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The Performance of International Organizations

Principal Investigator: Alexander Thompson

International organizations (IOs) are essential but controversial actors in world politics. They are expected to rebuild war-torn societies, reduce poverty, stop the spread of disease, prevent financial crises, address environmental problems, adjudicate disputes, ensure free trade, promote gender equality, reform legal systems, and reduce corruption. But instead of earning praise, IOs face relentless attacks from critics who believe they are ineffective – or worse, that they exacerbate the very problems they are supposed to solve.

Because IOs are so important to the international system, it is crucial that scholars and policy makers have a way of evaluating them. In this project, Alexander Thompson is developing a framework for understanding the performance of IOs. Why do some IOs perform better than others, and what are the determinants of their performance?

In order to fairly evaluate many very different IOs, Thompson proposes a continuum of metrics that range from process -- how efficient and hardworking the IO is -- to outcome -- whether the IO solved the problem. Just because an IO is efficient doesn't mean it can solve overarching problems; for example, the United Nations Development Fund is unlikely to singlehandedly eliminate world poverty regardless of how well it is run.

Thompson also examines the sources of IO performance, ranging from internal sources such as organizational culture and leadership to external sources such as the expectations of member states. Material resources are also considered.

One often-cited example of poor IO performance concerns U.N. peacekeepers in Africa during the genocide in Rwanda. Internally, the peacekeeping force's culture was focused on objectivity and consent -- they would go in only when invited and remain totally impartial. In Rwanda, they were reluctant to intervene in the genocide because they didn't want to be seen as taking sides; thousands of people died as a result.

Yet peacekeepers also operate under external constraints, as the U.N.



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Security Council often charges them with multiple -- and often conflicting -- mandates. They are to create safe havens, deliver humanitarian aid, separate combatants, set up schools, and train the police, among other things. Some of these goals require taking sides in a conflict, yet they are told to remain impartial. In some cases they are not given enough money or troops to do the job. All this means their mission is bound to fail, not because of the IO itself, but because of disagreement and conflicting mandates from member states.

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