

Research Paper

The post-politics of partnership: Understanding corporate power in multistakeholder governance

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The rise of ‘multistakeholderism’ in global governance over the past few decades has led to the increasing involvement of corporations as key ‘stakeholders’ in decision-making. As a norm, multistakeholderism invokes deliberative democratic ideals of dialogue and consensus as a procedural solution to complex societal problems. Through an examination of a food policy partnership, this article explores processes of political marginalisation that occur within multistakeholder governance, contrasting formal structures of inclusion with informal exclusion. The article draws on the notion of ‘post-politics’ in developing a decentred analysis of a multistakeholder setting, arguing that the informalisation of decision-making constitutes a key means through which unequal power relations are rendered invisible. While presented as inclusive and participatory, multistakeholder partnerships often reflect a form of post-political regulation in which contestation and conflict are intentionally displaced to informal spheres of decision-making. This article unpacks how pressures to maintain the vision of multistakeholder partnership as deliberative and inclusive can paradoxically result in processes of marginalisation and exclusion, which enhance the power and influence of corporations over policy making. In doing so, the article contributes to understandings of power in a world increasingly characterised by multistakeholder governance, illustrating the tensions that surface between the ‘post-political’ vision of partnerships and informalisation and exclusion in practice.

Introduction

Global governance has been characterised by a shift towards multistakeholder processes as a solution to complex problems in policy fields such as climate, food, and development (Erdem Türkelli 2022, Godziewski 2021, Ralston & Taggart 2025). The logic of multistakeholderism is that policy problems should be addressed by all actors who affect, or are affected by, the problem (Raymond & DeNardis 2015, Taggart & Abraham 2024), including transnational corporations and other corporate actors, civil society organisations (CSOs), governments, and international organisations. The emergence and spread of multistakeholder governance represents a key dimension of the broader trend towards corporations – and the private sector more generally – as legitimate actors in governance and policy processes (Hofferberth & Lambach 2022, Pouliot & Thérien 2023). The explosion of transnational private regulation (Bartley 2022) has produced new forms of authority, structured by instruments of ‘soft’ law and standard-setting that blur the responsibility and accountability of public and private actors for policy

and regulatory decision making (Andonova & Carbonnier 2014, Black 2008, Djelic & Quack 2018). Within food systems governance, the rise of private regulation has enabled corporate actors to take a central role in sustainability initiatives, such as nutritional labelling, labour standards and supply chain certification (Clapp & Fuchs 2009, Cutler 2010, Falkner 2003, Ponte 2014).

While multistakeholder initiatives form part of the wider trend toward private regulation (Cashore et al. 2021, Eberlein et al. 2014, Fuchs et al. 2011), it is important to identify what distinguishes multistakeholderism from other forms of private regulation. Whereas private standards can establish corporate actors as the principal rule-setters (Bartley 2018), multistakeholder processes invoke deliberative democratic ideals of dialogue and consensus among actors that share an equal ‘stake’ in the problem at hand (Uribe 2024a). The logic of multistakeholder governance is therefore one of collaborative decision-making, in which participatory mechanisms are grounded in ideas of accommodation, flexibility, and compromise (Bäckstrand et al. 2010, Banerjee 2018, Erdem Türkelli 2022).

