021: Dismantling democracy and resetting corporate control of food systems', *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 5 (2021), pp. 1–15; Clapp and Fuchs, *Corporate Power and Global Agrifood Governance*; Matias E. Margulis, 'Trading out of the global food crisis? The World Trade Organization and the geopolitics of food security', *Geopolitics*, 19:2 (2014), pp. 322–50; Nora McKeon, *Food Security Governance: Empowering Communities, Regulating Corporations* (London: Routledge, 2014); Thomas Plümper and Eric Neumayer, 'Famine mortality, rational political inactivity, and international food aid', *World Development*, 37:1 (2009), pp. 50–61.

⁴⁶Prato and Bullard, 'Re-embedding nutrition in society, nature and politics'.

⁴⁷Global Nutrition Report, *2021 Global Nutrition Report: The State of Global Nutrition* (2021).

⁴⁸Clapp, 'World hunger and the global economy'.

programmes such as food fortification or vitamin supplementation particularly appealing. Since then, nutrition has been viewed as a ‘smart investment’, both within and beyond UN circles.⁴⁹

In addition to these factors, the food and nutrition sector has unique characteristics that make it particularly susceptible to private influence. The association of nutrition with individual ‘health’, referred to as ‘nutritionism’, has provided fertile ground for the spread of market discourses. Nutritionism, in fact, dominates how we conceive our relationship with food to the point that its influence on policies often goes unnoticed. IOs such as the FAO and World Health Organization (WHO), for example, define malnutrition in ‘nutritionist’ terms, as a physiological condition caused by deficiencies, excesses, or imbalances in energy and nutrient intake.⁵⁰ This perspective extends into everyday life, where supermarkets promote products like antioxidant-rich chocolate or high-fibre cereals and classify nutrients as ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ in a constant pursuit of nutritional perfection.⁵¹

At the global level, the agroindustrial and pharmaceutical complexes have largely expanded their market opportunities from the meaning attributed to food according to the nutritionist paradigm.⁵² Industries can, for example, overemphasise the health benefits of their products, regardless of broader factors, or even market formula for babies based on the health promises of individual nutrients, as was the case during the ‘baby milk scandal’, in which Nestlé used aggressive marketing tactics that led mothers to abandon breastfeeding in favour of formula.⁵³ Existing research shows a clear alignment between the nutritionist paradigm and the interests of the food industry. Studies funded by the industry often emphasise the benefits of specific isolated nutrients. In contrast, independently funded research tends to explore broader socio-economic issues, such as access to food, corporate concentration, and environmental factors that contribute to hunger and malnutrition.⁵⁴ This mirrors the tobacco case, which stands as a pivotal example of how research can be instrumentalised to back up commercial interests.⁵⁵ Through marketing and research funding, private actors have thus deepened their credibility as efficient providers of solutions to hunger.

While private actors have been an integral part of the landscape of global food and nutrition governance, their influence has primarily stemmed from their financial resources, supported by a favourable ‘nutritionist’ paradigm. This has enabled them to not only take on key roles in food assistance but also to lobby and fund marketing campaigns and research that build support for their products. In this paper, I contend that, despite the pervasiveness of private power in the food and nutrition field, discourses around their *political* indispensability and roles have taken a bigger proportion. Additionally, the way they exercise their power has become more visible and outward-oriented. Let us now examine the practices that supported this shift.

⁴⁹World Bank, ‘An Investment Framework for Nutrition: Reaching the Global Targets for Stunting, Anemia, Breastfeeding and Wasting’ (2016).

⁵⁰WHO, *Malnutrition* (2022), available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/malnutrition#tab=tab_1.

⁵¹Catherine Price, *Vitamina: How Vitamins Revolutionized the Way We Think about Food* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

⁵²Prato and Bullard, ‘Re-embedding nutrition in society, nature and politics’.

⁵³Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, Cecilia Tomori, Sonia Hernández-Cordero, et al., ‘Breastfeeding: Crucially important, but increasingly challenged in a market-driven world’, *The Lancet*, 401:10375 (2023), pp. 472–85.

⁵⁴Nicholas Chartres, Alice Fabbri, and Lisa A. Bero, ‘Association of industry sponsorship with outcomes of nutrition studies: A systematic review and meta-analysis’, *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 176:12 (2016), pp. 1769–77.

⁵⁵Louise Curran, ‘Investor state dispute settlement (ISDS) and the social licence to operate of international business: An analysis of controversial cases’, *International Business Review*, 33:2 (2024), p. 102200; Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger, *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2023.102200>.

Exploring practices of political normalisation in the field of global food and nutrition

Individualising malnutrition: The ‘package of proven interventions’

It is now widely acknowledged that there exists a ‘package’ of ‘evidence-based’ nutrition interventions that, if implemented during the first 1,000 days of a child’s life (including the period of pregnancy), not only offers a solution to malnutrition globally but also promises substantial returns.⁵⁶ Nowadays, organisations such as UNICEF, the WHO, and the World Bank, among many other international institutions, adamantly insist on the critical importance of delivering this ‘package’ in Global South countries where levels of malnutrition are alarmingly high.⁵⁷ Most solutions within this ‘package’ consist of the delivery of products such as food supplements, powders, and vitamins produced by the agri-pharma nexus. They also consist of individual and behavioural policy programmes such as the promotion of hygiene and handwashing measures, often addressed with trainings and products such as soaps.⁵⁸ Programmes targeting the socio-economic determinants of malnutrition have been excluded from the ‘package’, under the rationale that the supporting evidence was ‘weak’ or insufficient, and thus not included in the supporting studies.⁵⁹ As highlighted by an interviewee, although the 1,000 days helped raise awareness of nutrition, it ‘tends to favour solutions that ignore the real causes of the problem.’⁶⁰

