

Formal International Institutions

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Abstract

Are “formal international institutions” (FIIs) associated with transformation, adaptation, or stasis? To answer, I consider three sub-types of formal international institutions (FIIs): inter-governmental treaties, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and formal inter-governmental organizations (FIGOs). These FII sub-types vary in two dimensions. Inter-governmental treaties are heavily inter-governmental but not as heavily bureaucratized; INGOs are moderately or heavily bureaucratized, but not as heavily inter-governmental; FIGOs are both heavily inter-governmental and heavily bureaucratized. Analyzing formal international institutions at the macro, meso, and micro levels, this article makes a three-part argument. At the macro level, FIIs are a transformation (a change in circumstances in the international system). At the meso level, FIIs are transformative (something that changes circumstances in policy areas and regimes). And at the micro level, FIIs are transformed (facing changed circumstances individually) in ways that risk stasis.

Keywords

international, institution, formal, organization, treaty, IGO, NGO, inter-governmental, bureaucracy, stasis, transform

Introduction

Are “formal international institutions” (FIIs) associated with transformation? Or are they sites of modest adaptation (at best) or stasis (at worst)? Stasis occurs when a fixation on maintaining the status quo prevents serious consideration of superior policies or arrangements.

When FIIs are mentioned, what frequently comes to mind are formal inter-governmental organizations (FIGOs) such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization of American States, or the World Trade Organization. FIGOs are regularly in the news, since they are key venues for discussing and handling thorny world problems. Definitionally, they are 1) official inter-state arrangements legalized through a charter or international treaty, and 2) coordinated by a permanent secretariat, staff, or headquarters.¹

In short: FIGOs are heavily inter-governmental and heavily bureaucratized. Note that each dimension is a continuum, not a binary categorization. Inter-governmentalism is the degree to which an entity operates through and for nation-states.² Bureaucratization is the degree to which an entity is a centralized body of non-elected officials, characterized by hierarchical authority, specialization, and adherence to rules.³

The ranks of formal international institutions are more diverse than FIGOs, since the dampening of either bureaucratization or inter-governmentalism yields two other subtypes.⁴ Without being coordinated by a permanent secretariat, staff, or headquarters, an inter-governmental treaty such as the Antarctic Treaty can be an FII, since it is an official inter-state arrangement. And without being an official inter-state arrangement, an international non-governmental organization (INGO) such as Amnesty International can be an FII, since it is coordinated by a permanent secretariat, staff, or headquarters. Therefore to dig into the question of FIIs’ association with transformation, adaptation, or stasis, it is useful to cover three sub-types of FIIs: formal inter-governmental organizations, international non-governmental organizations, and inter-governmental treaties.⁵ FIGOs are both heavily inter-governmental and heavily bureaucratized; INGOs

¹ Vabulas and Snidal 2013, 194.

² The converse of heavy inter-governmentalism would be *no* inter-governmentalism: an entity operating without states (Grigorescu 2020). This differs from the European Union literature, where inter-governmentalism’s converse is supra-nationalism: operating through a bureaucracy or other mechanism with authority *over* states (Pollack 2001; Koenig-Archibugi 2004).

³ Weber 1947, 330-331.

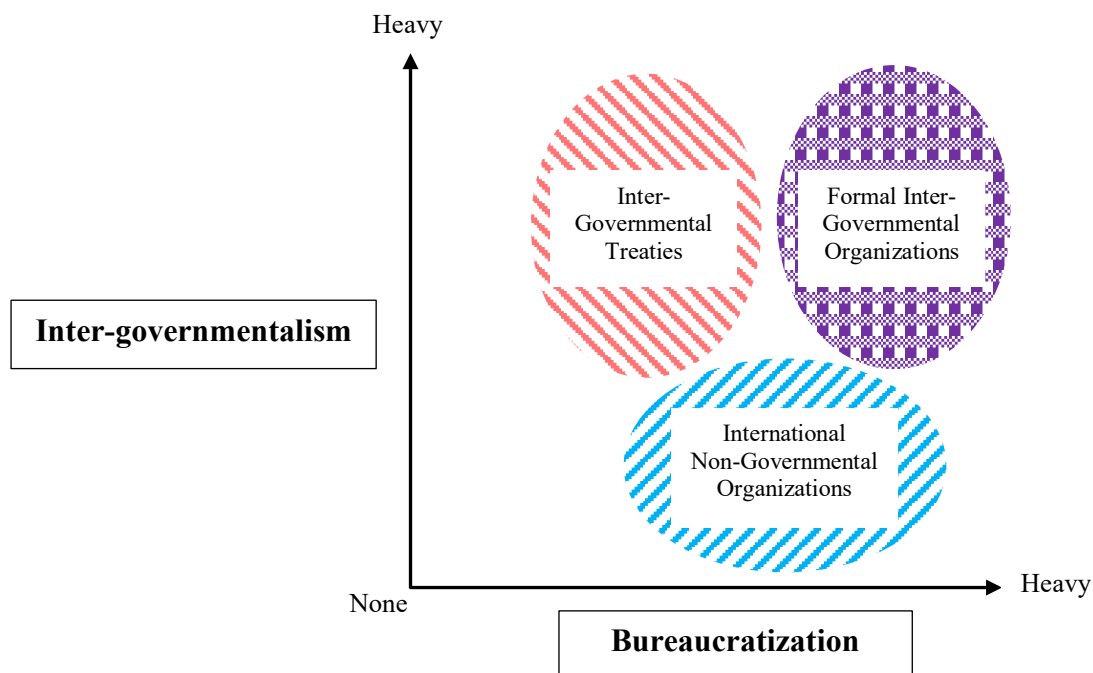
⁴ For the separate realm of informal international institutions, see Vabulas and Snidal (2013).

