

## EDITORIAL

# International Organization Studies— A New Frontier for Scholarship

by Kirsten Haack and John Mathiason

The new *Journal of International Organization Studies* responds to an emerging challenge for scholars of international relations: the growing role of the international public sector and its relevance for global life.

Sixty-three years ago, when the UN was new, the journal *International Organization* was created, aiming to channel scholarship about the increasing organization of international society through international organizations. As the UN became less popular and, perhaps, less important, *IO* moved away from international organizations and the international public sector to focus on what it called “international political economy.” However, today, more than ever, international organizations and their study is essential to understanding global life as an ever-expanding number of international organizations, be that global organizations such as UN and UNICEF or regional organizations such as the African Union or the Organization of American States, form a tightly knit network of overlapping communities.

With the dawn of the twenty-first century, we, therefore, found a need to have a place where scholars may focus on international organizations; to understand the processes, functions, and activities of international organizations; to compare, to discuss, and to analyze a form of governance that has become commonplace in the international community.

### **The Growth of the International Public Sector**

Understanding international organizations better has become imperative because of the growth in size and importance of the international public sector, a growth that has largely been ignored. Today, there are about 3,000 intergovernmental organizations (Union of International Organizations, 2004), and one estimate (Mathiason, 2008) suggests that if the linear growth patterns in the staffing of organizations of the United Nations System observed between 1985 and 2005 continue, by 2020 there will be 325,000 international civil servants. This may be a conservative estimate, since the tasks and functions being acquired by international organizations suggest even steeper, nonlinear growth.

With the increase in functions that international organizations perform in areas where neither nation-states individually nor the market are effective, we now have what could be called an international public sector. In this public sector, international organizations are given regulatory and management functions of global and transborder issues as diverse as crime, climate change, and global finance. However, while they seem like national public sector entities, they are qualitatively different in terms of governance, accountability, and management styles.

The growth of international organizations and the emergence of an international public sector has been neither predicted by international relations theory, nor does much of the theory explain how it works. Importing concepts from other disciplines may offer some insight but may have to be adapted. While international organizations have been around for a long time, they have been seen mostly from the perspective of their member governments, rather than as entities that deliver services or exhibit any dynamics of their own. Thus, we need to elaborate new ways to understand the role and functioning of international organizations as a political system made up of the international public sector and its institutions.

### **The Need to Find New Ways to Understand its Role and Functioning**

Alternative theories that can explain the role and function need to be examined. Theories abound, but often they are not tested against the realities of international organizations. Realism, liberalism, constructivism, and organization theory provide different approaches to organizing and interpreting data on and from the international public sector. While realism has not taken international organizations seriously, liberalism has recognized their importance in supporting a cooperative international community yet is too concerned with meeting this realist challenge of IO's relevance. Thus, the question of whether international organizations matter is discussed over any concerns in actually understanding how they work. While policy-oriented work (e.g., peacekeeping, development, human rights) has shed some light on the work of IOs and their effectiveness, IR theory has been unable to explain how policies and organization relate to each other and impact effectiveness.

One approach to understand IOs better is to assert that international organizations are part of international regimes and that regime theory provides a useful starting point in looking at them. Taking a functionalist approach (which was the academic theory on which was the inspiration for at least part of the UN at its initiation), international organizations may be seen to have a role in each stage of forming and managing international regimes. Five functions include regime creation, norm enforcement when the regime is agreed, direct delivery of services in humanitarian affairs, and peace and security as part of regime implementation, international public finance as one of the tasks given to organizations when the regime begins to work and international management, including accountability, when the institutions are up and running. Few of these functions have been explored comparatively and some have not been explored at all, but international organizations perform many, and in some cases all of them. Regime theory itself is a skeleton that needs flesh. It fell from favor soon after it was enunciated in 1982, in a special issue of *International Organization* because it did not seem to be a useful analytical theory. For practitioners inside the organizations, however, it provided very useful tools to explain what they observed, especially about negotiation processes. It needs to be tested further in the analysis of critical emerging international regimes, like climate change or Internet governance.

Another way to start is by taking international organizations serious as independent or self-directed actors. Constructivist theory has made some contributions in understanding actors and ideas change in international organizations, highlighting processes of change within them, and allowing for some agency. This has recently included intellectual histories and leadership research. Similarly, sociological approaches have highlighted the nature of IOs as bureaucra-

cies and the influence of cultures on their effectiveness. Organizational research in sociology and management studies has been raised often as a means to better understand international organizations; however, with few exceptions (see review by Haack in this issue), little research in this area has been undertaken.

