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# International organizations' responses to member state contestation: from inertia to resilience

GISELA HIRSCHMANN\*

International organizations (IOs) are meeting with increasing resistance, both from societies and from member states.<sup>1</sup> Recent examples are the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU, the threat of several African states to leave the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the cuts in the previous US government's financial contributions to various IOs. Such accumulated contestation by member states has raised a debate about whether or not the current international order has been in a crisis.<sup>2</sup>

In order to be able to assess the extent of any such crisis, I argue in this article that we first need to understand how IOs themselves respond to such existential challenges. So far, most of the existing literature has focused on reactions by other member states.<sup>3</sup> Studies on withdrawals from membership, for example, have examined the reactions of the remaining member states, but have not taken into consideration the complex interplay between the IO's bureaucracy and its member states.<sup>4</sup> While the role of member states is important, our understanding

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<sup>1</sup> Stefanie Walter, 'The backlash against globalization', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 24, 2021, pp. 421–42; Michael Zürn, 'Contested global governance', *Global Policy* 9: 1, 2018, pp. 138–45.

<sup>2</sup> Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Stephanie C. Hofmann, 'Of the contemporary global order, crisis, and change', *Journal of European Public Policy* 27: 7, 2020, pp. 1077–89; Liesbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz and Gary Marks, 'Contested world order: the delegitimation of international governance', *Review of International Organizations* 14: 4, 2019, pp. 731–43; G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Debre and Hylke Dijkstra, 'Institutional design for a post-liberal order: why some international organizations live longer than others', *European Journal of International Relations* 27: 1, 2021, pp. 311–39; Julia Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie? The vitality of international organizations', *International Studies Quarterly* 62: 1, 2018, pp. 1–13. For exceptions, see Robert B. McCalla, 'NATO's persistence after the Cold War', *International Organization* 50: 3, 1996, pp. 445–75; Tim Heinkelmann-Wild and Vytautas Jankauskas, 'To yield or shield? Comparing international public administrations' responses to member states' policy contestation', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, publ. online Nov. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2020.1822144>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 Sept. 2021.)

<sup>4</sup> Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 'Death of international organizations: the organizational ecology of intergovernmental organizations, 1815–2015', *Review of International Organizations* 15: 2, 2020, pp. 339–70; Stefanie Walter, *The mass politics of international disintegration*, CIS working paper no. 105 (University of Zurich, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-188107>.

of IOs' responses to contestation remains incomplete without an analysis of the internal dynamics inside IO bureaucracies.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this article asks how IO bureaucracies shape IOs' responses to contestation.

I investigate three types of bureaucratic responses to contestation, namely: *inertia*, i.e. no response; *adaptation*, i.e. introducing institutional changes to maintain the support of the challenging member state(s); and *resilience-building*, i.e. developing organizational capacities to limit contestation by member states. Integrating an organization perspective into International Relations (IR) research on IOs, I argue that each of these responses is a result of the IO's bureaucracy following specific pathways in which it does or does not undertake particular actions. By examining mechanisms of hunkering down, negotiation, framing, coalition-building, shaming and professionalization, I highlight the added value of the analysis of IO bureaucracies for the study of institutional change.

Through this conceptual framework, this article contributes to the rapidly evolving scholarship on IO survival and IO termination. So far, this field of research has focused on the systemic conditions that explain patterns of regime endurance and IO termination.<sup>6</sup> During periods of geopolitical crises, young, small and/or decentralized IOs in particular are more likely to 'die'.<sup>7</sup> From the few contributions that have analysed the role of IO bureaucracies, we know that bureaucratic autonomy matters for IOs' survival.<sup>8</sup> How exactly this autonomy plays out when IOs are confronted with life-threatening challenges, however, remains unclear. When IOs are under pressure, not only member states but also IO bureaucracies engage in self-legitimation strategies as they have an intrinsic motivation to gather support for their work.<sup>9</sup>

I use the case of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to investigate the role of IO bureaucracies through the lens of a least-likely case for bureaucratic autonomy. Through a qualitative within-case comparison and process-tracing, I study UNFPA's responses to three periods of contestation, in 1985–92, 2002–2007 and 2017–20. The analysis investigates how the specific activities of UNFPA's bureaucracy helped a young and small organization with initially little autonomy to resist existential challenges and ultimately become more resilient. The study reveals that the organization's threat perception, the position of other member states and its bureaucratic leadership are relevant explanatory factors that need to be considered when theorizing the variation in IO responses to contestation.

<sup>5</sup> Rafael Biermann, 'The role of international bureaucracies', in Rafael Biermann and Joachim A. Koops, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of inter-organizational relations in world politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 243–70; Steffen Eckhard and Jörn Ege, 'International bureaucracies and their influence on policy-making: a review of empirical evidence', *Journal of European Public Policy* 23: 7, 2016, pp. 960–78.

<sup>6</sup> Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer and Volker Rittberger, *Theories of international regimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 'What kills international organisations? When and why international organisations terminate', *European Journal of International Relations* 27: 1, 2021, pp. 281–310; Debre and Dijkstra, 'Institutional design'.

<sup>7</sup> Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 'What kills international organisations?'.

<sup>8</sup> Gray, 'Life, death, or zombie?'.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Jennifer Gronau and Henning Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy in world politics: international institutions' legitimation strategies', *Review of International Studies* 42: 3, 2016, pp. 535–57; Monika Heupel and Michael Zürn, eds, *Protecting the individual from international authority: human rights in international organizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

The article proceeds as follows. In the following section, I develop a conceptual framework to analyse bureaucratic responses to member state contestation. Thereafter, I analyse how UNFPA responded to contestation in the form of budget cuts in three instances, based on a combination of semi-structured interviews, primary documents and archival material, such as oral history interviews from the Sophia Smith Collection. The penultimate section discusses potential relevant variables for theorizing IO responses to contestation in the light of organization research and IR theory. The conclusion discusses the implications of the findings for current and future research on IOs.

## **The responses of IO bureaucracies to member state contestation**

The existence of IOs relies on contributions of money and personnel, a functioning membership body and policies implemented by member states.<sup>10</sup> States use numerous ways not only to influence IOs according to their interests, but also to contest IOs' authority or individual policies.<sup>11</sup> While membership withdrawals and budget cuts are nothing new in the history of IOs, these acts can pose a significant threat to the existence of IOs, especially if driven by nationalist and populist attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

This article is based on the assumption that IOs are autonomous actors and therefore have an inherent interest in maintaining their positions in the current multilateral order.<sup>13</sup> In response to member state contestation, some IOs opt for a conciliatory tone in their communicative responses, whereas others are more assertive.<sup>14</sup> This article builds on previous studies by focusing on the role of bureaucracies in shaping IO responses to contestation by member states. Drawing on the insights of organization theory, I propose three types of bureaucratic responses: inertia, adaptation and resilience-building.

