

The Paradox of Organizing States: A Meta-Organization Perspective on International Organizations

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In order to conceptualize international governmental organizations (IGOs) as powerful actors, international relations scholars increasingly resort to approaches that present these organizations as behaving like modern corporations or bureaucracies. Although we agree with the underlying assumption that it is useful to understand IGOs as organizations, we find these approaches only give partial answers. We argue that the key to a more complete understanding of international organizations is to conceptualize them not as standard forms of organizations with individuals as their members but as meta-organizations comprising organized actors as members. Meta-organizations are paradoxical constructions: autonomous actors with autonomous actors as members. An international organization is permanently competing for actorhood with its member states, and this competition has far-reaching implications for the ways they perform as agents of global governance. Meta-organization theory explains why international organizations are less powerful actors than standard organizations are—why it is more difficult for them to make decisions and to achieve coordination and organizational action. Yet international organizations are strong in other respects. Meta-organization theory explains why they are easily established, why they can place strong demands on new members, and why their existing members are slowly transformed by their membership. Overall, many international organizations are influential but in a different way than suggested by standard theories of organizations.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, international governmental organizations (IGOs) have become ubiquitous in world politics. The increasing salience of IGOs has affected the way international relations (IR) scholars approach the subject. Their main concern has traditionally been to determine if IGOs play any significant role in international politics. The warning of the “false promise of international institutions” set the tone (Mearsheimer 1994). In a Hobbesian world, so the argument went, the goal of member states is to remain in control. Realists expected IGOs merely to mirror power differentials among states and, therefore, to have little independent influence on state behavior. More recently, IR scholars have tended to brush realist skepticism aside. To them, the question is not *if* but *how* IGOs matter. For many, IGOs have become potentially powerful organizations setting rules for the world (see Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Keohane and Nye 2002; Grant and Keohane 2005; Zürn 2004).

A number of arguments have been advanced to justify that claim. Scholars have pointed out that for many IGOs of the UN system, especially the United Nations Security Council, decision making has become easier since the end of superpower rivalry (Malone 2007, 120–21). Another argument is that IGO decisions have become relevant for an ever larger group of states, because IGOs, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the EU, or the

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have accepted new members.¹ Furthermore, it is becoming more difficult for states to ignore the rule making of IGOs, which are increasingly tempered by “legalization” (Goldstein et al., 2001; Brütsch and Lehmkuhl 2007; Deitelhoff 2009) and “judicialization” (Alter 2001; Zangl 2008). In addition, IGOs have begun to address their decisions not only to states as a whole but also directly to societal actors within states. Consequently, it is argued, IGOs have become more intrusive (see Zürn 2004).

In order to cope with this apparent revival of IGOs, scholars have started to conceptualize IGOs as organizations—autonomous entities with their own capacity to act (Ellis 2010; Koch 2009; Ness and Brechin 1988). This is in contrast to approaches that view IGOs merely as an arena or a design feature of international regimes in which the representatives of member states act but not the organization itself.² Yet, of the several thousand IGOs currently in existence, most are comparatively weak organizations. Those who expect them to be powerful actors similar to states or multinational corporations risk being disappointed. Indeed, even large IGOs, such as the UN, are frequently criticized for not acting swiftly and forcefully when needed, for instance in international crises, such as the conflict in Ukraine.

International Organizations as Organizations

In order to understand IGOs as organizations, scholars have mainly resorted to two theoretical approaches. According to *Principal-Agent Theory* (PAT), IGOs must be considered actors that pursue their own interests; it is not merely the states that create IGOs and delegate certain tasks to their secretariats that are actors.³ It is the autonomy of secretariats that forces states into the role of a principal monitoring an agent. An alternative approach to IGOs, *Bureaucratic Organization Theory* (BOT), has specified the sources of autonomy.⁴ An IGO’s influence rests upon bureaucratic authority—on the specific expertise of its employees and their adherence to general norms and decision-making procedures (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 20–9). BOT has also proposed an explanation for the reason secretariats tend to deviate from their mandate. Deviations are not mere expressions of self-interested strategies of bureaucratic resource maximization but are better seen as “mission creep,” as an effort by the organization to obtain better control of its environment by expanding its mandate (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 9). In short, both PAT and BOT suggest that IGOs by virtue of having large secretariats become more significant actors on the international stage than hitherto recognized.

We share with these approaches the underlying conviction that understanding IGOs as organizations is a fruitful perspective. It suggests drawing on the rich stock of theories that have been developed in organization studies over the last sixty years or so when trying to understand international organizations. However, applying traditional theories of organizations to IGOs can be partly misleading. Both PAT and BOT implicitly liken IGOs to types of organizations that are renowned for their problematic tendency to concentrate power. PAT was developed in order to provide an understanding about the modern public corporation, in which shareholders face difficulty in controlling the organization’s professional management. BOT

1. For EU and NATO enlargement, see Schimmelfennig (2003).

2. For the political arena perspective, see Cox and Jacobsson (1973) and Rittberger et al., (2011). It has become a popular perspective in analyses of the EU (see Hix and Hoyland 2011). For the international regime perspective, see Koremenos et al., (2001), Keohane (1984) and Krasner (1982).

3. The principal-agent approach is based on the assumption that in a world of rational actors, a principal delegating a task to an agent will find it difficult to know if the agent behaves in the interest of the principal. To overcome this problem of information asymmetry, the principal needs to create incentives and monitor the behavior of the agent. If these agency costs exceed the principal’s benefits, the principal will not delegate. This approach has been widely applied to the study of IGOs. In addition to approaches developed for IGOs in general (see Abbott and Snidal 1998; Hawkins et al., 2006; Vaubel 2006), we find applications in the literatures on individual organizations. For applications to the EU, see Pollack (1997), for an example of World Bank reforms, see Nielson and Tierney (2003).