The introduction and consolidation of the ‘package’ of interventions as the key ‘evidence-based’ intervention to address malnutrition globally cannot be understood without an analysis of private power. An interviewee highlighted that ‘if the attention to hunger and malnutrition has been growing since 2008, it is not by coincidence.’⁶¹ In fact, a powerful network of private actors including the Gates Foundation, donors, and funds under the leadership of the World Bank was instrumental in advocating for such a framework, which problematised malnutrition in individual terms as a problem to be best addressed by administering specific products and trainings. Most of the products of the package of interventions are manufactured by powerful corporations from industrialised countries and then purchased by Global South countries dealing with a high burden of malnutrition.⁶² Therefore, corporations have a vested interest in sustaining this approach to the problem, as the existence of the ‘evidence-based package’ gives a stamp of approval to their products. Additionally, actors such as venture philanthropies might also benefit indirectly from sustaining this view, as they increasingly invest in for-profit companies dedicated to selling these products. For example, the Gates Foundation gives grants to for-profit pharmaceutical companies dedicated to the production of vitamin A, which is part of the interventions suggested by the ‘package’.⁶³ According to Gates, the role of private actors has been key in giving visibility to hunger and malnutrition. As he stated during an interview: ‘malnourished populations do not present a lucrative market that companies would naturally address’, thus the necessity of bringing in private sector expertise.⁶⁴

The focus on the 1,000 days and the package of interventions to be delivered within this period gained prominence following the publication of a series of articles in 2008 in the journal *The Lancet*,

⁵⁶Horton, ‘Maternal and child undernutrition’.

⁵⁷WHO, ‘Global nutrition targets 2025: Policy brief series’ (2023); World Bank, ‘Repositioning nutrition as central to development: A strategy for large-scale action’ (2006).

⁵⁸Horton, ‘Maternal and child undernutrition’, p. 179.

⁵⁹Anitha Sivasankaran, Anu Rangarajan, Fundira Dadirai, et al., *Evaluation of the Power of Nutrition: Findings from the Midline Assessment* (2020), available at: <https://www.mathematica.org/publications/evaluation-of-the-power-of-nutrition-findings-from-the-midline-assessment>}.

⁶⁰Interview, January 2023.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Anne C. Bellows, Flavio L. S. Valente, Stefanie Lemke, and Maria Daniela Núñez Burbano de Lara, *Gender, Nutrition, and the Human Right to Adequate Food* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁶³The Gates Foundation, ‘Committed grants’ (2023), available at: <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/committed-grants/2023/09/inv-064172>}.

⁶⁴ANI News, ‘Trying to solve some problems like malaria, malnutrition through philanthropy’ (2024), available at: <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/trying-to-solve-some-problems-like-malaria-malnutrition-through-philanthropy-bill-gates20240229204411/>}.

where the private sector played a significant role.⁶⁵ The series was funded by the Gates Foundation, and meetings related to the publication were hosted at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Conference Center with support from the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. Additionally, the analysis of some of the papers focusing on the links of nutrition with human capital was made possible by a grant from the Wellcome Trust, a UK-based venture philanthropy.

Coming from a journal as prestigious as *The Lancet*, these findings sparked a vigorous response from the international community, which quickly began to coalesce around this framework.⁶⁶ Right after the publication of the *Lancet* series, the World Bank released a report entitled ‘Scaling Up Nutrition: What Will It Cost’ to examine the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of the ‘package’ of interventions.⁶⁷ Staff members from the Gates Foundation were among the participants at a UNICEF-led meeting in September 2008, which discussed the list of interventions to be costed, along with staff members from the UN, the World Bank, and donor agencies such as USAID. The report reiterated the urgent need to act quickly, stating that investments in the 1,000 days will ‘yield high returns in the form of thriving children’s healthier families and more productive workers’ and that ‘the human and financial costs of further neglect will be high.’⁶⁸

Following the vigorous response sparked by the series, the *Lancet* published a follow-up series in 2013 with the explicit aim of ‘optimising’ the delivery of the 2008 package of interventions.⁶⁹ In addition to the list of ‘proven’ interventions, a range of programmes related to environmental and social factors – also likely to improve nutritional status – was considered. However, these factors were again excluded from the list of ‘proven’ interventions, due to their alleged inadequacy.⁷⁰ The 2013 *Lancet* findings were further backed up by an influential group of economists known as the ‘Copenhagen Consensus’, a frequent grantee of the Gates Foundation.⁷¹ The group of economists ranked the use of micronutrients as one of the most cost-effective interventions worldwide, highlighting that the returns of investing in ‘micronutrient programmes’ are surpassed only by those for combating HIV/AIDS.⁷² These findings were disseminated at various international forums, including the ‘Nutrition for Growth’ event ‘Beating Hunger through Business and Science’, which emphasised the ‘investment case’ for addressing malnutrition. The summit featured prominent participants such as state leaders, representatives of philanthropic organisations, financial entities, and corporations, including Bill Gates, the president of the Children Investment Fund Foundation, and the president of Unilever, a global corporation dedicated to the manufacturing of nutrition, hygiene, and personal care products.⁷³

The 2013 series further galvanised support for the ‘package’, prompting governments and business actors to reallocate resources towards programmes promoting the use of micronutrient powders and vitamins. For example, donors such as the UK committed to tripling their investment in these programmes ‘directly impacting’ undernutrition rather than its underlying causes, such as food access, industrial food production, corporate concentration, and the financialisation

⁶⁵Horton, ‘Maternal and child undernutrition.’

