

Roles and Functions of International Organizations

1. Roles of the IOs

1.1 Instrument

- instrument being used by its members for concrete purposes
- this is particularly the case of the IGOs, where members are sovereign states with power to limit independent actions taken by the IOs
- Gunnar Myrdal: “the basic fictitious notion about IGOs, as conveyed by their constitutions, is that they are something more than their component parts, something above the national states. ... In the typical case IOs are nothing else than instruments for the policies of individual governments, means for diplomacy of a number of different and sovereign national states. When an IGO is set up, this implies nothing more than that between states a limited agreement has been reached upon an institutional form for multilateral conduct of state activity in a certain field. The organization becomes important for the pursuance of national policies precisely to the extent that such a multilateral coordination is the real and continuous aim of national governments”
 - this is supported by empirical findings of other authors who show that IGOs are used by nations primarily as selective instruments for gaining foreign policy objectives

1.2 Arena

- arenas or forums within which actions take place
- IOs provide meeting places for members to come together to discuss, argue, cooperate or disagree
- arenas in themselves are neutral and can be used for cooperation or for fight
- IOs as an arena may be seen in the great number of conferences and meetings concerning the relations (mainly economic) between developed and developing countries – UNCTAD, UNIDO, GATT/WTO, OECD, WB Group

1.3 Actor

- IOs should act as an independent actors – in reality just few of them act as an independent actor

- we can say that the IO is most clearly an actor when it is distinguishable from its member states – “UN should do something”, “OPEC should decrease petroleum prices”, ... - these are expressions of existence that distinguish the IO from its members
- problem is the estimation of the degree of independent actor capacity of IGOs – are they more than just instruments and forums?
- once IGO starts to operate and build up bureaucracy and role not totally dependent on the acceptance of its every act by all its members, it becomes politically more difficult for a member state stop the IGO’s activities. This gives IOs with wide range of members and activities and well-developed central services a certain degree of autonomy in their actions

- to sum up all 3 roles: IOs can take on from 1 to all 3 roles; if basic documents of the IOs create strong institutions insulated from interference by the members and with powerful resources then it is more likely that they will perform the role of a relatively independent actor; if members have constitutional safeguards which allow them to prevent the growth of strong institutions then the IO is only likely to function either as a forum for the members or as a tool for policies of some members; if an IO has membership dominated by one powerful member, it is possibly used as a hegemonic instrument – IOs with members of about the same weight will be more egalitarian by nature and will act as a meeting place for equals; by their nature universal institutions will become forums within which a range of views may be expressed (case of the UN – it is difficult to remain an instrument of small group of states and to act as an independent actor)

2. Functions of the IOs

2.1 Articulation and aggregation

- IOs can operate in 3 ways in this context:
 1. they can be instruments for interest articulation and aggregation
 2. they can be forums in which interests are articulated
 3. they can articulate interests separate from those of members

2.2 Norms

- IOs have made a considerable contribution to the normative activities of international system

- some of the earlier NGOs in the 19th century were concerned with establishing worldwide certain values that were already accepted by developed countries: rejection of slavery, control of the effects of war, protection of native people, ...
- UN Charter itself provides set of values for international system: faith in fundamental human rights, equal rights of men and women and of large and small nations, freedom, ...
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights – common standards of achievement for all people and all nations; personal human rights, social and economic rights
- field of justice – some IGOs formalized already existing sets of norms (person trafficking), have amended existing conventions (slavery convention), or have articulated new normative values in their conventions (genocide, apartheid)
- field of economic affairs – IOs helped to establish norms of behavior – functioning of the world economy (Bretton Woods, Kingston), right to control state's own resources, expanding trade, disposal of economic benefits, qualitative side of world economy (population policies, ecological policies), good governance, ...
- field of international security – standards provided by UN and other IOs (prohibiting intervention in the affairs of independent states, granting the independence to colonial countries, disarmament, ...)

2.3 Recruitment

- IOs can have important function in recruiting participants in international system
- fact that IGOs consist almost exclusively of representatives of sovereign states gives a further incentive for non-self governing territories to achieve independence, because it allows them to represent their own interests in a wide range of the IGOs and brings these IOs closer to the universality of membership
- NGOs have increasingly recruited new participants to international system; By gathering together groups and individuals for a particular purpose (supporting world government, promoting trade union activity, furthering commercial interests, spreading religious beliefs), they have mobilized what is regarded as the fastest growing and widest based group of participants in current international system; NGOs brought new actors into the old state-centered system; they provide underpinning for closer international system and for IGOs

2.4 Socialization

- aim is to instill in the individual loyalty to the system within which he/she is living and to gain acceptance of the prevailing values of that system and its institutions

- socialization is carried out within a state by a number of agencies – schools, churches, youth clubs, ...

- process of socialization works at international level in 2 ways:

1. agents of socialization may work across frontiers, affecting directly individuals and groups in a number of countries – MNCs; NGOs; IGOs
2. process of socialization can take place between states acting at international level and between their representatives – over a period of time, states' governments can become “socialized” to act in certain way that is acceptable to the rest of international community, or to adopt a certain common value system

2.5 Rule making

- traditional principles on which IOs have based their rule making:

1. rules are formulated by unanimous or near-unanimous consensus of members
2. members have the practical option of leaving an IO and ending their assent to the existing rule
3. even within the bounds of membership, a state can assert the right to interpret unilaterally rules to which it has consented
4. executive-bureaucratic structure of the IO has little or no power to formulate (and implement) rules
5. delegates to IOs' rule-making bodies are instructed by their governments and do not act as independent representatives
6. IO has no direct relationship with private citizens of the member states

2.6 Rule application

- in international system, rule application is left mainly to sovereign states, as there is no central world authority with agents to undertake the task (in domestic system – police, armed forces, ...)

- IGOs are more active in the application of agreed rules (for example in the field of nuclear energy)

- NGOs usually participate in the monitoring of international rule application by governments (Amnesty International)

2.7 Rule adjudication

- the primal aim is to pronounce on existing rule

- it is associated with internal running of the IOs but more important function is played by certain bodies whose task is to adjudicate between the competing claims of members

2.8 Information

- IOs are invaluable in communication and information – more traditional approach towards transmitting ideas and messages in the system is through national governments with help of their diplomatic services

- IOs perform this function in dual role – as a forum for exchanging ideas and as an actor that present his own output of information

2.9 Operations

- international organizations undertake a number of operational functions, much in the same way as governments – banking, providing aid, helping refugees, dealing with commodities, running technical services, ...

- many of the operations undertaken by international organizations are associated with global governance