4. For BOT, see Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 2004). For studies of IGOs inspired by this approach, see Barnett (2003); Weaver (2008); Chwieroth (2010). Another relevant literature is on the role of secretariats (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009; Trondal et al., 2010; Egeberg 2012). Resorting to other sociological theories of organizations also implies the conceptualization of IGOs as autonomous systems (Gehring 2009; Koch 2009).

suggests that IGOs are similar to public bureaucracies, which elected politicians find difficult to control. In accordance with traditional organization theory, both theories are based on the assumption that members of the IGO are individuals, typically employees of the secretariats. The organizations are understood as consisting of their secretariats while the member states loom in the environment. Although the control and actions of secretariats are highly relevant issues in the relatively few IGOs that have large secretariats, studies of secretariats provide only partial answers to the broader issue to be discussed in this paper: the relevance and power of IGOs in general, both those with and without secretariats.

In order to understand that issue, we need to go beyond the standard assumption in organization theory that the members of organizations are individuals and acknowledge that IGOs are not organizations with individual membership but associations of states, which are in themselves organized actors. As such, IGOs are organizations of organizations or “meta-organizations.”

At the core of meta-organizations we find a real paradox: Meta-organizations are autonomous actors having autonomous actors as their members. This paradox has numerous ramifications for the way IGOs are established, how they make decisions, and how they can influence their members and the wider environment. Overall, *Meta-Organization Theory* (MOT) explains why IGOs are weaker actors than standard organization theories would suggest, and they gain their influence in a different way.

In the following, we list a number of ways in which IGOs as meta-organizations can be expected to be weak actors and elaborate how MOT explains such weaknesses. The aim of this article is not to present a list of typical IGO afflictions, many of which have been frequently observed in the scholarly literature and beyond. Instead, we want to offer a new explanation for them. By doing so, we want to show that a number of weaknesses of IGOs often are not due to specific design flaws but instead are inherent in their construction as meta-organizations. Of course, we do not deny that IGOs occasionally may have aspects of stronger actorhood. In such instances, MOT can be used as a point of departure to identify and explain such IGOs as deviant cases.

We begin by showing that meta-organizations constitute a special type of organization and that IGOs share some fundamental characteristics with all meta-organizations (Section 2). In subsequent sections, we point to some peculiarities of IGOs and demonstrate how these can be explained by meta-organization theory. We first discuss the ways in which IGOs are weak actors. Due to their internal tensions and decision-making problems, they have difficulty being strong actors controlling their environment (Section 3). They also have problems reforming themselves in order to become stronger. At the same time, IGOs have strengths that are seldom acknowledged by the other approaches in which IGOs are viewed as organizations: They are easily established and have an expansive dynamic that allows them to compensate for some of their weaknesses over time (Section 4). In conclusion, we highlight how our approach sheds new light on IGOs and their paradox.

The Challenge of Organizing States

In the world of international politics, understanding IGOs as associations of states is a matter of common sense. Even casual observations confirm that international organizations are being constructed as organizations with states as their members. The founding constitutions of IGOs refer to states as members with specific duties, obligations, and privileges. Decisions about which states should be allowed to join are debated at length and sometimes never resolved. Recruiting new members can be perceived as challenges to an IGO’s identity. How would the EU change, for instance, if Turkey were to join? Failing to recruit key states can also be problematic. The League of Nations, predecessor to the UN, was weakened by the fact that the U.S. never became a member. Thus, if we take the social construction of international organizations seriously, we can identify at least one way in which IGOs differ from such organizations as

firms or bureaucracies. Their members are not individuals, but the special form of organized actors that we are used to calling “states.”

The view that IGOs organize states rather than individuals may seem to be a truism to academic observers. Nevertheless, it remains unclear why understanding IGOs as organizations should be useful to theorize about IGOs as associations of states. On the one hand, early organization theory has offered a promising way: It did identify the membership of any organization as a crucial element (Ahrne 1994; Luhmann 1964; March and Simon 1958/1993). Formal organizations were seen to coordinate action through decision makers who make decisions about and on behalf of all organization members. Thus, according to this theory, coordination works only when the members are clearly defined for which the decisions apply.

On the other hand, organization theory presents an obstacle for understanding IGOs as associations of states. Most organization theories build on the assumption that the members of organizations are individuals, for example, individual employees. This assumption was explicit in early organization theory (March and Simon 1958/1993) and has become implicit and almost taken for granted in later theorizing. When IR scholars understand IGOs as their employees, they adopt the same assumption. For this reason, if we want to conceive of IGOs as associations of states, we need a theory built on the idea that not only individuals but also organizations can be members of organizations.

Organizations with other organizations rather than individuals as their members can be called “meta-organizations.” A large variety of organizations belong to this type. Whereas meta-organizations are associations, their members may be other types of organizations such as firms, states, or associations. National associations of firms, unions, or sport clubs provide examples of meta-organizations. Many national meta-organizations are, in turn, members of international meta-organizations: international sports associations, such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), international business associations, such as Association des Constructeurs Européens d’Automobiles (ACEA), or the International Egg Commission (IEC). Meta-organization theory points to several crucial differences between organizations with individuals as their members and organizations with other organizations as their members.⁵

In contemporary Western societies, organizations, including states, typically pose as social “actors,” i.e., as entities which are independent and sovereign, with self-interested goals, commanding independent resources, and having clear boundaries.⁶ Any deviation from this image can be interpreted as an anomaly or at least a weakness of a given organization. Most organizations produce their own goals and demonstrate rationality. It is more difficult to make it probable that an organization has “independence and sovereignty” to show that it has a capacity to make decisions on its own, that it is at least partly autonomous from other actors.

In meta-organizations actorhood becomes a challenge. If organizations have to pose as autonomous actors how can organizations that are members of another organization and this organization itself both be autonomous actors? Those who are perceived as members of an organization must regularly relinquish some of their autonomy to the organization, allowing the organization to make decisions affecting what the members can and should do.

There is considerable difference between individuals as members and organizations as members. The lack of autonomy that an individual experiences in organizations is problematic, particularly for people with organizational positions that provide almost no freedom to make their own decisions (as in some manufacturing) or in cultures in which people are expected to demonstrate a high degree of actorhood (as in many contemporary Western societies) (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). For an organization lacking autonomy, however, the situation is more serious—even a mortal threat. Organizations are precarious social constructions

5. For standard organization theory, see Scott and Davies (2007) and Hatch (2011); for meta-organization theory, see Ahrne and Brunsson (2005); Ahrne and Brunsson (2008).