⁶⁶David Flood, Anita Chary, Alejandra Colom, and Peter Rohloff, ‘Adolescent rights and the “First 1,000 Days” global nutrition movement: A view from Guatemala’, *Health and Human Rights*, 20:1 (2018), pp. 295; Lie, ‘Power in global nutrition governance.’

⁶⁷Susan Horton, Meera Shekar, Christine McDonald, Ajay Mahal, and Jana Krystene Brooks, *Scaling Up Nutrition: What Will It Cost?* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2010).

⁶⁸Horton et al., *Scaling Up Nutrition*, p. ix.

⁶⁹Zulfiqar A. Bhutta, Rehana A. Salam, and Jai K. Das, ‘Meeting the challenges of micronutrient malnutrition in the developing world’, *British Medical Bulletin*, 106:1 (2013), pp. 7–17.

⁷⁰Marie T. Ruel and Harold Alderman, ‘Nutrition-sensitive interventions and programmes: How can they help to accelerate progress in improving maternal and child nutrition?’, *The Lancet*, 382:9891 (2013), pp. 536–51.

⁷¹‘Copenhagen Consensus Center’ (2023), available at: {<https://www.copenhagenconsensus.com>}.

⁷²John Hoddinot, Mark Rosegrant, and Maximo Torero, *Hunger and Malnutrition: Challenge Paper* (2012).

⁷³Scaling Up Nutrition, ‘A historic moment for nutrition’ (2013), available at: {<https://scalingupnutrition.org/news/historic-moment-nutrition-nutrition-growth-summit-london>}.

of food systems. Additionally, businesses pledged to increase their funding for these nutrition initiatives, recognising their ‘high value for money’.⁷⁴ BASF, for example, a chemical company and one of the world’s largest producers of micronutrients, in particular vitamin A, participated in the summit.⁷⁵ Alluding to the *Lancet* series, BASF describes micronutrient fortification as ‘one of the best investments in human development’.⁷⁶ Similarly, Cargill has taken an active role in nutrition-related global events.⁷⁷ The food corporation began fortifying its top-selling edible oil brands in India with vitamin A. According to Cargill, this was an effective intervention, as it reached all income groups through basic food items while also yielding significant results in a short period.⁷⁸

Despite enthusiasm from an ‘investment coalition’,⁷⁹ the narrative surrounding the ‘1,000 days’ initiative faced strong criticism from civil society groups, who denounced the influence of private actors and organisations with close ties to the private sector in the *Lancet* series, such as the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). Established by the Gates Foundation, GAIN has consistently advocated for market access to nutrition products for its numerous corporate partners since its inception.⁸⁰ Social movements and civil society organisations raised additional concerns about potential conflicts of interest within the series, noting that two authors had served as members of the board of the Nestlé Creating Shared Advisory Committee.⁸¹ In response, the *Lancet* authors defended their collaboration with industry by emphasising that it was a ‘much needed contribution’ of scientists to assist a corporation in addressing development problems.⁸² Beyond conflicts of interest, critics argued that framing the ‘package of interventions’ as the most adequate solution to malnutrition ignored crucial approaches to addressing the problem, including food access and the role of industrial agriculture:

The moment that you only deal with women during pregnancy, and forget about humans as a whole, I guess it leaves you with this easy intervention package: let’s be sure they (women) get a sufficient number of nutrients and invest in something that will give us returns. But what about access to land and access to good food? It reduces the whole idea of nutrition to nutrients, consumption, and to factors such as these hygienic practices, when people even do not have access to clean water.⁸³

Therefore, from a socio-economic point of view, the 1,000 days framework disregards the underlying causes of malnutrition such as the role of the agro-industrial model, largely driven by corporations. Instead, by framing the package of interventions as ‘truth’, private actors not only granted an aura of scientific legitimacy to their products but also fundamentally positioned themselves as integral to the solution, rather than as part of the problem.

⁷⁴Results UK, ‘Nutrition for growth’ (2012), available at: <https://www.results.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/Nov%202013%20BGS1%20How%20are%20we%20tackling%20nutrition.pdf>.

⁷⁵Global Nutrition Report, ‘BASF’ (2024), available at: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-growth-commitment-tracking/basf/>.

⁷⁶World Business Council for Sustainable Development, ‘BASF: Fighting malnutrition with fortified staple foods’ (2013), available at: <https://www.wbcsd.org/resources/basf-fighting-malnutrition-fortified-staple-foods/>.

⁷⁷Global Nutrition Report, ‘Cargill’, available at: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-growth-commitment-tracking/cargill/>.

⁷⁸GAIN, ‘Lessons from businesses: Cargill India Private Limited: Leading by example in fortifying edible oil’ (2013).

⁷⁹Ann Louise Lie, ‘“We are not a partnership” – constructing and contesting legitimacy of global public–private partnerships: The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement’, *Globalizations*, 18:2 (2021), pp. 237–55.

