1 Introduction

Of Illusory Giants and Dwarfs: Do International Public Administrations Matter for Policy Making Beyond the Nation-State?

Among the many memorable characters created by Michael Ende, the author of *The Neverending Story*, Mr Tur Tur, who appears in Ende's lesser-known children's book *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver* (1963), quite literally stands out. In the book, protagonists Jim and Luke, travelling across a vast desert, spot a giant figure far on the horizon. Although initially frightened, the two decide to approach the colossus, who miraculously becomes smaller and smaller the closer they get to him. When they finally face the creature up close, they learn that far from being scary or even a giant, Mr Tur Tur is a perfectly ordinary-sized and, moreover, very kind man, who later proves to be a valuable ally in finding a way out of the dangerous desert. Mr Tur Tur, it turns out, is an illusory giant. Only when seen from a distance does he appear to be gigantic; the closer one approaches him, the more clearly one sees his true shape and colour.

This little tale has much to tell us about real-life problems of governance beyond the nation-state and, more specifically, about the role of international public administrations (IPAs) therein. IPAs – the administrative corpus of international organizations (IOs) – have led a shadowy existence as 'analytical wallflowers'. In the realm of international relations (IR), IPAs were perceived, at best, as distant points on the horizon, the examination of which was deemed unnecessary to the understanding of international policy making. Yet over the last few years, the analytical perception of IPAs as 'dwarfs' in the international arena has turned out to be as illusory as Mr Tur Tur's gigantism; the closer we approach them, the more clearly we see their agency in policy making beyond the nation-state. IPAs, in short, are only illusory dwarfs.

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The story of Mr Tur Tur draws attention to the importance of per-spective, of distance in particular. The assessment of how big a player an IPA is often depends on the perspective that defines the level of analysis from which a certain phenomenon is assessed. While those who view IPAs from a great distance run the risk of being taken in by the illusion and of thus misjudging an IPA's actual (informal) agency, those who see IPAs from too close a perspective might overestimate the magnitude of their administrative influence. For the purposes of comparison, one needs a perspective that is both remote enough to see the bigger picture beyond the formal, initially visible and close enough to take account of as much informal detail as possible. In this book, we advocate for a meso-perspective on IPA agency and influence that is sufficiently close to capture what really happens beyond formal rules and distant enough to make comparisons. Once we know how 'big' or 'small' a given set of IPAs are in terms of agency and potential influence, we need theories that can coherently account for differences across the board.

This book is guided by two main questions. First, being interested in IPA agency in policy making beyond the nation-state, we ask, *To what extent do international administrations have the potential to influence the initiation, formulation, and implementation of their IOs' policies?* In terms of analytical levels, or 'distance from our subject', we aim to strike a balance between comparability and close attention to the day-to-day workings of IPAs in proposing the concept of administrative styles. By focusing on these informal, quotidian procedures, we present a novel way to systematically assess IPA agency across different orga-nizations and different issue areas. We are also able to discern specific kinds of potential IPA influence by making the distinction between policy advocacy and institutional consolidation. Taking the middle ground between near and far, we are able to see the gestalt of the phenomenon in comparatively assessing IPA's actual form and size.

Second, once we know about the IPAs' administrative styles, we ask, *How do we explain variation? What makes an IPA a dwarf or a giant? Why are some giants leaning towards institutional consolidation while others are strong in policy advocacy, and still others do both*? We argue that the formation of different administrative styles comes along with different influence potential and orientations. Administrative style is affected by two dimensions: the internal challenges and the external challenges that a bureaucracy faces and perceives. This approach allows for systematic, generalized statements about the factors that

determine the potential policy influence of IPAs against the backdrop of the structural and institutional context in which they operate. A focus on administrative styles may thus enhance our theoretical understanding of the determinants of IPA agency and enable the conceptually guided comparison and measurement of IPAs over time and across the IO landscape.