The political science scholarship on multistakeholder partnerships tends to focus on the extent to which they are legitimate and effective, placing emphasis on the capacity of private actors to establish political authority via strategies that build legitimacy (Bexell 2014, Green 2013, Koliev & Bäckstrand 2024, Schleifer 2019). Less attention has been paid, however, to power dynamics and the question of how political conflict is dealt with in governance models premised on the expectation (and imperative) of consensus. This paper sheds light on what happens when multistakeholder processes are disrupted by conflict, and how the aspirational vision of partnership as consensus-oriented is, paradoxically, maintained through political marginalisation (Uribe 2024a). The article draws on the notion of ‘post-politics’ in developing a decentred analysis of the power dynamics within multistakeholder partnerships. Through an illustrative case study of a food policy partnership, the article traces the development of voluntary nutritional standards, and shows how strong corporate opposition led to the displacement of decision-making to informal, closed spaces of governance. This case highlights the political marginalisation that can occur within multistakeholder governance, contrasting formal structures of inclusion with informal exclusion. Through detailed analysis of working papers and draft standards, the article shows how corporate perspectives were privileged at the expense of CSOs, where formal structures of inclusion contrasted with informal exclusion from key negotiations. The findings suggest that processes of *informalisation* can be used to render unequal power relations invisible, and are used by policy makers to maintain a vision of multistakeholder engagement as deliberative and inclusive. This leads to a paradoxical situation, where preserving the image of partnership can result in processes of political marginalisation and exclusion. By examining the concrete practices through which ostensibly inclusive forms of governance can become exclusionary, we can more clearly understand how certain actors exercise greater influence than others. In spite of the many claims by international organisations, governments, and the private sector, this critique argues that ‘actually existing’ multistakeholder governance may often enhance the power and influence of corporations. In doing so, it contributes to understandings of power in a world increasingly characterised by multistakeholder governance, illustrating the tensions that surface between the ‘post-political’ vision of partnerships and informalisation and exclusion in practice.

The remainder of this article is structured into four sections. It begins by situating the central argument around informalisation and marginalisation in the context of two analytical perspectives: (1) the concept of post-political regulation; and (2) decentred approaches to policy analysis. This section introduces the notion of post-politics in global governance, and the idea that contemporary forms of regulation are oriented around a political rationality of consensus that renders conflicts of interest invisible. This is followed by an overview of the decentred approach to policy analysis used to connect the abstract concept of post-political regulation to concrete practices of governance. Following a section on methods, the article moves to the empirical analysis of multistakeholder governance. After providing an overview of the food policy partnership, I examine how industry resistance to a proposed voluntary standard on processed food led to the informalisation of decision-making, rendering invisible unequal

power relations. The empirical material details the political marginalisation of CSOs, who became increasingly peripheral in decision-making as it was displaced to informal spaces of governance. These findings illustrate a paradox of multistakeholder processes, namely that maintaining a post-political vision of partnership as deliberative and consensus-oriented in the face of conflict, may result in marginalisation and exclusion. The article concludes by exploring some of the implications for corporate power in an increasingly multistakeholder world, arguing that the use of informalisation as a coping mechanism stands to benefit some actors over others.

A Decentred Approach to Post-Political Regulation

The idea of ‘post-political regulation’ has been used to capture the shift towards multistakeholder forms of governance that assume consensus as the institutional outcome (Uribe 2024a). This term takes inspiration from the work of Chantal Mouffe (2005) on post-politics, contrasting the legitimate conflicts that constitute an intrinsic part of democratic politics, with the emergence of post-political forms of governance that render invisible conflicting or competing interests. For Mouffe, it is the refusal to acknowledge the potential for contestation that produces various forms of post-politics, in which the political character of decision-making is obscured or displaced in some way (see Burnham 2014, Crouch 2004, Wilson & Swyngedouw 2015). Taking inspiration from Mouffe (2005), Garsten and Jacobsson (2013) apply the concept of the post-political to business regulation, and the emergence and spread of ‘soft’ modes of governance, epitomised by multi-stakeholder partnerships and ‘network’ governance.

Following Mouffe, the notion of post-political regulation is used by Garsten and Jacobsson to describe the logic of governing through stakeholders, and in particular the norm of consensus underpinning governance practices. They argue that:

By not providing space for the articulation and negotiation of interests, potential conflicts of interest and power differentials among stakeholders are played down. In the post-political governance practices, the exertion of power, as well as the distribution of power resources, tends to be rendered both invisible and obsolete (2013: p. 430)

This does not mean that the *achievement* of consensus through substantive and meaningful participation constitutes a form of post-politics – rather, that in adopting consensus as an underlying political rationality, governing practices are organised in ways that assume this norm as the point-of-departure (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013).

