



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

INTERNATIONAL ACTOR

*Louis Sabourin, Professor
École nationale d'administration publique
louis.sabourin@enap.ca*

The notion of what constitutes an international actor has continually expanded over time. Before the rise of nation states, such entities included large cities, empires, monarchies and feudal regimes, as well as organized religions and their related congregations and orders, such as the Knights Templar and the Knights of Malta, not to mention associations based on trade and finance (the Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602; the Italian banks of the Renaissance). In the 17th century, the nation state became the principal international actor, and has remained so to this day. Numerous public international organizations have been instituted by modern nations as well. However, an increasingly important role is played by private bodies such as multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in addition to various movements, quasi-public institutions, groups and celebrities whose actions transcend national borders. This article deals with the latter type of international body, while public entities are discussed in the article entitled "International Organization."

International actors have become so numerous (Badie and Smouts, 1992) that it is difficult to provide a simple definition or draw a detailed picture of them (Moreau Desfarges, 2010). Nevertheless, it is possible to group non-governmental international actors into the categories presented in the following sections.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

NGOs are entities established and controlled by private individuals. They tend to be initially based in one nation before becoming international, as their activities are successively extended to regions, continents and the entire globe (Merle, 1986). In principle, NGOs are not answerable to national governments or international organizations. The first modern international NGOs were formed in the 18th century as part of the anti-slavery movement. The 19th century saw the advent of NGOs working for peace in Europe. The *Historical Dictionary of International Organizations* (2009) lists over 50,000 NGOs, 7,500 of which are genuinely international in character. More than 4,000 NGOs act as advisory bodies or observers for the UN's Economic and Social Council in accordance with the provisions of Article 71 of the Charter of the United Nations. Today, NGOs play a role in all kinds of causes: development and humanitarian aid (OXFAM, Doctors without Borders/Médecins sans frontières), the defence of human rights (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch), the protection of children (Save the Children), the protection of the environment (Greenpeace), the fight against corruption (Transparency International) and the struggle against

INTERNATIONAL ACTOR

HIV-AIDS (Sidaction). Several NGOs are linked to churches and devote their efforts to promoting education, health and justice (Caritas International and its subsidiary, Development and Peace). Generally speaking, “charitable” NGOs are considered legal entities that meet the following criteria: they are non-profit, politically independent and financially autonomous; they are privately established; and their actions are motivated by the public interest (Bessim, 1997).

NGOs vary hugely in terms of their size, scope and legal standing. Some have highly focused mandates and have, through media attention, acquired a great deal of influence internationally. Examples include the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Fédération internationale de football association (FIFA), whose budgets surpass those of many nations. Other, somewhat less widely influential NGOs are represented by professional and trades associations, labour unions, political parties, parliamentarians and interest groups based on diverse ideologies. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is today the best-known and most respected private humanitarian agency in the world. In contrast, certain international organizations, like terrorist groups or organized crime networks, operate illegally throughout the world. There are also religious or faith-based NGOs, supported by Christian churches (Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches) or Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu groups.

While some NGOs devote their energies to specific missions and may receive partial funding from the government or quasi-public organizations, others act as lobby groups. The legitimacy, representativeness and effectiveness of the latter are often called into question, but, in many cases, these NGOs play complementary roles that governments find useful. Although these NGOs lack international legal personalities, they are, or seek to be, essential forces in civil society by denouncing abuses and publicizing a range of problems. Their actions are particularly prominent at global summit meetings and international conferences or during natural disasters, regional conflicts or other heavily mediatized events in which anti-globalization movements are prominent (Revel, 2006).

Multinational Corporations

Multinational corporations are private, generally large companies operating in the industrial, trade and banking sectors. With the growth of globalization, they have become active in countless other sectors, such as research and knowledge. Examples of major corporations include Exxon, Total, Shell, BP, Nike, Sony, General Motors, Toyota, Nestlé, IBM, Coca Cola, McDonald's, Barclays, the Société Générale and Goldman Sachs. Media-related companies like CNN, Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, Apple and Google have joined the ranks of multinationals. These corporations now play a central role in international trade, particularly through their direct foreign investment. Observers estimate that multinational companies control around 75% of the world's trade flow.

