

International Organizations Matter

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Introduction

Theories of international relations make statements about the importance of actors in the international system. For representatives of the realist school (e.g. Hans Morgenthau) the nation-state is the only important international actor [1]. But this view neglects that since some decades new actors have stepped on the international stage and play a vital role in shaping world politics. Among them are international organizations which can be distinguished in two types: the international governmental organizations (IGOs) – such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the World Trade Organization – and the international non-governmental organizations better known as “NGOs” such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace International, and Doctors without Borders.

The Role of IGOs in World Politics

IGOs which are based on a multilateral treaty among nation-states have own institutions and competences as well as personal and financial resources. The aim of their members is to cooperate within one or more fields of interest. The establishment of IGOs began in the 19th century, when the Rheinschiffahrtskommission (1815), the International Telegraph Union (1865), and the Universal Postal Union (1874) were founded. After the 2nd world war their numbers increased with the foundation of organizations such as the United Nations (1945), the Organization of American States (1948), the Council of Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (both 1949). In 2013 the Union of International Associations (UIA) which publishes the Yearbook of International Organizations every two years lists 265 IGOs worldwide; their number is stagnating over the past years.

By founding IGOs, nation-states try to counteract their loss of power which derives from the increase of international problems and global interdependence (e.g. in environmental politics). They have come to the conclusion that only institutionalized cooperation with other nation-states serve their interests best and helps to solve problems which they cannot solve on their own as the problems are often transboundary. MacKenzie summarises as follows: “States created international organizations to do things that they could not do on their own or to prevent from happening things that were not in the state’s interests” [2].

IGOs play a vital role in world politics as they work for the protection of peace and international security (e.g. the United Nations), the protection of health (e.g. the World Health Organization), fair terms of employment (e.g. the International Labour Organization), the supervision of atomic energy (e.g. the International Atomic Energy Agency), or global rules of trade (e.g. the World Trade Organization). IGOs promote cooperation between nation-states as they serve as a forum for discussion and dialogue; they set up rules for the international system, establish mechanisms of supervision, and impose and authorize sanctions. They sometimes even gain a certain degree of autonomy or in other words, they are more than the sum of their members.

The Role of NGOs in World Politics

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is any voluntary

citizens’ group which has a firm organisational structure on a local, national or international level, is not profit making and independent of governments and campaigns for the common welfare [3]. NGOs work for specific issues such as human rights, environment, humanitarian aid and development.

The foundation of NGOs began in the second half of the 19th century. To mention in this respect is: the Anti-Slavery International Society (1839), the International Organization of Good Templars (1851), the International Committee of the Red Cross (1863). The UIA lists 176 NGOs in 1909, the number increased to 8.577 in 2013. During this period famous NGOs were founded such as Oxfam (1942), CARE International (1945), Amnesty International (1961), Greenpeace International (1971) and Human Rights Watch (1978).

The strength of NGOs is that they provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help to monitor and implement international agreements. Their activities include agenda setting, policy formulation and policy implementation. By agenda setting they want to convince nation-states and IGOs to deal with a certain problem, in case of policy formulation, they lobby decision-makers in order that their interests are considered in the problem-solving process. In case of policy implementation, NGOs are mainly involved in the realization of governmental programmes and projects what especially happens in the field of humanitarian aid and development. The work of NGOs enjoys high respect in the worldwide community what is expressed by the lending of the Nobel peace prize to the International Committee of the Red Cross (1917,1944,1963), Amnesty International (1977) and Doctors without Borders (1999).

NGOs strongly work together with IGOs such as the United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe and they are an important part of international conferences like the United Nations Climate Change Conference where they discuss problems with the governmental representatives and bring in their expertise in the conferences’ committees.

Conclusion

In this editorial I argued that international organizations are also relevant actors in the international system and that they – in addition to nation-states – matter in world politics. IGOs among other things contribute to peace, wealth and security as they institutionalize nation-state cooperation. NGOs improve the decisions of nation-states and

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IGOs as they provide expertise and know-how and in many cases play an important role in the implementation of governmental policies. Despite of this, it must be remarked that in the case of NGOs, one has to agree with Karns and Mingst, who pointed out as follows: "There are significant limits on NGOs' influence and effectiveness. In terms of size, resources, power, and legitimacy, they cannot and should not replace states and IGOs" [4].

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