*Inertia.* We should not expect IOs always to respond with action to member state contestation. On the contrary, there might not be any immediate response to the challenges. Not responding can be a strategic decision; but it can also mean that an IO is simply ignoring the challenge and sticking to institutional routines.<sup>15</sup> Inertia can therefore be a result of either a strategic decision or an organization's

<sup>10</sup> Erin R. Graham, 'Money and multilateralism: how funding rules constitute IO governance', *International Theory* 7: 1, 2015, pp. 162–94; Danesh Sarooshi, *International organizations and their exercise of sovereign powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, 'Hello, goodbye: when do states withdraw from international organizations?', *Review of International Organizations* 14: 2, 2019, pp. 335–66; Francesco Francioni, 'Multilateralism à la carte: the limits of unilateral withholdings of assessed contributions to the UN budget', *European Journal of International Law* 11: 1, 2000, pp. 43–59; Julia C. Morse and Robert O. Keohane, 'Contested multilateralism', *Review of International Organizations* 9: 4, 2014, pp. 385–412; Daniel L. Nielson and Michael J. Tierney, 'Delegation to international organizations: agency theory and World Bank environmental reform', *International Organization* 57: 2, 2003, pp. 241–76.

<sup>12</sup> Karen J. Alter, James T. Gathii and Laurence R. Helfer, 'Backlash against international courts in west, east and southern Africa: causes and consequences', *European Journal of International Law* 27: 2, 2016, pp. 293–328.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the world: international organizations in global politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas, 'To yield or shield?'

<sup>15</sup> Tine Hanrieder, 'The path-dependent design of international organizations: federalism in the World Health Organization', *European Journal of International Relations* 21: 1, 2015, pp. 215–39.

'blind spots'.<sup>16</sup> Following McConnell and 't Hart, I define inertia as 'an instance and/or pattern of non-intervention' by an IO in response to member state contestation.<sup>17</sup>

How can inertia be observed at the bureaucratic level? Research has shown that IOs communicate strategically.<sup>18</sup> Avoiding 'unfavorable headlines' through overt judicial activism has been identified as a 'survival strategy' used in particular by international courts and human rights institutions facing a populist backlash.<sup>19</sup> Hunkering down allows the IO bureaucracy to keep a low profile and to continue its work without changes. Empirically, hunkering down can be observed, for example, in an IO bureaucracy's refusal to issue public statements or press declarations on a contested issue, or regarding its relationship with the challenging member state, indicating an overall decrease in public visibility.

*Adaptation.* This response type is based on the theoretical assumptions of the principal-agent approach, according to which IOs, as the agents of their member states, make efforts to satisfy the principals' demands.<sup>20</sup> Thus the IO changes its policy to maintain the support of the challenging member state(s). Some decades ago, the threat of significant budget cuts by the US government under President Reagan led to adaptation in policy- and decision-making in, for example, the World Bank.<sup>21</sup> Further indicators of adaptation are policy reforms that grant the challenging state greater influence. Adaptation aims at accommodating the contesting state to the point where this state refrains from further contestation.

IO bureaucracies actively shape adaptation through framing and negotiation. To demonstrate to the challenging member state its willingness to adapt, an IO may rename a contested policy (e.g. adopting 'maternal health' instead of 'reproductive health') or stop the implementation of contested programmes (e.g. projects addressing climate change in response to the Trump administration's budget cuts). Moreover, we know from previous research that IO bureaucracies influence institution-building and shape the agenda of international negotiations.<sup>22</sup> We can thus expect these bureaucracies to actively negotiate aspects of policies and budgets with individual member state governments, especially if their resources are based primarily on voluntary contributions.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Tobias Bach and Kai Wegrich, *The blind spots of public bureaucracy and the politics of non-coordination* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Allan McConnell and Paul 't Hart, 'Inaction and public policy: understanding why policymakers "do nothing"', *Policy Sciences* 52: 4, 2019, pp. 645–61.

<sup>18</sup> Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, 'International organizations "going public"? An event-history analysis of public communication reforms from 1950 to 2015', *International Studies Quarterly* 62: 4, 2018, pp. 723–36.

<sup>19</sup> Laurence R. Helfer, *Populism and international human rights institutions: a survival guide*, iCourts working paper series no. 133 (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Darren G. Hawkins, David A. Lake, Daniel L. Nielson and Michael J. Tierney, eds, *Delegation and agency in international organizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Karns and Karen A. Mingst, *The United States and multilateral institutions: patterns of changing instrumentality and influence* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 306.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Biermann and Bernd Siebenhüner, 'Problem solving by international bureaucracies', in Bob Reinalda, ed., *Routledge handbook of international organization* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 149–61; Tana Johnson and Johannes Urpelainen, 'International bureaucrats and the formation of intergovernmental organizations: institutional design discretion sweetens the pot', *International Organization* 68: 1, 2014, pp. 177–209.

<sup>23</sup> Jörn Ege and Michael W. Bauer, 'How financial resources affect the autonomy of international public admin-

*Resilience-building* characterizes an IO's response where the bureaucracy develops organizational capacities to limit and push back against contestation by member states. This response type builds on theories of organizational autonomy, which find that IOs are able to 'insulate' themselves from the control of member states.<sup>24</sup> Instead of classifying this as dysfunctional organizational behaviour,<sup>25</sup> we can see resilience-building as helping an IO to protect itself against the challenging member state. While resilience has often simply been equated with persistence and longevity, the concept also includes a transformational component.<sup>26</sup> Resilience-building can thus be indicated by institutional changes that help the IO counter further contestation by member states, for example through resource diversification, a larger and more diversified staff body, or more permanent institutional structures for crisis management.<sup>27</sup> While changes in funding rules and assessed contributions require the consent of member states, bureaucracies of IOs that base their funding on voluntary contributions may enhance their independence by expanding these sources of finance.<sup>28</sup>

There are several ways in which IO bureaucracies can contribute to resilience-building. Previous research has revealed that, where formal enforcement power is lacking, shaming of member states is a fairly common practice among IOs.<sup>29</sup> We can also expect IO bureaucracies to use this strategy when a member state is contesting its mandate or core policies. Shaming constitutes a strategy of normative sanctioning that can lead to reputational damage for the contesting member state, both internationally and domestically.<sup>30</sup> By this means, the IO bureaucracy attempts to rhetorically delegitimize contestation, and thus to prevent other member states from engaging in similar behaviour.