The concept of post-political regulation provides a lens for understanding the political rationalities of multistakeholder governance, directing attention to the forms of political calculation and reasoning that shape decision-making (Abraham 2022). In this article, I focus specifically on how the political rationality of consensus organises practices of multistakeholder governance, and considers the mechanisms and techniques used by actors to try and maintain this rationality in the face of conflicting interests. To do this, I advance a decentred account of governance, exploring the concrete practices of multistakeholder partnerships. This draws on Bevir and Rhodes’ interpretive political science (2003, 2006, 2008) which seeks to ‘decentre’ political analysis through a focus on the ‘social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings’ (Bevir & Rhodes 2010, p. 73). Applying this framework to studying governance, Bevir (2013, p. 1) argues that a decentred approach helps to examine how governance processes are created and recreated through concrete policy practices. In their work on a decentred approach to understanding governance, Bevir and Rhodes (2016) emphasise the ‘constructedness’ of governance, in which ‘patterns of rule’ are created, maintained, and modified by actors. Their analytical framework is based on three forms of practice: *ruling*, *rationalities*, and *resistance* (the ‘3Rs’).

While Bevir and Rhodes do not explicitly focus on multistakeholder governance, their decentred framework is situated within the political science literature on governance, which they view as characterised by diverse practices of ruling, competing rationalities, and plural forms of resistance. Moreover, these practices are not confined to public institutions, but apply to political engagement between state and non-state actors. As they note:

Policy always arises from interactions within networks of organisations and individuals. Patterns of rule always traverse the public, private, and voluntary sectors [...] state authority is constantly being remade, negotiated and contested in widely different ways in widely varying everyday practices. (2016, p. 16)

A key empirical focus of decentred theory is therefore ‘networked’ governance models (Bäckstrand 2008, Börzel 2011), in which the state is one actor among many. I propose that the ‘3Rs’ decentred framework provides a useful heuristic that can be applied to multistakeholder governance, mapping its contours to this analytical framework.

Starting with ‘ruling’ as a form of governance practice, this term is used by Bevir and Rhodes to describe ideas that sit in the background, shaping how actors make sense of a given context (Schmidt 2010). In relation to multistakeholder governance, ‘ruling’ could be understood as ideas linked to both neoliberalism (Davies 2014, Eagleton-Pierce 2014, Peck 2010, Schrecker 2016) and managerialism (Knafo et al. 2019, Uribe 2024a). The spread of multistakeholderism in the early 1990s coincided with changes in global political economy associated with waves of privatisation, marketisation, and deregulation / reregulation (Erdem Türkelli 2022) that have steadily increased the political power of corporations (Hathaway 2020). In this context, multistakeholderism offered a persuasive language around democratising participation and corporate social responsibility that fits with the broader neoliberal turn towards accommodating corporate interests (Crouch 2011, Taggart & Abraham 2024). Over the past three decades, multistakeholderism has assumed an almost taken-for-granted status in policy areas, including development, climate, and health (de Bengy Puyvallée 2024, Gleckman 2018, Scholte 2020, Ralston & Taggart 2025). Conceived as a set of practices, we might think of these background ideas (Schmidt 2011) as the normalisation of corporate actors as stakeholders in global governance (Uribe 2024b).

