
REVIEW ESSAY

THE UNITED NATIONS AS A MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATION

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The combined fields of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international administration have an extensive literature (McLaren 2002). However, even an extensive literature may be simply an accumulation of data and not necessarily oriented toward a theory or even a model. This may be why there is a continuing procession of international relations (IR) scholars who criticize these fields for lacking a focus (Martin and Simmons 1998; Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Fosdick 1999; Davies 2002; White 2002; Dijkzeul and Beigbeder 2003). In any case, this article will attempt to demonstrate that there is an identifiable model for the United Nations (UN) and will show how this could organize the literature.

The previously-named IR authors well illustrate three problems concerning the study of IGOs. The first problem is the most trivial. Each of the authors seems compelled to begin the study with a lament for the lack of studies of IGOs. As has been shown (McLaren 2002), this supposed lack may only reflect on the diligence with which the library research was performed. In any case, even if there is a dearth of other studies, one scarcely needs to erect such a straw man to justify one's contribution to the field. In today's globalized world, the study of IGOs is always going to be worthwhile, no matter what else has or has not been written. It's time to move on to more positive justifications (e.g., Taylor and Groom 2000) if one really has something new to contribute to the study of IGOs.

Much more of a problem is the fact that it is rare for a study to restrict itself to the UN. Instead, each study attempts to make itself generalizable to the whole population of IGOs. The futility of this has been well expressed:

International organizations are the product of a targeted and systematic effort to ensure synergies of cooperation at the international level. As such, they are certainly part of the same cultural and political world—a world that can be conceived of as the age of multilateralism. From this common birth there result a number of similarities . . . All, for instance, claim to be dedicated in one way or another, directly or indirectly, to greater global economic prosperity and security. All also claim to be committed to arriving at decisions and implementing policies through international negotiation. This is why we tend to speak of them in generic terms, as if they were of one kind. *However, international organizations are not all alike. They have different identities, and*

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specifically, their membership, purpose, results, and values are rather heterogeneous
(Coicaud 2001, 520—italics added).

Jean-Marc Coicaud then goes on to discuss and elaborate upon the different organizational consequences arising from the differences in membership, purpose, results, and values among IGOs. The conclusion that one can draw from this is that the highest common factor among IGOs is not very high. If one wishes to discuss the UN, its funds and projects, its specialized agencies, NATO, the European Union, development banks, and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) all in the same study (e.g., Davies 2002; Dijkzeul and Beigbeder 2003), one is not going to achieve a very high degree of generalization. That is to say, one could be well advised to refrain from attempting it in the first place as one's conclusions will not say very much.

The third problem follows from the first two. IR studies of the UN do not have the proper organizational structure upon which to hang their material. On one hand, their research has not gone far enough in organization theory to disclose the solution to this problem, and on the other hand they have tried to bite off too much in seeking a generalized structure that will encompass all IGOs. The result is that they flounder, some close, some far afield, searching for an organizational form that will allow them to bridge the gap between the problems of IGOs that they cite, especially in the UN, and the rationale for these problems, the organizational structure, which must be understood before solutions can be suggested.

However, the solution to these problems is quite straightforward. IGOs in general and the UN in particular are not businesses, even though at least one scholar thinks they should operate that way (Beigbeder 2000); nor are they governments, although again one can find them being discussed as if they are (Davies 2002). IGOs in general and the UN in particular represent a third type of organization—the membership organization. This may be a new term, but the organizational concept is not new. It has been a valid organizational form for the international arena at least since the creation of the public international unions in the late 1800s, although these were more usually referred to as conferences (Murphy 1994, 56).

The rationale for the existence of IGOs derives from the need for cooperation among states in a particular functional area. This is the *raison d'être* of a membership organization—cooperation with others with respect to some particular facet of a person's life. Although cooperation often appears to be assumed in the IR literature to be contrary to a state's self-interest (White 2002, 6), in fact it has been obvious to countries since at least the middle of the nineteenth century that a state's wealth and the well-being of its citizens can be increased by this apparent limitation of the state's autonomy. This is not a new idea—people marry in order to obtain this outcome; they join unions and professional associations for this type of outcome; they create religious sects and congregational churches; they create cooperatives, be they producer/marketing cooperatives, or consumer cooperatives; they create private golf clubs. In fact, most of what has come to be known as civil society is composed of associations which are membership organizations. For the IR field, one can note from all this that there is no necessary disagreement between IR realists and idealists—one's self-interest can be enhanced by giving up some part of one's autonomy.

The membership organization is only concerned with a particular part of a member's life; it is not a full-time concern for the person. People join unions because union membership strengthens their economic power, but the bulk of a person's energies each day remain devoted to the workplace, not to union activities. This is just as true for dentists belonging to a professional association or to milk producers in a dairy cooperative. Without the milk from the cows, there is no point in joining the cooperative. The membership organization may hire a permanent, full-time staff, but the members themselves will not be around on an everyday basis.