In this introductory chapter, we show how the analytical view of IOs as actors in their own right has fuelled a growing interest in IPA influence in international policy making. While we do know that IPAs matter, we lack systematic knowledge and a comparative perspective on their informal agency. In the following pages, we argue that the study of IPA agency and its determinants has brought about important insights yet still lacks a meso-perspective on the phenomenon. We then go on to introduce our main argument and elaborate on the contributions we hope to make, before sketching out the structure and plan of the book.

1.1 Research Perspectives on International Public Administrations

Research on IPAs has gained strong momentum over the last two decades. This development is especially remarkable in view of the analytical neglect that has long characterized this field of inquiry. Although the growing interest in IPAs has brought about highly valuable findings on IPA agency and influence in international policy making, we are caught between analytical perspectives that take on either too remote or too proximate a view, implying that assessments of IPAs are either confined to their formal features or are rather idiosyncratic. We contend that there is a need for a meso-level perspective on IPAs that goes beyond merely formal assessments but that is sufficiently abstract to allow for systematic comparisons across different IPAs.

1.1.1 Seeing through the Dwarf Illusion: The Changing View on International Public Administrations

Globalization and the end of the Cold War fuelled the establishment and growing relevance of IOs in nearly all areas of global governance. IOs have been delegated a wide variety of tasks and are part of the global attempt to define effective means against climate change; they

command armed troops deployed to protect civilians in fragile states; they assist nation-states in solving humanitarian and refugee crises and they administrate the world financial system. While IOs are increasingly significant to both our understanding and the actual making of global governance, until the new millennium, they have played the role of 'ugly duckling' in IR theory (Verbeek, 1998). In a sense, IPAs were not even seen as illusory dwarfs; they were not seen at all. 'The question of what IOs actually do, a conception of IOs as actors as well as an understanding and explanation of their actions, had ... been largely overshadowed by the more fundamental theoretical entanglement of whether they matter at all' (Venzke, 2010, p. 68). Due to the discursive prevalence of realism and functionalism in the realm of IR, IOs (and hence IPAs even more so) had long been discarded as actors and research subjects in their own right (Reinalda & Verbeek, 2003). Even the emergence of a less statist perspective as a side product of regime theory left the general perception of passive IOs almost unchanged (Verbeek, 1998). To this day, IOs are often viewed as mere instruments of their member states or as forums for intergovernmental bargaining (Archer, 2015; Hurd, 2013; Rittberger & Zangl, 2006).[1]

It was not until the approaching new millennium that a major theoretical and analytical shift took place with regard to IOs. Theoretical advances in (sociological) institutionalism (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, 2004) and principal–agent theory (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Hawkins, Lake, Nielson, & Tierney, 2006; Stone, 2011) led scholars in global governance and IR to reopen the organizational black box and to look at IOs more seriously. Increasingly, IOs were theorized to matter,[2] since their broad spectrum of delegated authority and policy functions constitutes them as actors that influence their member states and the larger environment. By treating IOs as players in their own right, their conceptualization as actors goes far beyond their possessing a legal personality, since 'part of the point of creating international

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[1] For a more detailed account of how different theoretical traditions in IR view IOs and their secretariats, see Biermann et al. (2009).

[2] Note here that constructivists and organizational theorists were certainly pivotal in pushing this research agenda at the time, but naturally not the first to ever claim that IOs matter more generally. Liberal-idealists going back to Woodrow Wilson have made the same claim almost a century ago in emphasizing their role as a means to foster and uphold peace between states (Wilson, 1919; Woolf, 1916).

organizations is to have a body that is distinct from any of the states within it, and so agency on the part of the IO is an essential part of its function, purpose, and indeed existence' (Hurd, 2013, p. 17). This agency – the ontological potential and capacity to act according to their own will – enables IOs to influence their own output and processes, to thus 'act' and even to 'behave'. As actors, IOs can creatively work the rule structure in which they are embedded (Martin, 2006, p. 141).

