
Managers of Global Change

The Influence of International Environmental
Bureaucracies

edited by Frank Biermann and Bernd Siebenhüner

Institutional Dimensions of Global Environmental Change
A Core Research Project of the International Human Dimensions
Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP)

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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This book was set in Sabon by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Managers of global change : the influence of international environmental
bureaucracies / edited by Frank Biermann and Bernd Siebenhüner.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01274-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-262-51236-7
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. International officials and employees. 2. Environmental agencies—
Officials and employees. 3. Environmental policy. I. Biermann, Frank.

II. Siebenhüner, Bernd.

JZ4850.M35 2009

341.4—dc22

2008042142

Printed on Recycled Paper.

The Role and Relevance of International Bureaucracies: Setting the Stage

Frank Biermann and Bernd Siebenhüner

What is the role and relevance of international bureaucracies in world politics? In public perception and political debate, they often play a noticeable part. The election of the new United Nations (UN) secretary-general in January 2007 has generated wide media attention. In many countries and capitals, the offices and officers of the world organization and its many specialized agencies and programs are highly visible. From telecommunication to shipping, trade, science, environment, technology transfer, air transportation, tourism, financing—all of these areas of economic production and daily life are at some stage affected by the activities of international bureaucracies and influenced by international civil servants. For example, in 2006 when health scientist David de Ferranti wrote about an election of “what is potentially the most important position in global health,” he meant not the representative of any government or foundation, but the director general of the leading international bureaucracy in this field—the World Health Organization.¹

And yet, international bureaucracies enjoy a mixed reputation. Although some observers deride the UN and its subcommittees and sister bodies as an assembly of ineffective, inefficient, and unresponsive bureaucrats, the recruitment officers of these agencies cannot complain about a lack of talented people from all walks of life who seek to serve international bureaucracies. Whereas one U.S. ambassador to the UN famously quipped that one could take away the top floors of the UN secretariat building without anybody noticing, others still see a crucial and often powerful influence of international bureaucracies in world politics.

Given these conflicting perspectives, it is remarkable that the scholarly study of the influence of international bureaucracies has been a rather peripheral research object for most of the post-1945 period. In the

academic field of international relations, most research has focused on states as actors of world politics and on international institutions and regimes as constraints that place limits on state action. Within the recent discourse on global governance, students of international relations have reached beyond this traditional focus on state-to-state relations and included non-state actors in the analysis. One example is studies on transnational nongovernmental groups in fields such as environmental policy or human rights or on the privatization of global politics. Yet the myriad international bureaucracies from the specialized agencies and programs of the UN to the minuscule secretariat of the convention for the protection of European bats have stayed outside the mainstream state-centric international relations research programs.

The same holds for contributions of other disciplines. International lawyers offered extensive surveys of the setup, mandate, diplomatic history, and functions of international organizations. The increasing political relevance of international organizations is reflected, for example, in recent debates in the International Law Commission on the applicable law for treaties between international organizations and between international organizations and states,² or on the legal responsibility of international organizations for wrongful acts.³ Yet legal science provides no convincing comparative assessments of the influence that bureaucracies within organizations have, or comprehensive explanations for possible variations in this influence.⁴ Management studies have brought forth a vast literature on the influence of private businesses as well as non-profit organizations that includes analyses of institutional dynamics, organizational learning, principal-agent problems, and structural constraints.⁵ Insights generated from this research, however, have rarely been applied to public administrations, particularly international bureaucracies (Dijkzeul 1997; Siebenhüner 2003). Likewise, findings from the analysis of policy diffusion that identify international bureaucracies as key agents in the transnational transfer of technologies and policies (Busch and Jörgens 2005) have hardly been taken up.

This gap in the literature is problematic. First, the limited understanding of the influence of international bureaucracies is likely to mislead conclusions about the state of world politics, and to result in an overemphasis on state power and on a perception of international institutions as mere structures devised by states with no role of other actors. Policy outcomes that may have been strongly influenced by international bureaucracies are thus likely to be overlooked.