Second, rationalities constitute ‘the beliefs and associated technologies that govern conduct’ (Bever & Rhodes 2016, p. 10). This conceptualisation shares much with Foucauldian accounts of political rationality, which Brown (2015, p. 116) describes as the conditions of possibility for concrete practices and techniques of governing, which organise them and provide their normative basis. Rationalities are the political calculation and reasoning from which governance practices are specified and grounded (Abraham 2022). The origins of multistakeholderism can be traced to managerial thinking, and the emergence of the ‘stakeholder’ as a novel subject of governance in the 1970s and 1980s. While stakeholder inclusion existed before the onset of neoliberalism, multistakeholder engagement has become synonymous with neoliberal governance and discourses of ‘efficiency’ and ‘rationality’ associated with it (Uribe 2024a, Eagleton-Pierce 2014). As Taggart and Abraham (2024) note, the norm of multistakeholderism is that policy problems *ought* to be addressed by all those actors who affect, or are affected by them, which, crucially, includes the involvement of corporations alongside non-governmental organisations, governments, international agencies, and other groups. In addition to the managerial rationale that multistakeholder approaches are more efficient in addressing policy problems (Eagleton-Pierce & Knafo 2020, Whiteside 2020), multistakeholderism is characterised by appeals to deliberative democratic ideals. The discourses associated with multistakeholder governance not only frame it as a more efficient mechanism of problem solving, but claim that it promotes a kind of deliberative collaboration (Godziewski 2021). These discourses echo Habermas’ (1996) theory of communicative ethics, and the desirability of deliberative modes of decision-making which encourage reasoned consensus (see Landwehr 2010, Risse 2004). It is worth noting that such frames represent a modified version of

deliberative policy making which assumes political consensus as a point of departure, rather than something that might be reached through deliberative procedures (Brown 2015, Walters 2004). The political rationality of multistakeholder governance therefore yokes together a managerial emphasis on efficiency and problem solving, with discourses of consensus, dialogue, and inclusion (see Scherer & Palazzo 2011).

This governing rationality of consensus involves what Ronen Shamir (2008) describes as ‘responsibilisation’ – the process through which corporations have come to assume moral agency in governance. Responsibilisation is visible in the idea of corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship (Shamir 2004, Bartley 2018, Djelic & Etchanchu 2017), which position corporations as actors with a ‘stake’ in the public interest. Through this process of responsibilisation, corporations are moulded into subjects that are able to participate in regulatory decision-making as legitimate stakeholders in public policy making. Though distinct from the political rationality of multistakeholderism, responsibilisation could be understood to make possible its vision of deliberative policy making by repositioning corporations as actors with moral responsibilities towards society (Uribe 2024a).

Finally, practices of resistance are the struggles, conflicts, and other forms of contestation that can surface between actors (Bevir & Rhodes 2016). I extend this aspect of decentred theory by exploring the dynamics of resistance and accommodation as they play out across formal and informal governance spaces – and more specifically, how the informalisation of decision-making can be used to absorb the resistance of corporate actors.

Methods

To develop this analysis, I use an illustrative case study of a food policy partnership – the UK government’s ‘Public Health Responsibility Deal’. While this partnership is at the national level, it represents one of the clearest examples of the political rationality of multistakeholderism and of the conflicts that often disrupt the post-political vision of this model of governance. This case is by no means an isolated one (see Fougère & Solitander 2020, Moog et al. 2015), but it sheds light on the mechanisms through which power relations are rendered invisible.

Empirically, the article relies on discourse analysis of key government publications, such as policy strategies, working papers, reports, and other documents, in addition to interviews with actors involved in the partnership. I used an interpretivist ‘policy-as-discourse’ approach (Bacchi 2000) to identify the different policy frames used by actors to define how problems are represented, and persuade others of their preferred solutions (Dekker 2017). This discourse analysis is situated within a broader practice approach that conceptualises governance in terms of the discursive and material aspects of practice. I draw inspiration from the work of Jacqueline Best on expert authority and the everyday work of global development governance (Freeman et al. 2011, Pouliot & Thérien 2018). Defining practice as ‘activity organised around shared practical understandings’, Best (2014) focuses on the concrete policy practices through which governance occurs, emphasising the importance of practice in understanding the dynamic and contested processes of governing. In this analysis, I focus on practices as a form of productive power that configure decision-making – and the actors involved – in particular ways (see Best 2014, p. 34). In adopting this practice approach, my framework responds to some of the critiques levelled at Bevir and Rhodes’ interpretive approach for paying insufficient attention to actually defining practice (Wagenaar 2012).