A corporation is considered to be a multinational when it has a decision-making centre in one country and operations facilities (with or without a legal personality) in one or more countries other than the country it is headquartered in. The purpose of multinational corporations is to make profits (Macerole, 2006); to this end, they seek easy access to raw materials, skilled human resources and capital. They are able to relocate quickly almost anywhere in the world and promote their products thanks to targeted marketing. They exert considerable influence on governments and on populations. Since the 1970s and, particularly, the emergence of a new global economic order, under the influence of the developing nations, the UN has sought to regulate the activities of

INTERNATIONAL ACTOR

multinationals. Other international entities, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), have also established codes of conduct to better define and, above all, better regulate the activities of multinationals. These organizations are active in developing countries but have been only partially successful, especially since certain multinationals are now based in emerging nations (China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Russia) and are often directly or indirectly set up and run by the nations themselves. The growing importance of multinational corporations is closely linked to the rise in flows and trade. In this regard, it is worth noting that sovereign wealth funds in places like Kuwait, China, Singapore, Norway and Dubai generate enormous reserves and occupy a unique position in present-day global financial markets.

Foundations

In addition to NGOs and multinational companies, foundations may be considered international actors. Although they are based in one nation, they play an increasingly important international role, particularly with respect to culture (financing museums and artistic associations), education (scholarships, professor- and researcher-exchange programs), development aid (promoting education and health), the environment, and climate change policies. These entities, which include the Nobel, Aga Khan, Ford and Rockefeller foundations, as well as the more recently founded Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have become more and more powerful on the international stage.

Standard-setting bodies

Organizations of this type are often associated with NGOs, but they are very different in their status and nature. They are formed for the most part by professionals, whether from the public, quasi-public or private sectors, with the main purpose of determining international standards that will eventually be adopted by national governments. A notable example is the International Standardization Organization (ISO), which brings together experts from nearly 160 countries. The ISO has published an impressive number of professional standards dealing with management quality, environmental protection and corporate social responsibility.

The International Chamber of Commerce, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), the Business and Industry Advisory Committee (BIAC) to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the International Organization of Employers (IOE) are other international entities that, along with major international labour associations of various ideological tendencies, help to shape national and international policies through their influence on large international actors like the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the OECD.

Institutes, think tanks, forums and expert panels

In the course of the 20th century, various organizations have been established with the aim of reflecting on and debating issues, sometimes playing a decisive role internationally. There are, to begin with, annual forums like the World Economic Forum in Davos and the Conference of Montreal, or Porto Alegre meetings attended by anti-globalization NGOs. As well, there are a growing number of institutes, think tanks and fact-finding groups, initially based in the U.S.A. and

INTERNATIONAL ACTOR

Great Britain, but now found on continental Europe and elsewhere in the world. The purpose of these organizations is to produce ideas, evaluate policies in diverse sectors, publish studies and put forward proposals and recommendations. The Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Rand Corporation constitute notable examples.

National liberation movements

These movements are represented by more or less organized groups of people who fight for the right to establish an independent state; they are sometimes based in autonomous territories within national borders. Although such movements have been and remain most numerous in Africa and Asia, they exist on every continent. The conflicts in the Basque Country and in Northern Ireland, for instance have been in the headlines for a very long time. Other such movements followed closely by the media include former constituent entities of Yugoslavia and the U.S.S.R., as well as Tibetans, Uighurs, the Kurds and, especially, the Palestinians. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was granted observer status at the UN in 1974 and the right to take part in debates in the UN assembly in 1998. The PLO is also an official member of the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Sub-national entities

Over the past few decades, there has been a movement among federated states to create institutions that enable them to deal with issues that fall within their jurisdictions, such as education, culture and the environment. For instance, Quebec has become an independent member of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie. Many regions within the European Union have also formed associations. In addition, megacities, like Tokyo, London, Berlin, Mexico City, Hong Kong, São Paulo, Los Angeles, New York, Montreal, Moscow, Mumbai and Shanghai, also play a direct role on a global level. In some cases, such cities have formed networks or been twinned to encourage exchanges. Also included in this category are the numerous diasporas, whose political and economic actions have been steadily growing.

