



The relational preconditions of trust in collective action fields

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| Abstract: | <p>This paper explores some relational mechanisms that may facilitate strong inter-organizational alliances, and the associated trust, in collective action fields. It departs from mainstream research on trust by focusing on organizations rather than individuals. The paper focuses in particular on three mechanisms: embeddedness (i.e., the role of individual members' multiple involvements as facilitators of sustained inter-organizational exchanges); familiarity (the role of previous interactions in facilitating cooperation and thus generating trust), and brokerage (the role of trusted leaders in bringing different organizations together). These mechanisms may affect trust creation in two different ways: by facilitating dyadic alliances between pairs of actors, and by facilitating actors' incumbency of the same network position, regardless of being directly connected. Illustrations come from data on environmental groups in Milan in the mid-1980s, civic organizations active on various public issues in Glasgow and Bristol in the early 2000s, and organizations active on the urban environment in Cape Town in the early 2010s. While the exercise is exploratory in nature, the relational mechanisms identified may represent some of the building blocks for a systematic explanation of alliance building and trust emergence. Moreover, data from urban polities with different levels of democratic consolidation and cleavage pacification illustrate the importance of adding a comparative element to our explorations of the relationship between trust and collective action.</p> |

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1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is at the same time narrower and broader than the overall theme of the special issue which it is part of, “Trust and social movements”. It is narrower, because it considers just one of the many facets of that issue, namely, the role of some relational mechanisms as facilitators of the strong inter-organizational alliances that, as we’ll see, imply trust relations; while it pays no attention to important questions such as how social movements affect generalized trust in society, or how they thrive on the lack of it, as suggested by the recent wave of populist movements (see e.g. Forst, 2022). But the focus of the paper is also broader, as it does not restrict itself to alliances between organizations that squarely match the model of the participatory, protest-prone social movement organization: instead, it looks at all the alliance relations that occur within “collective action fields”. These are defined as sets of groups and organizations mobilizing on a voluntary basis for the production of collective goods (Diani, 2015: 1), irrespective of their chosen action repertoires, the radicality of their goals, or their identifying or not with large scale social movements.

This choice can be justified at two levels. If we focus on the characteristics of the actors promoting collective action, it is often difficult to differentiate between “protest” and “service delivery” organizations, as most organizations play both roles, if in variable combinations; accordingly, it would be unwise to restrict our focus, based on aprioristic assumptions about the presumed distinctiveness of our object of analysis (along similar lines, see Hadden, 2015: 180). If, on the other hand, we focus on relational patterns between organizations, we must recognize that “social movements” are just one of the modes through which collective action gets coordinated (see, from different angles, Diani, 2015; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). As we’ll argue in greater detail later, other modes of coordination, in particular coalitions, may also consist of sustained inter-organizational alliances, yet without implying a shared collective identity among the organizations involved. In this sense, trust can be regarded as a more inclusive concept than collective identity; focusing on organizations identifying with the same social movement, social or ethnic group, or community of belief would unduly limit our empirical focus.

The paper also departs from mainstream research on trust by focusing on organizations rather than individuals. Strictly speaking, organizations do not trust, nor identify allies; people speaking on behalf of them do. Still, they do not so in entire and exclusive reference to their own personal orientations, but in the context of the relational patterns that constitute their organizations. While we are not in the position of starting a general discussion of whether organizations have agentic capacity (Shapiro, 2005), we adopt a view of groups and organizations as bundles of patterned relations between individuals, arrayed in some hierarchical order; those patterns exert a variable yet significant amount of constraint over individual behavior (see e.g. Lazega, 2001; Monge and Contractor, 2003).

The paper starts off (#2) with a discussion of the problematic nature of alliances between voluntary organizations and the co-constitutive relation between alliances and trust. It qualifies the argument by pointing out that (a) the presence of trust can be taken for granted only in alliance relations that are not occasional but are perceived as central and sustained over time by the actors involved; (b) at the same time, trust does not necessarily imply collective identity; (c) particularized trust is the one that best characterizes the dynamics going on within collective action fields. We then move on to illustrate our specific analytic approach (# 3). We do not aim at providing a full explanation of the emergence of trust. Rather, and more modestly, we try to illustrate a few mechanisms that may contribute to the formation of sustained alliances (and hence, we imply, trust) between civic organizations. We adopt a view of mechanisms as “a constellation of entities and activities that are organized such that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome” (Hedstrom and Bearman, 2009: 5). The paper focuses in particular on three regularities, that are behind alliance building, and may be regarded as generators of trust: *embeddedness* (by which we mean the role of individual members’ multiple involvements as facilitators of sustained inter-organizational exchanges), *familiarity* (the role of previous interactions in facilitating cooperation and thus generating trust), and *brokerage* (the role of trusted leaders in bringing different organizations together). These mechanisms may affect trust creation in two different ways: by facilitating *dyadic* alliances between pairs of actors, and by facilitating actors’ incumbency of the same network *position*, regardless of being directly connected. In order to illustrate these processes (# 4) we rely on data collected in earlier projects on environmental groups in Milan in the mid-1980s (Diani, 1995), organizations active on a range of public issues in Glasgow and Bristol in the early 2000s (Diani, 2015), and organizations active on the urban environment in Cape Town in the early 2010s (Diani et al.,

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2018; Ernstson, 2011). The concluding section (# 5) sums up the main contributions of the paper. The relational mechanisms identified are by no means exhaustive. However, they may represent some of the building blocks for a systematic explanation of alliance building and trust emergence. Moreover, looking at data from urban polities with different levels of democratic consolidation and cleavage pacification illustrates the importance of adding a comparative element to our explorations of the relationship between trust and collective action.

2. Alliances, trust, and identities in collective action fields

The importance of alliance building within collective action fields should neither be over-estimated nor dismissed as marginal. While research shows that a substantial amount of collective action is conducted by organizations acting primarily on their own (e.g. Diani, 2015: chap. 4), still most organizations tend to regard alliances as a precondition for greater efficacy and ultimately success (Knoke, 1990). Dense clusters of cooperating actors contribute to collective action beyond the fact of strengthening internal solidarity (which, incidentally, is not always the case: Rone, 2022): they also increase civic organizations’ influence, as observers and opponents are more likely to recognize collective action and the challenges it poses when it is promoted by densely connected clusters of organizations rather than by isolated groups (Diani, 2011).