The data for this study were generated from a series of requests made under UK Freedom of Information legislation for memos, working papers and other interactions relating to the partnership. Collectively, these requests generated 400 pages of correspondence, capturing key negotiations between policy makers and food industry actors. This dataset is combined with documents made available by the UK government, including discussion papers, technical reports, and meeting summaries. I also conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with actors involved in the partnership, including officials from CSOs,

industry groups, academic experts and policy makers. These diverse data sources enabled me to build a detailed account of governance practices, and particularly the temporal dimensions of political decision-making.

Corporate Power and the Informalisation of Politics

Food Governance and Multistakeholder Partnership

As early adopters of ‘new public management’ ideas in the 1980s (Newman & Clarke 2009), UK governments have long promoted public-private partnerships as a model for public sector reform at national and international levels (Whiteside 2020). This ideological and policy support for managerialist-inspired governance models led to the spread of partnerships across almost all policy areas. The influence of these ideas is particularly noticeable in food policy, characterised by several ‘waves’ of partnership initiatives across different administrations (Caraher et al. 2023). The Public Health Responsibility Deal (hereafter the Responsibility Deal) represents one of the more high-profile governance initiatives, promoted by the UK government as a substitute for legislation or public health regulation. The Responsibility Deal was envisioned by the incumbent Conservative-Liberal government as the core of its public health strategy, in which the individualisation of health via ‘nudge’ economics (Gane 2021) was coupled with a multistakeholder partnership intended to catalyse corporate social responsibility for diet-related health problems.

The governing rationality of the Responsibility Deal was strongly managerialist, but also legitimised through appeals to deliberative policy making. The rationale articulated by the UK government centred on the alleged efficiency of multistakeholder approaches in comparison to the ‘diktat’ of public health legislation (Smith & Hellowell 2012). Press releases made by the government to announce the partnership claimed that it would ‘secure more progress, more quickly and with less cost than legislation’ (Department of Health 2011a). These managerial discourses were combined with appeals to deliberation among stakeholders, evident by the emphasis placed by the government on collaboration and consensus-oriented approaches. As signalled by its branding, the Responsibility Deal was grounded in the notion of corporate social responsibility, and the framing of food companies as stakeholders with responsibilities for public health. As the minister for health put it, policy making was to be ‘built on social responsibility, not state regulation’ (Department of Health 2010).

This political reasoning for stakeholder engagement was reflected in the design of the Responsibility Deal, which was organised around several policy networks, including a ‘Food Network’ with representation from transnational food companies (Unilever, PepsiCo, Mars and others), their trade associations, and CSOs. A steering group was expected to collaboratively develop several voluntary standards, covering food composition, nutritional value, and marketing. The first priority for the network was to collectively agree a standard on the ‘reformulation’ of processed foods, with an emphasis on products high in fat, sugar and salt. For many of the participating corporations (and the ultra-processed food industry more broadly), this proposal to alter the composition of their most profitable products (see Wood et al. 2023) somewhat inevitably led to conflict as discussions unfolded. Nonetheless, the government was initially optimistic, claiming that a voluntary agreement would demonstrate the ‘industry contribution to improving public health’ (Department of Health 2011b).

Resistance

Discussions over a voluntary standard on product reformulation took place over a series of meetings hosted by the UK government, which also provided the secretariat for the steering group. In addition to logistical support, the secretariat performed a more substantive function, with responsibility for drafting

working papers and undertaking stakeholder engagement. In the first stage of the partnership, the secretariat organised a stakeholder workshop to gather information and provisionally set out the objectives of a voluntary standard on what it described as the ‘calorie reduction pledge’. This pledge was initially imagined to include substantive nutritional improvements to processed and packaged foods, reducing product size, and ‘responsible’ marketing of ultra-processed foods. As the first draft of the standard emphasised, pledges should be ‘carried out on a sufficient scale to achieve population-level impact’ and improve the ‘overall nutritional profile’ of the company.