When implying that an IO 'behaves', however, one is actually talking about the collective decisions of either member states or – more interestingly for the purpose of this book – their bureaucracies. The realization that 'if IOs matter, their staff must be significant too' (Xu & Weller, 2004, p. 11) profoundly challenged the dwarf illusion, which became less and less tenable the closer scholars zoomed in on IOs. Zooming in on IOs entails viewing the secretariat as a distinct part of the organization, as a political system that interacts with the IO's other parts and with the broader environment.

We refer to these bureaucratic bodies as 'international public administrations' (IPAs), which can more specifically be defined as 'hierarchically organised groups of international civil servants with a given mandate, resources, identifiable boundaries, and a set of formal rules of procedures within the context of a policy area' (Biermann et al., 2009, p. 37). IOs as actors, thus, are far from being monolithic, since they typically comprise several different, interacting bodies. Major formal decisions are normally made in the political arm of an IO, that is, the plenary organ and the executive body. These two elements are political in the sense that they usually consist of member states' representatives acting in the interest of their respective home countries. The bureaucratic[3] part of the IO – that is, the IPA – provides the

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[3] We generally conceive of IPAs as more-or-less bureaucratic organizations. Similar to their national counterparts, IPAs carry out administrative tasks on the basis of clearly specified competencies within a fixed hierarchical structure. Although the extent to which IPAs (and, of course, any other public or private administration) resemble patterns of Max Weber's ideal-typical conceptualization of bureaucracies varies, all of these organizations share the basic ingredients typically associated with bureaucratic structures, namely the principles of rule-bound behaviour, in particular neutrality, hierarchy, and action on the basis of recorded and written rules (Weber, 1978). Note that in order to avoid too many repetitions and enhance readability, we will henceforth use the terms 'bureaucratic' and 'administrative' interchangeably.

organizational infrastructure. Similar to nation-states, IOs thus possess an administrative apparatus designed to carry out the actual day-to-day business of the IO, such as researching and formulating documents, or planning and preparing conferences and assemblies. Typically, IPAs are headed by a secretary general,[4] and personnel are usually accountable not to the member states but to the organization, which – at least in principle – defies direct member-state control.

These bureaucratic bodies, as the 'institutional backbones of governance', indeed do 'behave'. Since at least the time of Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) seminal publication on the authority and pathologies of IOs' secretariats, a growing number of studies that have been inspired by sociological institutionalism, organizational sociology, and principal–agent approaches have adopted the view that IPAs are far from being dwarfs in analytical terms (see inter alia Bauer & Ege, 2016; Biermann & Pattberg, 2012; Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009c; Dingwerth, Kerwer, & Nölke, 2009; Liese & Weinlich, 2006; Nay, 2011; Nielson & Tierney, 2003). These undertakings have been paralleled by recent efforts of public administration, scholars to systematically investigate IPAs as a genuine type of public administration (Bauer, Knill, & Eckhard, 2016; Knill & Bauer, 2016; Knill, Bayerlein, Grohs, & Enkler, 2019). Research combining IR and organization theories fuelled a renewed interest in studying IOs as political systems and their IPAs 'as organizations' (Brechin & Ness, 2013; Dingwerth et al., 2009; Ness & Brechin, 1988), recognizing that the internal structure and political personnel of IOs can be sources of policy change (Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009c) or organizational dysfunctions (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Building on the now classical contributions of Cox and Jacobsen (1973), Haas (1964), and Weiss (1982), the main contribution of these efforts was to highlight that IOs' secretariats, just like IOs, are not just epiphenomenal and instrumental (Mearsheimer, 1994) but wield a certain level of influence. This research thus highlights the agency of both IOs and their IPAs (Ellis, 2010; Rochester, 1986). Increasingly, IOs are disentangled from their bureaucratic bodies, which are now almost univocally conceived to be *actors* in various settings, such as the secretariats of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Martin, 2006; Vetterlein, 2012) or the

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[4] We use the term secretary general uniformly for all IOs; note that this also includes functional equivalents, since the particular denomination varies from IO to IO.

administrative apparatus of United Nations bodies involved in peace-building (Eckhard, 2016; Weinlich, 2014). With many scholars now taking IPAs seriously, it is safe to say that the long-standing dwarf illusion of IPAs has been debunked.