For the analyst, regardless of their substantive political impact, alliances are an important source of information about the logics that structure collective action fields. Sometimes they may originate from immediate reactions to major external threats – even though never fully spontaneous (Reese et al., 2010; Satoh et al., 2022). Most of the times, however, alliance building is far from a straightforward process. Alliance partners often need to find a balance between different instrumental, tactical interests; different group identities; different action repertoires; different basic values. Not only that: variations in political conditions may render such differences more or less salient in different contexts and at different points in time. The reasons why alliance building is complex have been repeatedly summarized (see, among several discussions, Diani, 1995; McCammon and Moon, 2015; Brooker and Meyer, 2019) so there is no need to go any deeper in the context of this paper. Suffice to note that, given the complexity of the elements involved, and the amount of political capital at stake every time

an alliance is formed, alliances among civil society organizations tend to imply the presence of trust between the parties involved.

Excerpts from activists of civic organizations in the UK in the early 2000s provide multiple illustrations of the link between alliance and trust. Solid alliances imply the confidence that partners' commitment is not volatile but is strong enough to keep cooperation alive even at difficult times. A member of a conservation group in Glasgow stated that "I always make a point that as an organization we are not here to run it and go away.... I think you are looking at three years into working, before people trust you and begin to understand that you are not going to run away when it gets difficult as people have done in the past." (quoted in Diani 2015, 59). Conversely, solid alliances are unlikely to develop when there is the risk of partners instrumentally and opportunistically using an organization's time and resources. This was well illustrated by the leader of a black and minority organization in Bristol: "We have been used as a group to the fact that somebody in order to secure funding or secure a position comes and wants to form a partnership with us or wants to be part of the network. Then once they have secured the funding or secured whatever it was the goal . . . you are forgotten about, you're a thing of the past" (quoted in Diani 2015, 60). Similar worries emerged regarding the adoption of radical action repertoires, when organizations could find themselves in a difficult position because of their allies' choice of tactics: "Some of us have had experience where we've been at the brunt for protesting . . . [in the riots] the majority of people who were jailed were black yet the thing was that there were black people and white people out on the front line, throwing stones . . . somebody says well there were some members from white organizations making cocktails and giving to the black youths to throw." (quoted in Diani 2015, 61).

These statements are consistent with a conceptualization of trust as "... the trustfulness of a trustor: the extent to which the trustor is willing to take the risk of trust being abused by the trustee." (Buskens, 2002: 8). In a similar formulation, the editors to this special issue define trust as "the expectation that others will contribute to the well-being of a person or a group, or at least will refrain from harmful actions" (Weipert-Fenner et al. 2024; see Nielsen, 2004 for a broader discussion of definitions of trust in the context of organizational collaborations). In our case, "abuse" refers to the damage that partners can bring to an actor if they try to

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reframe the issues along lines which are incompatible with the trustor’s beliefs and/or strategies, or if they adopt repertoires of action that the trustor considers unacceptable.

A few qualifications are in order. We need first of all to recognize that not all alliances necessarily imply deep trust between the parties involved; often times, contingent alliances may develop when the parties involved are prepared to take some risks with untested partners (Getha-Taylor et al., 2019; Raymond, 2006). The relation between trust and alliances becomes explicit only in the case of strong alliances, i.e., situations that imply recognition of allies as regular partners over time. The special role of trust in the case of sustained alliances between voluntary organizations is further highlighted by the comparison with alliance building in the business world (see e.g. Krishnan et al., 2006; Nielsen, 2004). Strategic alliances in that context have been found to rely on variable combinations of legal clauses and trust between prospective partners, depending on the perceived credibility of prospective partners (see e.g. Schilke and Cook, 2015). In the case of voluntary collective action, where legal tools to keep unreliable partners in line are virtually absent, the risk of losing political capital can only be reduced by trust mechanism. This further reinforces the assumption that trust be inevitably present in the case of sustained, non-occasional alliances between voluntary organizations. Accordingly, in the remainder of this article, we’ll treat trust and strong, sustained alliances between organizations as mutually constituting.

It is also worth addressing the relation between trust, alliances, and identity. In Melucci’s (1989) classical formulation, collective identity is an interactive process, consisting of three elements: a cognitive definition of the goals and context of action, an active relationship between the actors, and an emotional investment among them. The presence of these elements is likely to be associated with a trustful relation: the literature has indeed identified sharing some kind of group identity as a powerful predictor of inter-personal trust (Lenard and Miller, 2018: 62–64). However, the reverse relation does not necessarily apply: organizations may trust each other as reliable partners and participate in many joint initiatives without necessarily sharing strong emotional involvements, or situating their action in relation to a distinct social or political collectivity. For example, environmental groups and local residents’ associations may regularly cooperate, and trust each other, in the context of long-term conservation campaigns, without feeling necessarily part of the same

environmental movement; likewise, human rights organizations may act as advocates for specific, discriminated populations in close, trustful cooperation with organizations emanating from those groups, without necessarily sharing the same collective identity (e.g. Diani, 2015; MacHaffie, 2021).

Finally, what type of trust best characterizes collective action fields? The literature has identified three main types of trust (see e.g. Uslander, 2018; Weipert-Fenner et al., 2024): *vertical trust* in political and social institutions; *horizontal generalized trust* (also labeled interpersonal social trust), referred to people in general; and *horizontal particularized trust*, which implies “faith *only* in people like yourself..... [and] is based upon ties to one’s own in-group” (Uslander, 2018: 4). One could translate these types in organizational terms by suggesting that organizations may trust political and social institutions, organizations in general, or organizations of their own kind. The latter concept (“faith *only* in organizations like yourself”) seems the one which best fits the dynamics taking place within collective action fields, given the difficulty to define the boundaries of the in-group.