6. For organizations, see Drori et al., (2006); for states, see Meyer et al., (1997).

in which some degree of autonomy is a constitutive aspect. It is difficult to convince people that something is an organization if it cannot make some decisions of its own; rather it would, at best, be considered a department of another organization (see Drori et al., 2006: 14–7).

If a member organization has no autonomy vis-à-vis a meta-organization, it becomes irrelevant for its own members. A meta-organization is also expected to have autonomous decision-making power, however, and becomes irrelevant without a minimal degree of autonomy. Thus, the members and the meta-organization are victims of a paradox. The members must be autonomous actors, although belonging to an autonomous organization; and the meta-organization must be an autonomous actor, even though its members are autonomous. In practice, this paradox makes the meta-organization and its members compete for autonomy, leading to severe and intricate problems of actorhood.

IR scholarship suggests that crucial assumptions of MOT regarding the members also apply to the members of IGOs, i.e., states. Modern states are readily identified as actors that are organized.⁷ Furthermore, states are considered to be actors that are autonomous. They are “sovereign” also in the sense that they have the capacity of deciding about internal affairs and acting on the international stage (Krasner 1999; Biersteker and Weber 1996). Finally, IR scholars increasingly accept that this state autonomy has been frequently and significantly restricted from the outside, be it by other states or international organizations (Krasner 1999; Lake 2003, 2009; Wendt and Friedheim 1995). More recent IR scholarship suggests that the fundamental assumptions about meta-organizations apply to IGOs as well. Exploring their implications, therefore, seems promising.

The Challenge of Actorhood: Weaknesses of IGOs

Seeing IGOs as organizations suggests that IGOs are in fact powerful actors. Yet, most IGOs have a problem of living up to the image of a strong actor: they are not autonomous enough, they have problems of organizing collective action, and they do not control resources enough. The weaknesses can be explained by their character as meta-organizations. The actorhood of the meta-organization is constantly challenged, because their members are organized actors. MOT can explain in more detail problems of decision making, of deploying organizational elements, and of organizational reform.

Problems of Decision Making

Organizations are social systems constructed and run by decision making (March and Simon 1958/1993; Luhmann 2000). One crucial way in which organizations allow for collective decisions to be taken is through *delegation*. In organizations, members, owners, or other principals often delegate decision-making competencies to a professional management. By doing so, they greatly enhance the decision-making capacity of organizations.

IR scholars seeing IGOs as organizations have assumed that delegation of decision making is a routine feature of IOs as well. In fact, BOT assumes that at least part of the bureaucratic authority of IOs is delegated decision-making authority of the states (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). Similarly, PAT assumes that delegation of decision-making authority is constitutive of IGOs—no agency without prior delegation (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2006). While readily acknowledging that decision making is a variable, both approaches assume that delegation is an important prerequisite for an IGO to become consequential.

MOT, by contrast, suggests that extensive delegation of significant decisions is only a standard feature of individual-based organizations and that in meta-organizations it is more likely to be tightly circumscribed. In meta-organizations, delegating key decisions to a top management with a great deal of leeway is difficult and, therefore, uncommon, because it would imply a threat against the autonomy of the meta-organization’s members and their lead-

7. For comparative politics, see e.g., Skocpol (1985); for IR, see e.g., Waltz (1979, Chapter 5).

ers. Thus, the authority of the meta-organization's managers is limited, and they rarely have any far-reaching decision-making power (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008: 114–6). For meta-organizations, visible management is a problem, as it enhances the visibility of the members' loss of autonomy and provides a focal point for resistance.

MOT thus suggests that powerful secretariats in IGOs are the exception rather than the rule. And indeed, employees and their offices are called “secretaries” and “secretariats” rather than “executives” and “headquarters.” Leaders of international organizations are typically less known and have less status and power than presidents or prime-ministers of their members, and they have difficulty exaggerating their importance in the way that is typical for leaders of firms and states.

The difficulties in delegation lead to peculiar decision-making problems in meta-organizations. Because there is little delegation to a top management, crucial decisions are made by members via negotiations and voting, but using the majority principle in voting is difficult, because the minority must relinquish much of its autonomy.⁸ Furthermore, it is not obvious what constitutes a majority among organizations. A simple majority rule with one vote per member, which is an institutionalized principle in individual-based associations (Warren 2001), does not have the same legitimacy in a meta-organization. The possible variety among members is greater. For instance, in IGOs one can ask whether states with more members of their own or states that contribute more resources should have more votes. Any principle for defining a majority can be questioned, a fact that undermines the authority of majority decisions.

As in other meta-organizations it is common among international organizations that decisions can be made only by consensus, giving each member the right to veto each decision. This principle is also problematic: It guarantees autonomy for the members but virtually no autonomy for the meta-organization.

Decision-making problems can be avoided, of course, by avoiding decisions. The zone in which decisions are made by the meta-organization can be reduced in order to minimize the damaging effect on member autonomy, but the price exacted is the relevance of the meta-organization.

Finding a balance in meta-organizations between member autonomy and organization autonomy is a challenging task, accomplished by carefully choosing the more exact content of decisions. Decisions vary as to their effect on member autonomy. Decisions concerning tasks of the meta-organization's employees are the least threatening decisions. What the employees do is somewhat distant from the members; the members have less responsibility for employee actions than they do for their own. With the help of PAT and in other ways, they can blame the employees and their lack of control over them. So, paradoxically, adding a large secretariat to an IGO may be a way of rescuing both member and IGO autonomy. This could explain why member states have continually blamed the European Commission or the IMF for certain activities and yet have failed to undertake any serious effort to reform them.