Second, a better understanding of the role of international bureaucracies might assist in addressing democratic deficits of the current global governance system that have been intensely debated in recent years.⁶ Given the need to find new ways for the democratic legitimization of global decision making, several authors have pointed to the democratizing influence of involving non-state actors, such as environmentalists or human rights groups, in international negotiations. Others, however, are more cautious regarding the role of private actors. They point to problems of selection bias, as only parts of “global civil society” have the means to voice their views in global fora (Dingwerth 2005, 2007).

Although some view international bureaucracies as the embodiment of an undemocratic liberalism at the global level (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 15), these agencies could as well be seen as proponents of global legitimacy. Often, their policies support the interests of weaker actors against more powerful ones, as well as collective international interests (e.g., environment, food, or security) as opposed to the particular interests of powerful states.⁷

Third, a better understanding of the influence of international bureaucracies will help resolve policy debates about the reform of the United Nations and other bodies. The “effectiveness” of the UN and its specialized agencies—often judged against economic notions of efficiency by national policy makers—has been subject to public debate for decades, with little response from scholars of international relations (see also De Senarclens 2001). For example, there is a vivid policy controversy over whether to create a new specialized UN agency on environmental issues, a “world environment organization” (Biermann and Bauer 2005b). This debate has largely remained within the public policy community and has benefited little from substantiated findings from international relations research on the influence of international bureaucracies or on the optimal design for a world environment organization, if it were deemed necessary. As politicians and practitioners push for organizational reform, academics remain unable to specify how international bureaucracies affect the outcomes and impacts of global governance (Biermann and Bauer 2005a).

Taken together, the state of knowledge on the influence and dynamics of international bureaucracies in world politics is unsatisfactory. This is the central motivation of this book.

In particular, this research is motivated by a puzzling disparity between two observations about international bureaucracies: on one hand, most

international bureaucracies are similar in their institutional and legal setting. A large number of bureaucracies resemble each other in their mandate, the number and type of countries they are reporting to, and the general functions that they are expected to perform in specific policy domains. On the other hand, there is a notable variation in the role and influence of these international bureaucracies that is difficult to explain through their mandate, resources, and function—factors that dominate the debates in international relations theory.

For example, many international environmental treaties in force have a secretariat to support the implementation of the treaty and to facilitate negotiations on further action. Most of these secretariats are similar in mandate, means, and general function. Yet their reputation varies, often substantially: some are described as a “lean shark,” such as the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (Siebenhüner, this volume, chapter 11); others as “living in a straitjacket” designed by governments as their powerful masters, such as the secretariat to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Busch, this volume, chapter 10). Others again have generated substantial controversy and requests for substantial overhaul, such as the secretariat of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (Bauer, this volume, chapter 12). Yet these three bureaucracies are largely similar in mandate, size, financial means, and principals.

How can one explain this disparity between institutionally comparable bureaucracies and their apparently different actual roles? This book addresses this question. It reports on the core findings of a four-year research program that brought together a team of thirteen researchers and collaborating scholars: the Managers of Global Change (MANUS) project. The project first investigated the type and degree of autonomous influence of international bureaucracies. Second, we looked for possible factors to explain any differences in this influence. We wanted to know what accounts for variation: is it the complex web of external factors that cause differences in degree and type of influence—in other words, the structure of the political problem to be addressed? Or is it the specific institutional design that defines the relationship between international bureaucracies and governments and that regulates the embedding of the bureaucracies in a larger regime? Or is it rather the softer internal factors of people and procedures—the type of its leadership and the way its business is organized—that account for sizable variation in the influence of a bureaucracy?