⁵ These three sub-types are not claimed to be exhaustive— for example, a public-private partnerships (PPP) that is coordinated by a permanent secretariat, staff, or headquarters could also qualify as an FII. However, here the focus is on FIGOs, INGOs, and inter-governmental treaties, since they regularly qualify as FIIs.

are moderately or heavily bureaucratized, but not as heavily inter-governmental; inter-governmental treaties are heavily inter-governmental but not as heavily bureaucratized.

In Figure 1, ovals roughly position the three FII sub-types on the two dimensions.⁶ The positioning is only approximate, aiming to highlight key differences and similarities. The ovals' large size reflects variation within sub-types. For example, inter-governmental treaties vary in the size of their secretariats; FIGOs vary in their openness to permitting non-state entities as observers; and INGOs vary in their reliance on physical international outposts. Inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization are dimensions along which FIIs can differ—across sub-types, but also within them.

Figure 1: Inter-governmentalism, Bureaucratization, and Three Sub-Types of FIIs



This lays a foundation to explore the real-world motivating question of whether FIIs are most associated with stasis, adaptation, or transformation. People may first think of stasis, since FIIs are regularly portrayed as cornerstones of the international order. This is simplistic: it misses how revolutionary FIIs are and have been, and it glosses over how stasis might be linked to FIIs' revolutionary aspects. Analyzing formal international

⁶ My plot is useful beyond FIIs: one could position informal inter-governmental institutions (e.g., G7) at the top left, hybrid public-private institutions (e.g., GAVI) near the center, and grassroots social movements (e.g., Fridays for Future) at the bottom left.

institutions at the macro level (the international system), the meso level (policy areas and regimes), and the micro level (individual FIIs), I make a three-part argument.

At the macro level, FIIs are a transformation. FIGOs, inter-governmental treaties, and INGOs are now so commonplace that they often are taken for granted. Yet these formal international institutions—especially FIGOs—are largely a phenomenon of the past century, produced by inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization taking shape incrementally and eventually being combined. FIIs’ widespread existence is unprecedented: even in the early 1900s, inter-governmental treaties and INGOs were not as prevalent, and FIGOs were still rare. In other words, Figure 1’s upper right became populated relatively recently. The presence of so many FIIs in today’s international system is a transformation.

At the meso level, FIIs are transformative. FIIs have set off dynamics that reshape policy areas and regimes. Specifically, inter-governmentalism creates synergies and alters participating states; bureaucratization produces human agents with prerogatives of their own. Thus, through both dimensions, FIIs have a “more than” character: inter-governmentalism results in something more than the constituent governments, and bureaucratization results in something more than mere venues. According to various literatures coming from different angles, FIIs indeed have been transformative within policy areas and regimes.

At the micro level, FIIs themselves are transformed—in ways that risk stasis. Through inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization, FIIs are a transformation in the international system and are transformative within policy areas and regimes—but FIIs themselves also are transformed at the individual level. In many FIIs, inter-governmentalism has become closely tied to the notion of “sovereign equality”: treating states that are unequal in capabilities as being equal in rights. In this way, inter-governmentalism can lead to lowest-common-denominator situations in which an institution does only what is palatable to all member-governments. Meanwhile, FIIs’ bureaucratization can yield human agents with an overriding concern for organization-focused interests, such as maintaining survival or turf. Thus, both inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization can set off powerful forces for preserving order within individual FIIs. That risks stasis, because adaptations deemed threatening to governments or organizations may become less likely to gain traction. If inter-governmentalism or bureaucratization increases over time, the risk of stasis may increase as FIIs age. Moreover, a tendency toward stasis may be particularly sharp in FIGOs: although inter-governmentalism affects inter-governmental treaties, and bureaucratization affects international non-governmental organizations, both dimensions affect formal inter-governmental organizations. In terms of Figure 1, there is a risk of stasis for all three sub-types, but the greatest risk may be toward the top right.

In sum, FIIs are a transformation (a substantial change in circumstances in the international system), transformative (something that changes circumstances in policy

areas and regimes), and transformed (facing changed circumstances individually). I begin with the macro-level argument, then move to the meso level, and finally to the micro level. After tracing key historical and theoretical developments related to FIIs' past, I conclude with important questions about FIIs' diversity, power, and future.

Macro Level: The Recent Emergence of Inter-governmentalism and Bureaucratization

Just a few centuries ago, FIIs were rare. Thinking of inter-*national* interactions made little sense until there was a system of *nation-states*, and that system developed relatively recently. Then bit by bit, the contemporary international order—of which FIIs are often considered the bedrock—was built, resulting in a transformation of the international system.

Before the 20th Century: Inter-governmental Arrangements

In the traditional Western account,⁷ the roots of the modern state system lie in the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War. The peace negotiations involved a mix of religious and secular leaders: not only the Emperor of the Holy Roman Church but also delegations for Dutch, French, German, Spanish, and Swedish monarchs. These leaders hardly represented “nation-states” in today's sense. However, in agreeing that fellow leaders had the right to govern within their recognized territory without the meddling of external religious powers, they did lay the groundwork for contemporary understandings of territorial integrity, secular government, and non-interference.