⁸⁰Christopher Kaan and Andrea Liese, ‘Public private partnerships in global food governance: Business engagement and legitimacy in the global fight against hunger and malnutrition’, *Agriculture and Human Values*, 28:3 (2011), pp. 385–99; Laura Michelé, Stefano Prato, Patti Rundall, and Flavio Valente, ‘When the SUN casts a shadow’ (2020), available at: https://www.fian.org/files/files/WhenTheSunCastsAShadow_En.pdf.

⁸¹Nestlé, ‘Our governance and advisory structure’ (2016), available at: <http://www.aaci-india.org/doc/Governance-Nestle-Global-04012016.pdf>.

⁸²Chessa K. Lutter, Juan Pablo Peña-Rosas, and Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, ‘Maternal and child nutrition’, *The Lancet*, 382:9904 (2013), pp. 1550–1 (p. 1551).

⁸³Interview, February 2023.

Institutional ‘aptness’: Rendering UN-led institutions obsolete

The introduction of a ‘package’ of interventions as the best way to move forward occurred alongside profound transitions in the governing landscape of food and nutrition. The very same network of actors that contributed to establishing the package of intervention such as the World Bank, the Gates Foundation, UNICEF, and the WFP, backed by powerful donors such as USAID and private actors such as GAIN, mobilised the 1,000 days approach to advocate for the creation of Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN), a new multistakeholder ‘movement’ presented as the most agile governance structure to deliver the ‘package of interventions.’⁸⁴ Although SUN started as a small initiative championing the 1,000 days, it has nowadays become the power epicentre of food and nutrition governance.⁸⁵ It has gained such prominence that it has absorbed the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN), which had been the primary intergovernmental body for nutrition until then. As one interviewee noted, ‘SUN has moved from being a small platform to a huge global movement. It has also given corporations a legitimate seat in global governance, and they needed this seat so badly.’⁸⁶

According to SUN’s website, the *Lancet* series sparked the conversations that led to its birth. As pointed out by a civil society representative: ‘SUN was launched on the back that this whole evidence was the only way forward.’⁸⁷ One of the *Lancet* series’ key recommendations was that, to accelerate progress during the critical 1,000 days, the institutional outlook of nutrition governance had to be reformed. The paper, co-authored by Saul S. Morris, who has held positions at GAIN and the Gates Foundation, presented a pessimistic assessment of the global nutrition institutional architecture. It criticised the lack of an ‘inclusive framework that could more effectively represent all interests.’⁸⁸ It highlighted in particular, that the system was ‘fragmented and dysfunctional’, and that reform was necessary for it to effectively perform key stewardship functions, mobilise resources, and strengthen capacity to ‘accelerate action.’⁸⁹

In response to the call for reform, a report backed by the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and the European Commission was published to outline possible ‘paths’ for carrying out this institutional reform.⁹⁰ The report expressed strong enthusiasm for the creation of a ‘new’ governance structure (later known as SUN) that could enhance the participation of civil society and the private sector. In contrast, it was less optimistic about the role of the UN, particularly its UNSCN, which until then had served as the main intergovernmental loci of nutrition. The report portrayed the UN committee as a hindrance to progress.⁹¹

The UN Standing Committee on Nutrition, which has played an important role as a forum for discussion of nutrition-related issues and engagement of NGOs with the UN agencies, is widely observed to have failed to harmonize priorities and practices across the UN system and more broadly among the nutrition sector, and there is disagreement about whether UNSCN has the potential or support from its funders to assert genuine leadership. No one, for instance, thinks that it has the legitimacy or technical and political strength to serve the function for nutrition.

The Lancet’s criticism of the UNSCN unfolded against a backdrop of resistance from the SCN towards a coalition of private donors and funds that had strongly advocated for private sector

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ David Nabarro, ‘Global child and maternal nutrition: The SUN rises’, *The Lancet*, 382:9893 (2013), pp. 666–7.

⁸⁶ Interview, September 2022.

⁸⁷ Interview, February 2023.

⁸⁸ Horton, ‘Maternal and child undernutrition’, p. 619.

⁸⁹ Saul S. Morris, Bruce Cogill, and Ricardo Uauy, ‘Effective international action against undernutrition: Why has it proven so difficult and what can be done to accelerate progress?’, *The Lancet*, 371:9612 (2008), pp. 608–21 (p. 608).

⁹⁰ Ruth Levine and Danielle Kuczynski, *Global Nutrition Institutions: Is There an Appetite for Change?* (2009), available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/global-nutrition-institutions-therere-appetite-change>.

⁹¹ Levine and Kuczynski, *Global Nutrition Institutions*, p. 11.

involvement within the UN structure.⁹² According to a statement by the World Public Health Nutrition Association: ‘the UNSCN has enemies, because of its reputation for wanting to keep the private sector out of the picture.’⁹³ The push for private sector involvement within the UNSCN had been previously criticised by its NGO/Civil Society Group. In their statement, the group stressed the vital importance of preserving the ‘irreplaceable normative and leadership role’ of the UN in addressing global nutrition.⁹⁴ While there was a broad agreement on the need to reform the UNSCN, several governments, such as France and Germany, initially opposed the creation of a new global multistakeholder platform. They preferred, instead, to keep nutrition governance under the jurisdiction of a reformed UNSCN.⁹⁵ It was also emphasised by several governments that the mandate of food and nutrition should remain in the hands of governments. The German government, for example, questioned why the UNSCN, which had already provided substantial support to SUN, could not remain the long-term anchor for the newly established initiative.⁹⁶ Overall, there were concerns that the existing structures of the UNSCN could be dismantled, sidelined, or absorbed into a multistakeholder forum that predominantly relies on products such as food supplements supplied by companies based in the Global North.⁹⁷

