

Student Feature - Introduction to International Governmental Organisations

Written by Shazalina Z. Abidin

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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 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’.

Historical context of international organisations

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpDlaXLH_ul&t=131s

A brief history of the United Nations

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How does the UN work?

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.

A brief history of the European Union

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.

The African Union: An Introduction

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.

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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.

Useful links

The official website of the United Nations: <http://www.un.org/en/index.html>

The official website of the United Nations Security Council: <http://www.un.org/en/sc/>

The official website of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/>

The official website of the United Nations Trusteeship Council: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/trusteeship-council/index.html>

The official website of the United Nations Secretariat: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/secretariat/index.html>

The official website of the International Court of Justice: <http://www.icj-cij.org/homepage/>

The official website of the European Union: https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

The official website of the International Whaling Commission (IWC): <https://iwc.int/home>

The official website of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL): <https://www.interpol.int>

The official website of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): <http://asean.org>

The official website of the African Union (AU): <https://www.au.int>

The official website of the Commonwealth of Nations: <http://www.commonwealthofnations.org>

About the author:

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