By the 19th century, the notion of a nation-state had become more refined but continued to be dominated by Western Europe. The bloody French Revolution and the territorial ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte compelled several European powers to collaborate, not only to wage war but also to prevent it. This resulted in the informal international institution known as the Concert of Europe: a series of voluntary-but-expected meetings among Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and others. Meeting regularly between 1814 and 1914, major European powers attained relative peace within their region and made decisions about other parts of the world.

Agreements in the Concert of Europe and elsewhere did not always take the same form as today's international agreements, but they did reflect important developments in the evolution of international law. Legal systems certainly had existed in civilizations throughout the world—from the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, to the codification of Roman law under Justinian I, to the Confucian-flavored rules of Chinese mandarins. However, in the 19th century, the focus was shifting in at least two ways. For one, laws came to be seen as human-made, not divine. Furthermore, laws not only looked inward at relationships between rulers and their subjects; they also looked outward at obligations toward foreign powers and people.

⁷ For an alternative, see Tourinho 2021.

As the existence of nation-states solidified, demand grew for international law to formalize what rights and responsibilities these states had toward one another. Peace treaties and trade agreements now existed alongside more durable arrangements pursuing a variety of tasks, such as managing relationships (e.g., early configurations of diplomatic immunity in the 1814-1815 Congress of Vienna), sharing natural resources (e.g., the 1831 Convention of Mainz that detailed laws for the Central Commission for Navigation of the Rhine River), and facilitating communication (e.g., the 1874 Treaty of Bern that presaged the International Postal Union).

The Early 20th Century: International Organizations

International institutions were becoming more bureaucratized in the 19th century, with staffs, budgets, and physical offices. Nevertheless, they generally were not yet classified on an inter-governmental/non-governmental continuum. Rather, they were simply “international” arrangements whose work—such as dismantling the slave trade, protecting migrating birds, or providing medical care to prisoners of war—often involved government officials alongside activists, businesspeople, scholars, philanthropists, and ordinary citizens.⁸

World War I interrupted much of this international work and also ended the Concert of Europe system.⁹ Aspiring to rejuvenate international cooperation and avoid future large-scale wars, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson included the creation of a formal institution, the League of Nations, among the Fourteen Points he wanted in the treaty ending World War I. Although the U.S. Congress never ratified the treaty and thereby prevented the United States from being a member, the League did garner other member-states and began operating in 1920.

Yet a delineation between governmental and non-governmental participants remained blurry. Article 24 of the League’s Covenant vaguely referred to “international bureaus” whose work would either be assisted by the League’s Secretariat or, more dramatically, placed under the League’s direction. The Secretariat spent years fielding requests and agonizing over how their organization’s modest resources could be stretched to support additional bureaus.¹⁰

Eventually, in 1923, the League’s Council decided to interpret Article 24 narrowly: only “official” (roughly, inter-governmental) bureaus were eligible. This was a turning point in which international non-governmental institutions began to be relegated to a noticeably lower status within the League. Nevertheless, throughout the 1920s and

⁸ Davies 2016.

⁹ Snyder 1989; Holthoefer 2017.

¹⁰ Potter 1934, 10-12.

1930s, many non-governmental representatives did continue to enjoy broad access to the League's personnel and premises.¹¹

After World War II: Inter-governmental Treaties and Organizations

The League of Nations did not prevent World War II, but its aspiration for peace and prosperity was echoed in the postwar frenzy of formal institution-building. During this period, distinctions between international non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations solidified. Various NGOs participated in the San Francisco conference that negotiated an organizational replacement for the League, and Article 71 of the resulting United Nations (UN) Charter stipulates that the UN's Economic and Social Council "may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations."

Some observers take this as evidence that NGOs are foundational in the UN system. But these same facts hint at how NGOs are also marginalized. After all, it was largely U.S. government officials who drafted the United Nations Charter prior to the San Francisco conference, and Article 71 not only formalizes but also restricts NGOs' participation in ways the earlier League of Nations did not.

States that had prevailed in World War II often took leadership roles in constructing a vast postwar order of formal inter-governmental organizations and treaties, including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and numerous specialized UN bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Unlike the United Nations Charter, the agreements establishing these institutions generally did not mention non-governmental organizations or how to work with them. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many international organizations had encompassed governmental and non-governmental representatives operating side-by-side.¹² However, by the mid-20th century, inter-governmental organizations were more clearly demarcated—and often, despite being key parts of a "liberal" and "democratic" world order,¹³ in international affairs, they either dominated or overlooked their non-governmental brethren.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the population of formal inter-governmental organizations and treaties mushroomed.¹⁴ They took on more issues, such as preventing racial discrimination or governing outer space. In addition, some catered to constituencies in particular geographic areas (e.g., southeast Asia, western Europe) or niches (e.g.,

¹¹ The early 20th century offers other instances of non-state actors operating in formal international institutions that were not strictly inter-governmental—e.g., the Bank for International Settlements (Simmons 1993).

¹² Grigorescu 2020.

¹³ Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Johnson and Heiss forthcoming.