### **The Need for New Research Under Difficult Settings**

Research on international organizations is not easy. The simplest elements to observe (e.g., organizational structures, debates in intergovernmental organizations, policies, or the functioning of NGOs) have been studied for some time. The inner workings of organizations, and the relationships between organizations, have proven more difficult to observe and remain largely under-studied. Comparative analysis hardly exists; researchers and practitioners of different international organizations hardly let their research speak to each other, while knowledge of regional organizations often remains in the realm of 'area studies.' At the same time, the divide between academics and practitioners, their different approaches and (need for) different knowledge forms another barrier that hampers our understanding of international organizations. Practitioners (i.e., those with firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of organizations) are crowded out of an academic dialog that primarily addresses meta-questions of the relevance or autonomy of international organizations.

Despite these various obstacles, there are opportunities for researchers; the fact that international organizations are expected to be transparent (or at least their planning, budgeting, and management documents are supposed to be accessible) means that if new tools can be used (such as content analysis or network analysis), the functioning of international organizations can be better understood. Results-based management, for example, includes evaluations of performance, resulting in a large volume of data that shows, with varying degrees of reliability, how well the organizations function. This data too is available for analysis. Beyond this, the Internet increasingly enables access to documents and data previously only available to those scholars who were willing and able to travel and spend time in archives. Increasingly, databases of international organizations or the people who administered and managed them are created,<sup>1</sup> providing a rich pool of information for historical, comparative, and case-study analysis.

To use these tools and to better understand this emerging public sector, the growing number of international organizations and their functioning, researchers need a space for interaction and dialog that encourages thinking beyond traditional approaches to international organizations. The *Journal of International Organizations Studies* aims to provide such a space.

### **Editorial Policies**

The *Journal of International Organizations Studies* intends to be a major home for new research on institutions of the international public sector. *JIOS* seeks to encourage the creation of a distinct field of international organization studies. It aims to provide a window into the state of the art in international organization research and function as a platform for interdis-

1. See for example 'international organizations' on <http://rulers.org/>, the IO BIO project at [http://www.ru.nl/politicologie/koppeling/rein-alda/io\\_bio/IO\\_BIO/](http://www.ru.nl/politicologie/koppeling/rein-alda/io_bio/IO_BIO/) and UNU-CRIS/GARNET Network Regional Integration Knowledge System (RIKS) at <http://www.cris.unu.edu/riks/web/>.

plinary dialog on international organizations. Our mission is to support innovative approaches to the study of international organizations. We particularly welcome papers that explore new grounds and transcend the traditional perspective of international organizations as merely the sum of its members.

The journal builds on the work of the UN Studies Association (UNSA), an international working group of academics and practitioners dedicated to actively creating and contributing to the next generation of UN Studies. Founded at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Academic Council of the UN System (ACUNS) in New York City, UNSA sought to foster collaboration and raise awareness about the UN as an interdisciplinary field of study.

The working group found there was both a lack of conceptual, theoretical analysis of the UN, and an anachronistic focus on the UN as a diplomatic forum and provider of development aid and peacekeeping. UN researchers who are engaged in multidisciplinary research and those who aim to conceptualize the UN by introducing political science or sociological concepts and theories would find themselves sidelined in existing academic journals where the dominant position is one of state-centricity and policy analysis. Indeed, the group found the market of academic journals concerned with international organizations showed a predominance of policy-oriented work and a lack of recognition of international organizations as organizations, as well as an emphasis on both organizations and research in the Northern Hemisphere. The working group concluded that UN researchers would learn from and with researchers engaged in studying a variety of international organizations, such as the EU, ASEAN, and the African Union, and vice versa.

We believe that without a forum for exchange learning about international organizations is lost or constantly ‘reinvented,’ while established conventions of research remain unchallenged. This journal therefore aims to open up opportunities for innovative conceptual and theoretical research on international organizations and aims to provide a platform for dialogue within different fields of international organization research (e.g., UN Studies, EU Studies) as well as between them.

In addition to fostering conceptual and theoretical research, the *Journal of International Organizations Studies* also seeks to engage practitioners in its discussion. We recognize that advancing our knowledge about international organizations relies on engaging with those who work in and shape these organizations. Through its approach and organizational focus, *JIOS* aims build strong bridges between researchers and practitioners to support a better understanding of international organizations and to help shape a strong and viable future for them. We therefore encourage both academics and practitioners to use *JIOS* as a vehicle for new ideas and approaches in understanding the international public sector.

*JIOS* works across disciplines and therefore especially welcomes meta-disciplinary analyses that will provide a foundation for communication across academic fields and disciplines. We welcome scholarship about specific organizations as well as the phenomenon of international organizations, their structures and processes, and their place in the international community. The journal’s focus is the analysis and development of IO-specific concepts, theories, and methodologies. We welcome the full range of theoretical approaches and host theoretical and empirical studies in equal proportion.