Individuals

From a legal viewpoint, individuals are protected by a number of international conventions, notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted by the UN in 1966 and implemented in 1976.

Other, more specific international conventions now cover the case of migrants, stateless persons and refugees, as well as that of diplomats and tourists. Still other conventions deal with criminals, including terrorists and members of organized crime, who are of increasing concern to governments and international organizations.

With globalization becoming a global concern, individuals have frequently grown to become popular international actors . These personalities may hail from the world of politics (former leaders like Nelson Mandela, Tony Blair or Bill Clinton), organized religion (the Pope, the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa), business, or culture and entertainment (television, cinema, sport,

INTERNATIONAL ACTOR

fashion and music). They assume an international mandate, thus further swelling the ranks of international actors.

Bibliography

- Badie, B. and M.-C. Smouts (1992). *Le retour du monde : sociologie de la scène internationale*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques and Dalloz.
- Bessis, S. (1997). "Les nouveaux enjeux et les nouveaux acteurs des débats internationaux dans les années 90," *Tiers-Monde*, vol. 38, no. 151, pp. 659-675.
- Boughton, J. M. and C. I. Bradford Jr. (2007). "Gouvernance : nouveaux acteurs, nouvelles règles. Pourquoi transformer le modèle du 20^e siècle," *Finances et Développement*, pp. 10-14 [also published in English as "Global Governance: New Players, New Rules: Why the 20th-century model needs a makeover," *Finance and Development*, 2007, pp. 10-14].
- Cohen, S. (2005). *Les États face aux nouveaux acteurs*, www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/0204-Cohen-FR-1-3.pdf (page last retrieved in July 2012).
- Diez de Velasco Vallejo, M. (1999). *Les organisations internationales*, Paris, Economica.
- Krasner, S. D. (1983). *International Regimes*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press.
- Macerole, F. (2006). *Les firmes multinationales*, Paris, Venebert.
- Merle, M. (1986). *Les acteurs dans les relations internationales*, Paris, Economica.
- Moreau Defarges, P. (2010). *La mondialisation*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France.
- Piteus, C. (2000). *The Nature of Transnational Firms*, New York, Routledge.
- Quinner, E. and J. Galens (2004). *Les organisations non gouvernementales et le management*, Paris, Vuibert.
- Revel, C. (2006). *La gouvernance mondiale a commencé : acteurs, enjeux, influences... et demain?*, Paris, Ellipses.
- Reynolds, P. A. (1979). "Non-State Actors and International Outcomes," *British Journal of International Studies*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 91-111.
- Rubio, F. (2004). *Dictionnaire pratique des organisations non gouvernementales*, Paris, Ellipses.
- Schechter, M. G. (2009). *Historical Dictionary of International Organizations*, Lanham (MD), Scarecrow Press.
- Télescope (2009). *Les organisations internationales et la diffusion des systèmes de gouvernance*, vol. 15, no. 2.

REPRODUCTION

Reproduction in whole or part of the definitions contained in the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration* is authorized, provided the source is acknowledged.

HOW TO CITE

Sabourin, L. (2012). "International Actor," in L. Côté and J.-F. Savard (eds.), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration*, [online], www.dictionnaire.enap.ca

INFORMATION

For further information, please visit www.dictionnaire.enap.ca

LEGAL DEPOSIT

Library and Archives Canada, 2012 | ISBN 978-2-923008-70-7 (Online)