¹⁴ Shanks et al. 1996; Inoguchi and Le 2020.

industrialized democracies, petroleum-exporting countries). By branching beyond traditional issues of security and trade, as well as by targeting regional and inter-continental cooperation in addition to global cooperation, the number of FIGOs and formal inter-governmental treaties rapidly grew.¹⁵

The Cold War and Beyond: International Non-governmental Organizations

At the same time, several forces were shaping the population of international non-governmental organizations. One was the Cold War, which divided the world between the competing spheres of influence led by the United States and the Soviet Union. In this new era of nuclear weapons, the states with the greatest military, economic, diplomatic, and/or cultural power were seen to dominate global affairs. Particularly when superpower ideology did not perceive much use for INGOs, less space was left for them.¹⁶

This eventually shifted, partly due to a second force: hegemonic fatigue in the face of an increasingly complex state system. For three decades following World War II, decolonization and independence movements throughout Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Central/South America produced scores of new states. Suddenly, international politics involved long-marginalized people who sought redistributive justice, and who often were represented by fragile or authoritarian governments. The United States and the Soviet Union strategically engaged with some of these new states but largely ignored the rest.

Increasingly, international non-governmental organizations mobilized to fill holes left by self-interested or over-stretched hegemons, as well as corrupt or inept domestic governments. The 1960s and 1970s saw the internationalization of NGOs, plus the birth of numerous new INGOs. CARE International, Oxfam, and Save the Children, for example, shifted their purview from war-torn Europe to the entire developing world. Meanwhile, new organizations such as Amnesty International (AI), Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF International) began their trek to becoming household names. The population of international non-governmental organizations has grown in nearly every region.¹⁷

As their numbers and tasks grew, a third force emerged: many INGOs became more bureaucratized.¹⁸ For example, they employed professionalized staff, adopted increasingly hierarchical oversight processes, and reorganized into specialized divisions. It is common for organizations to bureaucratize as they age.¹⁹ However, the changes also were propelled by many INGOs' willingness to seek financial support or contractual work from governments and inter-governmental organizations—both of which tend to be

¹⁵ But on the possibility of death, see Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020.

¹⁶ Grigorescu and Başer 2019.

¹⁷ Reimann 2006.

¹⁸ Stroup 2012; Wong 2012; Bush 2015.

¹⁹ Cameron and Quinn 2011, 64.

bureaucratized themselves, with expectations for recurrent partners to be similarly structured.²⁰ Some activists resisted governmental and IGO partnerships. But others, perceiving that they could achieve greater policy impact by operating in increasingly-bureaucratized INGOs, embraced partnerships and orchestration offered by FIGOs.²¹

Takeaway: FIIs Are a Transformation at the Macro Level

This historical overview demonstrates that inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization were not developed—let alone combined—until relatively recently.

Inter-governmentalism evolved over three centuries. Through a contemporary lens, even late 19th-century inter-governmental arrangements appear antiquated: their Eurocentrism excluded large parts of the world, and their literalism barely imagined that governance authority (sovereignty) would be vested in anything other than a powerful individual (a sovereign). As long as the state system remained nascent and the population of national governments remained narrow, inter-governmentalism was limited. Even under the League of Nations system of the early 20th century, it was initially unusual to classify international institutions as predominantly inter-governmental, as opposed to predominantly non-governmental.

Even more recent is bureaucratization. Although treaties existed even in ancient times, such agreements hinged on individual rulers, were commonly reneged, and rarely survived long enough to become bureaucratized. But by the late 19th century, inter-governmental treaties were more prevalent and less impulsive. This facilitated bureaucratization. First, treaties themselves became more bureaucratized—with physical offices, distinct secretariats, recurring meetings, etc. Second, as governments grew accustomed to working together through treaties, they became more amenable to collectively establishing full-fledged inter-governmental organizations. Accordingly, surges in the number of FIIs—especially FIGOs—occurred both in the early post-World War II years and the early post-Cold War years.

Compared to even 100 years ago, the mere existence of so many FIIs is revolutionary. Their dimensions of inter-governmentalism or bureaucratization—once unimaginable in world affairs—have become commonplace. FIIs are a transformation at the macro level.

Meso Level: The “More than” Character of Inter-governmentalism and Bureaucratization

The practice of inter-governmentalism ripened earlier in world affairs than did the practice of bureaucratization. But both dimensions of FIIs have been transformative at the meso level, setting off new dynamics. Inter-governmentalism entwines and alters participating states, making policy areas and regimes something more than their

²⁰ Johnson 2016.

²¹ Abbott et al. 2015.

constituent governments. Bureaucratization produces human agents with prerogatives of their own, making policy areas and regimes something more than their organizational components. Inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization are not mere end-products of processes—they also stimulate processes.

Inter-governmentalism: More than Governments

Inter-governmentalism amounts to more than the individual governments involved. It often entails interdependence: situations where linkages among parties make the satisfaction of each party's needs and values contingent on the behavior of others.²² Moreover, participating in inter-governmentalism reshapes states and their context, as states' interactions within inter-governmental treaties or FIGOs set off additional dynamics.

One example is the modification of preferences. As states interact within inter-governmental treaties or FIGOs, they are socialized to consider broader or longer-term interests. Socialization is a process by which social interactions induct newcomers into particular modes of thinking, feeling, and acting.²³ Through recurring interactions, government officials develop and change how they understand states' roles, responsibilities, and interests.²⁴ As certain types of behavior are removed from their choice set and other types of behavior become automatic, states become more predictable, trustworthy, and collaborative within their groups.²⁵ This can prompt governments to look beyond narrow or short-term interests, and it also can make their promises more credible.²⁶ Inter-governmental treaties and FIGOs are not states' only socialization venues—but, by virtue of their moderate or heavy inter-governmentalism, they certainly are central ones.²⁷

Another example of dynamics stimulated by inter-governmentalism is the setting of precedents. In international policymaking, the use of inter-governmental treaties and FIGOs establishes methods and patterns, making similar (or even more intense) methods and patterns likelier in the future. In fact, this has been the explicit aim of functionalism and neofunctionalism. Functionalism advocates the creation of numerous FIIs specializing in particular functions or issues;²⁸ neofunctionalism further envisions that states, having initially cooperated in lower-stakes issues, will build trust and institutions that eventually can help with higher-stakes ones.²⁹ The credibility of functionalist and

²² Keohane and Nye 1977.