Taken as a whole, civic organizations, their activists and sympathizers, represent a specific component of society, and one that when looked at from the outside may well appear relatively homogeneous. Therefore, we might speak of particularized trust in the sense that collective action fields would consist of actors strongly trusting each other, and differentiating themselves from the rest of society. At the same time, differences between organizations promoting collective action may run very deep, and the presence of strong alliances and trust among them cannot be taken for granted. In highly fragmented collective action fields, “in-group/out-group” dynamics might well refer to the relationship between specific organizations within them. But if the possibility of sustained alliances involving multiple organizations were minimal, and particularized trust developed only at the level of specific organizations, collective action fields would be reduced to the aggregation of atomized organizations acting primarily on their own (following, in other words, what has been called an “organizational mode of coordination”: Diani 2015).

Acknowledging the difficulty of building even particularized trust within collective action fields, the key question then becomes: what facilitates the emergence of sustained alliances

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and the related forms of particularized trust, in which the definition of in-group goes beyond the boundaries of single, specific organizations? What are, in other words, the mechanisms that facilitate prospective trustors to engage in strong alliances – a decision that rests on the confidence that the other partners will not abuse their position in the relationship? The next section clarifies our approach, and its limits.

3. What mechanisms behind trust?

Literature on collective action has mainly treated trust as an independent variable, i.e., as a precondition to the development of collective action (Gould, 2003; Passy, 2003). Here, we reverse the perspective and treat inter-organizational trust as the result of previous collective action, analogously to what has been done in reference to networks (for a discussion: Crossley and Diani, 2019). We propose, in particular, that organizations get to recognize their strong alliance partners – and therefore, as we have posited, to develop inter-organizational trust – through sustained interaction. The goal of this section is to specify some forms of such interaction (Buskens, 2002; Uslaner, 2018). We are going to identify in particular three relational mechanisms that are likely to consolidate mutual recognition and obligation between different organizations, and thus to facilitate the development of bonding trust and sustained alliances (Table 1). By relational mechanisms we mean, in particular, regularities “which form within ties, interactions and networks, shaping and affecting the behavior of those involved and/or contribute to the formation, transformation, shaping and breaking of such ties/networks.” (Crossley and Edwards, 2016: 5.5). In our case, the “outcome” is the development of strong alliances, implying mutual trust, between organizations.

We’ll borrow insights from both the social movement and organization literature (see next section for details) in order to identify the mechanisms that we intend to explore. The first mechanism consists of the links created between organizations by individual members through their multiple personal networks. Such networks may be based on multiple memberships in different organizations, or through the personal ties that activists may have with members of other groups. We refer to this mechanism as *embeddedness*: ties created by organization members – especially core members – facilitate communication and mutual

understanding, reduce uncertainty about other organizations' behavior and facilitate the spread of solidarity feelings. This is conducive to the development of some level of trust and the ultimate strengthening of inter-organizational ties.

We label *familiarity* the second mechanism that we are going to consider: past experiences of interaction in the context of events jointly attended increase mutual awareness among organizations and ultimately facilitate subsequent identification as strong, trustworthy allies.

Finally, we will look at how trustworthy individuals (often playing leadership roles) can certify the reliability of one organization to prospective partners. In this case, *brokerage* seems to be the prevailing mechanism, as people who are recognized as reliable end up linking not only unconnected actors, but even actors that have some reasons for being mutually suspicious – e.g., because of ideological differences.

Table 1 about here

The exploration of *embeddedness* and *familiarity* mechanisms will be relational on two levels. One is *dyadic*, in that the mechanism accounts for the presence or absence of trust between two organizations based on the relational pattern in which they are involved. The other one is *positional*, as organizations who are involved in a certain relational pattern are more likely to find themselves in high density clusters of strong alliances. Research on corporate behavior has long pointed out that while firms may not share board members, third-party ties (i.e., sharing board members in another firm) may also strengthen cohesion and reinforce their ability to cooperate (Gulati, 1995a). We may detect analogous mechanisms operating within collective action fields. According to this less stringent criterion of trust relation, civic organizations may be involved in a mutual trust relation without necessarily identifying each other as a major partner. It suffices that they are part of a dense cluster of actors who are at the most at a 2-step distance from each other (a 2-clique, in network analysis: Borgatti et al., 2013: chapter 11). The hypothesis is that those actors be also densely related through embeddedness or familiarity mechanisms. The third mechanism, *brokerage*, while relational in nature, will not be operationalized in relational terms. Due to limitations of our data, we will not be able to test the impact of brokers on specific relational patterns; instead, we'll focus on the extent to which organizations in different polities regard the

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trustworthiness of other organizations’ leaders as an important condition for the development of an alliance with them.

It is worth stressing that our goal is primarily descriptive rather than oriented to causation, for two main reasons. First, the causal analysis of relational patterns and their impact on subsequent behavior (which includes the activation of additional ties) is notoriously difficult to conduct in the absence of a proper panel design. Feelings of mutual trust between two organizations, measured at a given point in time, may well be treated as predictors of future interaction as much as the outcome of previous interactions. Second, as our discussion of the complexity of alliance building suggests, the activation of a solid alliance may not be accounted for exclusively by relational mechanisms. At the very minimum, one should also take into account *homophily mechanisms*, reflecting “the tendency, widely observed across a diverse range of contexts, for social actors to disproportionately forge ties with others who are similar to them in some salient respect” (Crossley and Edwards, 2016: 6.1), and *environmental mechanisms*, i.e., “externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life” (McAdam et al. 2011, p.25). While we will refer to environmental mechanisms in our account of differences in the impact of the third mechanism, brokerage, across different polities, this will be a very partial use of mechanisms which are not primarily relational.

For these reasons, the paper will not go beyond the exploration of some correlations between phenomena that may well result in “stylized facts”, i.e., “simple empirical regularities in need of explanation ... in the middle of the classical divides between theory and description” (Hirschman, 2016: 606). The identification of some “stylized facts” might well provide the basis for a better specification of causal arguments at a later stage. In particular, while none of the correlations we shall identify here provides in itself an adequate explanation of the activation of strong alliances and the related trust, they may all represent important building blocks for a more comprehensive explanatory model.