These concerns materialised a few years later, when the international organisations and funds that withdrew support to the UNSCN, such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and WFP, subsequently launched SUN with the support of philanthropies and private networks.⁹⁸ Following a series of meetings and global events, the ‘investment coalition’⁹⁹ established a small committee that hired two consultants to draft the ‘SUN Framework for Action’, the precursor to the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) movement.¹⁰⁰ The framework emphasised the critical need to reverse ‘past neglect’ by instituting new governance structures and ‘fast-track’ decision-making models.¹⁰¹

In sum, today’s context for scaling up global nutrition is a new and far more favourable one. It is characterised by demonstrable and increasing proof of interventions with high development and health returns, increased recognition of the need to scale up such interventions, increased potential for *public-private partnerships* and increased will by the international nutrition community to agree on a common framework for action.

The next step involved defining the structure of the newly established platform. A stewardship study funded by the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and the government of Japan outlined different options. The first proposal involved placing the newly created multistakeholder structure under the UN’s auspices. The second proposed establishing the new institution as a separate organisation. The third proposal envisioned establishing it as a ‘new mechanism for multistakeholder stewardship under the aegis of the UN Secretary-General’.¹⁰² However, the report emphasised that,

⁹² Lie, ‘Power in global nutrition governance’; Flavio L. S. Valente, ‘The corporate capture of food and nutrition governance: A threat to human rights and people’s sovereignty’, *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch, Bread for the World* (2015), available at: {https://www.righttofoodandnutrition.org/files/R_t_F_a_N_Watch_2015_eng_single-page_Web.pdf}; Patti Rundall, ‘The business of malnutrition: The perfect public relations cover for Big Food’, in A. C. Bellows, A. Onorati, B. Walter, et al. (eds.), *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch, Bread for the World* (Brot für die Welt, FIAN and ICCO Cooperation, 2015), pp. 23–28.

⁹³ World Public Health Nutrition Association, ‘United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition, No Flowers Please’ (2011), available at: {https://www.wphna.org/htdocs/2011_apr_hp6_scn_crisis.htm}.

⁹⁴ Valente, ‘The corporate capture of food and nutrition governance’.

⁹⁵ UNSCN, ‘UNSCN nutrition partners kick-off meeting report’ (2010).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Prato and Bullard, ‘Re-embedding nutrition in society, nature and politics’; Michelé et al., ‘When the SUN casts a shadow’.

⁹⁸ Valente, ‘The corporate capture of food and nutrition governance’.

⁹⁹ Lie, ‘“We are not a partnership”’.

¹⁰⁰ Mokoro Limited, ‘Independent comprehensive evaluation of the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement’ (2015), available at: {http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/SUN_ICE_FullReport-All1-5-15.pdf}.

¹⁰¹ SUN, ‘Scaling Up Nutrition: A Framework for Action’, p. 4.

¹⁰² Paul Isenman, Keith Bezanson, and Lola Gostelow, ‘Stewardship of the SUN movement; taking SUN to the next level’ (2011), available at: {<https://scalingupnutrition.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Stewardship-Study-Final-Report.pdf>}.

should the third option be pursued, ‘there should be UN-wide leadership, but not control.’¹⁰³ The third option, aligned with the agenda of the Gates Foundation and the World Bank, ultimately emerged as the most appealing.¹⁰⁴

It is remarkable that a self-proclaimed ‘movement’ not ruled by the same norms that apply to traditional multilateral agencies, and which has favoured a top-down donor-driven approach to nutrition, came to have such a significant political role.¹⁰⁵ A close look into SUN’s decision-making structures reveals that as a global multistakeholder ‘movement’, it has normalised the role of the private sector as a key political partner, despite the absence of mechanisms to balance powers or hold anyone accountable.¹⁰⁶ Although SUN claims a country-based focus, countries were minimally involved in creation, and its most powerful actors remain donors.¹⁰⁷ The SUN Lead Group, for example, is comprised of members appointed by the UN Secretary-General, including members from governments, donors and multilateral banks, the UN, and the private sector, particularly the pharmaceutical, agribusiness, and consultancy sectors.¹⁰⁸ From 2012 to 2016, it was co-chaired between UNICEF and the Gates Foundation.¹⁰⁹ In addition to its leadership structure, SUN is organised around four networks: a UN network, a Civil Society Network, and a Business Network, and Donor network. The Civil Society Network represents over 3,000 organisations and is hosted by Save the Children, which was supportive of SUN from the very outset.¹¹⁰ The Business Network, co-convened by GAIN and the WFP, brings together more than 800 companies and donors including ‘giants’ from the agrochemical, food, and pharmaceutical sectors such as Unilever, Syngenta, Cargill, Kellogg’s, PepsiCo, BASF, and Mars.¹¹¹ Indeed, backed by considerable economic resources, GAIN played an active role in helping to launch SUN.¹¹²

Social movements, food scholars, and researchers have criticised SUN’s silver-bullet approach, arguing that it falls short in addressing the structural causes of malnutrition and creates additional dependencies on private networks. An study conducted in three ‘SUN countries’, Uganda, Guatemala, and India, showed that SUN’s narrow and ‘reactive’ focus on product-based solutions not only led to the scaling down of agroecological approaches but also promoted practices such as input-intensive agriculture which mostly benefited the agro-industrial food system.¹¹³

Within this favourable institutional landscape, private actors have actively nurtured and cultivated a myriad of small and mid-scale consultancies and initiatives, which in close partnership with IOs and governments, have contributed to naturalising a market-based discourse based on the urgency of delivering the ‘package’ of nutrition interventions.