This is just as true for states that join an IGO. The states will have a membership that justifies their involvement in the organizational resolutions and decisions, but the meetings where this activity occurs may only take place for a short period of time in any year; the day-to-day activity necessary to support the IGO may not consume any of their time and energies during the rest of the year. More goes on in each state than just its involvement with an IGO. It is likely that a permanent secretariat will be employed to run the required day-to-day activities of any membership organization, but this will depend upon the will of the members—a private golf club may hire one person to be the secretary-treasurer, a small union may only have one union steward.

This organizational form of the IGO has also been called the conciliar model (Jacob, Atherton, and Wallenstein 1972, 23). This was not because of any supposed emphasis on conciliation within the IGO, but because such a membership organization is likely to create some form of council, a subcommittee of the full membership, to allow the structure to function expediently the rest of the year when all the representatives of the member-governments are not present. However, it would appear that this conciliar name never caught on, perhaps because the council is not the purpose of the organization but only an operational means. The real purpose of the intergovernmental membership organization is to allow for the sovereign equality of all members to be demonstrated through casting a vote at the highest level of the organization—the assembly, plenary, or conference (*ibid*). It is direct democracy in action.

There is, then, a hierarchical side to the intergovernmental membership organization: "Subordinate to the plenary is the council, whose members are chosen by the plenary from the plenary. As a smaller but representative body, it can meet more easily and cheaply, and act more quickly. The hierarchical form of the organization is then completed by the international secretariat which receives directions from the council, and the plenary" (McLaren 1980, 42). This is the basic structure of the membership organization that represents so many IGOs, especially throughout the UN system.

In any membership organization, each member has equal status at the head of the organization. The membership is then served by a council chosen from the membership, perhaps called an executive committee or a board of directors or stewards, and a permanent administrative establishment not unlike an international secretariat. Both council and secretariat may be called by any of several different names.

Of course, in practice, all the members are not equal. This will be seen in any meeting. Some members, for a variety of reasons, will be able to exert more influence over the others and so obtain their way (e.g., McLaren 1990). The UN is no different, and it has become commonplace for texts to note all the different blocs—e.g., Group of 77, Nordic Group, Islamic Conference, et al. (Ziring, Riggs, and Plano 2000, 93)—that have

come into existence as individual states try to increase their influence. In effect, the blocs are membership organizations within the larger membership organization, the UN.

Membership organizations comprise individuals, or in the case of IGOs, representatives, of the member-governments, at the plenary level. These people will probably not meet together on a daily basis. Their meetings may be at the call of the chair or more regularly scheduled, such as annually, biennially, or even quinquennially. In any case, this results in the organization usually needing to be served by permanent officials who work for the organization daily and whose actions will probably resemble a Weberian bureaucracy, implementing programs and agreed-upon procedures.

In the UN, the plenary conference is the General Assembly. The UN then has a number of councils: the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council. There is no fixed number of such bodies in a membership organization, as each organization is free to create its own councils and bedeck them with whatever powers the members agree to. Thus, in the UN, the Security Council has been given some autonomous decision-making rights, and five of its members have permanent status and a veto. However, as one would expect in any membership organization, the other members are free to comply or not with those decisions (although any membership organization may create penalties for noncompliance). Finally, all these bodies, plenary and councils, are served by the UN Secretariat.

The Secretariat officials are often identified as “international civil servants” (Davies 2002, 4), but this is a sloppy use of the term and will not give them any such status comparable to national civil servants. As was noted almost fifty years ago with regard to the UN, “[n]ot only is there no international legislature; apart from the Security Council, with its vital but restricted functions, there is no cabinet permanently resident at headquarters; there are no international ministers in charge of departments with whom the departmental director can discuss any political issues that may arise or the formulation of policies” (Loveday 1956, 27).

Of course, the Secretariat, as permanent officials, are not without their own power and it is correct to note their intermediary role in implementing the wishes of the member-governments (Dijkzeul and Gordenker 2003, 320). But that is the crux. They only implement the wishes. Whether they convince the member-governments to take such actions, or whether it is the member-governments themselves that initiate the actions, it is still the approval of the member-governments that is required. That is the nature of membership organizations.

Leadership of a secretariat can vary from the executive director model to the executive secretary. The former takes charge of the organization’s agenda and leads the members, most readily done when the membership meets infrequently and the council is not proactive; the latter functions at the behest of the members and simply implements what the members, through the council or the plenary, agree to. Assessing the actions of UN Secretaries-General against this continuum is a well-recognized IR subfield (e.g., Smouts 2000, 37-38).

It can also be noted that the other components of a UN system (assuming that a system exists) are also membership organizations. They, too, have their own plenaries, councils, and secretariats. A major complication from all of this arises because the system—the members of the UN, the funds and projects, and the specialized agencies—may or may not consist of the same countries, but the representatives who speak at the meetings are certainly not the same people. Coordinating the positions of all these people is not an easy task for the government of any individual country (McLaren 1987) and it should not be surprising to anyone that the UN system often appears at least whimsical, if not chaotic. Domestic membership organizations are not always consistent in their goals and policies either when they must work with their counterparts in other jurisdictions.