4. Exploring trust-generating mechanisms

As we already indicated, data that illustrate these mechanisms have been collected in different settings (table 1), from Italy (Diani, 1995) to the UK (Diani, 2015) to South Africa (Ernstson, 2011; Diani, Ernstson and Jasny, 2018). The study of Milanese environmentalism in the mid-1980s is quite unique in its combining data, collected separately about organizations (42) and individual activists (204, about half of the core activists estimated for the 42 groups included in the analysis. See Diani, 1995: chapter 3). Full data were collected on inter-organizational collaborations, as well as on the ties created between organizations by their core activists. The latter consisted of both activists' engaged in more than one group, and activists having close friendships with core members of other organizations. The study of civic networks in two British cities surveyed organizations active on environmental, minority and migration, and social exclusion issues (124 in Glasgow, 134 in Bristol). In that project, that lasted between 2000-2003, extensive data were collected on organizations, including information on involvement in past events that were missing from the Milanese dataset, while it proved difficult to collect data on individual core activists. Field work for the study in South Africa took place between 2012-2014, and surveyed 129 organizations active in a range of Cape Town neighborhoods, highly diverse in affluence and racial profile. While the data collected are largely comparable to those gathered in the UK a decade earlier, the organizations contacted had a slightly narrower focus, concentrating on the urban environment (if broadly defined, covering, in other words, both natural and social aspects).

The data on alliances presented in this article have been generated on the basis of accounts from individual representatives of organizations. In all these projects, respondents were asked to identify their most important partners in the previous years.¹ Researchers insisted that people shared what they perceived to be the position of their organization rather than their personal views on the matter (Diani, 1995: 193-200; Diani, 2015: 35-46). Therefore, all studies broadly shared the same concept of alliance. "Alliance" was not conceptualized in terms of mere frequency of interaction between two organizations. In principle, two organizations might interact regularly (e.g. in the context of umbrella bodies, or of purely

¹ In the Italian and British studies, respondents were asked to identify up to five organizations that they regarded as very close, regular partners; in the South African study, the possible list was extended to ten, even though in practice the number of organizations mentioned was very similar.

routine events) without developing any strong bond. Instead, in this paper we treat “alliance” in terms of perception of relevance: alliances are the partnerships which organizations regard as sustained over time, and of substantive relevance (and for which, in the light of the preceding discussion, it is sensible to assume the presence of trust). It is certainly true that, by relying on this criterion, the definition of “strong alliance” may include relations that are very different in terms of intensity and frequency. At the same time, it is very difficult to keep under control the factors that might account for the intensity of exchanges/interactions between two organizations, starting with the organizational resources they control and the number and skills of their members: a monthly exchange of information between two highly endowed organizations may be far weaker than, say, a contact that takes place each trimester between two grassroots collectives that assign strong political and emotional weight to their relations. Accordingly, it seems more reasonable to focus on the importance that organization representatives attribute to their links to other actors than on the count of interactions (see Diani, 2015: 52-55 for a broader discussion of this issue).

As for the choice of the three cases for the present analysis, this was primarily driven by practical considerations regarding data availability. This is justifiable in the light of the exploratory nature of the exercise: it is extremely rare to find systematic datasets mapping relations between voluntary organizations at the level of detail required to explore the dynamics we are interested in. However, the possibility to conduct a paired comparison of local polities (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 2010), which differ substantially in terms of consolidation and cleavage salience, has also a direct theoretical relevance.

4.1 *Mechanism 1: Embeddedness (as stemming from activists' multiple involvements)*

Shared members have played a central role in accounts of alliances among corporate actors. Research on interlocking directorates has long suggested that firms connected through board members are more likely to engage in cooperation and alliances (see e.g. Gulati, 1995a, 1995b; Mizruchi, 1996: 293). This line of inquiry has been successfully extended to members of organizations acting on behalf of collective and public interests (Fennema and Tillie, 1999; Messamore, 2021). Social activists are often “serial offenders” when it comes to organizational involvement, as they tend to participate in the life of several organizations at

the same time. When they do so, they also create connections between their groups. These affect trust at multiple levels. Sharing members creates lines of communication that may, at least in principle, operate on a regular basis. This renders organizations' plans and styles of action more clearly intelligible to each other, facilitating the predictability of moves and the consolidation of inter-organizational trust. At the same time, activists that are engaged in several organizations also make a statement – no matter how implicit - about the compatibility of those organizations on some grounds at least. They reinforce a sense of commonality which is also in several respects conducive to mutual trust (Heaney and Rojas, 2014; Osa, 2003; Tindall et al., 2021).

In a nutshell, activists' multiple memberships create connections between their organizations at both the symbolic and the practical level. We can explore their impact on alliance building in two main ways. The first one follows a *dyadic logic*, i.e., it treats the presence of shared members between two groups as a direct predictor of an alliance between them. In order to test this relation, we need on the one hand, systematic evidence on inter-organizational exchanges within a given field; on the other hand, data about the multiple memberships of their core activists. This requires a very demanding campaign of data collection which is difficult to conduct. A rare example comes from Diani's (1995) exploration of networks of environmental organizations in Milan in the 1980s. The density of the 42x42 network consisting of inter-organizational alliances was 0.067, corresponding to an average of 2.8 alliance ties by organization; while the density of the 42x42 network consisting of the ties between organizations, created by their core members (the "latent" network), was 0.086, corresponding to an average of 3.5 connections per group (Diani, 1995: 102). Table 2 below reports the parameters of a QAP regression of the latent network on the alliance network. It shows that the odds of an alliance between two environmental groups were 13 times higher if they shared some core members, or if some of their core members were personally close to each other.

We must be aware of the limitations of this evidence. The small size of the population of environmental groups in 1980s Milan prevented us from taking into account a number of control variables, and thus from properly modelling the impact of ties created by individual activists on alliance building. Moreover, in principle the direction of the relationship might

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easily be reversed: arguably, cooperation between two organizations might encourage activists of one to become also active in the other one. However, this is unlikely: the focus of the analysis were core activists, and once they had achieved a prominent role in one organization, they were likely to focus on that rather than take up additional demanding roles in other groups; while they would have more plausibly maintained the multiple commitments which they had developed at an earlier stage of their activist careers (Diani, 2003).

