

The Rational Design of Relations Between Intergovernmental Organizations

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The Rational Design of Relations Between Intergovernmental Organizations

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Hylke Dijkstra

Book chapter in Joachim Koops and Rafael Biermann (Eds.) *Palgrave Handbook of Inter-Organizational Relations in World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Abstract The rational design of international institutions has been a prominent research agenda in the field of international relations. The chapter builds on this tradition by exploring how intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) design relationships with other IGOs. Using insights from organization theory on inter-organizational relations (IORs), it proposes to distinguish between the formalization, intensity, symmetry, and standardization of interactions between IGOs. The four dimensions allow for an analytical framework that is easy to operationalize. While the rational design literature shows great promise in analyzing the interaction between IGOs, it is important to account for the political nature of life in the international arena. The design of IORs in international relations is likely to be informal, intensive outside the formal settings, symmetrical and not very standardized.

The design of international institutions is an important topic in international relations (Koremenos et al. 2001). When states design institutions, they make choices that will subsequently affect the way states operate in the international system. Institutions can constrain sovereign states and empower them. International institutions can help states overcome collective action problems and they can reduce the transaction costs of cooperation. The presence of institutions can result in Pareto-improving (positive-sum) policy outcomes yet it can also lead to redistributive (zero-sum) payoffs (Krasner 1991; Gruber 2000; Drezner 2007). Institutions are a critical part of international life and it is well known that states take great care in designing them.

This chapter explores how intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) design relationships with other IGOs.¹ If states pay attention to the design of their institutions, it almost goes without saying that IGOs are likely to do so as well. It requires, after all, in most cases, the explicit or tacit consent of the member states for IGOs to entertain relations with other IGOs. The relations between IGOs are therefore a sub-set of the international institutions that guide the actions of states. And the design of

¹ International institutions are ‘explicit arrangements, negotiated among international actors, that prescribe, proscribe, and/or authorize behavior’ (Koremenos et al. 2001, p. 762). Formal IGOs, which are the subject of this chapter, are a sub-set of international institutions (see Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Volgy et al. 2008).

those relations will likely follow similar logics.

When analyzing the design of relations between IGOs, it is useful to consider insights from organizational theory. There has been a long tradition, in this discipline, of studying inter-organizational relations (IORs) (Benson 1975; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Cropper et al. 2008). Four so-called dimensions characterize relations between organizations (e.g., *formalization*, *intensity*, *reciprocity*, and *standardization*) (see Marrett 1971; Aldrich 1977).² These dimensions speak almost directly to the rational design literature in international relations. Importantly, they can be relatively easily operationalized allowing scholars to draw comparisons between organizational relations in international relations with different fields of organizations.

The outline of this chapter is straightforward. It first provides an overview of the institutional design literature in international relations as it has developed during the last 15 years. Subsequently, it discusses how the study of the rational design of IORs in international relations can benefit from insights of organizational theory. It introduces the four dimensions of IORs and operationalizes them by providing measurable indicators. By making this framework applicable to the discipline of international relations, it provides scholars with a toolkit for further analysis. In the conclusion, the chapter reflects on the importance of politics and power in IORs and outlines future directions for research.

1. The Design of International Institutions

The design of institutional institutions is a subject that has received extensive scholarly attention, particularly since the ‘rational design’ project of Barbara Koremenos et al. (2001). In their special issue they try to explain why international institutions ‘are organized in radically different ways’ (p. 761). International institutions, among others, differ in terms of their membership and scope. They have a varying degree of centralization, control mechanisms, and flexibility. In answering this puzzle, Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal offer us a set of independent variables (distribution problems; enforcement problems; number of actors; uncertainty about the state of the world, behavior, and preferences) and conjectures that logically explain variation in the institutional design of international institutions.

