



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

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INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Contemporary international organizations may be divided into two major categories: intergovernmental institutions, referred to as “public,” and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), said to be “private.” This article is concerned with the first category; the second, which covers thousands of diverse entities, is dealt with in the article entitled “International Actors.”

International organizations (IOs) can be defined in a variety of ways, given the considerable differences in their status (for-profit, not-for-profit, etc.), structures, objectives, functions, financing, working languages and membership rules (Colas, 1993; Diez de Velasco Vallejo, 1999; and Smouts, 1995). However, they are all intergovernmental entities, established through a constitutional instrument (such as a treaty or agreement) that provides each of them with its own decision-making powers that are distinct from those of its member states, as well as a jurisdiction, permanent structures and the means of attaining a common goal and specific objectives on an international scale.

An IO constitutes a legal person (i.e., a “body corporate” or a corporation) and, as such, it can sign agreements with other entities (for example, a headquarters agreement with the country in which it is legally established), own moveable assets and immovable property, bring actions, suits or other legal proceedings, and claim certain privileges, such as tax immunity. These attributes enable the organization to be an actor on the international scene.

The powers held by IOs may be more or less extensive. According to Colas (1993), IOs fulfil the functions of cooperation and integration. Generally speaking, the goal of the organization is more one of cooperation – that is, seeking to align various policies of member states – than one of integration – that is, developing common policies that have been defined and administered by the organization. In terms of the coordination approaches used to carry out their operations, IOs tend to adopt standards and see that they are complied with.

IOs have generally similar organizational structures. The great majority of them have a secretariat, a general assembly and diverse councils or commissions, which sit on either a permanent or an ad hoc basis, as well as a tribunal, intermediary agencies and, often, regional offices.

From a historical viewpoint, international associations date as far back as the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. However, it was not until the advent of the modern nation state, following the treaties of Westphalia in 1648, that the first diplomatic conferences eventually appeared. It was

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only in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars that the concept of an intergovernmental system truly began to develop.

The 1815 Congress of Vienna ushered in an era of multilateral treaties that not only served to codify international law, establish diplomatic status and abolish slavery but that also instituted the first international regimes to regulated waterways – namely, the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine (1815) and the Danube Commission (1856). These international entities were soon joined by the International Telecommunications Union (1865), the Universal Postal Union (1874) and the International Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property (1883).

In 1907, the Hague Conventions brought together not only European nations but also Latin American republics and proclaimed the principles of universality and equality that ultimately led to the creation of the League of Nations (LON). The LON, established in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles, was a genuine assembly of sovereign states that sought to be universal in scope. However, the absence of the USA (despite the role played by President Woodrow Wilson in instigating the LON), along with the limited means and powers of the new league, meant that it was incapable of preventing the worldwide economic crisis of 1929 and, more importantly, the outbreak of World War II.

In 1944, Allied leaders met at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire (USA), and set up the International Bank for Reconstruction Development (IBRD) and the International Monetary Fund. In 1945, they met again in San Francisco, and established the United Nations (UN). The UN generated a number of specialized agencies, as well as special programs, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); funding programs, including the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF); regional and special commission programs, like the Economic Council for Africa (UNECA) and the International Law Commission (ILC); and conference programs, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). In 1948, 23 nations signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which became the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. The WTO now includes over 150 member states, including Russia, which made its entry in 2012 after 18 years of negotiations

As a result of fast-moving developments on the international scene, particularly with the rise of Communism and the rapid spread of the decolonization movement, a large number of international institutions were established, most often on a regional or intercontinental basis. Some of these institutions disappeared following the disintegration of the USSR and the Soviet Bloc; one example is the Warsaw Pact, which had been set up as a riposte to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Other organizations were created in response to a marked uptake in trade, the growth of interdependence and the search for solutions to problems that national governments were unable to solve on their own. There are some 400 intergovernmental organizations in existence today; over 200 of them are in Africa, with its 54 nations. Between 1945, when the United Nations was founded, and 2012, the number of UN member states rose from 51 to 193.

As international organizations have grown more numerous, they have also come to play an increasingly central role in the evolution of global relations. National governments have come to realize that a formalized cooperation among themselves can help resolve problems, even internal ones, in almost every field, including peace, economy, trade, development, defence, health, the environment, human rights, and the promotion of culture, science and technology.

Although it is impossible to present an exhaustive list the roles assumed by IOs, their main functions can be broken down into the following general categories:

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- Global, with general jurisdiction; for example the United Nations (UN).
- Global, with specific jurisdiction; for example, the UN's specialized agencies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).
- Continental; for example, the African Union (AU), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU). The latter, which is the only supranational organization of this type, has seen its membership grow from 6 nations in 1957, when it was founded in Rome, to over 28 in 2010, with the admission of other potential members currently under consideration. This category also includes various international development banks that exist on each continent, as well as the UN's Economic Commissions on different continents.
- Intercontinental; for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Commonwealth; the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (or International Organization of the Francophonie), the Islamic Countries Conference, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).
- Regional; for example, Mercosur (Common Market of the South), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The rise of globalization, on the one hand, and the obstacles to establishing a true world government, on the other, have led nations to seek new forms of international governance. Every day, new multilateral agreements are signed, conferences on questions of worldwide interest are held, and events transcending national borders are organized. IOs occupy an ever-growing place on the world stage, but, at the same time, the leading economic powers, acting through groups like the G7, G8 and G20 that often lack specific legal status, have begun to create their own spheres of influence. Without undermining the viability of intergovernmental organizations as a whole or questioning their necessity, this phenomenon shows that, in future, IOs, the nations that create them and an increasing number of other international actors must cooperate more closely if they are to safeguard the management of world governance.

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