²³ Johnston 2001, 494.

²⁴ Finnemore 1996.

²⁵ Davis and Meunier 2011.

²⁶ Bearce and Bondanella 2007; Hooghe et al. 2019.

²⁷ Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990; Doyle 2012.

²⁸ Mitrany 1933.

²⁹ Haas 1964.

neofunctionalist principles grew as they were put into practice: from the 1940s onward, European integration widened and deepened, and the United Nations system grew to encompass many specialized organizations and treaties.³⁰ The first few decades after World War II were an era of “technocratic internationalism,” filled with efforts to funnel more tasks to inter-governmental treaties and FIGOs.³¹ Functionalist and neofunctionalist practices not only encouraged FIIs’ design and expansion but also set new precedents for states, making reliance on FIIs routine.

A last example of dynamics set off by inter-governmentalism is the development of different modes of decision-making. “Joint” decision-making—which is common for inter-governmental treaties and also occurs in some FIGOs—arises as states opt to pool authority, rather than delegate it. Whereas delegation is a conditional grant of authority by a principal (e.g., a group of states) to an agent (e.g., staff within a formal international institution), pooling involves joint decision-making among the principals. The process of joint decision-making has three main elements: the rules under which member-states make decisions, the procedure by which those decisions are ratified, and the extent to which decisions are binding.³² The three elements are a balancing act. By permitting their authority to be pooled *if* particular hurdles are surmounted, states have a way to guard their sovereignty before ultimately surrendering it. The balancing act is desired because pooled authority enables things that states could not achieve on their own, but pooled authority also intensifies interdependence and alters what states later could pursue unilaterally. Thus, even when inter-governmentalism involves joint decision-making instead of delegation to a separate agent, states encounter sovereignty costs that reshape the availability or feasibility of options in the future.

All three examples demonstrate inter-governmentalism amounting to something more than the individual governments involved. States’ interactions set off additional dynamics that modify preferences, set precedents, and develop different modes of decision-making. These dynamics involve states but also transcend them, making the whole more than just the sum of its parts. By instigating such processes, inter-governmentalism remakes policy areas and regimes.

Bureaucratization: More than Venues

Something similarly transformative has emerged from bureaucratization.³³ Bureaucracy is a prevalent, yet special, social institution. Its authority is not based on tradition or personal charisma, but on a belief in “the legality of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.”³⁴

³⁰ Johnson 2020a, 10.

³¹ Steffek 2021.

³² Hooghe and Marks 2015.

³³ Ness and Brechin 1988; March and Olsen, 1989.

³⁴ Weber 1947, 328.

Definitionally, a bureaucracy is a centralized body of non-elected officials, characterized by hierarchical authority, specialization, and adherence to rules.³⁵

Therefore bureaucratization—the process of becoming a bureaucracy—involves the development of organizational components (centralization, hierarchy, specialization, rules) as well as human ones (non-elected officials). That is, a bureaucracy is more than just a venue or just an agent; it is both simultaneously. Classic scholarship on bureaucracy has distinguished between venues and agents by labeling them “bureaus” and “bureaucrats,” respectively.³⁶

Some research emphasizes the venue side. For example, the literatures on rational institutional design and path dependence reach very different conclusions about intentionality and fitness-for-purpose. Yet in doing so, both point to features of institutions. In work on rational institutional design, the initial stage of institutional creation is pivotal, because representatives of states act instrumentally to craft a body that will meet their needs.³⁷ In work on path dependency, later life stages are critical, because institutions get mired in particular ways of doing things, even as conditions change.³⁸ But to substantiate their differing claims about intentionality and fitness-for-purpose, both bodies of work point to institutional features, such as design elements or standard operating procedures.

Other veins of scholarship emphasize bureaucracy’s agent side. For example, the literatures on bureaucratic pathologies and epistemic communities reach very different conclusions about the wisdom and effectiveness of entrusting tasks to formal international institutions. Yet in doing so, both point to human staff. In work on bureaucratic pathologies, the greater good becomes subordinate to individual self-interest or a desire to protect one’s own organization.³⁹ In work on epistemic communities, experts’ deep or cosmopolitan knowledge can overcome laypeople’s local or national preferences.⁴⁰ But in identifying the sources of “bad” or “good” processes, both bodies of work point to human agents, such as employees who mistake means for ends or strive to uphold the standards of a particular profession.

Centralization, hierarchy, specialization, rules, and non-elected officials are particularly conspicuous in the United Nations and other formal *inter-governmental* organizations.⁴¹ However, bureaucracy is also prevalent among international *non-governmental* organizations. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners consider bureaucratization and its repercussions in INGOs.

³⁵ Weber 1947, 330-331.

³⁶ Downs 1967.

³⁷ Rosendorff and Milner 2001; Koremenos et al. 2003.

³⁸ Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000.