The rational design project dealt with big questions and presented macro-level variables. It was not a surprise therefore that the publication of this special issue almost immediately resulted in scholars trying to refine the analysis, *inter alia*, by examining the variables in greater depth. One of the key advances in the study of institutional design has been the relationship between formal and informal institutions (Stone 2011, 2013; Vabulas and Snidal 2013). Instead of opting for formal institutions—such as binding international agreements, voting rules, or official procedures—states may act through informal international institutions since these involve lower sovereignty costs or allow for more flexibility and efficiency. Informal institutions give states opportunities to achieve distributive bargains and improve the balance between the member states within IGOs. Stone (2011), for instance, asks ‘[h]ow is the United States able to control the IMF with only 17 per cent of the votes.’ Informal rules between states are his answer.

The scope of IGOs has recently also been analyzed more thoroughly (Hooghe and Marks 2015; Lenz et al. 2014). A distinction has been made between ‘general purpose’ IGOs (e.g., the United Nations [UN]) and ‘task-specific’ organizations (e.g., World Trade Organization [WTO]). Interestingly, the scope of IGOs closely relates to their centralization and control mechanisms

² The remainder of the chapter will use symmetry instead of reciprocity, since it is more appropriate in the field of international relations.

(Hooghe and Marks 2015; Lenz et al. 2014). General-purpose organizations tend to have high degrees of delegation. Member states keep control through unanimity voting. In task-specific organizations, delegation is often more limited, yet member states regularly pool their sovereignty through majority voting. This insight has brought our understanding of the rational design of international institutions forward. It shows the interaction between the various characteristics of IGOs.

One aspect of rational design that has perhaps received more attention than others is the delegation of tasks to IGOs and their permanent secretariats. In the study of centralization and delegation, particularly the principal-agent approach stands out (Pollack 1997, 2003; Hawkins et al. 2006). This approach has carefully analyzed why states give resources and discretion to secretariats. It has come up with a whole range of independent variables that help to explain the design of these international bodies. These include preference heterogeneity between states, power asymmetries, sovereignty costs, contract specificity, structure of the agent, and the involvement of secretariats in design decisions (Nielson and Tierney 2003; Koremenos 2008; Copelovitch 2010; Urpelainen 2012; Dijkstra 2012; Green and Colgan 2013; Haftel 2013; Graham 2014; Johnson 2013; Allen and Yuen 2014).

Power asymmetries in the institutional design of IGOs are also widely studied. While the UN, for example, is ‘based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members’ (Charter, article 2(1)), the five permanent members of the Security Council are more important than the others. International institutions are, in this respect, often a reflection of great power politics (Mearsheimer 1994) yet institutions can also be designed as a means to constrain the powerful and commit them to international agreements (Keohane 1984; Moravcsik 1998; Abbott et al. 2000). International institutions are often established with a distributive purpose in mind (Krasner 1991; Gruber 2000; Drezner 2007). Some international institutions may benefit the interests of specific groups of member states leading to a situation of ‘contested multilateralism’ (Morse and Keohane 2014; Urpelainen and Van de Graaf, 2015). Even if institutions grant states equal opportunities, variation in their unilateral resources allows some to benefit more than others (Panke 2013, 2014; Dijkstra 2015).

Finally, uncertainty in the international area is an important variable which has received considerable attention (Koremenos 2001, 2005; Rosendorff and Milner 2001; Rosendorff 2005; Thompson 2010; but see also Nelson and Katzenstein 2014). Scholars have focused on the effect of uncertainty on escape clauses, sunset clauses, and other forms of flexibility. The well-established claim is that states—when faced with uncertainty—will not engage in serious contracting unless they can find agreement on exit strategies in case of a worst case scenario. Such flexibility cannot come for free. Important is indeed the balance between the costs involved in using escape clauses (see Rosendorff and Milner 2001). Using them should not be too cheap, as this would imply frequent usage and a lack of compliance. They should also not be too expensive as this could lead to systemic breakdown of international institutions (Rosendorff and Milner 2001).