With few exceptions (which we review in chapter 2), the international relations literature is surprisingly silent regarding the explanation of variation in the influence of bureaucracies. Partially, this reflects a general neglect of international bureaucracies in international relations theory after 1945. The few studies of the early post-1945 period were more descriptive and have been described as “idiographic institutional analysis” (Martin and Simmons 1998, 729). Some comparative studies were undertaken in the early 1970s, but all of them had a different focus, looking at—for example—decision making in international organizations or at the attitudes of delegates to international organizations. In the last decade, international bureaucracies have become a more common study object in international relations research. Yet as we lay out in chapter 2, the main research focus is not the question that interests us here. Instead, recent studies have concentrated on functional theories of why states create and support international organizations, on the stability and membership patterns of international bureaucracies, or on organizational change, along with a growing number of edited volumes with a more generalist analytical framework.

Our project goes beyond this work by an explicit focus on explaining variation in the autonomous influence of international bureaucracies as actors in world politics. In this respect, our research has some similarities with two strands of theory on international bureaucracies: principal-agent theory and sociological institutionalism. Our research differs, however, from these theories in a number of fundamental points.

First, although we draw on key aspects of principal-agent theory, we go beyond this approach by looking at factors that leave behind the dichotomic relationship between governments as principals and international bureaucracies as their agents. Principal-agent theory has contributed important work that explains the relationships between international bureaucracies and governments, and provides a solid explanatory basis for autonomous influence of international bureaucracies. Yet most of its core hypotheses assume variation in the type, number, or interest of the *principals* to an international bureaucracy (Hawkins et al. 2006; Vaubel 2006). For example, principal-agent theory offers explanations of autonomous activity of international bureaucracies that rely on situations of common agency, that is, either a collectivity of principals or a multiplicity of principals. Yet many international bureaucracies are constant regarding this variable. The same holds for the interest of principal-agent theory in the chain of delegation as a potential source of agency slack

(Pollack 1997; Nielson and Tierney 2003; Vaubel 2006). Again, most international bureaucracies have comparable chains of delegation, so this factor cannot account for different degrees or types of influence of international bureaucracies. Principal-agent theory thus offers theoretical models to elucidate the general influence of bureaucracies as well as variation of influence of bureaucracies with *different institutional embedding, mandate, or principals*. Variation of influence of bureaucracies that are similar with regard to these key variables of principal-agent theory cannot be assessed based on principal-agent theory.

Second, our work is related to—but goes beyond—the recent work in sociological institutionalism on international bureaucracies (Bauer et al., this volume, chapter 2). We share with sociological institutionalism a key interest in international bureaucracies as autonomous actors in world politics, and are interested in explaining their influence in particular. We thus do not assume—as realism and some strands of rational institutionalism would argue—that international bureaucracies are mere structures that function purely in accordance with the interest of states. Instead, we assume that international bureaucracies regularly have autonomous influence in world politics, and much of the empirical work in this book in fact attests to this claim.

Yet we also diverge from sociological institutionalism in a number of respects. For one, we employ a narrower definition of international bureaucracies. Barnett and Finnemore, for example, equate international organizations with international bureaucracies and use both terms interchangeably. For them, international organizations *are* international bureaucracies (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 3). This approach serves them well in the three empirical cases that they choose. Yet a systematic comparative research effort that includes a large number of international bureaucracies as actors requires, we argue, a more precise conceptualization. We therefore distinguish between “international organizations,” on the one hand, and “international bureaucracies” on the other (see Biermann et al., this volume, chapter 3, for more details).

We define international bureaucracies as agencies that have been set up by governments or other public actors with some degree of permanence and coherence and beyond formal direct control of single national governments (notwithstanding control by multilateral mechanisms through the collective of governments) and that act in the international arena to pursue a policy. In many cases, such bureaucracies will be part of international organizations. The concept of international “organiza-

tion” is thus broader: we define an international organization as an institutional arrangement that combines bureaucracies with a normative framework that is set by and is effective on states (and sometimes on non-state actors). The International Maritime Organization (IMO) may serve as an example: The IMO agrees through decision of its general assembly and subsequent ratification by member states on the creation of new international rules in its area of activity. States can join the organization, they can participate in rule making, and they are then expected to accept and implement the collectively agreed rules. Here, the IMO does not differ much from an intergovernmental regime. In addition, the IMO comprises a hierarchically organized group of civil servants who are expected to act following the mandate of the organization and the decisions of the assembly of member states. This is what we call an international bureaucracy. We hence differentiate between the IMO—as an institutional arrangement that brings together a normative framework, member states, and the IMO secretariat as the organization’s bureaucracy—from this bureaucracy itself.