As the pledge became more concrete, industry started to voice concerns about the scope and conditionalities attached to the standard, articulated via the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) – the trade association for the food manufacturing sector representing the interests of many transnational food companies. While the government expected to quickly finalise the pledge, the FDF underlined the ‘significant concerns’ of its members with the proposal. In discussions with the secretariat, the FDF argued that a voluntary agreement requiring companies to ‘tell consumers to eat less of their products’ was incompatible with industry interests, emphasising that the draft pledge would ‘send the wrong message to larger businesses and may prevent them from taking part’.

Informalisation

The vigorous opposition to the idea of improving the nutritional quality of foods constituted a significant disruption to the Responsibility Deal. In stark contrast to discourses of corporate social responsibility for health, policy makers were faced with mounting industry opposition to any policy that would rely on companies to assume responsibility for the health impacts of ultra-processed foods. While industry resistance should not have come as a surprise, it nevertheless threatened to destabilise the vision of multistakeholder governance. In response to the reality of conflicting interests, policy makers appeared to identify coping mechanisms (Reh 2013) in an effort to minimise conflict and maintain the vision of partnership as deliberative and inclusive.

The organisational ‘fix’ that emerged to address this contestation was the creation of informal, closed spaces of governance, in which participation was restricted to policy makers and industry representatives. The use of informal politics was justified by the secretariat as a means to reach consensus on the scope of the pledge, which interviewees pointed out was a necessary step in processes of stakeholder engagement. As noted by an interviewee, ensuring industry support for the standard was perceived to require informal negotiations, ‘as you can’t do it without negotiation’.

This informalisation of decision-making seemed to be used as a coping mechanism to maintain the image of the partnership as consensus-oriented. The interview data and internal documents in combination highlight the extent to which informal governance seemed to be used by the secretariat to avoid disrupting formal stakeholder meetings. In practice, informal ‘back stage’ discussions between the FDF and policy makers helped to avoid conflicts of interest spilling over into the ‘front stage’ of the partnership. This approach was described by the secretariat as a means to ‘facilitate discussion and commitment’ from food companies, but in fact resulted in decision-making becoming increasingly opaque.

While the informalisation of decision-making was temporarily effective in sustaining the vision of multistakeholder partnership as deliberative and inclusive, it did so by rendering unequal power relations invisible. Formal stakeholder meetings continued under the pretence of consensus, with interventions by government officials to reinforce notions of corporate social responsibility and stress the constructive tone of discussions. However, it is clear that corporate actors exercised discursive power in the informal conditions that had been created by policy makers. Informalising decision-making had the effect of making it less visible, enabling corporations to engage in extensive lobbying against proposals that were, in theory at least, meant to be deliberated through multistakeholder processes. It is clear from documents obtained via freedom of information legislation that the FDF – speaking on behalf of several

transnational food companies – used informal conversations via email, phone calls, and in-person meetings to block any version of the standard that was perceived to threaten their core products and business models. This ultimately led to the FDF stating that it would not engage in even informal discussions until ‘fundamental issues’ with the scope of the pledge had been addressed. From example, an email from the FDF to the secretariat noted:

Thank you for the useful meeting we had with you, [redacted] and [redacted] to discuss the draft [...] that said, some fundamental issues do remain for our members [...] While we are supportive of a calorie reduction pledge, we would have fundamental difficulty with any proposition that appears to require businesses to inhibit their commercial strategies for growth. When we met, you said that this was not the Department’s intention and that you would produce wording that made this clear. It would be helpful to see this as soon as possible.

As this conflict played out behind the scenes, the secretariat continued to maintain the impression that the pledge would be agreed through deliberation among different stakeholders. During a food network meeting, policy makers downplayed tensions over the pledge, suggesting that it was matter of resolving ‘remaining issues of the wording’ with ‘the thrust of proposals well known’ among stakeholders. Yet, this performative optimism stood in stark contrast to the hardening stance of food companies to the voluntary standard.