Furthermore, we know from the literature on inter-organizational relations that international bureaucracies build relations with peer organizations, non-state actors and like-minded member states.<sup>31</sup> Besides these external coalitions, inter-

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istrations', *Global Policy* 8: 5, 2017, pp. 75–84; Ronny Patz and Klaus H. Goetz, *Managing money and discord in the UN: budgeting and bureaucracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Tana Johnson, *Organizational progeny: why governments are losing control over the proliferating structures of global governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the world*.

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourbeau, *On resilience: genealogy, logics, and world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Louise K. Comfort, Arjen Boin and Chris C. Demchak, eds, *Designing resilience: preparing for extreme events* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), p. 25; Klaus H. Goetz and Ronny Patz, 'Resourcing international organizations: resource diversification, organizational differentiation, and administrative governance', *Global Policy* 8: 5, 2017, pp. 5–14; Eugénia Heldt and Henning Schmidtke, 'Measuring the empowerment of international organizations: the evolution of financial and staff capabilities', *Global Policy* 8: 5, 2017, pp. 51–61; Julia Hillmann and Edeltraud Guenter, 'Organizational resilience: a valuable construct for management research?', *International Journal of Management Reviews* 23: 1, 2021, pp. 7–44.

<sup>28</sup> Ege and Bauer, 'How financial resources affect the autonomy'.

<sup>29</sup> Teresa Squatrito, Magnus Lundgren and Thomas Sommerer, 'Shaming by international organizations: mapping condemnatory speech acts across 27 international organizations, 1980–2015', *Cooperation and Conflict* 54: 3, 2019, pp. 356–77.

<sup>30</sup> Heinkelmann-Wild and Jankauskas, 'To yield or shield?'.

<sup>31</sup> Liliana B. Andonova, *Governance entrepreneurs: international organizations and the rise of global public-private partnerships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Biermann, 'The role of international bureaucracies'; Jonas Tallberg, Thomas Sommerer, Teresa Squatrito and Krister Jönsson, *The opening up of international organizations: transnational access in global governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

national bureaucracies engage in networking with like-minded states, which may support them *vis-à-vis* the contesting state.<sup>32</sup> Bureaucracies can also connect with civil society organizations, media organizations and subnational actors in efforts to shift public opinion in favour of their organization.<sup>33</sup> Through coalition-building, IO bureaucracies can proactively build up resilience in anticipation of potential future contestation.

Finally, IO bureaucracies can engage in management professionalization to build resilience. Recent research on the League of Nations has revealed how the League’s Secretary-General used staffing decisions to increase the autonomy of the Secretariat.<sup>34</sup> IOs have also professionalized their communication channels when publicly challenged in order to legitimize themselves.<sup>35</sup> Through professionalization of fundraising, an IO’s bureaucracy can build up additional financial capacities that contribute to resilience.

Table 1 summarizes how IO bureaucracies are able to shape IOs’ institutional responses to member state contestation. The mechanisms through which we may analyse the active role of IO bureaucracies are hunkering down, framing, negotiation, shaming, coalition-building and professionalization. The three response types—inertia, adaptation and resilience-building—and the individual mechanisms within each response type are conceptualized as ideal-types, which in reality may take place simultaneously or overlap. Given the complexity of bureaucracies, different subsections of a bureaucracy may engage in different mechanisms at the same time.

**Table 1: Bureaucratic responses to contestation**

<i>Response type</i>	<i>Bureaucratic mechanism</i>
Inertia	Hunkering down
Adaptation	Framing Negotiation
Resilience-building	Shaming Coalition-building Professionalization

These response types relate to institutional change in different ways. While inertia implies no change, adaptation and resilience-building are two forms of

<sup>32</sup> Tana Johnson, ‘Cooperation, co-optation, competition, conflict: international bureaucracies and non-governmental organizations in an interdependent world’, *Review of International Political Economy* 23: 5, 2016, pp. 737–67.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Bernauer and Robert Gampfer, ‘Effects of civil society involvement on popular legitimacy of global environmental governance’, *Global Environmental Change* 23: 2, 2013, pp. 439–49.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Gram-Skjoldager and Haakon A. Ikonomou, ‘The construction of the League of Nations Secretariat: formative practices of autonomy and legitimacy in international organizations’, *International History Review* 41: 2, 2019, pp. 257–79.

<sup>35</sup> Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt, ‘Self-legitimation in the face of politicization: why international organizations centralized public communication’, *Review of International Organizations* 13: 4, 2018, pp. 519–46.

institutional change that operate very distinctly. Adaptation implies changes intended to accommodate the challenging state's demands; accordingly, an IO bureaucracy choosing this response frames its activities along the lines of the contesting state's demands and rhetoric. In negotiations, the bureaucracy offers changes in the contested activities or its institutional structure as concessions to the challenging state. By contrast, resilience-building results in institutional changes that intend to constrain the contesting state and prevent further attempts at contestation by this or any other state.

Of course, IO bureaucracies are not the only relevant actors shaping institutional responses to contestation. As we know from the literature on IO design, significant institutional changes cannot be adopted without the support of at least a critical mass of states.<sup>36</sup> While acknowledging that member states play an important role in IOs, this article focuses on the range of activities used by IO bureaucracies in response to contestation. I argue that investigating the use of bureaucratic mechanisms in situations of existential challenge will help us generate new hypotheses on the intra-organizational dynamics at play in response to contestation.

### *Research design and methods*

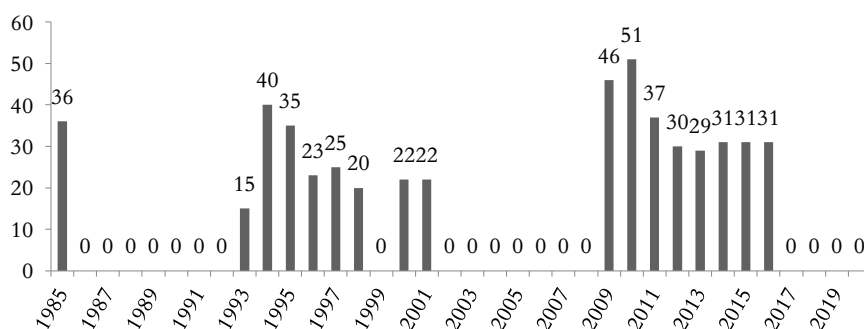
This analysis is designed as a theory-building study that examines the responses of IO bureaucracies to existential challenges. Budget cuts have become a powerful way for states to express their disapproval of certain aspects of multilateral cooperation.<sup>37</sup> While most member states are notoriously late payers and often withhold payments for various reasons, budget cuts have significant implications for the functioning and the policy scope of an IO that might, under specific circumstances, lead to its decline. Used as a means of contestation, budget cuts can—in a fashion similar to membership withdrawals—significantly challenge an IO's existence.

