

Klaus Dingwerth, Antonia Witt,  
Ina Lehmann, Ellen Reichel  
and Tobias Weise:  
International Organisations under  
Pressure: Legitimizing Global  
Governance in Challenging Times

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In April 2020, the Supreme Audit Office of the Czech Republic published an audit conclusion on the Czech Republic's funds provided to international organisations and other related expenditures. The aim of the audit was to verify the effectiveness of state funds provided to international organisations. According to the SAO's audit, the Czech Republic cooperates with almost 500 international governmental organisations. The amount of mandatory contributions for such cooperation is around CZK 3 billion per year. The Czech Republic also provides other related contributions, which cost approximately CZK 1.5 billion in 2018. Based on its review and information provided by relevant state agencies, the SAO's assessment is uncomplimentary. The SAO concluded that regarding the prerequisites for an effective provision of funds for international organisations, neither the monitoring nor the evaluation of the benefits of the cooperation and coordination were fulfilled (SUPREME AUDIT OFFICE 2020: 2–3). This illustrates how international organisations and their functioning attract more public scrutiny. In the age of austerity, the *raison d'être* of international organisations as well as states' participation in them is put under the spotlight. Together with a pressure emerging from other contemporary trends such as democratisation, economic and political globalisation and technological change, international organisations are increasingly subjected to a longer and more demanding list of normative expectations than they were in the past. Consequently, the preservation and continuity of their legitimacy have become more challenging than ever.

In this context, a group of German and Swiss political scientists, namely Klaus Dingwerth, Antonia Witt, Ina Lehmann, Ellen Reichel and Tobias Weise, began working on their research for the book under review eight years ago. Their goal was to investigate how the quality of the political discourse in which international organisations gain, maintain, and restore their legitimacy has changed since the end of the Cold War. In their own words, the book "*is about the crisis of international organisations, understood as a situation in which key constituencies no longer take the need for international organisations for granted*" (p. 3). Indeed, the legitimacy of international organisations is not a new topic for research in international relations and the authors even already published several studies on this issue in the past.<sup>1</sup> However, the book under review brings a new comprehensive coverage of this topic in the context of changing norms of global governance against the backdrop of the legitimisation contest.

To demonstrate the narrative, the authors employ a strong theoretical framework introduced in chapter two of the book. The chapter provides the conceptual and methodological backbone for the case studies covered in chapters three to seven, which analyse the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and its successor, the World Trade Organisation (WTO); the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the African Union (AU); the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). Together, the studied organisations form a diverse group of international organisations in terms of their membership, historical records, internal governance, powers, and policy areas. The authors do not elaborate on the choice of the international organisations. They do, however, make clear that “[the] ultimate objective was to write a book about international organizations, and not five organizational histories” (p. 26). Therefore, from their perspective, this book is not about the WTO or the IAEA. Each case study is only a piece of a mosaic in the complex universe of international organisations that they aspire to depict.

Each of the analysed cases follows the same pattern as they all include five substantive sections respectively concerning: (1) a reconstruction of relevant parts of the organisational history; (2) a description of the normative baseline; (3) major normative shifts; (4) effects of the changes on the functioning of the organisation today; and (5) a concluding discussion on “how internal as well as external development have contributed to shap[ing] the organisation’s changing terms of legitimation” (p. 59). In the last part of each chapter, there is a description of the two most relevant normative changes in the legitimisation of the given international organisation. Finally, the last chapter summarises the main findings and discusses their practical implications.

Considering each case study, the authors describe legitimisation contests in which a variety of actors to seek to define what distinguishes a “good” international organisation from a “bad” international organisation (p. 30). For this purpose, the authors introduce a set of normative frames to analyse the selected international organisations and their activities. The book persuasively depicts how international organisations have expanded the range of subjects from which they actively aspire for legitimisation in the recent past. However, the effort is now more difficult than ever and the audiences are becoming more heterogeneous as well, particularly

dramatically since the 1970s. One of the key considerations to take from the book is that despite the different circumstances of the studied international organisations, in all the cases, stakeholders' conflicting interests usually cause the given international organisation to struggle to maintain its value for the overall audience.