Marginalisation

Informalising decision-making helped government officials to deal with political conflict that threatened to disrupt the political rationality of multistakeholder governance. However, this organisational ‘fix’ had the effect of informally excluding other actors from decision-making. In displacing politics to spaces that were *de facto* restricted to corporate actors, CSOs found themselves marginalised in discussions over the standard. Interviews with CSO representatives reveal a widespread perception that policy decisions and negotiations were taking place beyond formal structures. As one interviewee reflected, the Responsibility Deal was ‘more of a partnership between government and industry – they were the two major actors. [CSOs] were kind of involved on the periphery but we weren’t influential or important’. The political marginalisation experienced by CSOs was often attributed to the strategic bypassing of the formal structures of the partnership. This exclusionary dynamic was highlighted by several CSO representatives, with one interviewee observing that:

What was quickly apparent that industry had more access to ministers and civil servants ahead of civil society [...] There was a whole range of basic governance things that weren’t done terribly well. There just wasn’t very clear governance or terms of reference. It certainly wasn’t run as if they genuinely wanted it to be a conversation between civil society, government and industry.

Paradoxically, the organisational ‘fix’ used by policy makers to maintain the vision of partnership as inclusive and deliberative, led to a pattern of exclusion that shaped governing practices. Not only did this dynamic appear to marginalise CSOs in ad hoc decision-making, but rendered unequal power relations invisible.

As decision-making was informalised, food companies shifted to a more confrontational strategy as they sought to significantly weaken (or even block) the voluntary standard. The ‘submerged’ nature of informal governance was arguably a crucial factor, allowing the FDF to bluntly articulate the preferences of its members. The draft version of the pledge – which would have required changes to the production and marketing of highly profitable ultra-processed foods – was strongly opposed by food companies, with the FDF stating that it would ‘not be offering drafting suggestions’ until the scope of the proposed standard was altered. In response, the secretariat made a series of far-reaching changes to the pledge that

individualised the problem of diet-related health – principles emphasising the responsibility of the food industry were substituted for the language of individual responsibility. Over the course of six months, policy makers progressively revised the terms of the voluntary standard, making multiple substantive revisions that reframed and narrowed the scope of the pledge. Policy solutions targeting the activities of food companies were substituted with a discursive focus on ‘lifestyle choice’ and the actions that could be taken to ‘support and enable’ individuals to ‘eat and drink fewer calories’. Nearly all of these revisions aligned with the expressed preferences of food companies for a pledge that recognised and promoted individual responsibility for health. As the FDF underlined to the secretariat through informal channels:

[...] The ultimate aim, of course, of the calorie reduction challenge is a net reduction in the number of calories consumed by individuals and this is not something industry can deliver [...] to mandate what types of activity are deemed acceptable or to exclude actions such as extending consumer choice by offering lower calorie options appears to us wholly counter-productive and to run counter to the principle of personal responsibility.

Crucially, these discussions took place in informal spaces of governance, away from the formal structures of the partnership. Instead of the deliberative and inclusive approach to decision-making promised by multistakeholderism, the marginalisation of CSOs restricted their role to ‘rubberstamping’ policy decisions that had been reached informally:

We were disappointed to learn that the majority of voluntary pledges with industry had already been decided. We did not feel like it was a collaborative approach [...] we were not really being engaged [but] being invited to rubberstamp something.

Eventually, diverging interests and growing frustration with the Responsibility Deal led to the departure of several participating CSOs, with Cancer Research UK highlighting that it had ‘yet to see any evidence that it has improved public health or that this approach is more effective than legislation’ (Cancer Research UK 2013). Nonetheless, in the intervening years, the partnership maintained an outward impression of collaboration and inclusion, with the government seeking to proactively raise public awareness of the Responsibility Deal and the progress being made towards public health goals (Douglas et al. 2018, Ralston 2021). The tensions that began to surface at the start of the Responsibility Deal were absorbed by policy makers through informalisation, provisionally displacing political conflict long enough that the partnership operated for multiple years.