I use the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) as a within-case analysis through which to investigate bureaucratic responses to contestation. Over the course of its existence, UNFPA has been confronted with US budget cuts three times: first during the Reagan administration, second under that of G. W. Bush, and for the third time under Donald Trump (see figure 1 [overleaf], which shows 1999 as another year in which a Republican-dominated US Congress cut contributions to UNFPA). By studying UNFPA's responses to budget cuts as a comparative within-case analysis, I trace the processes reflecting different responses over time, taking into account earlier experiences when analysing UNFPA's responses to later challenges. For each of these three periods, I analyse the bureaucratic mechanisms that shaped UNFPA's responses to contestation.

<sup>36</sup> Darren Hawkins et al., *Delegation and agency*, ch. 1; Orfeo Fioretos, 'Historical institutionalism in International Relations', *International Organization* 65: 2, 2011, pp. 367–99; Liesbet Hooghe, Tobias Lenz and Gary Marks, *A theory of international organization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 107.

<sup>37</sup> Francioni, 'Multilateralism à la carte'.



**Figure 1: US contributions to UNFPA, US\$ million, 1985–2019**

Source: Data retrieved from The Kaiser Family Foundation, *UNFPA funding & Kemp-Kasten: an explainer*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/unfpa-funding-kemp-kasten-an-explainer/>.

By studying the dynamics underlying these episodes, I seek to derive more systematic theoretical explanations of the variation in response types. Given UNFPA's small size and relatively young age at the time of the first budget cuts, we can consider it a least-likely case to resist existential challenges.<sup>38</sup> At the time of those first budget cuts, UNFPA was a very small organization, with only four senior staff and little bureaucratic autonomy, whose mandate had changed from a technical concern with demographics to the highly politicized topic of promoting sexual and reproductive health.<sup>39</sup> Having been in existence for only 15 years when the US government decided to cut its budget for the first time, the organization faced a significant challenge rather early in its lifetime. Studying the bureaucratic responses of such a small and relatively non-autonomous organization will therefore reveal important generalizable insights that will hold also for larger and more autonomous IOs whose secretariats usually have more room for manoeuvre. Moreover, the fact that UNFPA has already been challenged by the same state three times during its history makes it a good case to study path-dependent effects. Through this approach I intend to gain more insights into the life-cycles of IOs and the 'hidden' dynamics at work in responses to existential challenges that have to date been insufficiently studied.<sup>40</sup>

When studying UNFPA's responses to contestation, it is important to keep in mind that it is not a monolithic organization. The organizational units relevant for this analysis are UNFPA's executive director and senior leadership, the divisions at headquarters level, the liaison offices (in particular those in Washington DC and Brussels) and the field offices (in particular in China). Some of these organizational units did not exist when UNFPA first came into existence, but evolved over

<sup>38</sup> Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 'What kills international organisations?'

<sup>39</sup> Nafis Sadik, 'Interview', Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection (New York: Smith College, 24 July 2003), p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> Julia Gray, 'Life, death, inertia, change: the hidden lives of international organizations', *Ethics and International Affairs* 34: 1, 2020, pp. 33–42.

time. The analysis further includes UNFPA's executive board, which approves its policies and programmes.<sup>41</sup> This allows us also to take the role of member states into account while focusing on the bureaucratic responses.

The analysis relies on a combination of semi-structured interviews with UNFPA staff members and civil society organizations such as Population Action International (PAI) and Friends of UNFPA, and an analysis of archival material such as oral history interviews from the Sophia Smith Collection; in addition, I use publicly available primary documents from UNFPA, PAI and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), as well as secondary literature from the field of population research.

## **UNFPA's responses to contestation: a stairway to resilience in global population politics**

UNFPA was created during a period of extensive population growth worldwide, to support and advise governments in developing population policies through voluntary family planning, 'without violating the dignity and freedom of the human person'.<sup>42</sup> Originally established in 1967 on the initiative of the US government as the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, its budget has been, and remains today, entirely based on voluntary contributions. In the early years, the US government matched every financial contribution by other states and thus contributed by far the largest share to UNFPA's overall budget.<sup>43</sup> This active role of the US government in global population policies, however, changed in the 1980s.

### *The Mexico City Policy and budget cuts under the Reagan administration: UNFPA's responses*

UNFPA's international family planning programmes promoted voluntariness, but several participating countries adopted coercive policies which led to grave human rights abuses such as coercive sterilization or abortion.<sup>44</sup> From the early 1980s, China's one-child policy in particular caused great concern. This strengthened the position of the anti-choice and religious right coalition in the United States. Domestic opposition to international population activities eventually became linked with a growing dissatisfaction with US engagement in UN institutions. The Reagan administration fundamentally departed from previous US administrations' support for global population policy. At the International Population Conference held in Mexico in 1984, the US delegate James Buckley announced what became known as the Mexico City Policy or the 'global gag rule'. In his

<sup>41</sup> Stirling Scruggs, 'Interview', Population and Reproductive Health Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection (New Paltz, NY: Smith College, 17–18 July 2005), p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> Stanley Johnson, *World population and the United Nations: challenge and response* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 250.

<sup>43</sup> EveryCRSreport, *The UN Population Fund: background and the US funding debate*, 15 July 2010, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL32703.html>, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Paige W. Eager, 'From population control to reproductive rights: understanding normative change in global population policy (1965–1994)', *Global Society* 18: 2, 2004, pp. 145–73.

conference statement, he declared that ‘before the US will contribute funds to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities, it will first require concrete assurances that the UNFPA is not engaged in, and does not provide funding for, abortion or coercive family planning programs’.<sup>45</sup>

Two senators in the US Congress used this momentum to introduce an amendment to Congress’s annual legislation on foreign operations appropriations, stipulating that ‘US funds will not be made available to any organization or program which, as determined by the President, supports or participates in the management of a program of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization’.<sup>46</sup> Taken together, the Mexico City Policy and the Kemp–Kasten amendment constituted a fundamental turnaround in US engagement with UNFPA, with significant implications for the organization’s financial resource base.