Decisions need not concern actions. They may concern talk: what the meta-organization shall say or what each member shall say. Decisions about talk can usually be expected to be easier to make than decisions about actions, because they do not require resources or actions from the members—only statements. A situation in which it is easier to make decisions about what to say than what to do tends to produce more talk than action. Meta-organizations may become highly competent in deciding on resolutions that look good but imply little action. Hypocrisy becomes a tempting option when the organization encounters conflicting demands: Compensating for the lack of action in line with a certain interest by producing talk and decisions that support that interest. Or hypocrisy becomes the result of internal conflict: The organization satisfies members with diverging interests by acting in accordance with the interest

8. This is true even for an advanced IGO such as the EU (see Finke et al., 2012).

of some members and making statements in accordance with the interest of others (Brunsson 2007). Hypocrisy is a widespread phenomenon in several international meta-organizations, such as the World Bank and the WTO (Lipson 2007; Weaver 2008).

Difficulties of Action

The decisions of IGOs are primarily addressed to their members. IGOs manage to coordinate action to the extent that members comply with and implement the decisions taken on behalf of all the members. Drawing on standard organization theories for understanding IGOs, IR scholars are likely to overestimate the action capacity of IGOs.

Once more, MOT suggests that being an actor is easier for individual-based organizations than for meta-organizations. Organizations can resort to organizational elements that increase the likelihood of decision making being consequential. All formal organizations have access to five basic elements that allow them to produce coordinated action: membership, rules, monitoring, sanctions, and hierarchy (Ahrne and Brunsson 2011). Although meta-organizations are constructed in the same way as other organizations, in practice they often encounter difficulties in deploying these elements. It is their meta-organization characteristics that create the same difficulties in IGOs.

The meta-organization's setting of rules for what members will do creates a challenge to member autonomy, but the challenge can be reduced by avoiding the combining of rules and hierarchy. It is common for meta-organizations to formulate standards—nonbinding rules. Standards are less threatening than binding rules, because the decision is split into two components: The standard set by the organization, and the member's decision to comply (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000). Standards are common in IGOs where they are often called "recommendations," "best practices," "guidelines," or benchmarks"; in IR research they are often called "soft law" (Mörth 2004). Standards are often the only way of reaching decisions about rules. In the domains in which the EU does not have any formal competencies—labor market policy, for example—the EU does not refrain from decision making, but adopts voluntary best-practice standards instead (see Heidenreich and Zeitlin 2010; Borrás and Jacobsson 2004). Similar techniques have been employed in other IGOs (Schäfer 2006).

Decisions about effective monitoring of members are also difficult to make and enforce in meta-organizations, because members do not want to demonstrate that the meta-organization or its members are not fully complying with various rules. Furthermore, monitoring needs attractive labels or arguments, such as "peer reviews" and the search for best practice—concepts often used in the EU in relation to monitoring.

A meta-organization's ability to sanction members effectively is severely curtailed. The fact that both a meta-organization and its members are organizations affects the balance of resources between them. Because most of the members have existed as organizations long before the meta-organization was established, they generally have more resources at their disposal than the meta-organization has (although there may be wide differences in available resources among members). As a result, the typical meta-organization is relatively poor, controlling fewer resources than most of its members. Because states command most of the resources, and large states are extremely resourceful organizations, it must be expected that an IGO cannot command the resources necessary for a positive and forceful incentive, the opposite being an exception.

Meta-organizations face similar difficulties using negative sanctions, because few members would accept them. A recent illustration for the reluctance of states to accept negative sanctions has been provided by the Kyoto protocol. Its binding emission targets call for hefty fines to member states that failed to meet them. Yet, when Canada faced the prospects of paying a large fine, it simply reneged on its obligations by exiting from the Kyoto protocol.⁹

9. Curry, Bill; McCarthy, Shawn (2011): Canada formally abandons Kyoto Protocol on climate change. *The Globe and Mail*. Available online at www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-formally-abandons-kyoto-protocol-on-climate-change/article4180809/, updated on Monday, 12 December 2011, checked on 30 July 2012.

More importantly, the ultimate negative sanction, the IGO excluding a recalcitrant member, is seldom a realistic option. Meta-organizations depend on their members to a larger extent than individual-based organizations do, because the members are not as exchangeable as most of them are in individual-based organizations. IGOs face the same challenges. Expelling members is likely to have negative repercussions for the IGO itself. What would have happened to the European Monetary Union if Germany or France had been expelled for having violated the Maastricht criteria for several consecutive years? How would the character of the UN change if it were to expel states with a serious record of human rights violations?

Organizational elements cannot be considered in isolation in meta-organizations—their combination and their combination with decision-making procedures are key. Using one element may require the avoidance of other elements or certain forms of decision making. IGOs can seldom make majority decisions on binding rules, for example, the compliance of which is monitored and sanctioned. It is easier to make decisions about binding rules that are not monitored or sanctioned, especially if those decisions can be made by consensus. As a member of the International Whaling Commission, Japan is obliged to abandon the hunting of whales. Nevertheless, Japan continues to hunt whales for “scientific purposes,” and although international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) have continuously questioned these practices, the International Whaling Commission has turned a blind eye.

In sum, difficulties of using organizational elements in meta-organizations help explain why IGOs have problems influencing and coordinating their members and, therefore, have problems of achieving coordinated organizational action. Furthermore, when extensive resources are needed for action, meta-organizations are at a disadvantage, because most of the resources required belong to their members and may be difficult or time-consuming to mobilize. Members may exploit their organization’s dependence on their resources to influence meta-organization decisions. The UN Security Council is a well-known example of an organization that is highly dependent on the resources of member states. Although it can authorize measures to preserve or restore peace, it cannot implement them. Rather, the Security Council must rely upon the willingness of its members to commit troops. After Iraq attacked Kuwait in 1990, for example, the council adopted several resolutions condemning the aggression and authorizing countermeasures, but it took a coalition of states to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait.

Members of meta-organizations often have better chances of providing strong actorhood. That is true for IGOs where members are powerful states. There is often a risk that one or a few member states will act on their own rather than contributing to IGO actions. A good example is the EU’s difficulty in developing a common foreign policy in order to have a more marked influence on world politics and to defend Europe’s interests vis-à-vis powerful states.