Financing the membership organization is a perennial concern. It is a common practice in a membership organization to charge each member an equal fee for membership. The figure will usually be derived as a result of determining the proposed expenses of the organization for the coming year and then dividing this by the number of members. Cost control becomes the most important aspect for the members and a profit-making orientation, excess revenues, would simply be a tax upon the members. Assuming that everyone pays the membership dues, a secondary result of this is that the budget will always be balanced between revenues and expenses.

However, there can be situations where the members are categorized and different categories pay different amounts. This has been the more common practice in the IGOs throughout the UN system. However, although it appears to recognize the uneven wealth distribution throughout the world, in fact it may do more harm than good as those who pay more gripe about that and those who pay less lose their nominal status as sovereign equals (Hüfner 2003). For example, currently the smallest annual amount paid by any member of the UN is approximately \$5 million. With an annual budget of about \$3 billion and a membership of 191 countries, a fee structure based on equality would mean an annual amount of approximately \$15 million per country. It might be argued that this is scarcely an amount to frighten any modern country, and so it might actually be to each country's benefit to pay this as its UN status would then become more equal with all other countries. With a more equal status for each member, it could be more difficult for any individual member to dominate the organization.

One difference between the UN and most other membership organizations is that the UN, as a collective security organization attempting to be universally inclusive, is loath to expel any member that does not pay the annual fee; most membership organizations will gain and lose members from year to year, and those members who do not pay the annual fees can expect to be expelled.

Membership organizations may or may not have formalized themselves with a written constitution. Where one exists, it will be a document to which all members have subscribed, but there may still be times when the membership agrees to ignore its requirements. It is the members who are sovereign. IGOs are likely to have such documents too, and the UN members have all agreed to the UN Charter. However, the UN Charter is considered a political document, not a legally binding one (Ziring, Riggs, and Plano 2000, 28-29; White 2002, 32-43). Thus, it can be expected both that majorities may attempt to coerce minorities and that the membership will from time to time ignore Charter provisions. The result is that both inject instability into the expectations of others (Kappeler 2003, 65-66).

The UN also has another major difference with most other membership organizations. It has become the practice in the UN for the member-governments to select their own citizens to hold a portion of the posts within the Secretariat, even though the UN Charter itself, in Article 101, requires that merit is to take priority over patronage. The practice has led to a general vilification of the administrative officials and, although it does ensure that all parts of the world, and a great variety of cultures, are included in the administration (Davies 2002, 10; McLaren 1997), it is usually concluded that it has done no good to the overall operations and reputation of the UN (Davies 2002, 89; Salomons 2003, 118-19).

With these characteristics in mind, the criticisms of UN operations can now be put into perspective. Because the UN is a membership organization, it will not operate as a Western democratic government, including an opposition party to propose alternative policies (Davies 2002, 7). A text may be correct in some of its observations concerning problems within the UN, but when the text is built upon the UN operating as a government rather than as a membership organization, one has failed to understand the rationale for those problems.

Nor does the UN operate as a world government, so one should accept, for example, that the legal order of the UN can be undermined by the actions of the members (White 2002, 25). The present organizational structure must be identified before one can recommend meaningful solutions.

Another of the latest IR books on IGOs states in its concluding chapter that “[s]everal chapters suggested public administration and private enterprise tools, yet applying these tools is not easy” (Dijkzeul and Gordenker 2003, 313). One wonders why the authors expected it to be easy since a membership organization is neither a public administration nor a private enterprise. Without a recognition of the proper organizational form, problems can be identified but suggested solutions are inconsequential.

In summary, the UN is obviously more complex than what has been laid out above as the basic characteristics of a membership organization. However, one must begin with the correct identification of the basic organizational structure if one is going to understand the structural rationale for organizational decisions and practices. The UN is a membership organization and therefore all significant decisions will be made by the full membership (including the decision to hive off collective security decisions to the Security Council). For better and for worse, it is the membership that dictates all the practices and procedures of the UN, whether one considers these to be good or bad (McLaren 1995, 107). That is the way of membership organizations, and is a recognition of sovereignty and democracy. It happens in domestic unions when the tentative agreement negotiated by union stewards must be ratified by the full membership; it happens in all of the IGOs. Scholars may try to attribute decision-making powers to other bodies, such as councils, secretariats, or NGOs, but ultimately the situation has to come back to the plenary. This is the rationale for UN actions that must be understood and considered in all proposals for solution of what is perceived to be a problem with the UN. The UN is not a business, it is not a government, it is not the Roman Catholic Church rising hierarchically to a single figure, the pope. It is simply and only a membership organization with all the merits and defects that that label connotes.

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