

Institutions for global environmental change

Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) help to create and bind international regimes. Without them, there would be little in the way of monitoring performance, devising regulations, considering sanctions and arranging follow-up meetings. Yet they are all too often relatively shadowy bodies with little accountability or even institutional identity. The illuminating article by Biermann and Bauer that follows, suggests some novel ways in which to evaluate their performance and effectiveness in international environmental regimes. The trick is to guess what would have occurred without their existence. They do mobilise agendas, establish rules, generate responsiveness, possibly change national reporting styles, and activate stakeholders. But they are also creatures of international diplomatic politics. They therefore fall prey to the personalities and the prejudices of the diplomats, advisors, lobbyists, and various hangers-on. Such personalities and advocacy politics

are usually very difficult to fathom, unless the analyst works from the inside. Here is an opportunity for the scientist-cum-journalist-cum-intelligence gatherer. Such people are becoming part of the academic scene. But deeper still are the national politics that lurk behind the intergovernmental diplomats. They lie in the realms of more established politics and political analysis. Combine the two perspectives and the IGOs may get a fair and reasonable assessment.

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Assessing the effectiveness of intergovernmental organisations in international environmental politics

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1. Introduction

In analysing international environmental co-operation, most studies have focused on states as actors of

international relations (IR) and on international institutions as constraints that place limits on state action. Scholars have also reached beyond the traditional focus of interstate relations and have examined the role of non-state actors and of public-private partnerships. Intergovernmental organisations, however, have largely stayed outside the mainstream debate in IR discourse. Apart from a small literature of descriptive and

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taxonomic studies that are informed by international law, diplomatic history and the accounts of practitioners, few scholars have yet attempted to systematically examine the effectiveness of international organisations as actors in their own right.

This gap in the literature is problematic for several reasons. First, the limited understanding of the effectiveness of international organisations is likely to mislead conclusions about the state of global environmental governance, resulting in an overemphasis on state power and on a perception of international institutions as mere structures devised by states with no role of other actors such as intergovernmental organisations. Improved scholarly understanding of the effectiveness of international organisations will also help to resolve ongoing policy debates about the reform of the United Nations system. In the field of international environmental governance, the “effectiveness” of the UN and its specialised agencies has been subject of intense public debate, with little academic response from the community of IR scholars. One example is the recent debate on the creation of a world environment organisation,¹ which could profit from a more solid academic grounding in IR research. As politicians and practitioners debate organisational reform, academics remain unable to specify how international organisations effect the outcomes and impacts of global environmental governance. Subsequently, reliable answers on how their effectiveness may be increased, derived from a substantial and systematic research effort, are not available.

In the following, we criticise the current global governance discourse based on its lack of attention for intergovernmental organisations, and sketch a research strategy for assessing the effectiveness of intergovernmental organisations in the field of international environmental politics.²

2. International organisations in IR theory

We define international environmental organisations as agencies that have been set-up by national governments with some degree of permanence, that are beyond the formal control of national governments but are controlled by multilateral mechanisms through the collective of governments, and that serve environmental

protection as a specific policy purpose. Thus, we distinguish international environmental organisations from ad hoc agencies, such as temporary conference secretariats, as well as from purely national agencies, from transnational non-state actors, and from profit-oriented corporations. We also distinguish the term “international organisation”—a hierarchically organised group of international civil servants with a given mandate and resources within the context of a given policy area—from both international institutions and international regimes in political science, as well as from the term international organisation as it is used in international law, which allows us to analyse and compare essentially similar entities that differ in their legal status. Our definition thus covers the United Nations Organisation and its specialised agencies, but also some of its semi-autonomous sub-bodies, such as treaty secretariats.

With few exceptions,³ the study of international environmental organisations has remained outside the focus of the current debate. Political realism and neo-realism remain distinctly state-centric in their theoretical premises and view intergovernmental organisations, at best, as structures constraining state behaviour. Institutional approaches are more perceptive to the possibilities of intergovernmental environmental co-operation and to a possible role that international organisations might play. Yet in its quest to explain when and how institutions matter, neoinstitutionalists have remained preoccupied with international environmental regimes or, more recently, non-state actors and private-public policy networks. Even though neoinstitutionalist research has significantly advanced the understanding of international environmental co-operation and broadened empirical knowledge through numerous case studies, these studies did little to further understanding of the role that international organisations play in international environmental governance.

International organisations have been addressed in some detail only in a recent strand of IR research, sociological institutionalism, which has emerged—largely drawing on the ‘old’ institutionalism of sociology and by the constructivist critique of mainstream IR theories—as a distinct neoinstitutionalist approach. Barnett Michael, and Martha Finnemore, (1999), for example, propose a substantive reconceptualisation of the role of international organisations. Drawing on Weberian analysis of organisation and his concept of rational-legal authority, they identify the ‘politics, power and pathologies’ of international organisations. Despite these studies, however, little is yet known about the effectiveness of international environmental organisations and about how this effectiveness may be

¹See for example the contributions in Biermann and Bauer (forthcoming).