Table 2 about here

We can also explore the same mechanism from a *positional perspective*, in which the connections created by activists do not necessarily lead to dyadic alliance ties, but rather facilitate the location of organizations in the same, densely connected, position. Again, research on corporate behavior has long pointed out that while firms may not share board members, third-party ties (i.e., sharing board members in another firm) may also strengthen cohesion and reinforce their ability to cooperate (Gulati, 1995a). We may detect similar – if not identical – mechanisms operating within collective action fields. A core-periphery analysis of strong alliances in the Milanese environmentalist network identified a highly connected core of eight organizations. The same organizations were also highly connected through the ties created by the multiple involvements of their activists (tables 3-4), however, there was not necessarily a dyadic correspondence between alliance ties and overlapping memberships. What mattered was that organizations at the core of the alliance network also constituted a highly connected set of actors in the network created by their activists. They were embedded in a specific milieu, even when they were not directly linked to each other.

Tables 3-4 about here

4.2 Mechanism 2: Familiarity (or, past shared involvement in public events builds trust)

By “familiarity” (Gulati, 1995b) we mean the influence that collaborations at a given point in time, implying sustained exchanges with both practical and emotional content, may have over the long run. Such interactions may create feelings of mutual confidence and trust likely to shape interactions at subsequent phases, including actors’ alliance building strategies. The bonds that develop between movement actors over time are likely to reduce the complexity of their choices of allies at later stages. This mechanism could also be framed using concepts such as “path dependency” or “recursiveness”. We prefer to use a more neutral term like “familiarity” as it does not carry the theoretical implications that would derive from an association with broader approaches such as, respectively, institutionalism (see e.g. Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2002) or pragmatism (see e.g. Ansell, 2011: chap.6).

We can look for illustrations of this particular mechanism in the involvement of grassroots organization in public events over time. While the study of events – in particular, protest events – has focused on the volume and nature of the interaction with powerholders (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015; Koopmans, 2004), it is also possible to look at the cooperative interactions between grassroots organizations as a source of bonding social capital and trust. Participation in broad, inclusive events such as the World Social Forum has actually been shown to be an important facilitator for the development of trust and the identification of common grounds between otherwise diverse organizations (see e.g. Byrd and Jasny, 2010). More generally, by participating in repeated joint mobilizations, organizations develop a deeper mutual understanding of their approaches, of their reliability and willingness to work together in pursuit of a common goal (see e.g. Kanellopoulos et al., 2016; Portos and Carvalho, 2022). Research on corporate behavior has long reached similar conclusions, as previous experiences of cooperation have been found to be powerful predictors of inter-firm alliances at later stages (Gulati, 1995a, 1995b; Buskens, 2002: 16). Accordingly, it is plausible to suggest that recurrent interactions are likely to result in strong alliance ties and trust between organizations.

In order to explore this hypothesis, we will draw primarily upon data from a study of civic organizations in two British cities (Diani, 2015). Information was collected about their involvement in major local events since the 1990s up to 2002 (18 of the protest and 8 of the civic, non-contentious kind in Glasgow; 9 of the protest, 8 of the civic type in Bristol; Diani,

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2015: chap.6). The higher the number of events in which they were involved, the higher the chances that this activate some *familiarity* mechanism. In turn this should lead organizations, with a shared past of involvement in local public life, to identify as strong allies at a later stage. It is important to stress that the information collected in this context referred to opportunities of interaction created by the convergence of two or more organizations on some events of general public interest. It did not entail that organizations involved in those events regarded each other as “strong allies”.

This hypothesis was originally explored following a *dyadic logic*, with inconclusive results. In a city like Glasgow, which was still characterized by a relatively deep divide between protest politics and routine politics, and by the relative salience of traditional cleavages, a common past of participation in events was actually found to be a significant predictor of alliances in the early 2000s. However, this was not the case in a city like Bristol, that featured a more pluralistic and less polarized political culture (Diani, 2015: 65). In terms of alliance building, the familiarity stemming from a shared past of participation in public life seemed more important in a context in which (a) traditional divides were more salient, and (b) the amount of political capital one risked when embarking on a cooperation with unfamiliar partners might be comparatively higher.

Differences across cities were also found when re-analyzing the data from a *positional logic*: according to it, organizations might not have necessarily participated in a high number of specific events jointly, but as long as they had been consistently involved in public events in the past they might still occupy a similar, central position in the network together at a later stage. In Glasgow, the analysis of strong, non-occasional alliances in the early 2000s identified a core of 26 organizations; in Bristol, of 24 organizations (see table 5). For both cities, the expectation was that organizations with a long story of participation in events should be disproportionately present in the core of the civic network. Data supported this expectation much more neatly in Glasgow than in Bristol. In the Scottish city, organizations which were densely connected at the core of the network had a significantly richer background of involvement in both protest events and civic events of any kind, including non confrontational ones (table 6). In Bristol, in contrast, although the pattern was similar, differences were much smaller and hardly significant ($p < 0.1$).

Tables 5-7 about here

Another opportunity to test our argument from a positional perspective comes from the study led by Henrik Ernstson in Cape Town (Ernstson, 2011). In that case, the core of the civic network based on strong alliances consisted of 22 organizations (out of 129). Past participation was defined in slightly different ways than in the UK, as it differentiated between involvement in public events broadly defined (i.e., of the protest and civic kind), and in important protest campaigns. Results pointed in the same direction as in Glasgow: organizations in the core of the civic network had a significantly richer background of participation in both public events and protest campaigns (table 7).

When analyzed from a *positional* perspective, data suggest a broadly consistent pattern across cities, but also some important qualifications. Generally speaking, organizations in the core of the alliance network share a more substantial history of participation in past public events - regardless of whether we focus on protest events, or on civic events of any kind. This illustrates the role of familiarity in generating trustful alliance relations based on mutual recognition. However, the relationship is hardly significant for Bristol. We must also consider that, from a dyadic perspective, pairs of organizations that had participated in many past events together were also more likely to develop strong alliances in Glasgow, but not in Bristol. This suggests that familiarity mechanisms are likely to be more effective in polities featuring comparatively higher levels of contention than in a polity like Bristol which, at the time of the study, stood out for its pluralistic, moderate political culture and the low salience of its main political cleavages (Diani, 2015: chap.9).