Cultivating the landscape: Nurturing market-based discourses

A final mechanism through which private actors have normalised their frames of references and scripts in the global nutrition landscape is by seeding, funding, and nurturing numerous small and medium-sized institutions such as consultancies, funds, and coalitions. These institutions, alongside governments and donor agencies, strongly advocate for investments in the ‘package’ of interventions. An analysis of the discursive frames of these initiatives shows that they use various

¹⁰³Isenman, Bezanson, and Gostelow, ‘Stewardship of the SUN movement; taking SUN to the next level’, p. 12.

¹⁰⁴Interview, September 2022.

¹⁰⁵Michelé, Prato, Rundall, and Valente, ‘When the SUN casts a shadow’.

¹⁰⁶Michelé, Prato, Rundall, and Valente, ‘When the SUN casts a shadow’.

¹⁰⁷Lie, “‘We are not a partnership’”.

¹⁰⁸SUN, ‘SUN Movement Lead Group’ (2023), available at: {<https://scalingupnutrition.org/about/who-we-are/sun-movement-lead-group>}.

¹⁰⁹Lie, ‘Power in global nutrition governance’.

¹¹⁰Lie, ‘Power in global nutrition governance’.

¹¹¹SUN Business Network, ‘Global members’ (2023), available at: {<https://sunbusinessnetwork.org/global-members/>}.

¹¹²Regina Moench-Pfanner and Marc Van Ameringen, ‘The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN): A decade of partnerships to increase access to and affordability of nutritious foods for the poor’, *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, 33:4_suppl3 (2012), pp. 373–80.

¹¹³Michelé et al., ‘When the SUN casts a shadow’.

practices to naturalise market-based solutions as the most adequate way forward, including calls for lower regulatory obstacles and an insistence on the urgency of ‘investing’ in the package. In doing so, initiatives such as the 1,000 Days, the Power of Nutrition, Stronger Foundations for Nutrition, the Global Social Observatory, and GAIN have contributed to normalising private actors’ role as global governors and to re-channelling global food and nutrition resources into private hands. As highlighted by an interviewee, these are the initiatives where ‘money flows’, and as such it is hard to ignore them.¹¹⁴

One such entity is the ‘1,000 Days Initiative’ launched in 2010 with backing from the governments of the United States and Ireland, the Gates Foundation, InterAction, and GAIN. As its name suggests, the initiative seeks to catalyse action and investment during the critical ‘window of opportunity’.¹¹⁵ Similarly, in 2017, a group of venture philanthropists including the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, Dangote, the Eleanor Crook Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Gates Foundation, among others, joined forces to launch a coalition called ‘Stronger Foundations for Nutrition’. This coalition focuses on ‘maximizing the potential of future generations’ during the 1,000 days and describes itself as a ‘community of impact to end malnutrition’.¹¹⁶ Corporations have played a significant role as partners of the coalition. For instance, the Eleanor Crook Foundation partnered with the multibillion gaming industry to reach one million children with therapeutic food through a video gaming marketing campaign that raises money via game purchases.¹¹⁷

Similarly, consultancies set up by the private sector have been pivotal in normalising the role of private actors and their market narratives. A notable example is the Global Social Observatory (GSO), a private organisation that relies heavily on corporate funding. The GSO received a \$935,000 grant from the Gates Foundation to produce a ‘toolkit’ to advise SUN on how to manage conflicts of interest.¹¹⁸ The GSO defined conflicts of interest as an ‘umbrella’ term, putting an emphasis on ‘trust’ and the importance of not compromising the ‘joint’ endeavours and ‘stakeholder alignment’. Such a definition of conflicts of interest not only fits but also protects the governance models advocated by the private sector.¹¹⁹

A similar mechanism called ‘The Power of Nutrition’, initially born out of public–private collaboration between the UK government and the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, has also been instrumental in spreading the idea according to which market-based approaches are the only way forward. Since its creation, the Power of Nutrition has been expanded to involve partners like the Swiss bank’s UBS Optimus Foundation, the World Bank, and UNICEF. The Power of Nutrition draws on the ‘package’ of interventions and the *Lancet* series to give its work a scientific stamp.¹²⁰ In recognition of its role as an ‘accelerator’ for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Gates Foundation awarded the initiative USD \$3 million.¹²¹ In recent years, the Power of Nutrition has broadened its involvement and efforts through direct partnerships with the private sector and UN funds. It has, for example, collaborated with UNICEF to implement a programme in Ethiopia funded by philanthropic and financial sector contributions to promote the ‘package’.¹²² Similarly, the Power of Nutrition has partnered with corporate entities such as Unilever to combat undernutrition in India by encouraging personal hygiene practices such as handwashing

¹¹⁴Interview, February 2023.

¹¹⁵Thousand Days, ‘Our story’ (2023), available at: {<https://thousanddays.org/about/our-story/>}.