³⁹ Egeberg 1995; Barnett and Finnemore 2004.

⁴⁰ Littoz-Monnet 2017; Steffek 2020; Eckhard 2021.

⁴¹ Bierman and Siebenhüner 2008; Graham 2014; Heinzl and Liese 2021.

Some accounts emphasize change, crediting bureaucratized INGOs for a substantial impact on world affairs. One example is Transparency International (TI), which has played a central role in exposing and combating governmental and private-sector corruption. With an international secretariat in Germany and a long roster of national chapters, TI is a bureaucratized INGO that has been aggregating and publicizing corruption data for decades.⁴² Even among observers who are skeptical about the data itself, there is widespread acknowledgment that TI has shaped divestitures and other responses to corruption.⁴³

However, other accounts emphasize stasis. For example, some research spotlights the authority trap confronting “leading” NGOs—international NGOs that tend to be bureaucratized and have gained status as household names.⁴⁴ To maintain their coveted seats in international negotiations and their deference from multiple audiences, personnel in these INGOs may avoid confrontations and dilute their aims. The tactic produces “vanilla victories” that help to keep these INGOs in authoritative positions but do not produce meaningful policy change.⁴⁵

In INGOs and FIGOs alike, bureaucratization has complex implications. It is not only about the institutional components on bureaucracies’ venue side, but also about the human components on bureaucracies’ agent side. Bureaucratization is applauded and disparaged. It may be planned or unplanned. It often begets further bureaucratization, making rollback difficult.

Bureaucratic agency is less prevalent in some policy areas or regimes. In FIGOs for example, research shows that staff have more impact on the creation of new organizations that deal with economic or social policy, rather than security policy.⁴⁶ And in INGOs, research finds that personnel have made much policy headway within the long-running regimes surrounding whaling or forestry,⁴⁷ but have lacked traction in the practically non-existent regimes on killer robots or male infant circumcision.⁴⁸ Yet the fact remains that, in international policymaking, researchers and practitioners are alert to the possibility of bureaucratic agency—and find evidence of it among both FIGOs and INGOs.

Takeaway: FIIs Are Transformative at the Meso Level

Inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization have been transformative in particular policy areas and regimes.

⁴² Wang and Rosenau 2001.

⁴³ Gutterman 2014.

⁴⁴ Stroup and Wong 2017.

⁴⁵ Johnson 2020b.

⁴⁶ Johnson 2014.

⁴⁷ Betsill and Corell 2008.

⁴⁸ Carpenter 2014.

Inter-governmentalism is about more than governments. Individual states, even the most powerful ones, could not produce all the institutions and outcomes resulting from synergies among states. Interacting through inter-governmental treaties and FIGOs sets off dynamics—concerning things such as preferences, precedents, and modes of decision-making—that radically alter policy areas, regimes, and states themselves.

Similarly, bureaucratization is about more than venues. That is, bureaucracies contain bureaus (organizational components featuring centralization, hierarchy, specialization, rules) and also bureaucrats (human components featuring non-elected officials). Research continues to catalog situations in which the human agents in bureaucracies—both in FIGOs and INGOs—have driven change.

Both inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization are transformative at the meso level, stimulating processes that (even if incrementally or gradually) reshape policy areas and regimes. Inter-governmentalism alters states and the context in which they interact. Bureaucratization produces human components who develop their own prerogatives. Bureaucratization and inter-governmentalism have not necessarily revamped the entire international system, but they have yielded substantial changes in parts of it. Since the impact is more pronounced in some policy areas and regimes than others,⁴⁹ this particular set of transformative forces is best characterized as operating at the meso level.

Micro Level: Inter-governmentalism and Bureaucratization Preserve Order but Risk Stasis

At the micro level, it is FIIs themselves that are transformed—and in ways that preserve order, but risk stasis. FIIs are transformed by inter-governmentalism (which elevates concern for sovereign equality) and by bureaucratization (which elevates concern for organizational interests). Either concern can impede changes to individual FIIs. While order-preservation is not necessarily stasis, stasis occurs when a fixation on preserving the status quo prevents serious consideration of superior policies or arrangements.

Inter-governmentalism and Sovereign Equality

One of international relations' most important, yet abstract, concepts is sovereignty. Sovereignty is a national government's authority to govern the people and territory of its own state without external interference and without infringing on other states' same authority. This concept, which evolved alongside the Westphalian system, is conferred by others and disconnected from one's own power. If enough other recognized states acknowledge a particular national government as the head of a bona fide "state," then that national government holds sovereignty—regardless of how much military, economic, diplomatic, or cultural power it has. As long as national governments act as if sovereignty is real, it becomes real in the sense of actually constraining and predicting

⁴⁹ Alter and Raustiala 2018.

behavior. But a fundamental tension is: can states really be equal in sovereignty, despite being grossly unequal in power?

FIIIs have been central vehicles for treating sovereignty as reality and treating states as equally sovereign. For many FIGOs, decisions are made by consensus or unanimity, with each state having one vote and also an effective veto. For many inter-governmental treaties, legal language stipulates that a state is not bound to agreements it has not ratified. Such FII practices reinforce sovereign equality and attempt to manage the tension posed by power inequality.