4.3 Mechanism 3: Brokerage (or, the importance of trustworthy leaders)

The data presented in the previous sections suggest that opportunities for interaction may actually facilitate the development of alliance and therefore trust. Such opportunities may be created by individuals deciding to be active in more than one organization at the same time, or by organizations recurrently participating together in public events. The question remains, however, whether beyond these “objective” relational opportunities actors substantively recognize the importance of trust in alliance building. In order to address it we need to shift our focus from relational mechanisms to the perception that actors have of those mechanisms. In this section we shall look at how actors perceive the importance of leaders, capable of brokering relations and building alliances between their organizations. As we noticed when looking at the role of shared activists, the identification of other organizations as possible alliance partners often depends on the role of individuals who can act as informal lines of communication between groups because of their personal contacts or multiple memberships (Diani, 2003; McAdam et al., 2001: chapter 4). Organization leaders may play a particularly important role in this. They may act as “gatekeepers”, certifying the plausibility of proposals for joint action coming from the outside; or they may act as “representatives” of their own group in negotiations with other actors (Gould and Fernandez, 1989; Fernandez and Gould, 1994; see e.g. Peña, 2021 on leaders connecting parties and grassroots organizations).² But how much do organizations recognize the importance of this role?

One – admittedly partial – way of addressing this issue comes from the answers that organization representatives in UK and South Africa gave when asked to identify the factors that might encourage or discourage the activation of alliances. Available answers included the presence or absence of “trustworthy leaders”. The percentage of respondents identifying this as a major factor changed drastically across the two countries. In the UK, the presence of trustworthy leaders was regarded as important to alliance building by a small share of groups, that barely exceeded 10% in either city (Diani 2015, 57-60). Conversely, the percentage of groups identifying other groups’ untrustworthy leaders as a major obstacle to alliance

² For reasons of space and lesser relevance to our argument, we do not consider here forms of brokerage in which the broker is not associated with any of the parties involved (see Gould and Fernandez, 1989).

building was similarly low (11% in Glasgow, 8% in Bristol: Diani, 2015: 60).³ The picture from South Africa was very different: trust was regarded as an important facilitator of alliances by 37% of civic organizations, while 39% of them considered lack of trust as an important obstacle (Diani, 2022).

This striking difference prompts a few remarks on the relationship between trust, collective action, and the features of the polities in which action develops. Comparing the British urban polities in the 2000s with the South African situation of the 2010s may be regarded as an instance of most dissimilar design. They may have been sharing a relatively similar institutional system, given South Africa's colonial past as part of the Commonwealth, but they are quite different on several aspects which are essential to our analysis. First of all, one has to take into account the different levels of consolidation of the democratic process, with apartheid being abandoned only in the early 1990s. From that also stems a political system dominated by one single ruler, the African National Congress. Despite levels of inequality that not only are among the highest in the world, but have even increased since the dismantling of apartheid, the prestige of ANC due to its role in the anti-apartheid struggle gives it a strong legitimacy. Taking also into account that South Africa used to be lower on social (general) trust than on political trust (Mattes and Moreno, 2018: 360 and 376), this may have contributed to weaken attempts to set up broad alliances against the "trusted" ANC government, and to transform into a national social movement the innumerable local and/or single-issue protest campaigns that occur on a regular basis in the country (Ballard et al., 2006; Beinart, 2010). On the other hand, one should also note that recent data suggest that political trust has also gone down, closer to UK levels (Moosa and Hofmeyr, 2021; *Trust in government, UK: 2022*, 2022). This may be due in no small part to the role of corruption, that has been identified as reducing trust not only in general (You, 2018), but particularly in South Africa (Anciano and Piper, 2019; Masenya, 2017).

For the reasons indicated above, the overall higher instability of the political system in South Africa may render the activation of alliances heavily dependent on the certification

³ Interestingly, it was not the same organizations which identified leaders' trustworthiness as a facilitator, and untrustworthiness as an obstacle.

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3 guaranteed by leaders that are considered trustworthy. However, we also need to pay special
4 attention to the role of inequality, in two senses. At one level, inequality makes it very
5 difficult for the most deprived sectors of citizenry to mobilize on behalf of their interests. The
6 scarce resources these citizens have at their disposal result in their influence depending
7 massively on their credibility and their unwillingness to compromise, whether on specific
8 issues or on broader ideological principles. The risk of wasting political capital by embarking
9 in alliances with organizations that might try to impose their line over their partners is
10 particularly high for those groups, and renders of paramount importance to engage only in
11 mobilizations with partners who can be trusted. On another level, inequality, reflected in
12 post-apartheid class relations and in ethnic divisions, as well as, more specifically, in the
13 structuring of the urban space, may activate homophily mechanisms that heavily affect the
14 composition of specific positions within larger networks. This in turn may render alliances
15 that cut across those divides more dependent on trust, as social barriers are more difficult to
16 overcome (Alexander, 2010; Mottiar and Bond, 2012).
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30 The differences in the impact of inequality over alliances and trust dynamics in the two
31 countries become more evident if we differentiate between organizations, depending on the
32 profile of their main constituency. Given the lack of better data, in order to estimate the
33 average levels of affluence of one organization's support we look at the affluence of the
34 neighborhood in which the organization is located (let's not forget that these are all
35 organizations with a clear local focus). In the case of Cape Town, where race and class
36 strongly overlap, we distinguish in particular between organizations located in areas that
37 apartheid policies classified as black/colored, organizations located in white areas, and
38 organizations in areas identified as racially mixed (Turok et al., 2021). In the case of Britain,
39 we differentiate between organizations operating in areas classified as low, middle, or high
40 income (Office for National Statistics, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021). Data suggest a
41 very different picture in the two cases: in South Africa, organizations located in non-white
42 areas, whose social and political status was far less consolidated, were much more likely than
43 organizations located in white or mixed areas to identify trustworthy leaders as a precondition
44 for durable alliances and trust (table 8); these findings, generated at the organizational level,
45 are consistent with comparative individual level data that point at the strong role of ethnic
46 divisions as a major obstacle to the development of generalized trust (Dinesen and
47 Sønderskov, 2018). In Britain, in contrast, neither Glasgow nor Bristol, for all their social and
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political differences, showed any significant correlation between the status of organizations' location and the role assigned to trustworthy leaders (table 9).