The actorhood problem is particularly obvious in handling situations of crisis or conflicts in which quick decisions are required. Opportunities to make decisions are limited, as it may be difficult to arrange meetings for member representatives on short notice. And making decisions is a protracted and often a tedious procedure (Coddling and Rutkowski 1982), with complicated negotiations among representatives, some of which may also act as “veto players,” waiting until the last minute to declare their final position (Tsebelis 2002). This weakness may be observed in many IGOs. The resolution of the European debt crisis is a good example of the difficulty IGOs face in responding to a crisis. Crisis resolution required many meetings over several years and yet yielded extremely slow progress, even though there was constant pressure from financial markets to act swiftly.

Problems of Reform

In recent years, many IGOs have been subject to reforms. Well-known examples are the UN Security Council, NATO, the WTO, the IMF, the EU, and the World Bank.¹⁰ The overwhelm-

10. For the UNSC reform see e.g., Hurd (2008); on NATO reform see Lindley-French (2007); on the World Bank see e.g., Weaver (2008); on the IMF see Woods (2006), on the EU see Moravcsik (1998).

ing impression is that these reforms have been partial successes at best. Unsuccessful reforms have often given rise to yet other attempts. IGOs appear to be highly resistant to planned change. They may undergo a great deal of change, yet not be easily changeable.

Organizational reforms are common phenomena in most large organizations, and their implementation is often problematic. In the case of IOs, meta-organization theory can add to the standard explanations of these observations. In comparison with individual-based organizations, meta-organizations appear to be peculiar organizations, ineffective and even flawed, and in need of reforms. Because of the weaknesses described here, they have great difficulty deciding upon and implementing radical planned changes, including changes aimed at reducing the weaknesses.

Because of its paradoxical nature, actorhood problems cannot be resolved once and for all. MOT suggests that meta-organizations will be continually confronted with demands for reforms. And should reforms succeed in redressing the actorhood of the meta-organization or reducing it, the new situation is likely to be criticized as well and serve as an incentive for further reform initiatives.

Some demands for reform originate in the meta-organization's position in its environment. In order to interact forcefully with other organizations, not the least those with individual membership, a strong actorhood of the meta-organization is often required and is sometimes expected by external parties, and, therefore, ground for claims for reform. For IGOs, a case in point is the EU.¹¹ One key catalyst of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy has been demands by the U.S. and others for the EU to strengthen its capacity to contribute to peacekeeping. On other occasions, forceful actions from IGOs are not appreciated by external parties, and they may try to stir up reforms intended to increase the autonomy of members. Although some EU members, such as France and Germany, opposed the war against Iraq, the U.S. sought to weaken the EU by specifically appealing to the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Poland, to join the war effort in exchange for military cooperation. By doing so, the U.S. could also hope to make future attempts of the EU foreign policy framework more difficult.¹²

The meta-organization character of IGOs not only produces demands for these types of reform but also makes them difficult to satisfy. IGOs have problems deciding on a specific content of reform, because they do not agree on the direction that the organization should take—toward more or less actorhood. And weak actorhood is a difficulty when it comes to implementing reforms. With problems in decision making, a weak leadership, and lack of sanctions at their disposal, IGOs can be expected to have difficulties in accomplishing reform. A striking feature of reforming IGOs is the difficulty of implementation and the number of times they have failed, as clearly demonstrated in the case of the World Bank (Weaver 2008).

In recent years, IGOs have also been confronted with demands for reforms for more democracy. Here the situation is even worse: There seems to be a general lack of solutions. The constitution as a compound of two types of autonomous actors, suggests that IGOs, by definition, reduce the autonomy of member states, and that demands for democratizing IOs, therefore, are legitimate. Restrictions of national autonomy by the IGO easily appear to be in conflict with the fundamental norm of democratic self-determination. For example, when the WTO denounced its members' social and environmental regulation as mere informal barriers to trade. Calls for democracy can arise among member states but also among *members* of member states. Citizens of democratic states fear that their citizenship is jeopardized by IGOs (Usherwood and Nick 2013).

The meta-organization perspective suggests why demands for democratizing IGOs are so difficult to satisfy. The crucial defining element of democracy is the representatives' account-

11. For a Meta-Organization perspective on the EU, see Kerwer (2013).

12. On foreign policy of the EU, see Hill and Smith (2011).

ability to their constituencies (Keohane et al., 2009). Increasing the democratic legitimacy of IGOs through representation, however, places the IGO in a dilemma, because, as previously discussed, there are no satisfactory voting rules. Using the principle of one vote per member makes the influence of citizens in small states disproportionately large. Conversely, if voting rules aim at a more faithful representation of the population of its member states, they are likely to undermine democracy within their smaller member states, as they risk being outvoted by larger states.

The alternative strategy of strengthening democracy in IGOs through horizontal control (see Dryzek, 2006; Steffek 2010) is also problematic. Demands for increasing horizontal control have triggered a wide-ranging discussion on how IGOs could become more transparent and accountable to INGOs and a wider global public sphere. IGOs that need to be responsive to demands of the INGOs in their environment, however, will find it more difficult to respond to demands from their members, whenever these demands differ. Thus, increasing horizontal democratic accountability is likely to undermine vertical accountability to its members.

Overall, there are no clear-cut solutions for increasing democracy in IGOs or other meta-organizations. Democratic ideas that have been conceived with reference to individual-based organizations do not seem to constitute stable forms of *meta-democracy*.

Beyond Actorhood: The Strengths of International Governmental Organizations

So far we have used meta-organization theory to explain why most IGOs are weak actors most of the time. However, if efficient actorhood was the only way for IGOs to exert influence, it would be impossible to explain their salience. According to the theory of meta-organizations, we have to look for something other than actorhood in order to explain the strengths of IGOs. The fact that meta-organizations tend to be weak actors with difficulty acting on their environment in a strong and coherent way does not necessarily mean they have little influence on their environment. BOT points to more subtle mechanisms that have been exploited by a few large IGO secretariats, for example, influence through their specialist expertise. MOT, by contrast, suggests other sources of influence; sources that are available to meta-organizations whether they have built large secretariats of experts or not. The very characteristics of meta-organizations that make them weak actors constitute one of the reasons for their hidden strengths. Although meta-organizations have problems in using many of the organizational elements of hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions, they are less challenged when making use of the element of membership. Much of the strength of a meta-organization comes from its ability to decide who can become a member, which is a major instrument for influencing its environment. The strengths of IGOs can be understood in relation to their creation, their expansion, and their long-term influence on their members.