The announcement of the Mexico City Policy took conference participants by surprise.<sup>47</sup> Nothing in the US government’s participation in the preparatory meetings had indicated the imminence of this fundamental shift in the US commitment to international population programmes. During the conference, the other member states’ delegations did not outspokenly confront the United States on the announced policy shift. On the contrary, the outcome document adopted at the conference urged governments ‘to take appropriate steps to help women avoid abortion, which in no case should be promoted as a method of family planning’.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the document also recognized unambiguously the ‘leading role’ of UNFPA in global population policies.<sup>49</sup>

Statements by high-ranking UNFPA staff reveal that the budget cuts were perceived as a significant threat by the organization.<sup>50</sup> At the time when the cuts were announced, the US government still made 25 per cent of all financial contributions to UNFPA’s core budget.<sup>51</sup> UNFPA’s executive director at the time, Rafael Salas, predicted that the cuts would not only disrupt the organization’s programmes but ‘stall the momentum generated by UNFPA’.<sup>52</sup> UNFPA’s initial response to the Mexico City Policy can be characterized as hunkering down:

We kept our head down ... Maybe it’ll go away. Let’s not say anything. Instead of coming out very forcefully and publicly about the Chinese, and forcefully saying to the US, You’re crazy. This is what we do. It’s kind of a bureaucratic thing. If you don’t make decisions and rock the boat, you’re not going to get in trouble.<sup>53</sup>

In parallel, UNFPA’s leadership also made efforts to accommodate the US’s demands to a certain extent. Their strategy was to ‘try to maybe rearrange the program, talk to the Chinese behind the scenes’.<sup>54</sup> In numerous negotiations

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *World population and the United Nations*, p. 256.

<sup>46</sup> EveryCRSreport, *The UN Population Fund*.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, *World population and the United Nations*, p. 254.

<sup>48</sup> Johnson, *World population and the United Nations*, p. 259.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *World population and the United Nations*, p. 280.

<sup>50</sup> Rafael M. Salas, ‘Statement 25 September 1985’, *Population and Development Review* 12: 1, 1986, pp. 161–2.

<sup>51</sup> EveryCRSreport, *The UN Population Fund*, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Salas, ‘Statement’.

<sup>53</sup> Scruggs, ‘Interview’, p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> Sadik, ‘Interview’, p. 63.

conducted especially by Executive Director Salas, UNFPA's senior leadership tried to persuade the United States to reverse its position.<sup>55</sup> But it became clear that Washington was not interested in any compromise, despite a USAID investigation finding no evidence for UNFPA being involved in coercive measures: 'We were just spinning our wheels for nothing at all.'<sup>56</sup>

After a change in the organization's leadership in 1987, UNFPA focused increasingly on the professionalization of its fundraising activities. During Salas's tenure, fundraising had successfully been prioritized as one of the core tasks of the executive director, and had generated an annual budget of \$142 million from 13 major donors in 1984.<sup>57</sup> When Nafis Sadik became executive director in 1987, a fundraising office was set up at headquarters level.<sup>58</sup> As a result, UNFPA managed to double contributions from other donors within the first ten years of Sadik's tenure as executive director.<sup>59</sup> By shifting attention to other donor states, this new fundraising strategy provided the basis for a first diversification of resources.

Overall, UNFPA's responses to the US budget cuts under the Reagan administration was mixed: at first, hunkering down and negotiation prevailed; then, towards the late 1980s, the focus shifted to the professionalization of fundraising among a wider range of donors. Thus inertia and adaptation were the two primary initial responses; then, after a change in leadership, the bureaucratic mechanisms increasingly included resilience-building activities. These processes were crucial in determining UNFPA's development throughout the 1990s and are therefore relevant for our understanding of its responses to the next period of budget cuts.

### *Responses to budget cuts during the Bush administration*

In 1993, the Clinton administration reinstated US funding for UNFPA. Then, in the early years of the George W. Bush presidency, the controversy about UNFPA's engagement in China resurfaced.<sup>60</sup> During the years 2002–2008, the US Congress invoked the Kemp–Kasten amendment and also requested that UNFPA manage US funding in separate accounts to prevent its being spent on programmes in China, despite finding no evidence for UNFPA's involvement in coercive abortion policies.<sup>61</sup>

While these funding cuts were still significant, by this time the role of the United States as a donor had changed significantly. When the White House reinstated the Mexico City Policy, the United States' position had diminished; whereas in 1985 it had been by far the largest contributor, providing 27.3 per cent of the organization's funding, by 2000 it had become the seventh largest contributor, providing only 8.1 per cent of the total. Compared to the 80 per cent

<sup>55</sup> Sadik, 'Interview', p. 77.

<sup>56</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> Salas, 'Statement', p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 39.

<sup>59</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 90; Sadik, 'Interview'.

<sup>60</sup> US funding for UNFPA continued during the first year of the G. W. Bush administration, mainly owing to Colin Powell's influence within the administration: see Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 101.

<sup>61</sup> EveryCRSreport, *The UN Population Fund*, p. 11.

that America contributed to UNFPA's budget when it came into existence, this constituted a very marked decline. Moreover, inside UNFPA, the previous cuts had isolated the United States in such a way that senior UNFPA positions would no longer be given to Americans.<sup>62</sup> Statements by UNFPA's senior staff members demonstrate that the organization had become used to the unreliability of US funding: 'We knew that if you cared about family planning, ... that the money ain't going to come from the US for the foreseeable future.'<sup>63</sup> Initially a significant threat to the organization's existence, by the early 2000s US budget cuts had become something UNFPA needed to work with.

At the same time, support for UNFPA among other member states had been growing, especially in the aftermath of the Cairo conference in 1994.<sup>64</sup> This led to the formation of new coalitions among the UNFPA membership when the Bush government reinstated the Mexico City Policy: 'Most countries hated it [the Mexico City Policy]. The North Koreans thought it was so much fun to fight together with all the other countries against this policy.'<sup>65</sup> In response to the cuts, UNFPA established a new liaison office in Brussels to mobilize funding from the EU, especially the European Commission.<sup>66</sup> The EU assured the organization that it would increase its funding, and also encouraged its member states to step up and compensate for the reductions in US funding. Moreover, UNFPA used the united position of the other donors strategically to single out and shame the US government after the budget cuts were announced.<sup>67</sup> The organization had already professionalized its lobbying activities by establishing a permanent office in Washington DC in 1994.<sup>68</sup> After the budget cuts by the Bush government, UNFPA decided to build up a new funding base that included private foundations such as Rockefeller, Gates and the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH).<sup>69</sup> In addition, a new constellation of support formed: two American women, independently from each other, successfully launched campaigns asking 34 million US citizens to send \$1 each to UNFPA to compensate for the loss of US financial contributions under the Bush administration. Initially, UNFPA was rather sceptical about these actions, but increasingly embraced private contributions.<sup>70</sup>

At both headquarters and field levels, UNPFA started to professionalize its external communication in an effort to pre-empt and manage misinformation

<sup>62</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 97.