²The paper presents parts of the research methodology of the research group MANUS—“Managers of Global Change: Effectiveness and Learning of International Organisations”, a new research effort within the Global Governance Project of the Free University of Berlin, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, and Oldenburg University (glogov.org). See Biermann and Bauer (2003) for details. Generous funding for the MANUS group through the Volkswagen Foundation is appreciated.

³Jönsson, (1986), Ness and Brechin, (1988), Haas, (1990), Haas and Haas, (1995) and Malik, (1995).

increased. While regime analysts have come a long way in assessing the effectiveness of international environmental regimes (e.g., Mitchell, 2002; Young, 2001), their conceptual models are of limited value concerning the effectiveness of international environmental organisations and cannot simply be adopted to examine bureaucratic actors that transcend the institutionalist notion to ‘matter’ merely as structures of the international system.

The same is true for the contributions of other disciplines. International lawyers have offered extensive surveys and analyses of the set-up, mandate and diplomatic history and various functions of most major international organisations, yet without offering convincing comparative assessments of the effects these organisations have in real life. Management studies have brought forth a vast literature on the institutional dynamics and learning processes and indeed the effectiveness of private businesses as well as non-profit organisations. However, insights generated from this research have rarely been applied to public administration and hardly ever to international environmental organisations. Likewise, recent findings from the analysis of environmental policy diffusion (Tews and Busch, 2002), identifying international environmental organisations as key agents in the transnational transfer of technologies and policies, have yet to be taken into account by IR scholars. In sum, there is a considerable gap in understanding regarding the role of international organisations in international relations, and in international environmental governance in particular.

In the following, we will thus first sketch possible methods to assess the effectiveness of individual international organisations in environmental politics. In Section 4, we will then outline some hypotheses that might be suitable to explain variation in the effectiveness of international organisations operating in the field.

3. Approaching the effectiveness of international organisations

The effectiveness of international environmental organisations can be assessed along three dimensions; the *output*, that is the actual activity of an organisation; the *outcome*, that is the change in the behaviour of societal actors (such as governments, nongovernmental lobbyist groups, scientists, the mass media, or individual actors); and the *impact*, that is changes in regard of policy targets, such as quantifiable improvements in the natural environment. Data for output indicators is comparatively easy to generate, yet their empirical significance remains limited. Impact indicators, on the other hand, are highly difficult to pin down, particularly in the environmental field. Linking observable environmental improvements to the specific influence of an

international regime in a meaningful way is virtually impossible regarding the complexity of ecological processes.

Hence, it seems preferable to focus on the level of outcomes of organisational activity to assess the effectiveness of intergovernmental organisations, that is, behavioural change. Policy outcomes can be both intended or unintended, that is, they can also alter the behaviour of actors who were not addressed by the specific policy enacted by an organisation.

A main problem with the assessment of policy outcomes is the need to separate the influence of specific policies of the specific international environmental organisation in question from the background noise of general political developments, ranging from the activities of other actors to more generic factors that influence behavioural changes, such as economic changes, elections, or some form of crisis. This particular problem can be addressed, to some extent, by the method of counterfactual analysis: how would the behaviour of an actor have evolved if the international organisation in question would not have enacted the specific policy the outcome of which is studied. While this method is problematic in itself, it nonetheless seems to be the best tool available to assess the outcome of specific activities of international environmental organisations.

In most cases of international environmental politics, it is particularly challenging to separate the outcomes of activities of an international organisation from the outcomes of the regime (or the regimes) that may have an influence in the particular issue area. Would, for instance, the regime on substances that deplete the ozone layer still have been (as) effective without its secretariat? Which indicators could plausibly help to assess the distinct effect of the ozone secretariat in successfully implementing the policies of this particular regime? While superfluous at first sight—since what really matters is the change of behaviour of actors addressed by a specific policy—the analytical distinction between the outcomes of the overall regime and the policies enacted by the secretariat is necessary for the comparative analysis of different international environmental organisations in different settings.

4. Explaining variations in organisational effectiveness

If different organisations show in a comparative analysis some variation in their effectiveness, the question arises how to explain this variation.⁴ To date there is hardly any literature that offers convincing and tested hypotheses to explain variation in the effectiveness of international environmental organisations,

⁴See Biermann and Bauer, (2003) for details.

which ultimately might help to devise reform strategies to enable decision-makers to improve the effectiveness of a given organisation, for instance by altering certain features in its institutional design. Hence, we have developed a set of hypotheses that are based on first empirical data as well as different theoretical strands of research, including regime analysis, management studies and policy science. These hypotheses require further elaboration and testing through in-depth comparative case studies. Analytically, we distinguish between structural variables that are related to the organisational design of an organisation, and contextual variables that are related to the specifics of the case.