¹¹⁶Stronger Foundations for Nutrition, ‘Stronger foundations for nutrition’ (2022).

¹¹⁷Stronger Foundations for Nutrition, ‘Stronger foundations for nutrition’.

¹¹⁸Global Social Observatory, ‘Consultation process on conflict of interest in the SUN movement’ (2015), available at: {<http://katherinehagen.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/GSO-COI-Project-Final-Report.pdf>}.

¹¹⁹Rundall, ‘The business of malnutrition’.

¹²⁰Sivasankaran et al., *Evaluation of The Power of Nutrition Findings from The Midline Assessment*, p. 2.

¹²¹Gates Foundation, ‘Committed grants’ (2020), available at: {<https://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/committed-grants/2020/05/inv005670>}.

¹²²Rotary, ‘The power of nutrition partners with Rotary, other organizations for new malnutrition in Ethiopia’ (2021), available at: {<https://www.rotary.org/en/power-nutrition-partners-rotary-other-organizations-new-malnutrition-program-ethiopia>}.

– a ‘proven’ programme endorsed by the *Lancet* series and SUN. These interventions use a technology developed specifically by Unilever’s hygiene soap brand, which is the leading soap brand in India.¹²³ This programme has also drawn in taxpayer money. According to the Power of Nutrition’s CEO, the partnership between Unilever and Lifebuoy ‘unlocks committed public sector resources’ to maximise investment in nutrition.¹²⁴

Cultivating the global nutrition landscape in market-friendly terms has not only redirected resources to private-led solutions but also marginalised perspectives that view food and nutrition a fundamental right or a sociocultural practice. As pointed out by a member of civil society, ‘private actors and big foundations have put money into it in very strange ways, they have done so by setting up SUN, the 1000 days, GAIN, and all this micronutrient thing and we have had a massive struggle in keeping words like “culturally appropriate nutrition or diets,” they do not want that, they want all that stripped out from conversations.’¹²⁵ Echoing this, a civil society representative added that ‘omitting any reference to sustainability effectively de-links the interrelations between unsustainable systems of food production and the challenges they pose to meeting nutritional needs: this favours corporations in many ways.’¹²⁶

However, despite criticisms, the ‘package’ continues to attract disproportionate resources in the global food and nutrition sector, when compared with approaches that put the emphasis on the environment, regulation, or industrial agriculture. The role of GAIN, one of the most proactive initiatives in the global nutrition field, has been key in nurturing this state of affairs. Initially proposed as an initiative within the Gates Foundation, GAIN was launched by UNICEF, the Gates Foundation, Procter & Gamble, and the president of Zambia in 2002 at a special session of the UN General Assembly to promote large-scale fortification programmes.¹²⁷ Backed up by substantial economic resources, GAIN has contributed to reinforcing the idea that nutrient delivery and behaviour-change programmes are the best ways of addressing malnutrition.¹²⁸ It has done so by conducting research in partnership with members from the food industry such as GlaxoSmithKline, Mars, Incorporated, Nutriset, PepsiCo, and Unilever, among others.¹²⁹ Drawing on its research, GAIN has also been involved with the WHO, where it has provided input to formulating guidelines on the use of micronutrient powders.¹³⁰ To that end, GAIN advised ‘behaviour change communication’, including the use of social marketing practices and the training of media in the delivery of these products in Global South countries.¹³¹ GAIN has continued to exercise its influence despite the fact that its partnership council¹³² features major food sector players, including the Gates Foundation, Unilever, and the SUN Business Advisory Group, and is funded by various government agencies and private sector actors such as Arla Food Ingredients, the Rockefeller Foundation, and several investment funds.¹³³

By seeding and nurturing a myriad of initiatives, actors such as philanthropies, corporations, and business-oriented non-governmental organisations have contributed to the marginalisation of solutions that require political-economic transformations of the agrifood system or regulatory measures. In doing so, they have contributed to normalising solutions that do not challenge their role as drivers of the problem as well as their financial ‘stakes’.

¹²³Sivasankaran et al., *Evaluation of The Power of Nutrition Findings from The Midline Assessment*.

¹²⁴Sustainable Brands, ‘New partnership aims to improve hygiene, nutrition in Indian children (2019), available at: {<https://sustainablebrands.com/read/behavior-change/new-partnership-aims-to-improve-hygiene-nutrition-in-indian-children>}.

¹²⁵Interview, February 2023.

¹²⁶Interview, September 2023.

¹²⁷GAIN is currently established as a foundation under Swiss law.

¹²⁸Kaan and Liese, ‘Public private partnerships in global food governance’; Lie, ‘Power in global nutrition governance’.

¹²⁹Jennifer Clapp and Gyorgy Scrinis, ‘Big food, nutritionism, and corporate power’, *Globalizations*, 14:4 (2017), pp. 578–95.

¹³⁰GAIN, *Strengthening the Enabling Environment for Scaling-Up Access to Good Quality Complementary Foods* (2016), p. 21.

¹³¹HF-TAG, ‘Programmatic guidance brief on the use of micronutrient powders for home fortification’ (2014).

¹³²GAIN, ‘GAIN Partnership Council’, (2023), available at: {<https://www.gainhealth.org/about/leadership/partnership-council>}.

¹³³GAIN, ‘Donors’ (2023), available at: {<https://www.gainhealth.org/about/donors>}.