<sup>63</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 67.

<sup>64</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 95: 'But by [1984], every [developing] country in the world had a family planning program ... Even a country like Sudan talked about reproductive health'. See also Sadik, 'Interview', pp. 60, 97.

<sup>65</sup> Author interview 3 with UNFPA official, online, 18 May 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Author interview 4 with UNFPA official, online, 27 May 2020.

<sup>67</sup> 'During the Bush era, we had a concerted effort where we had ... contributions from almost every country at the world. One of our stories was even Afghanistan gave us a hundred dollars because they supported our work. And so, with the kind of talking point, every country in the world supports us except for one': author interview 1 with UNFPA official, in person, 20 Feb. 2020, Cambridge, MA. 'No other country has ever withheld funding from UNFPA. And in fact, we made a big fuss of it': author interview 3.

<sup>68</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 101.

<sup>69</sup> 'If you want it [i.e. family planning] to happen in the world, ... you've got to work with the people on the ground, the NGOs, and develop more and more contacts': Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 67.

<sup>70</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 101.

campaigns.<sup>71</sup> In addition, training for advocacy on behalf of UNFPA was systematized throughout the different field offices.<sup>72</sup> Media offices were established in UNFPA's branches in Mexico, Dakar, Senegal, Nairobi, Jordan and Kenya, and the staff in these offices were regularly trained by the senior leadership in dealing with communication crises.<sup>73</sup>

Overall, UNFPA's response to the George W. Bush administration's budget cuts reveals resilience-building on a number of levels. Despite the cuts, UNFPA's staff size increased to around 1,100 by 2005.<sup>74</sup> The resilience-building activities were facilitated by a decline in US influence, in view of its smaller contribution to UNFPA's budget, as well as more solid support for UNFPA by other donor states, both rhetorically and financially. UNFPA also professionalized its lobbying activity and its communications, notably with the establishment of liaison offices in Washington DC and Brussels. In particular, coalition-building with civil society actors, a wide donor community and private actors led to a diversification of its fundraising activities. This allowed UNFPA and its supporters to isolate and shame the US government within the executive board, domestically and internationally among the community of member states. These processes of proactive resilience-building proved crucial when the UNFPA came to address the most recent period of budget cuts, enacted by the Trump administration.

### *Reactions to budget cuts under the Trump administration*

The third period during which UNFPA was confronted with budget cuts from the US government started when President Trump took office in 2017.<sup>75</sup> In addition to these financial cuts, the Trump administration requested that the UN remove any references to reproductive health from its plan for a humanitarian response to COVID-19. On 18 May 2020, Acting USAID Administrator John Barsa, in a letter to the UN Secretary-General, requested that 'the UN should not use this [COVID-19] crisis as an opportunity to advance access to abortion as an essential service'.<sup>76</sup> Apart from the fact that nowhere in the COVID-19 response plan did the UN suggest this, such a letter from a staff member of the US administration to the highest UN official was unprecedented, disregarding as it did established diplomatic hierarchies and channels of communication.<sup>77</sup>

At the time of the cuts, the share of US funding in UNFPA's overall budget was around 10 per cent.<sup>78</sup> In contrast to other UN organizations such as UNICEF,

<sup>71</sup> Author interviews 1, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 136.

<sup>73</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 70.

<sup>74</sup> Scruggs, 'Interview', p. 98.

<sup>75</sup> 'Memorandum of justification for the determination regarding the "Kemp-Kasten Amendment", as cited in The Kaiser Family Foundation, *UNFPA funding & Kemp-Kasten: an explainer*, 14 May 2021, <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/unfpa-funding-kemp-kasten-an-explainer/>.

<sup>76</sup> USAID, 'Acting Administrator John Barsa letter to UN Secretary General Guterres', press release, 18 May 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/may-18-2020-acting-administrator-john-barsa-un-secretary-general-antonio-guterres>.

<sup>77</sup> Author interview 4.

<sup>78</sup> Author interview 1.

where the United States' contributions by far exceeded those of other member states, the US role within UNFPA had become less significant. According to UNFPA staff members, the American contribution was still important, but not as crucial as it had been in the early years: 'It is huge, of course, but not insurmountable.'<sup>79</sup> Moreover, previous funding cuts had harmed the perception of the United States inside UNFPA as a reliable source of funding: 'You know, we never count on American funding. It comes and goes.'<sup>80</sup> Clearly, then, from the perspective of UNFPA, budget cuts from the US government have changed from constituting a significant shock for the organization to a more regular challenge that the organization has learned to deal with.

The response mechanisms enacted by UNFPA also indicate this preparedness. Even before the cuts were announced, UNFPA's leadership had secured the support of other important donor states.<sup>81</sup> UNFPA still maintained its presence in Washington DC, with a view to achieving an exemption for humanitarian funding.<sup>82</sup> During this period, emphasizing the humanitarian aspects of its work became an important way for the organization to assert its relevance.<sup>83</sup> UNFPA has accordingly used the humanitarian frame to situate the issue of sexual and reproductive health in a broader context and appeal to a wider audience.<sup>84</sup>

Two other mechanisms prevailed in the UNFPA's responses to the budget cuts: coalition-building and professionalization. Alongside early coordination with other donor states, UNFPA headquarters focused on building a strong network with civil society organizations and private actors. Some of these activities were undertaken to counter further stigmatization of UNFPA and its partner organizations, and emphasize the relevance of its activities to the wider public.<sup>85</sup> A Strategic Partnerships Branch was established to reach out to private actors, including foundations and even individuals as supporters 'in kind' or as potential funders.<sup>86</sup> These coalition-building activities have been accompanied by significant professionalization inside UNFPA's bureaucratic structure. The Resource Mobilization Division and the Division for Communication and Strategic Partnerships have significantly expanded UNFPA's staffing in these areas, hiring staff members with private sector backgrounds as well as media and communication experts.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Author interview 1.

<sup>80</sup> Author interview 4.

<sup>81</sup> 'Our chief of resource mobilization was able to at least start the conversation with some of our other donors to say, in case this happens, we may be calling on you to help step up and bridge the gap': author interview 1.