It is important to recognize that the rational design literature tries to explain a limited number of big instances in international relations. Institutional creation and design are rare events. States are not very often in a position to create and design a new institution from scratch. Indeed, given the high transaction costs of creating new institutions and the degree of uncertainty that institutional creation brings, it is normally more attractive for states to try to *change* existing institutions before creating new ones (Jupille et al. 2013). Only if none of the existing institutions is deemed potentially suitable for addressing a certain cooperation problem, states will design new ones. While institutional creation may be a rare event, design choices remain of pivotal importance, particularly

since institutions are strongly path dependent (North 1990; Steinmo et al. 1992; Pierson 2004). Germany and Japan, for instance, still play modest roles in the UN as they were excluded from the Security Council during the design phase in 1944–45 (Koremenos et al. 2001, p. 762). It is therefore worth paying attention.

The rational design of IGOs is thus an important topic in the literature. This section has not attempted to provide an exhaustive overview of all the relevant publications. Rather, it has tried to give an impression of what this literature is about and to point at some of the relevant variables. The rational design approach is not without its limitations (Wendt 2001; Duffield 2003), but gives an overall perspective on how states establish international institutions. Such a macro-picture is often in short supply in the area of IGOs, where scholars tend to increasingly specialize in individual organizations. It also provides us with a good basis to analyze the relations between international organizations. This will be the topic of the remainder of the chapter: the rational design of relations between IGOs.

2. The Design of Relations between Organizations

While scholars working on international regimes have analyzed how the interaction between institutions, or institutional complexity, affects institutional design (Aggarwal 1998; Gehring and Oberthür 2004; Raustiala and Victor 2004; Alter and Meunier 2009), the theoretical literature on how relations between IGOs are designed remains fairly limited (Kolb 2013 being a notable exception). This section of the chapter considers ways of operationalizing and classifying the relations between IGOs. While it provides examples of detailed IORs, it is essentially about the big picture.

The relations between IGOs are at least as diverse as IGOs themselves. This makes classifications both important and a challenge. Academics working on international regime interplay have made a number of suggestions (for an overview: Oberthür and Gehring 2011). The problem with these classifications is that they tend to be specific to international relations and/or difficult to operationalize. The literature on organization theory offers a way out. Cora Marrett (1971) and Howard Aldrich (1977) identified four so-called dimensions of interaction between international organizations (e.g., *formalization*; *intensity*; *symmetry*; *standardization*). These dimensions speak to the institutional design literature on IGOs. They are also easy to operationalize. They can help us in studying rational design questions. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the four dimensions and their indicators.

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
Formalization	The extent to which agreements are formalised.
	The extent to which formal coordination agents are appointed.
Intensity	The number of issues covered.
	The frequency of relations between the IGOs.
Symmetry	The extent to which resources are exchanged equally.
	The extent to which IGOs have sovereign equality.
Standardization	The extent to which exchangeable units are defined.
	The extent to which procedures for interaction are defined.

Table 4.1. Dimensions of IGO interaction. Based on Marrett (1971) and Aldrich (1977).

2.1 Formalization

Formalization is a logical first dimension to classify IORs. After all, when it comes to the IGOs themselves, formalization is a key variable distinguishing between formal IGOs, informal IGOs, and decentralized cooperation (Vabulas and Snidal 2013). It therefore makes sense to classify the relations between IGOs also on the basis of their formalization. There are two important indicators in this respect: the extent to which agreements are formalized and the existence of formal coordinating agents (Marrett 1971; Aldrich 1977).

Formal agreements are common between IGOs. The EU and NATO, for instance, signed the Berlin Plus agreement in 2003. This agreement allows the EU to use NATO military assets. The WTO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have a cooperation agreement since 1996 governing regular consultation and coordination as well as assistance and training. The Rome-based agriculture and food agencies (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], World Food Program [WFP] and International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD]) signed with the European Commission in 2011 the Statement of Intent on Programmatic Cooperation on Food Security and Nutrition. These are just some examples of formal agreements between IGOs.

There exists variation in the format of such formal agreements. The literature of legalization in world politics, however, provides us with further directions. Kenneth Abbott et al. (2000) distinguish between the ‘obligation,’ ‘precision,’ and ‘delegation’ of agreements. Some agreements between IGOs are binding, others are not. Some outline vague principles and intentions, while others precisely define rules. The compliance with agreements between IGOs may be subject to international arbitration or not. Beyond the binary choice of whether an agreement exists or not, IGOs thus have to determine the *degree* of formalization of agreements.