Conclusion

For decades, private actors have wielded significant power in global politics. However, in recent years their presence and visibility has taken on even bigger proportions. Not only are they provisionally contracted to assume functions traditionally belonging to the state, but they also participate in deliberations on multistakeholder platforms, where they sit as ‘stakeholders’ on a par with states, even when their ‘stake’ is primarily financial. Structural as well as conjunctural background conditions, such as the ascendancy of neoliberal frames and the growing financialisation of the food sector, have both sustained and reinforced these shifts.

In this context, I aimed to analyse private actors’ power not by looking at how they legitimise their role to external audiences, but by examining how they reinforce their regular presence, acceptance, and perceived indispensability in global politics. Although it does not happen outside legitimacy and authority-building dynamics, political normalisation operates at a different level. It is about the mechanisms through which private actors are able to craft political ‘normalcy’, thereby ensuring that their supported frames of reference become the standard way of doing things – and thus also the standards against which to measure what is deemed legitimate.

Empirically, the paper focused on the case of global food nutrition governance. It showed how actors such as corporations, philanthropies, and business-oriented hybrid initiatives have largely driven dominant ways of knowing and acting upon hunger and malnutrition. They did so by promoting an individualised view of nutrition as a problem to be most efficiently solved through nutrient consumption; by driving a process that shifted the loci of power of the field from a multilateral forum to a multistakeholder platform, portrayed as most ‘apt’; by cultivating small and medium-sized arrangements that, in close collaboration with IOs and governments, have naturalised market-based narratives.

In exploring how private actors attempt to normalise their role as states’ *political inter pares*, this paper seeks to enrich existing accounts in two ways: on the one hand, the paper adds to a growing body of scholarship that has examined how non-state actors, in particular private actors, become legitimate rulers.¹³⁴ However, I have shifted the focus away from an analysis of legitimation processes to examine how the practices deployed by private actors contribute to setting the stage for what is seen as ‘normal’ versus what are deemed ‘deviant’ ways of knowing and acting upon problems. One of the key contributions of the paper has been to show how, within this process, actors such as philanthropies and corporations shift their *roles* from peripheral participants to essential political partners in decision-making alongside states. This shift challenges the public–private distinction upon which traditional legitimacy benchmarks are often based. In fact, private actors do not only ‘mimic’ public institutions or adhere to traditional metrics of democratic accountability to be seen as legitimate. Instead, we see a trend where they increasingly contribute to crafting themselves the conditions under which certain knowledge forms and ways of governing are validated as rightful in the first place. Additionally, a focus on political normalisation sheds light on how the ‘stakeholderisation’ of governance¹³⁵ coincides with private actors assuming a much more outward-looking and centre-stage political role. Far from acting as delegated authorities, opting for self-regulatory measures, or building support through backdoor practices, private actors are increasingly refashioning the boundaries of political normalcy in a way that their presence comes to be taken for granted.

In the case this paper examined, the normalisation of private actors as political inter pares has led to the diversion of public resources away from long-term solutions, leading governments to opt for prioritising public spending on consumer products. It has also diverted attention away from

¹³⁴Hall and Biersteker, *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance*; Hofferberth and Lambach, ‘Becoming global governors’; Katsikas, ‘Non-state authority and global governance’; Clapp and Fuchs, *Corporate Power and Global Agrifood Governance*; Cutler, *Private Power and Global Authority*.

¹³⁵Jongen and Scholte, ‘Legitimacy in multistakeholder global governance at ICANN’; Mark Raymond and Laura DeNardis, ‘Multistakeholderism: Anatomy of an inchoate global institution’, *International Theory*, 7:3 (2015), pp. 572–616; Taggart and Joseph Abraham, ‘Norm dynamics in a post-hegemonic world’; Uribe, ‘Excluding through inclusion’.

considering other possible ‘solutions’ such as regulating the industry or re-envisioning dominant systems of food production. Similar trends are also evident in global health governance, where big pharma and philanthropies increasingly shape what is considered valid and acceptable, often to the detriment of public interests.¹³⁶

There are reasons to expect that the core argument of the paper can ‘travel’ to other issue areas – though with potentially different expressions. Security and technology governance are examples of sectors in which normalisation is widespread but less premised on consumer narratives than on an ‘efficiency’ and innovation rhetoric. Similarly, in internet governance – often regarded as the archetypal multistakeholder model – governing with private actors may serve as a way to circumvent the purely intergovernmental model advocated by actors such as Russia and China.¹³⁷ However, even in this realm, a degree of caution is required, as normalisation can foster dependency logics, making it increasingly difficult for public authorities to enforce their own regulations without the ‘collaboration’ of industries such as Big Tech.¹³⁸ Future analyses could examine the expressions and effects of political normalisation in other fields, as well as further interrogate the logic of political equivalence that sustains it.

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¹³⁶McGoey, ‘The philanthropic state’; Litzo-Monnet and Osorio Garate, ‘Knowledge politics in global governance’; Anne Roemer-Mahler, ‘The rise of companies from emerging markets in global health governance: Opportunities and challenges’, *Review of International Studies*, 40:5 (2014), pp. 897–918.

¹³⁷I thank one of the reviewers for this point.

¹³⁸Jean-Marie Chenou and Roxana Radu, ‘The “right to be forgotten”: Negotiating public and private ordering in the European Union’, *Business & Society*, 58:1 (2019), pp. 74–102.