<sup>82</sup> As a result of UNFPA's work in Washington, Democrats in the House and Senate released letters publicly calling on the Trump administration to grant a humanitarian exception to the US ban on funding for UNFPA: US Congress, 'Reps Speier, Lee, DeGette, Engel and Lowey, Senators Murray and Shaheen lead call for Sec Pompeo to immediately exempt global health funding for COVID-19 response from global gag rule and provide UNFPA humanitarian exemption', press release, 4 May 2020, <https://speier.house.gov/press-releases?ID=B74AE07F-2458-42F2-8DAA-E4F16950FF43>; <https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-blumenthal-murray-shaheen-dem-colleagues-lead-call-to-overturn-ideological-trump-administration-policies-that-undermine-global-health-and-covid-19-response>.

<sup>83</sup> Author interview 4.

<sup>84</sup> UNFPA, 'Humanitarian action', 2020 overview: brochure on file with the author.

<sup>85</sup> 'It is sometimes hard to get NGOs who we fund and work with to publicly back us': author interview 1.

<sup>86</sup> Author interview 2 with UNFPA official, online, 20 March 2020.

<sup>87</sup> 'I think headquarters has evolved ... over the last 20 years or so ... Handling the media is now done in an extremely professional way ... Also with all kinds of management support systems and enterprise resource

Throughout the bureaucracy, the perspective prevailed that hunkering down was no option and would even be dangerous.<sup>88</sup> Instead, the organization decided to push back, for the first time with the public support of the UN Secretary-General.<sup>89</sup> However, in contrast to the concerted shaming effort that UNFPA undertook with other donors in response to the earlier budget cuts under President Bush, the organization at this point focused on coalition-building with new partners, for example through an 'individual giving strategy' in a quest to become even more independent of particular donor states.<sup>90</sup> Overall, the organization has built up significant resilience, both by professionalizing fundraising and communication activities and by building new institutional channels to connect with a diversified resource base.

To sum up, we can see that UNFPA's response to budget cuts has evolved from initial attempts primarily at hunkering down and negotiation towards significant resilience-building. Following initial inertia and adaptation, UNFPA headquarters started to professionalize communication and fundraising among other donors. When the US government under President Bush cut its contributions, the UNFPA leadership secured support from other member states and engaged in a concerted effort to shame the United States for its cuts. In addition, the bureaucracy engaged in coalition-building with domestic civil society actors and professionalized its lobbying activities through offices in Washington and Brussels. These activities aimed to increase the legitimacy of UNFPA's work within a like-minded community and to raise awareness for the topic. This led to a greater diversification of UNFPA's funding base, including individual donations from American citizens. Finally, in anticipation of the most recent budget cuts under President Trump, UNFPA's leadership had already secured support from other donor governments prior to their announcement. In response to the cuts, UNFPA emphasized its work in humanitarian contexts, thereby legitimizing its work among the wider public by highlighting the less controversial aspects of its policies. Most importantly, UNFPA focused on coalition-building, in particular with private actors, and on exploring new channels for diversifying its financial resources beyond donor states, both at headquarters level and through field offices.

## **Exploring the variation in bureaucratic responses**

The empirical analysis presented above reveals several theoretical insights that are worth exploring to explain the variation in bureaucratic responses to contestation. This section discusses these potential explanatory factors by connecting them to existing IR research, in particular principal-agent theory, and organization research. In doing so, I take into consideration the characteristics of the IO

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planning, all the systems underneath it have professionalized': author interview 4.

<sup>88</sup> 'This is a political narrative and we're the low hanging fruit ... We try not to fall into that narrative, but we also don't hide below the parapet. We are very proud of our work. And we want to tell everyone what we do, because it's a life-saving human rights agenda': author interview 1.

<sup>89</sup> Author interview 1.

<sup>90</sup> 'I would say that's one super important lesson: don't take friends for granted and also expand the number of friends': author interview 1.



bureaucracy as well as the role of the IO's member states, both the contesting state and the other member states.

The empirical analysis has shown that UNFPA's perception of the severity of the threat that the US budget cuts posed for the organization has changed over time. Initially, these cuts were perceived by the organization's leadership as amounting to an existential threat. At this time, the predominant bureaucratic mechanisms adopted in response were inertia and adaptation attempts. Over the years, budget cuts became less of an existential threat and instead were perceived as a more regular challenge, which the organization even anticipated during the latest period of contestation. This changed threat perception corresponded with a significant increase in resilience-building activities.

These findings significantly challenge the expectations of organization theories, according to which less severe challenges or 'small-scale surprises' are more likely to lead to inertia or a 'wait-and-see' attitude, whereas challenges that are more costly are more likely to result in resilience-building approaches.<sup>91</sup> Instead, the findings seem to correspond more with the expectations of principal-agent theory, which argues that an IO is more vulnerable with regard to states that possess institutional veto power or contribute a large proportion of the IO's budget.<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, budget cuts from the largest contributing states are too costly to be ignored, whereas budget cuts from states with a smaller share in the IO's overall budget do not represent the same degree of severity for the organization. This indicates that the assumptions of organization theory need to be refined when applied to IOs.

The second factor that potentially influences the variation in IO responses to contestation is the position of other member states. In the years prior to the Mexico City conference, member states were not unified regarding multilateral cooperation on population, with a particular division between developing and developed countries.<sup>93</sup> During the Mexico conference, most member states did not expressly challenge the policy changes announced by the United States. Thus the outcome document of the conference reflected the new US position on abortion rather than adopting a more differentiated view on the issue. By contrast, member states were far more homogeneously supportive of UNFPA at the time of the budget cuts under the Bush and Trump administrations. By this time, funding for sexual and reproductive health, as well as the funding necessities of UNFPA, had become accepted by a majority of the UN's member states.<sup>94</sup>

These findings do largely correspond with the expectations of organization research. According to this perspective, inertia is more likely if there are competing power coalitions that block each other to stimulate action, or if there

<sup>91</sup> Johan M. Rosenschöld, Jaap G. Rozema and Laura A. Frye-Levine, 'Institutional inertia and climate change: a review of the new institutionalist literature', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5: 5, 2014, pp. 639–48; Comfort et al., *Designing resilience*, p. 19.

<sup>92</sup> Hawkins et al., *Delegation and agency*.

<sup>93</sup> Johnson, *World population and the United Nations*, p. 249.