1.1.2 Actual Dwarfs or Giants? IPA Influence in Policy Making

Once the literature has moved past the analytical problem of whether IOs matter or not, scholars began closing in on the subject. '[A]n international organization is most clearly an actor when it is most distinctly an "it", an entity distinguishable from its member states' (Claude, 1984, p. 13). The extent to which an IO is an 'it' – that is, IPA agency as a potential – becomes visible in its actions. Given the complex setup of IPAs' being embedded in the broader structure, action comes to mean 'independent action'. By definition, to be attributable to the IPA, agency must materialize in those actions taken by the IPA that would not have happened if an IO were simply the sum of its member states. In other words, IPA agency becomes visible in the influence IPAs exert on IOs' policies and processes. As a logical consequence of this and with the realization that IPAs are not dwarfs after all, the question arises as to if and how bureaucracies employ their agency, that is, how they actually influence IO policies and processes. We know from research on domestic administrations that bureaucrats may exert considerable influence on the contents and methods of policy making, which reach far beyond the street level. Bureaucracies can be highly active in initiating the development of new policies and typically play a pronounced role in the drafting of policy proposals to be adopted by the legislature. In short, it is established in the national context that public administrations are far from merely constituting instruments or means for policy makers and governments but pursue their own interests and objectives in policy making (inter alia Rourke, 1969; Heclo, 1977; Knill, 2001; Peters & Pierre, 2004).

Indeed, IPAs have similarly been found to exert considerable influence on IOs' policy outputs. Although different disciplines apply a variety of conceptual perspectives when addressing IPAs, the literature is surprisingly united in finding that IPAs matter as significant actors in international politics (see reviews by Busch, 2014; Eckhard & Ege, 2016; Liese & Weinlich, 2006). IPAs can influence IOs'

substantive policies, such as economic programmes by the IMF and the World Bank (Martin, 2006; Sharma, 2013; Vetterlein, 2012), for example, or the emergence and change of the World Health Organization's (WHO's) global AIDS initiative (Harman, 2010; Nay, 2011), the implementation of IOs' policies (e.g. Eckhard, 2016; Stone, 2008; Yi-Chong & Weller, 2004), and institutional policies that affect the design and change of IOs (Barnett & Coleman, 2005; Hanrieder, 2014; Hawkins & Jacoby, 2006; Johnson & Urpelainen, 2014; Weaver & Leiteritz, 2005). Although political control and responsibility over the decisions taken on all these questions remains well in the hands of member states, international policy making is clearly more than merely the sum of IO interests.

While the literature seems to have agreed that IPAs possess a certain degree of agency of their own, the actual extent of their influence in policy making continues to be debated (see Bauer et al., 2016; Reinalda, 2013). Despite the fact that the bureaucratic bodies form the major share of an IO, and notwithstanding a growing academic interest in IPAs, we lack systematic comparative knowledge of IPA agency in policy making beyond the nation-state. As we have seen, a variety of studies empirically assessed IPAs' influence in single or small-N case studies and concluded that IPAs can indeed be influential. This research highlights the agency of IOs and their IPAs (Ellis, 2010; Rochester, 1986) and has provided valuable insights into the various ways IPAs might matter for concrete IO policy outputs (Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009a). These pronounced efforts of a large number of scholars examining IPAs' involvement in and influence on IO policy making notwithstanding, from what we know so far, they could be real or illusory dwarfs or giants.

1.1.3 Dwarf or Giant Is a Matter of Perspective: IPAs from Near and Far

While we know that IOs do matter when trying to understand international policy and that IPAs can be relevant actors in this regard, we know little about whether – and if so, which – IPAs can really be considered active players in the field. We contend that one reason for this lies in the analytical perspectives applied. Our assessment of how and how much IPAs matter in international policy making crucially

depends on perspectives: in other words, how closely we delve into the workings of IPAs.

