

# International Organisations

Written by Shazalina Z. Abidin

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## International Organisations

<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/12/30/international-organisations/>

SHAZELINA Z. ABIDIN, DEC 30 2016

**This is an excerpt from *International Relations* – an E-IR Foundations beginner’s textbook. Download your free copy here.**

As you may have picked up in the previous chapter, we live in a world of laws. While sovereign states are the principal legal actors, international organisations are increasingly important in helping us govern our world. Today’s international system is made up of a cacophony of different voices and interests. In addition to states there are also non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations and hybrid organisations which are a mix of all the different categories.

Imagine stepping off a plane into a foreign country. As you disembark you switch on your phone to check the messages that may have come through while you were in transit. You follow the sign that directs you to the airport’s exit, clear immigration, and then pick up your luggage at the designated carousel. You then head straight for the ‘nothing to declare’ green lane to exit the airport. Those routine actions would have already brought you into contact with the work of at least four different international organisations. The aircraft that you arrived in would have been one of the many planes under the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and regulated by standards set by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO); that you were able to use your phone to check messages would have been courtesy of the work of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU); and your customs clearance would have been facilitated by the Kyoto Convention set by the World Customs Organization (WCO) to simplify the customs process.

These are just some of the ways in which international organisations form an integral part of our everyday lives. Whether these organisations are working to build houses for the impoverished like UN-Habitat does, or working to ensure a standard of health for everyone like the World Health Organization (WHO) does, there is no running away from international organisations. Today, it is increasingly difficult to imagine an international system in which the only voices that matter are those of states.

### International governmental organisations

An international governmental organisation (IGO), also referred to as an intergovernmental organisation, is an organisation with a membership of only states. The organisation is usually founded upon a treaty, or a multilateral agreement, and consists of more than two states. Member states determine the way in which the organisation is run, vote within the organisation and provide its funding.

Established in 1945 following the end of the Second World War, the United Nations (UN) is a prime example of an international governmental organisation with almost universal membership. Only states can be members of the United Nations and membership is valued because it confers upon the member state international recognition of its sovereignty. As of 2017 there are 193 UN member states – but it is important to note that a small number of states are not members. Taiwan, for example, has repeatedly requested membership but has had its request blocked by China. This is because China regards Taiwan as a part of its sovereign territory and does not recognise it as an independent nation. Taiwan, of course, wants United Nations membership because this will mean that the international community fully accepts its sovereignty. The Taiwan example has gone unresolved for decades due to

# International Organisations

Written by Shazalina Z. Abidin

the major role that China plays within the United Nations as one of its most powerful members.

There are six main organs of the United Nations. Once a state is a member, it is automatically a member of the General Assembly. This is the most democratic organ where each state gets one vote, no matter how big or small, rich or poor the country. It is also the place where, every September, world leaders give their address to the international community from behind a dark green podium with the UN crest clearly visible. The other organs are the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Trusteeship Council, the Secretariat and the International Court of Justice. By far the most powerful organ is the Security Council, which has 15 members. Five states – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – are permanent members of the Security Council. The other ten are voted in by the General Assembly for two-year tenures. The Security Council is the only organ that can impose sanctions on states or deploy military forces on behalf of the international community to keep the peace in a certain area, region or country. The United Nations itself does not have its own military force, but it can muster military and police personnel through contributions by its members. These UN peacekeepers are distinguished by their trademark blue helmets, giving rise to the nickname ‘Blue Berets’.

In order to be inclusive the United Nations has welcomed the participation (note participation, not membership) of civil society groups during some of its meetings, but never at the sessions of the all-important Security Council. Organisations may speak as observers to the General Assembly, or as organisations with ‘consultative status’ with the UN Economic and Social Council for example. There are civil society organisations on all issues, ranging from disarmament to oceanic noise pollution, and from mental health to refugees. There are also private individuals who are invited to speak at special United Nations meetings. It is therefore common to witness heart wrenching first-hand accounts of sexual abuses, torture, or discrimination. Such testimonies have the power to galvanise the international community. Yet, no matter how powerful these testimonies are, it is ultimately up to the member states to determine the course of action. The Secretariat, including the Secretary-General who leads the United Nations, cannot take action on its own and can only appeal to member states to ‘do something’. Because of this, the United Nations remains undeniably and irrevocably an international governmental organisation and not a level of authority above the states.