Establishing International Organizations

In the field of IR, the establishment of IGOs has been seen as a task requiring a substantial effort. According to PAT, states create international organizations only under specific circumstances (Abbott and Snidal 1998). States will delegate tasks to a new international organization, only if its benefits outweigh the costs of creating it. The costs are not only the resources required for establishing a secretariat but also the political cost of a reduced sovereignty. Furthermore, states must overcome the problems of monitoring secretariats, which are likely to behave as self-interested agents (Hawkins et al., 2006). The major hypothesis resulting from this perspective is that creating an international organization is a tedious process that is likely to remain a rare event. Creating the relatively large number of international organizations of the UN system after World War II appears to have been a heroic effort, mostly on the part of the U.S., and it is unlikely to be repeated.

Given this perspective, it is difficult to explain the rapid expansion of international organizations over the past fifty years. Between 1981 and 1992 alone, the Union of International

Associations reported a dramatic increase in the number of IGOs, from 1,039 to 1,690 (Shanks et al., 1996: 596). There are several recent examples of quick organizing as an effect of the last financial crisis: The creation of the new G20, the upgrading of the Financial Stability Forum to the Financial Stability Board, and the creation of the European Banking Authority. BRICS, the group of “emerging economies” comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, is about to turn their regular annual meetings into a formal international organization. A little-noted example of a regional IGO is the Arctic Council, founded in 1996, an organization in which member states bordering on the Arctic commit themselves to sustainable development. The expansion of INGOs has been even more impressive, expanding from approximately 200 in 1900 to approximately 4,000 in 1980 and reaching 7,600 by 2010 (Boli and Thomas 1999: 13). Roughly 90 percent of these INGOs are meta-organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008: 21). The rapid expansion of both IGOs and INGOs is easier to understand using a meta-organization perspective.

MOT explains why it is relatively easy to create an organization with other organizations as its members. Establishing a meta-organization requires few resources compared to the resources controlled by the member organizations; the constituting members merely need to pool a tiny fraction of their resources. Initially, the members’ administrators often conduct the administration of the meta-organization. Many meta-organizations remain inexpensive compared to the resources of their members, even over time; they produce inexpensive decisions and talk rather than engaging in costly actions.

Organizations have little incentive to resist membership in a meta-organization once the creation of one has been suggested. The low cost is one factor for the ease with which organizations agree to membership. In addition, given the small number of members—five to ten members are enough to start a meta-organization—there are ample opportunities for the potential member to exert influence. Furthermore, meta-organizations seldom begin with a program that seems to be a severe threat to the autonomy of its members.

In IGOs, the fear of lost autonomy for member states is sometimes reduced by avoiding the use of the concept of organization. One creates alternative labels, such as “committees” (e.g., the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision), “public-private partnerships” (e.g., the Roll Back Malaria Partnership), “forums” (e.g., World Forum on Energy Regulation), “task forces” (e.g., the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering), or “initiatives” (e.g., the Global Methane Initiative). On closer scrutiny, however, such forms of cooperation often turn out to be meta-organizations or turn into meta-organizations over time.

States have a lot of incentive to join an IGO under creation. To remain outside would deny them the influence that membership provides. Even states that had been against the initiative to establish an IGO may choose to join in order to prevent the organization from making certain decisions or to obstruct its activities. An organization that can recruit both its supporters and its opponents as members is an easy organization to form.

Enlarging International Organizations

In recent years, IR scholars have developed a keen interest in enlargement. This is no surprise, given that after the end of the Cold War, Western IGOs, such as the EU or NATO, have decided to accept a number of formerly socialist states (e.g., Schimmelfennig, 2003). Yet, enlargement has mostly been analyzed as one among other challenges facing the organization.

Conventional organization theory suggests that recruiting new members is an important, although fairly routine, task for most organizations. MOT, by contrast, suggests that in meta-organizations, recruiting new members is not just a routine task to uphold the operational capabilities of an organization. Instead, it is one of the most important strategies for this type of organizations to exert any influence at all. Meta-organizations tend to have more influence on candidates than on members. The reason is that while they cannot easily sanction members (see above), they can have a strong influence on candidates by defining conditions of access. Therefore, a static approach to analyzing power and membership is misleading. The current

membership is the result of the past power of turning what was the environment of the meta-organization into organization, and existing power is the power to make that transformation happen now and in the future. Power is also related to the degree the organization makes its would-be members adapt to its demands. In this perspective, it becomes clear why the EU and NATO sought to gain control over Eastern Europe through enlargement.

The “gate-keeping” power is enhanced if the organization has a monopoly status. Monopoly status is more typical for meta-organizations than for most kinds of individual-based organizations—typically there is only one meta-organization within a certain sphere of activity. This characteristic of monopoly is inherent in their mission to be the representative for special issues or themes, whether specified as geographical regions or as certain tasks. Becoming a member of a meta-organization is attractive, because it can facilitate interaction with all the relevant organizations in that domain or provides an organization with the opportunity to gain an identity and status equal to that of the members. Thus, to start a new meta-organization in order to compete with another meta-organization would be of little value unless all its members switched to the new organization.

As proposed by MOT, almost all IGOs gravitate toward a monopoly position. Although some have started to compete with states or INGOs, we rarely see IGOs competing in the same functional and regional domain (see Alter and Meunier, 2009: 19). The organizations of the UN system are characterized by a clear division of labor. Functional overlap is the exception even among international environmental “regime complexes,” and it is usually not created deliberately by the member states (Gehring and Oberthür, 2011). Whenever IGOs do perform similar tasks, it is detrimental to their effectiveness. Thus, the IMF’s policies that were designed to promote long-term economic development have been seen as a problematic intrusion into the domain of the World Bank. After the foundation of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), two IGOs existed in the same geographic region of Western Europe with the identical purpose of promoting free trade, and yet competition between the trading blocs was limited. The founding states of EFTA saw their organization merely as an alternative for states that, for a variety of reasons, did not want to join the EEC. Over time, these trading blocs have cooperated so closely that, for practical purposes, they have become indistinguishable. In case a functional overlap persists among IGOs, it is likely to diminish their actorhood, as they lose influence over the member states (Drezner, 2009).