Discussion and Conclusion

The shift toward multistakeholderism in global governance is premised on the idea of multistakeholder models as offering a more deliberative form of policy-making that is not only inclusive and participatory, but also efficient in solving complex policy problems (Bäckstrand et al. 2010, Widerberg et al. 2023). This post-political vision of governance invokes ideals of consensus and optimistic assumptions of shared perspectives and interests. This article examined how political conflict is dealt with in governance models that are premised on expectation of consensus.

Drawing on a practice-oriented analysis of governance, the findings reveal the ways in which post-political visions of multistakeholder partnerships may be actively maintained through strategies to manage disruption and displace political conflict. Tracing the governing practices involved in the drafting of a voluntary agreement on ultra-processed foods and diet-related health, the article shows how informalisation was used by policy makers to accommodate pressure from food companies. While these practices helped to preserve the image of partnership as deliberative and consensus-oriented, this was, paradoxically, achieved through political marginalisation. What the development of the voluntary

standard on ‘calorie reduction’ illustrates, is that the privileging of corporate perspectives came at the expense of the informal exclusion of other actors.

What do these findings tell us about the politics of multistakeholder governance? I would suggest that this article makes three key contributions to the existing scholarship. First, the practices of informalisation I have explored echo insights from other scholars working on patterns of engagement and inclusion in global governance. Dingwerth (2014) observes that the most important structural obstacles to participation are the informal mechanisms that lead to *de facto* exclusion from the political process (see Taggart & Haug 2024). The analysis developed here highlights the concrete governance practices through which decision-making is informalised, and shows how informality may be used as an organisational ‘fix’ to dynamics that threaten to disrupt or destabilise particular political rationalities. However, such governance strategies can have perverse consequences, undermining the justification of multistakeholderism in the first place.

Second, this study of the politics of multistakeholder partnership reveals the implications of informalisation on power relations, in which the displacement of decision-making from formal to informal spaces of governance led to political marginalisation and exclusion. As this practice-based account of decision-making underlines, the use of informalisation as a coping mechanism rendered unequal power relations invisible. While CSOs were formally represented in the partnership, corporate power was exercised in a submerged politics (see Hay 2014) that was largely unamenable to scrutiny. This account therefore problematises interpretations of informality as responding to ‘gridlock’ in global governance by offering greater flexibility (Roger 2020). Though informality is often a necessary, even unavoidable, aspect of decision-making (Lamp 2017), informalisation can create issues for inclusion and participation when it bypasses formal structures (Ayres et al. 2017, Lauth 2013). This risk is magnified for multistakeholder approaches that are promoted as more inclusive and participatory forms of governance, and where corporate actors with superior resources can exercise power in ways that are hidden from public scrutiny.

Third, this article contributes to the international political economy scholarship on the politics of failure, and specifically how failures can be concealed to protect the status quo (Maechler & Best 2025). I demonstrate how the early failures of multistakeholder processes were kept quiet by policy makers in an attempt to preserve the post-political vision of the partnership. Although the ‘quiet failures’ (Best 2020) of partnership could not be sustained indefinitely, my findings point to strategies of accommodation that can be used to absorb pressure and deflect challenges (Newell 2019). In this case, strategies of informalisation performed an important role in sustaining the Responsibility Deal, despite minimal evidence of impact on diet-related health (Knai et al. 2015). Extending this analysis to multistakeholder governance more broadly, it suggests that initiatives do not necessarily have to achieve their objectives (and can repeatedly fail to do so) to be sustained, or even expanded.

To conclude with some reflections on the rise of multistakeholderism and its promise of deliberative policy making, I would argue that maintaining the post-political vision of consensus and inclusivity will often demand governance practices that either inadvertently or intentionally privilege the interests and perspectives of some actors, and not others (Uribe 2024a). Further investigation of these dynamics is needed to challenge the post-politics of partnership, uncovering the unequal power relations that are rendered invisible in ‘actually existing’ multistakeholder governance. In focusing on informalisation, this article offers what I hope is a useful analytical framework for understanding the dynamics and practices of contemporary governance and how this shapes the exercise of corporate power.

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Conflicts of interest

No conflicts to report.

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