Here, the other designation sometimes used to describe IGOs – ‘intergovernmental organisation’ – is helpful in appreciating the difference in ‘global governance’ (which IGOs bring to our international system) and ‘global government’ (which does not currently exist). Virtually all IGOs are intergovernmental. This means that their power rests with governments (the member states) not with the organisation. States are free to leave the organisations, or even in some cases to ignore them. There are usually consequences for both actions, but the fact remains that even in extreme cases – when an organisation like the United Nations imposes sanctions, or authorises war, on a state – international governmental organisations do not rule over states. Such punitive measures are only possible when the members of the UN Security Council are in accord, agree with such proposals, and a coalition of states agrees to finance and partake in the operation. Therefore, the power rests with the states themselves, especially the more powerful states, and there are regular examples of states rejecting a certain course of action because it was not in their national interest. Here, the failures of the United Nations to establish a coordinated response to the Syrian war comes to mind, despite hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced since 2011.

If an IGO was not intergovernmental, as explained above, it would be in the rare category of ‘supranational’. To have supranational powers means that an organisation is actually able to govern its members and have a degree of independence from its member states. The only clear example of a major organisation such as this is the European Union (EU). For that reason, it is often described as *sui generis*, or ‘unique’ in its own right. The European Union is unique because, unlike the United Nations and other international governmental organisations, it can actually be said to exercise a degree of sovereignty over its members via law-making powers in certain areas that its members agreed to relocate to the supranational level. It also has its own currency which, together with other capabilities, gives it some of the powers otherwise only seen in states. This is not without controversy in Europe and there is a rising tide of discontent with the growing power of the European Union and a desire in some political circles to weaken, or even dissolve, the organisation so that more of the power returns to the states. The ‘Brexit’ debate, when the British public voted in a 2016 referendum to leave the European Union, raised many of these issues and is an interesting instance of the idea of supranationalism being challenged.

## **International Organisations**

Written by Shazalina Z. Abidin

Leaving aside bigger organisations like the European Union and the United Nations, international governmental organisations are typically more specific in nature – often dealing with just one particular issue or a specific geographical area. The work that they do is often clear from their names – for example, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) or the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). These are issue-based organisations and their members are worldwide. Then there are organisations of states in specific regions, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU). These often emulate elements of the European Union, but none (as yet) feature supranational powers. Other organisations are neither geographically limited nor limited to a single issue. The Commonwealth of Nations, for example, is an organisation whose membership is restricted to former colonies of the United Kingdom. Having been around since 1949, the Commonwealth also has its own permanent secretariat. An international governmental organisation that does not have its own fixed secretariat is the BRICS – an intergovernmental organisation of only five countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) focusing on economic and financial issues of interest to its members. The point to remember is that as long as an organisation is composed exclusively of states, or governments (including government agencies), it is an international governmental organisation operating according to international norms.

These international governmental organisations are outside the United Nations but are almost always tied to the UN in some way or another. For some, these ties are explicitly spelled out in the document that establishes them. For others, the simple goal of ensuring that their work is relevant ties them to the United Nations at least tangentially. Take the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), for example. The founding statute of the Agency dictates that its reports should go to the United Nations so that the Security Council may take action against any countries that fail to meet their obligations. This works out well for the international community – as the International Atomic Energy Agency monitors the use of nuclear technology while the UN Security Council enforces measures to ensure state compliance over nuclear safety and security.

### **International non-governmental organisations and hybrid international organisations**

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are non-governmental organisations that either work at the international level or have international members. International non-governmental organisations are a mixed bag, best described as those organisations that are not intergovernmental, business entities or terrorist organisations (Davies 2014, 3). There is no exact figure for the number of international non-governmental organisations that are currently active. The United Nations lists over 4,000 with consultative status – which may only be a fraction of their true number.

Some spectacular and headline-grabbing protests are organised by certain international non-governmental organisations. Images of Greenpeace protestors chaining themselves to ships, or of anti-globalisation protestors blocking streets, are usually well covered in the media. These are the organisations whose mission is to raise awareness among the general public on issues of concern. No less effective are those that carry out their missions away from the limelight. Mercy Corps, for example, helps disaster survivors in countries around the globe, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) is often the first highly skilled responder to a crisis and Oxfam is at the forefront of various poverty eradication programmes around the world. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan termed groups like these the ‘unsung heroes’ of the international community.