True, a partial sense of sovereign equality existed even in the Concert of Europe, among a set of European states that overpowered other regions of the world but were too evenly matched to overpower one another. Yet not until the 20th century, after the increased population of inter-governmental treaties and FIGOs had permeated nearly any policy issue or geographic area, did recognition of sovereign equality become concrete and widespread far beyond Europe. Through their handling of votes, ratifications, and reservations, many FIGOs and inter-governmental treaties make it possible for an individual state, whether weak or strong, not to be forced to abide by decisions it did not endorse.⁵⁰

Sovereign equality is operationalized in diverse ways, and it is starker in some FIIIs or policy areas than in others. Among inter-governmental treaties, a state generally is not bound to agreements it has not ratified—and even for agreements that a state does ratify, the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties lays out situations in which a state may use reservations to sidestep particular treaty obligations. Among FIGOs, on the other hand, the operationalization of sovereign equality is more varied. It is reflected in the UN General Assembly and the many other organizations that use one-country-one-vote (instead of weighted votes) or make decisions by consensus or unanimity (rather than by simple- or super-majority). However, not every FIGO reflects sovereign equality. For example, emergency financial bailouts from the International Monetary Fund include conditions demanded by key lending states, and decision-making in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is dominated by the small set of states that are most advanced in atomic energy technology.

But such diversity does not erase the fact that inter-governmental treaties and FIGOs regularly reinforce states' sovereign equality, despite states' power inequality. This happens even in the face of pushback.⁵¹ Powerful states complain that, in FIGO systems of one-country-one-vote or consensus/unanimity, their outsized contributions are devalued or disincentivized.⁵² Meanwhile, international lawyers note that leniency in treaty ratifications and reservations offers states many unilateral loopholes.⁵³ And yet,

⁵⁰ Hollis 2005.

⁵¹ Börzel and Zürn 2021.

⁵² Krishnakumar 2018.

⁵³ Gamble 1980; Redgwell 1993.

FIGOs and inter-governmental treaties that have operationalized and promulgated sovereign equality tend to hold the line on it, even against powerful pressures for change. This is noteworthy: through formal international institutions, a notion that is radical has also become routine. The difficulty of holding the line is also a reminder that when individual FIIs preserve past order-keeping arrangements, that is not necessarily stasis. In fact, compared to adaptation, preservation can entail much greater effort and impact.

Nevertheless, sovereign equality does risk stasis. If each state has an equal right not to be forced to abide by decisions it did not endorse, inter-governmental decisions will reflect the lowest common denominator or not be made at all. And if decisions are consistently unambitious or non-existent, stasis takes hold.

FIIs are transformed by inter-governmentalism, with the risk of stasis varying across individual institutions. Most overtly, the risk is tied to inter-governmentalism. After all, sovereignty pertains to states, and therefore FIGOs and inter-governmental treaties (as opposed to conventional INGOs) are most pertinent here. Furthermore, among FIGOs and inter-governmental treaties, the risk of stasis increases with the operationalization of member-governments' sovereign equality. For instance, lowest-common-denominator outcomes are likelier where expectations for consensus/unanimity endow each state, whether weak or strong, with a de facto veto over institutional decisions. Moreover, to the extent that an FII's embrace of sovereign equality intensifies over time (perhaps because pushback eventually dies out), the risk of stasis also might increase with an institution's age.

Bureaucratization and Organizational Interests

Through the inter-governmentalism dimension, FIIs have helped to produce—and have been transformed by—the notion of sovereign equality, which did not exist a few hundred years ago. Through the bureaucratization dimension, too, FIIs have produced and been transformed by something new: organizational interests. Recall that bureaucratization creates “bureaucrats” in addition to “bureaus.” Without the human components who have a direct stake in preserving bureaucracies' organizational components, speaking of organizational interests would be meaningless.

Bureaucrats' aims include material security, legitimacy, and policy advancement.⁵⁴ All three aims are in jeopardy if an organization's survival is in jeopardy. Consequently, bureaucrats look after organizational interests. For bureaucrats, who are social decision-makers taking action on behalf of a larger group, this results in an “internality.” With a traditional externality, a private decision-maker ignores the costs or benefits her decision has for society; but with an internality, a social decision-maker contemplates the costs or benefits her decision has for her organization and herself.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Johnson 2013.

⁵⁵ Wolf 1979, 122.

By their very nature, bureaucracies' organizational components of centralization, hierarchy, specialization, and rules do not bend easily. The upside is that bureaucracies are well suited to preserve past arrangements, even against forces for change. The downside is that bureaucracies can be inflexible. The more centralized, hierarchical, specialized, and rule-bound an institution is, the less readily it will make adjustments. And if institutions repeatedly forego small adjustments to circumstances that have changed slightly, adaptation becomes more difficult: adaptation would now involve bigger adjustments to circumstances that have changed significantly. This vicious cycle risks stasis. To the extent that bureaucratization itself intensifies over time (perhaps because bureaucratic pathologies set in, or because institutions tend to add additional bureaucratic features during their life cycle), the risk of stasis also might increase with an institution's age.