## Overview of the First Issue

The first issue of *JIOS* shows how different scholars use new approaches to elucidate the workings of the international public sector. Following our key aim to bring together knowledge from the 'inside' and 'outside' of international organizations, the contributing authors come from both academia and practice, and some are from both. Some approach issues by explaining how theory can inform research and practice, while two others look at specific processes and institutions to show how they work (or not). In this first issue, we have highlighted how different contributions help us to theorize and explain international organizations.

In the section "Theorizing International Organizations" David C. Ellis analyses the "organizational turn" in IO studies, examining not only the relevance of organization theory to the study of international organizations but also the adoption of a new, non-state-centric ontology to better understand IOs. Ellis' contribution highlights the epistemological and methodological barriers researchers face in fully understanding international organizations and recognizing their autonomy and agency. These barriers are very real for those seeking to move beyond IOs as merely the sum of their member states and Ellis' proposal to draw on a corporate ontology enables us to reach across to other disciplines, such as sociology or management, to help us understand what IOs do.

The second section, "Understanding International Organizations," offers insights into the processes and structures of international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization. The contributions by Müller, Mathiason and Bhandari, and Kamradt-Scott show us how individuals and systems work together to achieve the desired policy results. Relying on detailed case studies, the authors show that organizational success may be found elsewhere than generally assumed. Joachim Müller, head of administration of the World Meteorological Organization and a recognized scholar of UN reform, presents for this issue part of his current research (and forthcoming book) on interagency coordination, one of the key processes in international management. Müller asks whether the oft-quoted need for system-wide coordination works to achieve success. Analyzing the cases of the "Delivering as One" initiative and the system-wide action on climate change he finds that coordination faces considerable systemic challenges, proposing consolidation instead. Using an editor's prerogative, John Mathiason and Medani Bhandari contribute an empirical analysis of the composition and functioning of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, one of the most influential of international organizations that has created a remarkable precedent for achieving consensus within a clearly demarcated and decidedly un-governmental epistemic community of scientists. It explores the implications of consensus-based decision-making that characterizes international organizations as a factor that allows nongovernmental actors to determine facts on the basis of which international public policy is created. Adam Kamradt-Scott shows how norm entrepreneurs influence change at the World Health Organization (WHO). Using the case of communicable diseases such as SARS, the author shows that in the pursuit of organizational goals (here, disease control), organizational actors challenge established practices to achieve best outcomes through practice. Again, like Müller and Mathiason and Bhandari, the author's analysis of bureaucratic practices shows the importance of engaging with international organizations more broadly.

In our “Insider’s View” section, we invite those who have experience working inside international organizations to contribute shorter, less-formal pieces of research. We hope to encourage a dialogue here between academia and practice. First to contribute is Luise Druke. With over thirty years experience at the UN and now at Harvard University, Luise continues a dialogue started by the UN Studies Association, the role of academics and practitioners in understanding the UN, their relationship to each other, and the kinds of knowledge each produces and expects of the other. The author analyses the important interplay between both sides in the work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, outlining important aspects of successful engagement of academic knowledge in the field.

Finally, our review section has two functions: not only does it offer a more traditional avenue for the review of books (Gieg’s *Germany’s European Policy—and Beyond*, and Gundersen’s *Studying Myths and Recipes in Organizational Studies*), it also seeks to provide a platform for researchers of organizations across disciplines as well as for researchers of different international organizations across the regions to gain insight into ‘similar but different’ questions relating to international organizations. In future issues, *JIOS* will include reviews of UN Studies, EU Studies, and IOs in Asia and Latin America. The review section also includes reviews of panels (Driesken’s *A Systematic Analysis of the EU as an Actor in the UN System*), workshops (Paepcke, Drame, and Zerbe’s *Diversity and Global Understanding*), or conferences to bring new ideas to IO researchers faster than normal conference proceedings and to include those who would often be prevented from joining conferences in the U.S. or Europe. *JIOS* Reviews seek to include reviews of material not published in English (Haack’s *The Organization of International Organizations*) in order to raise awareness of diverse research approaches and ideas encourage greater dialog between ‘the regions.’

## REFERENCES

- Mathiason, John (2008), “What Kind of International Public Service Do We Need for the 21st Century?” *Global Governance*, Vol. 14, No. 2: pp. 127–33.
- Union of International Associations (2004) *Yearbook of International Organizations*, <http://www.uia.org/statistics/organizations/types-2004.pdf>.