On the one hand, we find thick descriptions, which are analytically too close to allow for generalizable statements about IPA agency. While the above-mentioned qualitative single- or small-N case studies provide rich empirical information on the ways IPAs have exerted concrete influence in a given time period or case, the idiosyncratic assessment of IPA influence naturally renders comparisons across different bureaucracies highly difficult. While this is certainly a general drawback of the method and should not be held against the research itself, this case-specific research comes with a second problem. Usually, we find interpretations of instances in which bureaucratic influence was successful (i.e. actually visible). Yet this focus on visible cases of influence bears the danger of a biased case selection, since non-visibility does not necessarily imply that IPA influence was not present at all (Beach, 2004).

On the other hand, we see studies that approach IPAs (or IOs) from afar. Many scholars explicitly acknowledge these problems associated with the qualitative approach and systematically analyse a large number of IPAs on the basis of quantitative research designs. Focusing on the formal autonomy of IOs and IPAs, their independence, or the amount of authority delegated to them (Bauer & Ege, 2016; Ege, 2019; Haftel & Thompson, 2006; Hooghe & Marks, 2015), IPA influence has been mapped and measured in medium- and large-N studies. Although highly innovative and doubtlessly valuable, these approaches similarly come with a number of drawbacks associated with the analytical perspective. Because the informal is infamously hard to quantify, often these studies implicitly assume that formal discretion automatically implies that an IPA will actually make use of this room for manoeuvre. The basis of policy influence is located in the formal autonomy of IPAs as fixed in the founding treaties and other statues of the IO (Bauer & Ege, 2016). From an informal governance perspective (Stone, 2013), however, the presence of autonomy does not automatically mean that bureaucracies also seek to exert influence on policy making. Likewise, the absence of autonomy does not necessarily imply that bureaucracies dispense with the development of informal activities to overcome their formal autonomy limitations. Put simply: knowing about what IPAs can do in principle (knowing the boundaries of their discretion) does not tell us much about what they do de facto.

In sum, no analytical concepts have thus far been developed that would allow for systematic comparison of informal IPA influence and agency across different IOs. Existing research is either based on single case studies or fully quantitative approaches. While certainly fruitful, both approaches bear distinctive problems. While cases studies suffer from potential selection bias and idiosyncratic explanations, quantitative approaches have the problem of relying on formal assessments of IPA influence, that is, on data that are comparatively easy to collect for a larger number of organizations. What is missing, however, are comparative assessments that *combine* the strengths of in-depth studies on administrative influence with a broader comparative perspective.

1.1.4 Why Some IPAs Are Dwarfs While Others Are Giants: Explanations for IPAs' Potential for Policy Influence

In the young but rich literature on IPAs, their agency, and their influence, we are confronted with a plethora of loosely connected theoretical assessments of the conditions under which IPA influence might be more or less pronounced. Why are some IPAs considered giants while others are considered dwarfs? In the last ten years, several relevant factors have been suggested that might enable or constrain IPA action. The long list included bureaucratic expertise and expert authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Nay, 2012), politicization (Cox & Jacobsen, 1973; Hanrieder, 2014), member state control capacities (Best, 2012), and contextual factors such as policy uncertainty and organizational crises (Broome, 2012; Chorev, 2013). Scholars also pointed towards factors like the degree of administrative discretion, administrative resources, organizational structures (fragmentation versus concentration) (Graham, 2014), hierarchical structures (Eckhard, 2016), mandates (Hall, 2015, 2016), funding structures (Graham, 2017), and the nature of the political problem to be addressed, to name only some of the most prominent arguments in this regard (Snidal, 1990; Biermann et al., 2009; Lenz, Bezuijen, Hooghe, & Marks, 2015).

All these factors have been used convincingly to explain specific cases or important aspects of IPA agency. Informal institutions and behaviour, however, can rarely be explained against the backdrop of purely structural factors, let alone singular explanations. In sum, we have seen that while the literature has clearly moved past the dwarf illusion by