Bureaucracies' human components can break the cycle.⁵⁶ For example, research on organizational progeny shows that when employees from an existing FIGO are involved in creating a new FIGO, the employees tend to reflect on their own difficulties with state interference, then push for institutional designs with greater insulation. In fact, sometimes the idea for a new organization does not come from states, but from FIGO employees.⁵⁷

Yet outside of particular activities, it is difficult to make blanket predictions. Bureaucracies' organizational components (centralization, hierarchy, specialization, rules) tend to cement arrangements from the past, and that risks stasis. However, bureaucracies' human components (non-elected officials) could go either way.⁵⁸ Bureaucrats make complicated judgments connecting their own interests to organizational interests. Since their aims include not only material security but also legitimacy and policy advancement, bureaucrats may impede change—or push for it.⁵⁹ As with any set of humans, what is good for society does not always win out over what helps oneself, and what is wise in the long term does not always win out over what is attractive at the moment.⁶⁰

Hence, bureaucracies' human components are a wild card containing some risk of stasis. Since these human components are part of bureaucratization, FIGOs and INGOs (as opposed to inter-governmental treaties) are most pertinent here. Sometimes the human components fight stasis; sometimes they court it.

Takeaway: FIIs Are Transformed at the Micro Level, in Ways that Risk Stasis

⁵⁶ Honig 2019.

⁵⁷ Johnson 2014.

⁵⁸ Vaubel 2006; Copelovitch and Rickard 2021.

⁵⁹ Ellinas and Suleiman 2011.

⁶⁰ Johnson 2020a.

The risk of stasis within FIIs is linked to both inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization.

For the inter-governmentalism dimension, the risk is associated with the notion and practice of member-governments' sovereign equality. With sovereign equality, strong and weak states have the same right not to be forced to abide by decisions they did not support. This disconnects sovereignty from state power, but it also produces lowest-common-denominator situations in which an institution does only what is palatable to all member-governments.

For the bureaucratization dimension, the risk of stasis is associated with the development of organizational interests. The notion of organizational interests involves bureaucracies' human and organizational components: the former has a stake in preserving the latter. This can lead to bureaucrats de-prioritizing changes for the greater good or the longer term—and instead, focusing on maintaining organizational survival or turf.

Both the sovereign equality on the inter-governmentalism dimension, as well as the organizational interests on the bureaucratization dimension, can transform individual FIIs, making them less likely to pursue changes that are deemed threatening to member-governments or to the organization itself. This emphasis on order-preservation may shade into stasis. Since both inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization affect FIGOs, the risk of stasis is probably sharpest for FIGOs. Moreover, if inter-governmentalism or bureaucratization increases over time, the risk of stasis also may increase with an institution's age. Thus—even though FIIs are a transformation at the macro level and are transformative at the meso level—they are also transformed at the micro level, in ways that preserve order but risk stasis.

The Future: Diversity and Power in Formal International Institutions

FIIs are a transformation (a change in circumstances in the international system), transformative (something that changes circumstances in policy areas and regimes), and transformed (facing changed circumstances individually). Throughout this argument, two themes arise: diversity and power. Both raise questions about FIIs' future.

Diversity

Formal international institutions are diverse, as demonstrated by the three sub-types examined. Inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization are dimensions along which FIIs differ—not only across sub-types, but also within them. For example, among FIGOs the operationalization of sovereign equality is not uniform, since not every organization uses one-country-one-vote (instead of weighted votes) and makes decisions by consensus or unanimity (rather than by simple- or super-majority).

One avenue for future work is to capitalize on FIIs' diversity to systematically test where stasis does and does not occur. Is the risk of stasis indeed highest for FIGOs,

which combine inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization? Is stasis strongly connected with an institution's age, since inter-governmentalism or bureaucratization may increase over time? What other factors might soften or intensify risks introduced by inter-governmentalism and bureaucratization?

Another avenue is to use Figure 1 as a framework for examining how institutions "move." Is it the case that inter-governmental treaties regularly bureaucratize and bloom into FIGOs, but FIGOs rarely de-bureaucratize and scale down to inter-governmental treaties? Over time, do most international non-governmental organizations naturally become more inter-governmental, as they link to states for funding or policy work across borders? Is the growth of the INGO population an indication that FIGOs are in danger of extinction—or that FIGOs now have many more potential partners?

Power

In addition to being diverse, FIIs are also a way to deal with power. On the one hand, their creation and expansion were sometimes propelled by more powerful states. On the other hand, FIIs often elevate less overtly powerful actors. The operationalization of sovereign equality provides weaker states with rights they would not have based on their power alone. The spread of the "rule of law" begins to protect citizens from their own governments. The ideal of participatory governance gives access and voice to civil society groups. The needs of technocratic policymaking invite epistemic communities to share expertise.

Since power is a fundamental topic in world politics and policymaking, much research is already attuned to how much FIIs assist powerful states, other actors, both, or neither. But questions remain. Is there systematic evidence that decision-making by consensus or unanimity, with one-country-one-vote, indeed discourages powerful states from contributing outsized resources or effort to FIIs? To what extent do various states genuinely possess plurilateral or go-it-alone options, making it credible to work outside of existing FIIs? Do FIIs deserve credit for spreading and instilling norms of participatory governance or the rule of law?

Another important avenue is to probe the causes and consequences of criticism toward FIGOs, inter-governmental treaties, and international non-governmental organizations. Do FIIs that embrace the notion of sovereign equality face more anti-globalism backlash than those that do not? Are FIIs more disliked for what they do, or what they are? Is criticism short-lived and narrowly focused on particular FIIs, or is there a legitimacy crisis threatening the entire "world order"?

Looking at the past, it is clear that FIIs are a transformation in the international system, are transformative within policy areas and regimes, and are transformed at the individual level. But looking toward the future, the themes of diversity and power must be probed. Scholars and practitioners need to better understand why stasis varies, how

institutions “move,” the extent to which FIIs assist powerful states as opposed to other actors, and what drives contemporary criticism.

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