<sup>94</sup> 'I think one of the reasons why we do get support either from governments or from NGOs is because I think people thought that sexual and reproductive rights would no longer be considered controversial': author interview 1.

are certain gatekeepers that prevent actions from being undertaken.<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, we would expect inertia if the other member states are divided in their views on how to respond to the challenge. Indeed, in the case of UNFPA, the only period of inertia occurred when other member states were not united in their attitude towards the challenge. Adaptation and resilience-building, in particular as reflected in measures involving changes in the funding rules, can take shape when a critical mass of member states are united on the issue.<sup>96</sup> Although UNFPA's funding rules have not changed, the increasingly solid support for the organization among member states allowed the bureaucracy to take proactive steps to diversify its funding and make full use of the flexibility provided by a funding system based on voluntary contributions. The findings also support the insights of the recent literature on membership withdrawals, which argues that the institutional impact of contestation is determined by the position of other member states.<sup>97</sup> An important additional insight of the analysis is that the position of other member states is neither predetermined nor stable; indeed, the analysis has revealed how IO bureaucracies can take an active role in promoting coalitions of support among member states and civil society actors.

Finally, the analysis also indicates that the change in UNFPA's bureaucratic responses to contestation corresponded with a change in the organization's executive leadership. This supports the argument of organization research that leadership strategies are crucial in building an organization's resilience.<sup>98</sup> Two important leadership strategies for resilience identified by existing research, namely facilitating 'emerging nodes of coordination' and organizing 'outside forces', seem to apply in this case.<sup>99</sup> The diversification of resources had already started under Rafael Salas. However, one of the reasons why UNFPA's diversifying fundraising strategy became so successful was the relationship Nafis Sadik managed to establish with the other donor countries represented on the executive board: 'They say I come in like a queen, reign on the executive board, and leave with my subjects eating out of my hand ... But it took a few years to do that, because in the beginning I think they were a bit suspicious about whether I could manage.'<sup>100</sup> Sadik's close ties to donor representatives on the executive board proved a valuable resource in enabling UNFPA to continue its programmes despite the cuts.

To summarize, the empirical analysis has revealed several factors that are relevant for theorizing IOs' responses to contestation. First, the degree to which contestation is perceived as a severe threat by the IO's bureaucracy seems to influence whether the organization engages in hunkering down or negotiation as opposed to resilience-building mechanisms. Second, the position of other member states, in terms of both their homogeneity and their support for the organization, appears

<sup>95</sup> McConnell and 't Hart, 'Inaction and public policy', p. 647.

<sup>96</sup> Fioretos, 'Historical institutionalism'; Erin R. Graham, 'The institutional design of funding rules at international organizations: explaining the transformation in financing the United Nations', *European Journal of International Relations* 23: 2, 2017, pp. 365–90.

<sup>97</sup> Walter, *The mass politics of international disintegration*.

<sup>98</sup> Comfort et al., *Designing resilience*, p. 10.

<sup>99</sup> Comfort et al., *Designing resilience*, p. 136.

<sup>100</sup> Sadik, 'Interview'.

to have a significant influence on the type of institutional response to contestation. Finally, the proactive role of the bureaucracy's leadership should not be underestimated, for example in respect of shaping the position of other member states. These factors suggest that integrating organization perspectives into IR theories can foster our understanding of IO responses to contestation.

## **Conclusion**

This article set out to provide a more in-depth understanding of the institutional reactions of IO bureaucracies to member state contestation. Earlier research on the decline of IOs has indicated that the autonomy of an IO's bureaucracy might play a role in IO survival. This article has built on this insight to analyse the responses of IO bureaucracies to situations that pose a threat to their existence. Drawing on organization research, I investigated three ways of how IO bureaucracies respond to contestation: (1) inertia, i.e. no immediate action in response to the challenge; (2) adaptation, i.e. policy changes to maintain the support of the challenging member state(s); and (3) resilience-building, i.e. developing organizational capacities to limit contestation by member states. By examining processes of hunkering down, framing, negotiation, shaming, coalition-building and professionalization, the study provides insights into the role of IO bureaucracies in shaping institutional responses to contestation.

I used a within-case comparison of UNFPA to illustrate my argument. UNFPA has repeatedly been confronted with budget cuts by US governments throughout its existence. However, its responses varied across three time periods of cuts: while inertia and adaptation were present in the first period, resilience-building processes dominated during the latter two periods. The activities of UNFPA's bureaucracy were crucial in shaping these responses: after initial hunkering down and attempts at negotiation, the bureaucracy focused on professionalization and coalition-building (first among other member states, then increasingly among private actors) over the years, combined with shaming during the second period and new framing in the most recent period. I demonstrated that the organization's changed threat perception, the increasingly supportive and homogeneous position of other member states, and a change in UNFPA's executive leadership can help explain the variation in bureaucratic responses. Overall, the analysis has shown that while these processes might be undertaken more easily by more autonomous organizations, even the bureaucracy of an IO with little autonomy can engage in these activities.

The within-case comparison reveals an important additional insight that further confirms the value of historical institutionalism, according to which new institutional routines established by an IO in response to a specific challenge determine the organization's responses to subsequent challenges. However, the path-dependent effects of past decisions are not necessarily recognized by the organization itself: during the interviews, many staff members considered UNFPA to be a very different organization compared to the past, without seeing

any need to draw on the lessons of previous experiences. Only one staff member interviewed attempted to draw on institutional memory about responses to past budget cuts in addressing a current one.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, all of them recognized the importance of past activities of UNFPA's bureaucracy in enabling the organization to survive. Future research is necessary to grasp the extent of these path-dependent effects.

Another important insight that became manifest through the analysis is related to the mandate of an organization. Research has claimed that organizations with a more technical mandate are more likely to survive exogenous shocks.<sup>102</sup> The case of UNFPA shows not only that an IO's mandate can evolve from a rather technical focus on demographics to a highly politicized issue, but that the mandate also plays an important role in shaping the possibilities for responding to challenges. Most interviewees argued that while UNFPA's politicized mandate made it more vulnerable to attacks, it also helped resilience-building.<sup>103</sup> Future studies should investigate more systematically the impact of mandates and their politicization on the scope for action of IO bureaucracies.

Finally, the findings of this article generate important questions for future research on the survival and decline of IOs. In the light of the recent research on IO deaths, we need further systematic studies on how budget cuts as a means of contestation challenge the existence of IOs, and what factors constrain this threat. Based on the expectations about IOs' responses generated through this analysis, future research is required to investigate which institutional responses are particularly effective in securing an IO's survival. This will be essential to contribute to a better theoretical understanding of the full life-cycle of IOs while giving appropriate consideration to the role of bureaucracies.

<sup>101</sup> Author interview 2.

<sup>102</sup> Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 'What kills international organisations?'

<sup>103</sup> As an example of this understanding, one UNFPA staff member said: 'At UNFPA, for better or for worse, we approach this very differently than other UN agencies because we have such an important mandate, but our mandate is a very sensitive one and it's a political one. And accordingly, we have to engage and advocate in ways that might be a bit different from other UN agencies': author interview 1.

