

The effectiveness of international law is under increasing strain in today's polarized world. Global crises – ranging from armed conflict and resource disputes to climate change and economic inequality – have exposed deep fractures within international institutions. These challenges are not merely a consequence of power rivalries but reflect a broader erosion of trust in the capacity of international law to deliver fair and effective solutions. Growing contestation over norms – framed along divisions such as West vs. Global South or liberal vs. authoritarian – has diminished the perceived legitimacy of international law, undermining both compliance and the development of new rules.

This paper reconsiders the resilience and adaptability of international norms by focusing on the role of trust as a stabilizing force in global governance. Drawing on the Theory on the Relational Normativity of International Law (TORNIL), it argues that the binding force of international norms cannot be understood solely through formal sources such as treaties or underlying moral values. Rather, the context in which norms are developed and applied – shaped by relationships, such as between states and international institutions – emerges as a critical factor. Trust within these sets of relationships influences both compliance and the capacity for legal norms to evolve in response to crises.

Drawing on illustrative examples from areas such as environmental governance, security and trade, this paper demonstrates that trust among states and within international institutions shapes both the resilience of existing norms and the development of future rules. When trust erodes, non-compliance and institutional paralysis follow. By re-centering trust as a condition for relational normativity, this paper offers a pathway to strengthen international law's legitimacy in a world increasingly defined by fragmentation and contestation.