A second indicator for formalization is the existence of formal coordinating agents in IGOs—whether an organizational provision has been made to facilitate the relations between IGOs. Once again, there is a spectrum of alternatives (see Biermann 2008, pp. 164–166). The least intrusive are joint ministerial meetings bringing together the member states of the different IGOs. The EU, for example, keeps such meetings with about every other regional IGO (Jorgensen and Laatikainen 2013). Regular high-level meetings are also organized between the World Bank and IMF. Ministerial meetings are often replicated at bureaucratic levels where senior national officials prepare the work of their ministers (see Biermann in this Handbook).

Direct contacts between IGO secretariats are also often formalized. IGOs have dedicated desk officers, units, or even directorates dealing third organizations. These services, while unilaterally established, tend to become the direct external contact points for IGOs, thereby facilitating and potentially deepening cooperation. IGOs also increasingly open permanent offices in the vicinity of other IGOs just as states have embassies. No less than 21 IGOs and 13 specialized UN agencies have an office in New York and maintain formal relations with the UN (United Nations 2012).³ Many IGOs also have a presence in Brussels, Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi. Finally, IGOs may appoint liaison officers to be physically located in other IGOs. This is helpful in, for example, joint military missions. Giving liaison officers such access indicates a high degree of formalization.

Formalization is therefore an important dimension of categorizing relationships between IGOs. The two indicators—the extent to which there are formal agreements and/or formal coordinating agents

³ A small number of IGO representatives are double-hatted in that they also carry out diplomatic functions as a state representative. This excludes IGOs which do not have formal relations, such as NATO.

—give us a first impression of the sort of relationship that two or more IGOs are entertaining. While this dimension comes from organizations studies, it resonates well with the international relations literature. It, for example, speaks directly to the work done on legalization. It furthermore shows us the importance of structural provisions made to coordinate between two or more IGOs. Formalization is, however, only one indicator of IORs. It needs to be complemented by other dimensions.

2.2 Intensity

A second dimension of IGO interaction is intensity. This dimension gives us a more in-depth insight as to whether relations between IGOs are actually substantive. In economic terms, intensity is often measured as the amount of resources exchanged times the frequency of their exchange (Marrett 1971; Aldrich 1977). It is useful to slightly adjust these concepts when dealing with the relations between IGOs. The resources exchanged between IGOs are, after all, not always tangible. This chapter therefore defines intensity as the scope of interaction between IGOs times the frequency of interaction.

In the literature of international relations, scope is considered as one of the facets of the institutional design of IGOs ('what issues are covered?'; Koremenos et al. 2001, p. 770). Some IGOs have a universal scope, while others have a restricted set of topics (Hooghe and Marks 2015; Lenz et al. 2014). Needless to say, scope is a relevant dimension of relations between IGOs as well. Some IGOs have all-encompassing interactions with other IGOs, which cover security, political, cultural, and economic aspects of international relations. The relationship between Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the EU is an example in this respect (see Nuremberg Declaration 2007). The scope of cooperation between the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) is much more limited.

IGOs clearly do not have complete freedom in determining the scope of their relations with other IGOs. After all, the scope of relations between IGOs cannot be more extensive than the scope of each of the individual IGOs. The Arctic Council, for instance, cannot team up with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to handle security affairs in Latin America. From the institutional design and organizational ecology literature, however, we know that scope is not necessarily fixed (Koremenos et al. 2001; Hannan and Freeman 1977, 1989). Issues are sometimes related with the result that one cannot be dealt with without the other. They are not always clearly defined. Finally, IGOs may change the scope of their organization. NATO, for instance, significantly broadened its scope after the end of the Cold War to address new security challenges. Its crisis management missions in former Yugoslavia, for example, resulted in interaction with IGOs, such as the UN, EU, OSCE, with which NATO previously hardly had a relationship (Biermann 2008).