Tables 8-9 about here

All these elements suggest the importance of trust in situations in which differences and cleavages among movement actors are deep and salient (Askvik, 2010). The logics behind decisions to engage or not engage in alliances with partners that differ in some important ways from one's own perspective may be highly variable, as different political conditions alter the importance of symbolic incentives and in turn facilitate a different balance of intransigence and compromise. When cleavages are salient and society is polarized, like in South Africa, activists may be less able/willing to compromise with groups with a somewhat different approach in order to set up broader coalitions: if their organization compromised, but their alliance partners stuck to their original approach, and imposed their line on the coalition, this would result in a severe loss of political capital. This would be problematic given the importance of symbolic resources in that particular phase, and a structure of preferences in which unilateral compromise is the worst possible outcome. In such conditions, failure of alliance building is a most likely option unless specific mechanism of trust building intervene. The presence of trustworthy leaders is certainly one of them.

The case of the Unite Behind coalition, set up in 2017 in Cape Town, vividly illustrates these dynamics (Piper et al., 2023). The coalition, consisting of several grassroots organizations active in Western Cape, was part of civil society's campaigns to force president Zuma to resign on corruption grounds. In this it was ultimately successful. However, in the midterm the coalition failed to evolve into a proper social movement with a common agenda and identity. In its early phases the coalition members had shared some basic trust that made them distinctive and relatively cohesive vis a vis their social and political environment. After Zuma's demise, however, the particularized trust that connected them in relation to the rest of society gave increasingly way to forms of particularized trust articulated at the level of single organizations. Among the reasons of this involution, inadequate leadership seems to have played a significant part (Piper et al., 2023).

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On the other hand, the collapse of a coalition and the inability to jointly push a collective agenda forward may be regarded more frequently as the worst possible outcome in contexts like the UK cities, where opportunities seem to be relatively open, and the salience of ideological divides relatively limited. Under those conditions, organizations’ intransigent loyalty to their ideological principles, and their reluctance to compromise may be regarded as hardly justifiable, considering that (a) there is less political capital at stake; and (b) there is a widespread perception that, for all the limitations, marginal gains may be reached through patient negotiations within the system. From this it follows a stronger propensity for organizations to play by the rules of the game and recognize the role of one’s coalition partners rather than out-staging them. The limited importance attributed to trustworthy leaders as facilitators of alliances is consistent with this interpretation.

5. Conclusions: Relations affect trust, but not always in the same way

This paper offers two main contributions. First, we have looked at data from a range of collective action fields in order to explore the role of specific mechanisms as generators of trust and facilitators of alliances between civic organizations. We have explored in particular three mechanisms. One of them, that we have referred to as *embeddedness*, suggests that alliance building be easier when organizations share core members, or when their core members have personal friends among other organizations’ core members. Evidence collected in Milan among environmental groups and their core activists pointed in that direction. Data from three different cities – Bristol and Glasgow in the UK, and Cape Town in South Africa – illustrated another mechanism, that we called *familiarity*, focusing on the impact on trust of past joint involvement in public events. The consistency of the findings across different settings is worth noting. Sustained interactions in the context of past events consistently emerged as predictors of organizations engaging in alliances as well as jointly occupying a core position in civil society networks at a later stage. Both *embeddedness* and *familiarity* are genuinely relational mechanisms. In the case of the third mechanism, *brokerage*, lack of proper data prevented us from testing its direct impact on alliances. We were however able to explore actors’ perceptions of the importance of trusted partners in their

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3 decisions about alliances. The presence of trustworthy leaders, able to play *brokerage* roles
4 between their organizations and prospective partners, was recognized much more in South
5 Africa than in the UK.
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11 The opportunity to compare different urban polities in UK and South Africa represents the
12 second contribution of this paper. As it has been repeatedly noted (Weipert-Fenner et al.
13 2024), analyses of the link between relations, networks, and collective action have
14 overwhelmingly referred to established democracies in the affluent West (Diani and
15 McAdam, 2003; Van Dyke and McCammon, 2010; Zajak and Haunss, 2022). Relatively little
16 is known about similar dynamics in unstable or developing democracies, mostly located in
17 the global south (see, however, Rossi, 2017; Sika, 2020). For all its limitations, the
18 comparison between UK and South Africa identifies some possible lines for a better
19 specification of the role of trust in different settings.
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29 Do these findings tell us anything specific on social movements, rather than on collective
30 action networks at large? The boundaries between social movements and coalitions are
31 notoriously blurred, to the point that attempts to identify the analytic distinctiveness of social
32 movements have often been dismissed in favor of “pluralistic” approaches (e.g. Hutter and
33 Weisskircher, 2023; Snow et al., 2019). Others have suggested, however, that a distinctive
34 feature of social movements by comparison to coalitions be the collective identity that binds
35 their members over time (e.g. Diani, 2015; Melucci, 1989). As we have argued earlier, inter-
36 organizational trust does not necessarily imply a shared identity: even organizations that do
37 not regard each other as part of the same collectivity may trust each other as reliable partners
38 in long term collaborations in the pursuit of specific, instrumental goals. At the same time, as
39 many analyses of the shift “from coalitions to movements” have noted (Almeida, 2005;
40 Brooker and Meyer, 2019; Dobbie, 2009; Drury et al., 2003), sustained interaction over time
41 often results in the emergence of some distinctive identity. In turn, this implies specific
42 definitions of in-group and out-group boundaries, and therefore of the bases on which
43 particularized trust is built.
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56 While we must recognize the conceptual differences between coalitions and social
57 movements, and the implications of such difference for the relationship between trust and
58 collective identity, it is also important to note the variable salience of collective identities
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(Flesher Fominaya, 2019; Stryker et al., 2000). A specific movement identity may be variably salient, and variably exclusive, at different points in time, depending on the shifting properties of a given polity. My own work on Italian environmentalism suggests for example that the salience of the left-right cleavage in Italy in the 1970s prevented the emergence of an inclusive, encompassing identity among environmental organizations; this became possible in the following decade also thanks to the weakening of the previously dominant cleavage (Diani, 1995). It is also possible to think of different movements as being more or less dependent on strong mechanisms of trust; as a general principle, radical movements facing a hostile environment might be expected to be more dependent on trust relations than movements operating in a relatively favorable context. This – admittedly cursory – remark points at a possible expansion of the analysis, aimed at specifying the relationship between ties and trust in different movements and different political phases. To this purpose it will be essential to consider other kinds of mechanisms in addition to relational ones: in particular, homophily mechanisms, suggesting trust to stem from similarity in actors’ traits and orientations, and environmental mechanisms, pointing at the role of contextual conditions in facilitating or discouraging alliances (see e.g. Van Dyke and McCammon, 2010). A proper analysis of alliance building and trust formation should model all these elements and more. The “stylized facts” we have assembled here should then be best regarded as some – but certainly not all – of the essential blocks on which to build a more systematic, comparative assessment of the foundations of trust in collective action fields.