As we lay out in chapter 3, this definition of international bureaucracies also differs from the narrow concept of international organizations in international law and the broad concepts of organizations in management theory. It also differs from the concept of “institutions,” which usually denotes systems of rules and decision-making procedures (IHDP 1999; Young 2002; Young, King, and Schroeder 2008; Simmons and Martin 2002, 192–194), but is in nonscholarly writing also sometimes used for international bureaucracies (such as in “the Bretton Woods institutions,” when in fact the bureaucracies are meant).

Our definition solves a variety of problems in recent research. It allows work in the lines of both sociological institutionalism and principal-agent theory to differentiate between states as actors within international organizations and the international bureaucracies as semi-autonomous actors within these organizations. It is more parsimonious than other attempts at solving the conceptual problem of international organizations being at the same time normative frameworks and bureaucratic actors (see Biermann et al., this volume, chapter 3, for a more detailed discussion). The differentiation between international bureaucracies and international organizations helps to keep apart international bureaucracies as actors and the collectivity of member states of an international organization, both of which are referred to as “international organizations” in most writing on international relations.

In addition, our approach departs from sociological institutionalism in drawing less from research in the field of sociology than from organizational theory and management studies. Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 2004), for example, build their work essentially on a Weberian notion of bureaucracy and of a bureaucratic functional rationale and culture that pervades international bureaucracies. This sociological concept of a bureaucratic culture explains certain elements of their autonomous influence as actors in international relations similar to Weber's explanation of the role of Prussian bureaucracy in his time. However, concerning most modern international bureaucracies, this bureaucratic culture is a constant—most UN agencies, programs, and secretariats are likely to function according to similar rational-legal bureaucratic patterns. The bureaucratic rationale thus explains elements of their *overall* influence and authority, but less so *variation* in this influence. Our project therefore rather draws on organizational theory and its *empirical* notions of organizational cultures and internal procedures. We thus analyze international bureaucracies as social processes and collective entities constituted by their distinct organizational cultures, structures, and behaviors (e.g., March and Simon 1958; Thompson 1967; Mintzberg 1979; Schein 1985; Morgan 1986; Nonaka 1994). As we argue in this book, much variation in the autonomous influence of international bureaucracies can be traced back to differences in these organizational cultures, the “software” within bureaucracies that are otherwise similar in their legal mandate, resources, and general function.

Finally, our approach differs from both sociological institutionalism and principal-agent theory in the normative motivation of our research. Sociological institutionalism and principal-agent theory often assume a self-centered interest of bureaucracies, which leads, in their view, to “pathological” bureaucratic behavior. Bureaucracies are assumed to strive predominantly to maximize their mandate, funding, staff, and power, and to fend off interference from governments and other actors. In this view, international bureaucracies are a problem for democracies, as some sort of leviathan that has been created by democratically elected governments but that managed to loosen control from their creators to advance an independent agenda. Our approach differs inasmuch as it is empirically based rather than theoretically derived. We find international bureaucracies more often interested in resolving political problems than increasing their power as such. For us, autonomous influence of international bureaucracies indeed requires some monitoring and control to

ensure their legitimacy—yet we do not see autonomous influence as a problem or pathology per se.

Empirically, the research for this book covers nine international bureaucracies (although comparable studies on other bureaucracies have been reviewed as well). As we describe later (see Biermann et al., this volume, chapter 3), all case studies are based on the examination of primary sources, such as internal and published documents of the bureaucracies; secondary sources, such as academic studies and written assessments of diplomats; a series of interviews and participatory observation gained through field visits to all headquarters of the bureaucracies studied; as well as an expert survey to collect data from external stakeholders. Altogether, more than one hundred civil servants were interviewed for this study. Because of the number of cases and researchers, we took special care with the methodological and practical preparation of field visits to guarantee the validity and comparability of data from different bureaucracies.