Hybrid organisations are those international organisations whose membership comprises both states and civil society members. The states may be represented by government departments or agencies; while civil society, as we have seen earlier, can be just about anyone or any organisation. One such hybrid international organisation is the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which deals primarily with the preservation of the environment and whose members include government agencies from countries such as Fiji and Spain and non-governmental organisations from all corners of the globe. Individual members are often experts and affiliated to one of the IUCN’s six commissions. The number of hybrid organisations has increased as more and more partnerships are forged between states and civil society. There is now an understanding that hybrid organisations, where governments, non-governmental organisations and multinational corporations all have a say, can be highly effective

# International Organisations

Written by Shazalina Z. Abidin

because of the reach, expertise and funding that such groupings can command.

## How international organisations shape our world

One of the more visible international non-governmental organisations in the world is the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Today, the Red Cross is synonymous with work with victims of humanitarian crises, but before its founding there was no organisation to carry out such work and no guidelines for humanitarian concerns arising out of war and conflict. In 1862, Swiss businessman Henry Dunant published a book describing the aftermath of the 1859 Battle of Solferino, which he had experienced first-hand. He wrote how the soldiers were left wounded on the field with no medical care even after the battle had ended. Dunant managed to organise the local population into providing assistance to the sick and wounded. Many were moved by his account and in 1863 Dunant founded the International Committee of the Red Cross. Dunant's efforts prompted a push to provide for the care of wounded soldiers and civilians caught in places of conflict. This was the start of the Geneva Conventions, which all UN members have since ratified. The Geneva Conventions form part of the international law that governs humanitarian concerns arising out of war and conflict and stand as testimony of how an international non-governmental organisation (in this case the Red Cross) can start a movement that later develops into international norms and standards.

States were once the judge, jury and executioner of all matters related to the conduct of international affairs. Under the guise of state sovereignty, the state could act with impunity as far as its citizens and lands were concerned. Those days are effectively over as the pressure of outside interests, amplified through international non-governmental organisations, have eroded state impunity. In no other area has there been such a major leap forward than in the development of norms involving international human rights. It also used to be the case that monarchs, presidents, prime ministers and other state leaders held immunity from any kind of criminal prosecution while they were in power. That too, has now changed. The International Criminal Court, which sits in The Hague, now has the jurisdiction to hold individuals responsible for a range of crimes. The United Nations briefly discussed the idea of an international criminal court in the 1950s, but it took the efforts of a coalition of international non-governmental organisations, calling themselves the Coalition for the International Criminal Court, to realise the vision of a world court for heinous crimes. In 1997, the Coalition eventually managed to garner the political will, and within a few short years the Court had been established. Today, approximately two thirds of the world's states are members and dozens of individuals have been prosecuted for war crimes, genocide and other crimes against humanity.

There are many success stories of how international organisations, once thought to be the tools of states, have come into their own and set the agenda for the international community. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of environmental preservation. It took the combined efforts of vocal non-governmental organisations and might of the United Nations to bring states together for a watershed conference on the environment in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Often called the Earth Summit, the UN Conference on Environment and Development was revolutionary because it emphasised the collective responsibility of states towards the wellbeing of the earth. Due to the Earth Summit, states signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Convention to Combat Desertification – treaties that became important milestones in the fight to save the environment from the harmful practices of mankind. The momentum the Earth Summit generated still has an impact today as nations continue to work together, albeit often acrimoniously, to combat climate change.

For the average citizen, the most important international organisations might be those whose work can be felt on the ground. The UN Development Programme has been a lifeline for many impoverished nations, helping to raise populations out of absolute poverty, developing programmes to allow the people to be economically sustainable and closing the gender equality gap that exists in many developing nations. In these cases, instead of states contributing to the organisation and keeping it financially afloat, it is sometimes international governmental organisations such as the World Bank that provide the means for the states to pursue development policies that would otherwise not be possible. However, the results of these assistance programmes have been mixed and they are often contentious, as they have sometimes left countries in significant debt or failed to improve their economies.

## Conclusion

## International Organisations

Written by Shazalina Z. Abidin

Like most other things, international organisations are only as good as the results they yield, but there is no denying that they play a central role in international affairs. Their growth, particularly in the twentieth century when the concept of global governance came of age, means that nearly every aspect of life is regulated in some way at the global level. International organisations, in their vast array of forms, complement and sometimes positively challenge the role of the state. Going back to the airport analogy used at the start of this chapter, we may not always be aware of how international organisations affect even the most mundane things in our lives. But, our lives would be materially different without them

*\*Please consult the PDF linked above for any citation or reference details.*

---

### About the author:

**Shazalina Z. Abidin** is a Foreign Service officer with the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After postings in Washington, DC, and to the UN in New York, she completed her PhD at the University of Sheffield on the Responsibility to Protect.