The other important finding is that despite the variation in the international organisations as well as the sources of their legitimacy, the consequences of the normative shift are similar in all the cases. To be considered legitimate, international organisations need to focus on their procedural rules in order to be transparent and accountable in their decision-making. Moreover, the ways to take into account civil society and non-governmental organisations should be explored more vigorously in order to deflect some criticism from national capitals routinely blaming "Brussels" or "Geneva" for their policy failures. For instance, an example related to the AU illustrates how the organisation has sought to build its legitimacy on working not only for and with African states, but also for and with the African people. In practice, its bureaucracy's effort increasingly focused on the principles of democracy, human security, and human development, values relevant for AU citizens more than for many of AU governments, and an active engagement in collaboration with non-state actors such as human rights NGOs.

In proving their case, the authors present an ample amount of empirical evidence – both quantitative and qualitative – to evaluate each factor. In conducting research for this study, they analysed over 150 annual reports, member states' statements made in eighty sessions of international organisations' bodies, and almost two thousand media articles as well as a couple hundred other documents. From the perspective of the included sources, there is a particularly interesting approach in the investigation of the public relations and the building of public images of the scrutinised international organisations, as the analysed materials range from the popularisation of the WTO in newspapers and even cartoons to social media, public statements, annual reports, and even the Twitter account of the IAEA Department of Technical Cooperation, which is examined in order to illustrate how the IAEA's public relations management has shifted.

In order to assess the main value of the book under review, it is necessary to take the broader context into account. As we are entering

“a global landscape of increased great-power rivalry, nuclear proliferation, weak states, surging refugee flows, and growing nationalism, along with a reduced U.S. role in the world” (HAAS 2020), the role and legitimacy of international organisations become even more contested than the authors could have anticipated at the beginning of their research. The recent months provide an ample amount of evidence of such changes and their implications for the legitimacy of international organisations. For instance, in April 2020, US President Donald Trump announced that he was halting the funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO), delivering a major blow to an organisation that depends on the United States for nearly 10 percent of its budget. In late May 2020, Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the WHO altogether, accusing the agency of becoming a puppet for China during the coronavirus pandemic (NICHOLS 2000). Meanwhile, the UN Security Council has been silent, as it was paralysed by the rising tensions between China and the United States. In this regard, the authors may underestimate the emerging rivalry and its ramifications for global governance and international organisations in particular. This is so despite their own view that the contested multilateralism “presents international organisations that have been focal points for international cooperation [with] not only a new situation, but also a new legitimisation challenge” (p. 53). One of the institutions that were newly established and promoted by China, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), would have deserved to be another case study to complement the already rich analytical framework.

It is clear that international organisations get into murky waters. But the old truth about them stays same: they are created and sustained by member states, and they can only fulfil their function if they are allowed to do so. From this perspective, international organisations should also better reflect power shifts as their membership is the primary source of their legitimacy (LIPSCY 2017). Accordingly, the book should have perhaps devoted more attention and methodological robustness<sup>2</sup> to this specific issue, which seems rather neglected in comparison with other criteria. Under the current development in world politics, as described above, international organisations are becoming central arenas for international contestation as rising powers increasingly seek to reshape the world order. Such development adversely affects their perception and *ipso facto* their legitimacy. Finally, this may lead an international organisation’s members to reconsider their membership in it and, eventually, result in its death

(EILSTRUP-SANGIOVANNI 2020: 339–370).

In sum, the book is an excellent study of global governance based on a thoughtful account of the searches for legitimacy of a diverse group of five international organisations. In this way, it engages with a very topical and controversial issue and provides an important contribution to the broad literature on international organisations and democratising global governance. As such, this study will be particularly useful for scholars of global governance and international relations.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 E.g. Dingwerth, Klaus (2005): The Democratic Legitimacy of Public-Private Rule Making: What Can We Learn from the World Commission on Dams? *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 65–83; Dingwerth, Klaus – Schmidtke, Henning – Weise, Tobias (2020): The Rise of Democratic Legitimation: Why International Organizations Speak the Language of Democracy. *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 714–741.
- 2 For instance, Susan Block-Lieb and Terence C. Halliday recently employed institutional theory to study the role of actors shaping global institution-building and institutional change in the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) in their recent book *Global Lawmakers: International Organizations in the Crafting of World Markets*.

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