The establishment of an IGO changes the environment both for members and nonmembers. Even if it was in the interest of nonmembers to resist the establishment of the IGO, their environment has changed in a way that may make them interested in joining it. Furthermore, a monopoly puts the meta-organization into a powerful position toward prospective new members. Once an IGO has been established as the only one in a certain area, potential members have two options: become a member or not become a member. Not becoming a member implies abstaining from the chance to influence the organization’s future direction. A state that is interested in influence and what an IGO can offer is in a weak negotiating position and can often be persuaded to adapt to the special member requirements for that organization. It is exactly at the moment when a potential member applies for membership that the IGO is in its most powerful position.

IGOs have used this power position on occasions to a greater or lesser extent. One strategy—used by the UN—has been to recruit as many states as possible that are willing to become members, in order to eliminate a large part of the environment. Another strategy, applied by international organizations, such as the EU, OECD, and WTO, is the exercise of selectivity in accepting new members and the placing of strong demands on any new member regarding their constitutions, economic performance, and political systems. The first strategy, to include as many members as possible, encompasses a larger part of the environment, but at the cost of reducing the IGO’s power over the new members.

The second selective strategy tends to leave a greater part of the environment unorganized. On the other hand, the IGO can place stronger demands on new members. Sometimes a limited membership is granted as a first step, in order to make the fulfillment of the IGO demands seem less dramatic, and commitment to them is secured over time. Prospective members are first admitted as associate members (as in the EU or WTO) until they have fulfilled the required criteria for membership. The Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering has sought to increase its control over offshore financial centers by encouraging them to become members of so-called FATF-style regional bodies. Membership in these regional bodies does not include the right for these countries to participate in decision making (Hülse and Kerwer, 2007).

The most obvious power-increasing strategy of IGOs is creating incentives for states to become members. Once all states have become members, what is the next step in increasing power in the remaining environment? One possibility is for an IGO to extend the definition of its mission and goals, thereby increasing its scope of influence outside its original domain. Another possibility is to cooperate with other IGOs. It may, for instance, establish a new IGO with other IGOs as members, or an IGO may become a member of another IGO (EU's membership in the WTO, for instance). A third possibility would be for two IGOs to merge. Such mergers have not happened, although it is not an unusual strategy among other meta-organizations, and it is also a possible future scenario for IGOs, such as the IMF and the World Bank (Carreau, 1994).

Transforming Members

In organizations existing members are not only influenced by the direct use of organizational elements but also by indirect processes connected to their membership. Because of the difficulties using the organizational elements, meta-organizations have to rely a great deal on these indirect ways of influencing. In this context, MOT highlights the time dimension. MOT suggests that the strengths of meta-organizations vis-à-vis their existing members are revealed over longer periods only, and membership is likely to be a long-term affair. Like most other meta-organizations, IGOs often have considerable staying power, and the turnover of their members is extremely low. Belonging to an IGO may, in the long run, lead to processes in which the members have less control, and that reinforce the IGO at the expense of its members. Although IGOs appear to be resistant to planned change in the form of reform attempts, they are likely to change in other ways.

We identify two processes observable in IGOs and other meta-organizations. One is the successive adding and sedimentation of decisions. Even if decision making is tedious and slow, an IGO is likely to have accumulated over time a substantial number of valid decisions on organizational elements. The IGO has become more organized. After a decade or so, the members may find that they have agreed to rules, monitoring activities, and sanction systems, some of which may even be binding, and abolishing these elements requires new decisions that are difficult to make.

The second process is one of mutual adaptation, a fundamental ordering that is based on no organizational decision other than membership, but that is common in organizations, due to their role as an arena where members meet (Lindblom, 2001). When representatives of an IGO member state, whether politicians or administrators, work closely together with representatives from other states, they may be socialized into the ways of running the business of an international organization (Checkel, 2005; Schimmelfennig et al., 2006). There is a process of learning. Member states learn from other members how they can influence IGO decision making, and how they can best comply with the IGO's decisions (Jacobsson and Sundström, 2006: Chapter 4). As they do so, the awareness of member states about the common decision-making agenda will increase, which may lead to national policies becoming more compatible with that agenda.

In addition, the boundaries between a meta-organization and its members may become blurred because the organization and its members constitute the same type of social construction. This ontological affinity easily leads to unclear or permeable boundaries. As the members become involved in and adjust themselves to the decision-making procedures of the meta-organization, the boundaries can dissolve. For example, when the administration of the member organization is integrated into the administration of the meta-organization or the other way around. This is not an unusual process for members of such international organizations as the EU, OECD, and WTO. The administrative staff of the IGO delegates tasks directly to some or all of its members. Consequently, some administrative divisions of a member state can be regarded as “enclaves” of the IGO. In this sense, some member ministries and authorities can be considered enclaves of the EU (Vifell, 2006; Wessels, 2003; Trondal, 2010).

Common policies and operations, as well as a number of common rules and monitoring activities, facilitate cooperation and exchange among the members of IGOs. If there is an increase in interaction within trade, education, or research, for instance, the members will become more dependent on their membership. To achieve the same things outside the IGO requires strong mobilization. At the same time, the status and identity of members are likely to become associated more strongly with the IGO. Therefore, members prefer to stay and, over time, are likely to become more willing to adapt to the requirements of the IGO.

Altogether the sedimentation of decisions, the mutual adjustment among members, the blurring of boundaries, and the increased member dependence may, in the long run, undermine members’ actorhood and increase the actorhood of the meta-organization. If this development goes far, the members may become more like departments or divisions, and the meta-organization may become more like an organization with individual members. Finally, it may even be transformed into an individual-based organization. This development has been observed in other types of meta-organizations, but it may take place in IGOs as well. During the nineteenth century, for instance, the German Customs Union was transformed into a single German state. Similarly, European federalists expect the EU to be transformed into a single state, albeit without any wars of unification.