4.1. Structural variables

- (a) *Formal competencies*: The transfer in authority that states concede to an international organisation varies considerably and might help explain variation in the effectiveness of the agency. For instance, some organisations are formally entitled to actively monitor regime compliance in member states while others depend on national reports of limited significance and reliability or, worse, have no means of monitoring at all. Such formal competencies matter significantly, and our research seems to indicate that an organisation equipped with far-reaching formal competencies is likely to be more effective than an organisation with little or no formal competencies.
- (b) *Degree of regime embeddedness*: The question of the formal mandate given by governments to an organisation is related to the question of its embeddedness into the framework of an international regime. Many organisations operating in international environmental politics are in fact secretariats of multilateral treaties, with a certain degree of autonomy from the regime that differs significantly from case to case. As for larger international organisations, such as the specialised UN agencies, all of them are usually embedded in some form of normative framework that is governed by states, such as the various regimes that influence the activities of the UN Environment Programme. First evidence suggests that organisations are the more effective the weaker they are regulated within a given regime. In other words, we hypothesise that the more autonomous an organisation may act, the more influential its actions will be.
- (c) *Organisational structure*: Management studies treat the hierarchical structure in a given organisation as crucial in explaining organisational effectiveness. A low degree of hierarchy allows for comparatively high flexibility in the actions of individual organisational units. The dynamics and complexity of problems in environmental policy appear to advise in favour of a more horizontal and flexible structure of international organisations. It appears plausible to assume that organisations with a high degree of flexibility in organisational structure are more effective than organisations with more vertical hierarchies.
- (d) *Problem of fit*: As the field of environmental policy is probably the issue area most diverse and disorganised in its institutional setting, a debate has emerged regarding a “problem of fit”, which applies both to regimes and organisations. At issue are possible limits in the effectiveness of policies due to the mismatch of the problem at hand and the institutional and organisational response to it (IHDP, 1999). The underlying hypothesis is that organisations that are most closely designed for the structure of the problem they are intended to solve, are most effective.
- (e) *Availability of resources*: International organisations vary significantly in their access to resources, both regarding the staff they employ and the finances they can avail of. While it seems plausible to assume that the availability of resources affects organisational effectiveness, studies of business administrations have shown that a more generous allocation of resources does not necessarily correlate with increases in effectiveness. Cases of project evaluation in international environmental policy allow for similar conclusions. We now seek to test in our sample of international environmental organisations the validity of the hypothesis whether increasing resources will improve an organisation’s effectiveness.
- (f) *Stakeholder involvement*: Management studies found the involvement of stakeholder groups to correlate with the general acceptance of a given measure, because the chance of becoming actually involved tends to increase stakeholders’ willingness to co-operate and ultimately their commitment to the successful implementation of a policy. The success of UNEP’s Environment Liaison Centre provides a point in case. We generally expect organisations that value co-operation with relevant stakeholders to be more effective than organisations relying on their own authority, and we hypothesise that stakeholder involvement positively correlates with organisational effectiveness.
- (g) *Other aspects of institutional design*: Additional structural variables that have been considered in assessing organisational effectiveness include questions of decision-making procedures, internal mechanisms of conflict resolution, mechanisms for external representation, or the recruitment of human resources.

4.2. Contextual variables

Contextual variables seem harder to grasp analytically, as many of them are coincidental by nature. Nonetheless they need to be considered to allow plausible conclusions whether an observed outcome or impact may actually be causally connected to a particular structural variable or rather needs to be attributed to the context. Many contextual variables relate to external factors an international environmental organisation may be affected by. They may range from general changes in belief systems—such as perceptions of an epochal ‘wind of change’—to the state of the world economy or major incidents such as those of 11 September 2001. Likewise, scientific discourse and technological innovation can dramatically increase options and mould actor strategies, as was the case with the technological breakthrough in substituting chlorofluorocarbons that altered the political context in the ozone case. Other contextual variables are internal. They may include the specific influence of the head of an organisation given his or her personal characteristics, or the specific influence of the professional ethos of an agency. While these factors are particularly hard to assess, their relevance cannot be underestimated.

5. Outlook

International organisations and their effectiveness have largely been ignored by scholars from IR and political science. Available research in the field lacks comparative empirical data as well as theoretical scrutiny. We thus continue to pursue an ongoing multidisciplinary comparative research effort on inter-governmental environmental organisations in order to advance the theoretical discourse on the role of international organisations in global environmental governance and to generate new empirical data as well as methodological innovation. The variables and hypotheses outlined above will be further elaborated and tested on the empirical basis of about a dozen case studies of international organisations operating in the field of international environmental policy. The

cases have been selected with a view of both high degrees of variance in organisational design and political relevance.

Through the adjustment and application of insights on institutional behaviour and organisational behaviour that political science, international law and management studies offer today, we pursue an interdisciplinary research methodology and strategy for assessing and explaining the organisational effectiveness in international environmental politics. We expect this to benefit the general discourse on global governance and particularly to improve our understanding of the role international organisations may play.

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