The interaction between international organizations may be all-encompassing on paper (e.g., ASEAN and the Southern Common Market [MERCOSUR] cooperation), but this does not necessarily mean much in practice. The frequency of interaction is therefore important: how often do international organizations interact? The number of formal ministerial meetings between IGOs is, of course, a starting point, but these tend to be limited to a maximum of one per year. At the level of civil servants, there may be more intergovernmental meetings. NATO and EU ambassadors, for example, hold multiple joint meetings per year, which is facilitated by the co-location in Brussels.

In terms of numbers, most interactions generally take place between the secretariats of IGOs. From

the level of Secretary-General to desk officer, there are regular direct contacts between officials working for the secretariats of IGOs. Interactions range from formal letters to more informal emails, phone conversations, and face-to-face meetings. Needless to say, such contacts increase in frequency when IGOs engage in joint ventures and activity. When the UN and EU planned a multidimensional presence in eastern Chad (2007–2008), consisting of UN police trainers and EU troops, there was constant communication between officials from both secretariats (Dijkstra 2010). Many of these contacts are informal: these civil servants were neither instructed by the formal power holders to coordinate their efforts nor did they follow formal standard operating procedures. The trouble with such informal interactions—from the researcher’s point of view—is that they are often difficult to measure and typically require extensive fieldwork.

While formalization is about the formal framework guiding interactions between IGOs, the intensity gives meaning to the width and depth of cooperation. Through combining the scope of interaction with the frequency, it provides an indicator of the substance of interaction beyond the formal rules. What is important about the intensity dimension is that it, once again, resonates well with the concepts used in international relations. Scope is also a key indicator in the rational design project. While intensity thus adds body to the study of IORs, it is still not sufficient to fully comprehend the relations between IGOs. Indeed, it says little about the balance between IGOs and the distribution of power. This is another dimension.

2.3 Symmetry

The third dimension in this classification is symmetry. It tells us whether the interaction between IGOs is a relationship between equals. It brings into our analysis the importance of power. This dimension also has two indicators: the extent to which resources are exchanged equally and to which IGOs have equality in decision-making. With regard to resources exchanged, most of the cases hint to inequality. The EU, for example, makes use of NATO military assets, which is a clear case of asymmetry giving NATO leverage. Similarly, when the OECD produces reports on economic and social issues, which other IGOs (and states) use in their own policy process, it creates a situation of informal dependence.

Symmetry, power politics, and the distributive payoffs of international cooperation are, of course, important issues in the international relations literature (Mearsheimer 1994; Krasner 1991; Gruber 2000; Barnett and Duvall 2005; Drezner 2007; Stone 2011). While states might be formal equals in IGOs, some states need cooperation more than others. The inequality between organizations is also captured by resource dependency theory. This is one of the most prominent approaches to IORs and has proved relevant in the discipline of international relations (Biermann 2008; Gest and Grigorescu 2010; Biermann and Harsch, this Handbook). The exchange of resources between international organizations is, of course, an important reason why IGOs interact in the first place. The emphasis here is on how the interdependence affects the balance of power between IGOs.

The resources which are exchanged between IGOs vary widely. They can include financial assistance, technical assistance, information, or simply military capabilities. Financial assistance can be rather straightforward. Many IGOs rely on support from other multilateral donors. For example, the IMF provides technical assistance to many low- and middle-income countries. This is partially paid for through multilateral donations by the various regional development banks and the EU. NATO has provided the African Union (AU) with strategic airlift during military operations as well as expert and training support in setting up the African Standby Force.

Other areas of interest are semi-autonomous programs and joint ventures. The World Bank and

other international donors, for example, contribute (indirectly) to the work of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which is closely associated with the AU. The WHO, Unicef, World Bank, and Gates Foundation furthermore work together in the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) (Muraskin 2004). The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria is a third example. Such joint ventures have the advantage that assistance by other IGOs is decoupled from internal governance structures (see Hale and Held 2011). It makes asymmetries in resources exchange better manageable and by-passes awkward questions of the 'sovereignty' of the IGOs.