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| Table 1. Mechanisms behind alliance building and trust | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Mechanism | Definition | Impact on trust | Main empirical illustration |
| Embeddedness | Individuals' multiple involvements create connections between organizations and their social milieu | Organizations are more likely to trust each other if they are embedded in the same social milieu through the multiple involvements of their members | Environmental collective action field in Milan (mid-10980s): 42 organizations 204 core activists |
| Familiarity | Interactions at time t generate positive or negative expectations about actors' behavior, that affect identification as allies at time $t+1$ | Organizations are more likely to trust each other if they have shared positive past experiences | Civic organizations active in urban collective action fields in Bristol (134 organizations) and Glasgow (124) in the early 2000s; Cape Town (129) in the early 2010s |
| Brokerage | Brokers connect actors that otherwise would not be communicating | Organizations are more likely to trust each other when trustworthy leaders may certify prospective partners' credibility and reduce risks of losing political capital | |

Table 2. QAP regression of connections created by members on alliance ties between environmental groups, Milan 1980s

| | | | Coef | Odds Ratio | T | Sig | |
|---------------------------|--|--|----------------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------------|
| Intercept | | | -3.177 | 0.042 | -24.71 | | |
| Joint core members | | | 2.594 | 13.381 | 12.103 | 0.001 | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | | | Loglikelihood | Rsquare | Sig | N | Permutations |
| Statistics: | | | -361.015 | 0.127 | 0.001 | 1722 | 1000 |

| | | | | | |
|---|-----------|-------|--|--|--|
| Table 3. Density of the core block in the alliance network in Milan (different relations) | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Alliances | Periphery | Core | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Periphery | 0.021 | 0.096 | | | |
| Core | 0.033 | 0.446 | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Ties created by activists | Periphery | Core | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Periphery | 0.037 | 0.187 | | | |
| Core | 0.187 | 0.679 | | | |

Table 4. Observed/expected ratio, ties created by activists (core defined by alliances)

| | | | | | |
|------------------|------------------|-------------|--|--|--|
| | | | | | |
| | Periphery | Core | | | |
| Periphery | 0.35 | 1.80 | | | |
| Core | 1.80 | 6.23 | | | |

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Table 5. Core-periphery models in Bristol and Glasgow

| | Core | Periphery | N |
|-----------|-------|-----------|-----|
| Glasgow | | | |
| Core | 0.165 | 0.010 | 26 |
| Periphery | 0.047 | 0.010 | 98 |
| Bristol | | | |
| Core | 0.120 | 0.008 | 24 |
| Periphery | 0.029 | 0.008 | 110 |

Table 6. Past involvement in civic events by core/periphery position in British cities (1990-early 2000s; source: Diani 2015)

Protest events only

| | Mean | S.D. | N |
|-------------------|------|------|-----|
| Glasgow*** | | | |
| Periphery | 2.37 | 2.93 | 98 |
| Core | 5.61 | 5.4 | 26 |
| Total | 3.05 | 3.81 | 124 |

Bristol*

| | | | |
|-----------|------|------|-----|
| Periphery | 0.53 | 1.31 | 110 |
| Core | 1.12 | 1.87 | 24 |
| Total | 0.63 | 1.44 | 134 |

Any civic event

| | Mean | S.D. | N |
|-------------------|------|------|-----|
| Glasgow*** | | | |
| Periphery | 3.51 | 4.02 | 98 |
| Core | 7.69 | 7.29 | 26 |
| Total | 4.39 | 7.29 | 124 |

Bristol*

| | | | |
|-----------|------|------|-----|
| Periphery | 2.44 | 2.49 | 110 |
| Core | 3.54 | 3.39 | 24 |
| Total | 2.63 | 2.69 | 134 |

* $p < 0.1$; *** $p < 0.001$

| | | | | | |
|--|--|------|------|-----|--|
| Table 7. Past involvement in events by core/periphery position in the Cape Town alliance network | | | | | |
| | | Mean | S.D. | N | |
| All public events*** | | | | | |
| Periphery | | 2.14 | 3.86 | 106 | |
| Core | | 9.18 | 8.85 | 22 | |
| Total | | 3.35 | 5.68 | 128 | |
| Major protest campaigns*** | | | | | |
| Periphery | | 1.07 | 1.56 | 106 | |
| Core | | 3.36 | 2.08 | 22 | |
| Total | | 1.47 | 1.87 | 128 | |
| *** p < 0.001 | | | | | |

Table 8. Trustworthy leaders' importance for alliances by race profile of Cape Town area*

| | Black or coloured | White | Mixed | Total |
|----------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Not important | 51% | 71% | 77% | 63% |
| Important | 49% | 29% | 23% | 37% |
| Total | 63 | 31 | 35 | 129 |
| * p < 0.02 | | | | |

| Table 9. Trustworthy leaders' importance for alliances by income profile of UK city areas | | | | | |
|---|--|------------|---------------|-------------|-------|
| | | | | | |
| Bristol | | Low income | Middle income | High income | Total |
| | | | | | |
| Not important | | 85% | 82% | 78% | 83% |
| | | | | | |
| Important | | 15% | 18% | 22% | 17% |
| | | | | | |
| Total | | 41 | 44 | 18 | 103 |
| | | | | | |
| Glasgow | | Low income | Middle income | High income | Total |
| | | | | | |
| Not important | | 96% | 82% | 92% | 89% |
| | | | | | |
| Important | | 4% | 18% | 8% | 11% |
| | | | | | |
| Total | | 25 | 49 | 49 | 123 |