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that theorizing IGOs as meta-organizations offers a fruitful research perspective for understanding and analyzing their key characteristics. It is a useful addition to other organizational theories of IGOs, in particular the two major paradigms offered by BOT and PAT. According to MOT, IGOs face the paradox of trying to combine organized actors in another organized actor. This paradox imposes structural limitations on how IGOs can act. Decision making and the organizing of members is considerably more difficult in IGOs than it is in individual-based organizations. IGOs can be expected to exert an impact over time, however. As they are easily established and maintained, they stand a chance of slowly transforming old members and influencing potential new members. MOT also makes sense of the perpetual demand for reform with which IGOs are confronted. We have argued that these characteristics are not due to design faults but are inherent in the construction of IGOs.

Our contribution is limited in the sense that we have mainly developed the ideal-typical characteristics of IGOs. This begs the question of *variation*. Surely, IGOs show the characteristics typical of meta-organizations to a different degree. While exploring the range of variation and its causes requires systematic empirical research, MOT does offer some leads for such a research program on IGOs. The theory allows deriving hypotheses on variation across organizations and across time. It also helps identifying cases for comparison.

Meta-organization theory can help us better understand why some IGOs are more autonomous, powerful, or changeable than others at a certain point. Some IGOs may function as little more than arenas, in rough accordance with the way authors in the realist tradition have treated

them. Others have gained a certain degree of actorhood. As we have demonstrated, according to MOT, weak actorhood is what can be expected while any higher degree of actorhood requires further explanations. In line with the arguments presented in this article, MOT would predict that an IGO would become a stronger actor the more resources it controls, the more similar the members are, and the less need the members have to demonstrate their autonomy. In addition, an IGO's influence over its present and future members can be expected to be stronger the more of a monopoly status it has and the more selective in choosing members it can afford to be. Also, the older the organization, the more membership can be expected to have transformed the members, which in turn increases the chances for stronger actorhood. At the same time, there may be counteracting forces. For instance, a new IGO that mainly operates informally may gain a certain strength quickly while an established IGO with an ambitious management and an elaborate set of rules may at some point trigger strong member state resistance.

Similarly, the theory of meta-organizations is useful for understanding *variation over time*. We believe that taking into consideration the dynamics of IGOs is critical. Their present state is the result of an ongoing development, in which the role of the members varies over time. Due to their paradoxical construction, meta-organizations have built-in problems and tensions that tend to prevent equilibria and steady states. Observed stability in IGOs requires as much explanation as observed change. It is crucial to understand the processes that reinforce the IGO. For example, instead of just analyzing the activities and effects of large secretariats, one can ask what makes or hinders large bureaucracies' growth within IGOs in the first place. And what are the processes by which IGOs gain control over large resources? Individual-based organizations may be not only a beginning but also an end of an IGO. What processes would favor the dissolution of an IGO, a return to a set of non-organized, separate states, or its transformation into one individual-based organization.

Another advantage of MOT is that it opens up *comparisons with other similar organizations*. For understanding what *is* happening and what *may* happen in IGOs, we can learn from other meta-organizations, even national ones that have different purposes but are struggling with the same fundamental paradox and tensions typical of all meta-organizations. And by comparing IGOs to other meta-organizations, one can gain a better and more specific understanding of what makes them special as meta-organizations. If we compare them with individual-based organizations, the consequence could be unrealistic expectations regarding actorhood, as well as attempts at installing management methods and reform strategies that may be appropriate for individual-based organizations but not for meta-organizations. Comparison with other meta-organizations can also shed light on the variation issue, among which there is a considerable variation in actorhood and influence. Furthermore, IGOs share their meta-organization characteristics with a large majority of the approximately 7,600 INGOs, such as international business associations or international associations for national environmentalist organizations. These similarities between IGOs and INGOs are useful to consider when we try to understand the interaction among them.

Finally, we contend that MOT casts a new light on the perennial question of *how much IGOs can matter*. The two alternative theories discussed in the introduction—BOT and PAT—share the assumption that with the help of secretariats IGOs can become relatively powerful. MOT, by contrast, sees principle limitations to IGOs ever attaining great levels of power, as long as they remain meta-organizations and do not turn into individual based ones. Although MOT acknowledges sources of influence other than powerful actorhood, it comes somewhat closer to the realist position than does either of the other two approaches.

As mentioned in the introduction, realists are skeptics regarding IGOs, because they view the international system as an anarchical one, in which the survival of a state is constantly jeopardized. States investing too much trust in IGOs, the skeptics say, risk their security and ultimately their survival. The international system is often not a maligned Hobbesian world,

however, but can be a more benign Lockean world of cooperation or even a Kantian international society of norms (Wendt, 1999). Consequently, the realist skepticism may seem overblown. Yet, MOT suggests that this is not entirely the case. MOT can be seen as generalizing the realist skepticism to today's more benign worlds of international relations. From that perspective, relying on IGOs also entails a risk for a state's autonomy. But in contrast to realism, this risk is not one of being conquered by another state; rather it is the risk of losing autonomy to the IGO. For this reason, there will be limits to the amount that member states will be prepared to delegate to IGOs, even when they do not need to operate in a Hobbesian international environment. If this reasoning is correct, any deficits in the power of IGOs are a matter not merely of design but of principle. We need to adjust our expectations for the possible role of IGOs in contemporary global governance accordingly.

IGOs are lacking in actorhood, and yet they lead to some taming of member-state actorhood. They obstruct or retard the decision making of members, but the loss of some actorhood among member states does not mean IGOs become strong actors as states can be. The decrease of members' actorhood is not fully compensated for by the increase of the IGO's actorhood. The result may well be a general reduction of actorhood. But in a world that has already witnessed too much actorhood by nation states and empires, a reduced actorhood is perhaps more of a solution than a problem.

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