To keep this comparative research effort focused, we restrict our empirical analysis to global governance in the area of environmental protection. This field is of particular interest for the guiding question of this book, because it is one of the institutionally most dynamic areas in world politics regarding the number of international institutions and actors that emerged over the past three decades. More than seven hundred multilateral environmental agreements are in force (Mitchell 2003)—this makes global environmental policy a fertile ground for larger comparative efforts, unlike many other institutionally more centralized areas of world politics.

Within this domain, this book covers two types of bureaucracies that have so far rarely been systematically included in comparative research programs: *secretariats* of international environmental treaties, and *environmental departments* of the secretariats of intergovernmental organizations that cover more than merely environmental policy. The selection of cases within these two groups has been based on the comparability of the studied bureaucracies regarding core function and size, but also on prima facie variation regarding possible explanatory variables of problem structures, institutional settings, and policies. Within the group of environmental departments, we analyzed the environmental department and other subdivisions of the World Bank, the environmental department of the secretariat of the IMO, the environment directorate of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

(OECD) secretariat, the secretariat of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the secretariat of the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Within the group of treaty secretariats, we studied the secretariat of the 1985 Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and its 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (“ozone secretariat”); the secretariat of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (“biodiversity secretariat”); the secretariat of the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (“climate secretariat”), and the secretariat of the 1994 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa (“desertification secretariat”).

The research documented in this book has yielded two core findings that could not be explained by previous work. First, international bureaucracies with similar legal mandates, financial and staff resources, and institutional functions vary in their autonomous influence. In other words, factors that are often seen as key variables in institutional theory—such as mandate or resources—matter less in explaining the outcome of bureaucratic activity than might have been expected. Second, we explain this variation by extending the analysis through including the macro level of politics—the problem structure—as well as the micro level, that is, the people in the bureaucracies and the particular organizational procedures, cultures, and leadership styles that they develop.

This book is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the state of the art in the academic disciplines of international relations and organizational and management studies and places our research in the larger theoretical context. Chapter 3 presents the research design that underlies this project and all case studies and a description of our empirical research methodology. Chapters 4 through 12 present the nine in-depth case studies that have been at the center of this project. Finally, chapter 13 draws the overall conclusions of this four-year research project and outlines its general findings.

Notes

1. *International Herald Tribune*, 4–5 November 2006, 4.
2. See the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties between States and International Organizations or between International Organizations of 21 March 1986, UN Doc. A/CONF.129/15.

3. In 2000, the International Law Commission decided to include the topic “Responsibility of International Organizations” in its long-term work program, with the eventual goal of a legal agreement on this subject. See International Law Commission 2003, para. 41–54.

4. On international organizations and the law of international organizations and institutions, see Aldrich 1979; Amerasinghe 1996; Bennett 1991; Dupuy 1998; Kirgis 1993; Schermers and Blokker 1995; and White 1996, among others.

5. Key publications include Argyris 1990; Argyris and Schön 1996; Denton 1998; Argote 1999; Carnall 1999; Schwandt and Marquard 2000.

6. See, in particular, Barnett and Finnemore’s chapter on the legitimacy of an expanding global bureaucracy (2004, 156–173). On the democratic deficit of inter- and transnational politics more generally, and on different attempts to conceptualize democratic governance on the transnational level, see, for instance, Archibugi and Held 1995; Archibugi, Held, and Köhler 1998; Bohman 1999; Dahl 1994; Dingwerth 2007; Held 1995, 1997, 2000; Rosow 2000; Scholte 2002; Wolf 1999; Zürn 2000; as well as the reports of the Commission on Global Governance 1995 and the South Centre 1996.

7. As in the case of the International Labor Organization, which includes unions and industry representatives in its decision making, international bureaucracies could also provide models for the institutionalized and balanced involvement of stakeholders and civil society at the global level. See Biermann 2002 for a discussion of stakeholder involvement in international environmental organizations.

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