The second indicator of symmetry is whether IGOs have sovereign equality in the rules that govern their interactions (Biermann 2015). There is, of course, a formal aspect to this indicator—whether an international organization fully consents to its relations with other IGOs. Do IGOs, in this respect, have a veto over the decisions taken in IORs? In many cases, international organizations may interact with other IGOs (e.g., for the purpose of information exchange), but policy-making still takes place in the individual IGOs (Oberthür and Stokke 2011). The EU and NATO retain their own chain of command, even if they are closely cooperating in theater. As, for example, Rafael Biermann (2008, p. 168) succinctly notes: '[t]he bottom-line is: Asymmetric relations are avoided, for they imply dependence and hierarchy.'

While there may not be any case where an IGO gets outvoted by other IGOs, there are also hardly cases where relations between IGOs are completely equal. When it comes to the Greek bailout, for example, the EU is a more prominent actor than the IMF. In fact, the IMF is almost an EU agent, despite the considerable financial contributions and its formal autonomy (see Hodson 2015 for the complicated relationship). This is puzzling given the significant unilateral control of the USA over the IMF (Thacker 1999; Stone 2004, 2008, 2011; Oatley and Yackee 2004; Broz and Hawes 2006). Which international organization informally calls the shots, of course, depends on a whole range of reasons, such as authority, asymmetrical interdependence, capabilities, and so on. The main point for symmetry is, however, whether decisions are arrived at through equality or whether there is one more dominant international organization.

Symmetry is thus an important dimension for IORs between IGOs. It builds on both the international relations and organization theory literature. It adds power as well as politics to the equation. Together with formalization and intensity dimensions, it provides a good understanding of the relations between international organizations. What these dimensions still miss is the long-term perspective: the extent to which interactions have become standardized and part of the standard operating procedures of international organizations.

2.4 Standardization

The final dimension concerns the standardization of relations between IGOs. Standardization differs from formalization in that it concerns the substance rather than the form of institutionalization (Marrett 1971). Standardization helps lowering 'the transaction costs per unit of work' (Aldrich 1977, p. 277) between international organizations. It is essentially about whether interactions have grown into business-like relationships that occur repeatedly and almost automatically over time, following a similar recipe. There are again two indicators of standardization: the extent to which exchangeable units are agreed upon and procedures for interaction exist.

The definition of exchangeable units is important for many IGOs when they interact with other IGOs in their relations with other IGOs. A frequent point of concern in the interaction between the UN, NATO, and the EU is, for example, the interoperability of communication and information

systems during operations (see, e.g., NATO 2006). Standardization is, however, not only concerned with the exchange of goods. It can also be about the definition of vocabulary. Generic concepts such as ‘sustainable development,’ ‘human rights,’ and ‘terrorism’ may have quite different meanings within different IGOs. Ensuring a ‘safe and security environment’—a widely applicable military term—has become a more standardized concept, while ‘impartiality’ remains under debate (Donald 2002).

At least as important as the substantive exchangeable units is the standardization of the procedures of interaction. There is wide variation, in this respect, in the types of procedures. The mentioned Berlin Plus agreement describes how the EU can make use of NATO assets. The EU–UN cooperation in Military Crisis Management Operations (2004) provides an overview of the various modalities of how the EU and UN forces can work together in military affairs (e.g., EU member states providing capabilities for UN mission, EU providing a standby force or bridging operation, or EU and UN working together in theater). The IMF and the WTO have relatively well-established procedures governing their interaction as well (IMF 2014; WTO [n.d.]).

There are often procedures of interaction of IGOs on the ground in third countries. In Bosnia, for example, all relevant IGOs (EU, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], World Bank, IMF, NATO, OSCE, United Nations Development Program [UNDP]) are part of the so-called Board of Principals under the leadership of the High Representative (Office of the High Representative 2002). This coordination body has established some guidelines to avoid overlapping responsibilities and effort. Similarly, in Kosovo, the EU and NATO have established guidelines on how to deal with riot control. When riots include para-military violence, NATO takes over from EU police. The existence of such detailed procedures is an indicator of a high level of standardization.

Important as standardization is in the relations between international organizations, this is also a dimension that shows us the difficulty of creating continuous relationships between IGOs. The absence of standardization in many cases—even between IGOs that are close—is evidence of the fact that relations between IGOs are oftentimes not business-like. Instead, they are subject to underlying political considerations. The relationship between the EU and NATO, for example, and the petty fights between Cyprus and Turkey differ in this respect from the relations between Apple and its touchscreen suppliers, which are subject to market forces. Standardization nonetheless provides a useful yardstick against which to measure the interaction between IGOs, particularly on more technical issues such as interoperability.

3. Conclusion: Future Research

With the substantial increase in IGOs since the end of the Cold War (Pevehouse et al. 2004; Stokke and Oberthür 2011), international organizations regularly interact with each other. This chapter has outlined opportunities to study their relations from a rational design perspective. It starts from the assumption that states take great care in designing their international institutions. And that the same can be said of international organizations when they interact with other IGOs. International organizations almost always require the explicit or tacit consent of their membership. They are also likely to take relevant independent variables—such as uncertainty, distributional and enforcement problems, and the number of actors—seriously. This makes an analysis of the rational design of relations between international organizations important.

The chapter has combined insights from organization theory and the international relations literature to put forward four dimensions of IORs: formalization, intensity, symmetry, and standardization. Creating bridges between these two rather different disciplines has proved useful. Established

insights from organization theory speak surprisingly well to concepts from the rational design literature in international relations. The further use of these dimensions thus has to have the potential to contribute to both disciplines. The field of international relations, and international organizations more in particular, can benefit from robust ideas developed over the past decades. The field of organization theory can be further expanded to also include international organizations in its empirical scope. The four dimensions which are relatively easy to operationalize are useful in this regard.

While there is thus much to be gained from future research on the rational design of IORs in international relations, a note of caution is in place. The trouble with organization theory is that it deals with the field of economics and not with the field of politics. It has been long recognized that it is not at all straightforward to transfer insights from economics to politics, as many of the functional perspectives ignore the omnipresence of power (Moe 1990). This requires an important caveat. As much of this chapter has indeed noted, power and sovereignty put severe limits on the extent that interaction between international organizations can be institutionalized. If IGOs jointly engage in activities, this potentially creates further distance between the member states and the implemented policy, which makes oversight more difficult. Because of the risk of agency loss, the design of IORs in international relations is therefore likely to be informal, intensive outside the formal settings, rather symmetrical and not standardized.

The issue of politics leads immediately to the key question who are the designers of IORs? On the one hand, the IGOs themselves can be seen as key drivers behind the interaction. By fostering relationships with other IGOs, they can develop agency beyond their own membership. After all, the IORs are one step further removed from the formal political power holders. Alternatively, IGOs may be wary about entertaining relations with other IGOs, as it might negatively affect their resource base and their organizational autonomy (Biermann 2008). Indeed, member states often have to actually force IGOs to cooperate better between each other. That IGOs are involved in the design of institutions creates an additional level of complexity and is an independent variable worth studying (see Johnson 2013, 2014). This intra-IGO politics may well turn out a critical explanation for the rational design of IORs.

A discussion on the independent variables triggers questions about future research. It is useful to make four points. First, each of the four dimensions can be studied in its own right. Just as the variables of the rational design project became topics of papers, these four dimensions also demand more attention. Second, the interaction between these dimensions is worth exploring. One claim could be that asymmetrical relationships are more likely to be subject to formal agreements than symmetrical ones. Third, the dimensions are presented as dependent variables in this chapter, but are of course also independent ones. Moreover, independent variables to explain the four dimensions still need to be identified. Fourth, in terms of research method, it would be interesting to compare quantitative population studies of IORs with qualitative case studies. This chapter has only been able to explore the rational design of relations between international organizations. Now it is time to get to work.

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