

*Global Institutions*

# WHY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS HATE POLITICS

DEPOLITICIZING THE WORLD

Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens



“In this superb book, Lucile Maertens and Marieke Louis open a new research agenda on the depoliticization of international organizations. They do it in a way that is analytical, sophisticated, and yet engaging because it is grounded in real empirical puzzles.”

– *Frédéric Mérand, University of Montreal, Canada.*

“This book is the final nail in the functionalist coffin of depoliticized global governance. Thanks to a rich analysis of everyday practices inside international organizations, Louis and Maertens show how little-understood professional and institutional logics lead civil servants and diplomats to portray politics as an obstacle to global governance—when it is in fact its irreducible condition.”

– *Vincent Pouliot, McGill University, Canada.*

“The first systematic study on practices and logics of depoliticization within international organizations. A conceptually sophisticated and empirically rich book which sheds new light on international politics.”

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# Why International Organizations Hate Politics

Building on the concept of depoliticization, this book provides a first systematic analysis of International Organizations (IO) apolitical claims. It shows that depoliticization sustains IO everyday activities while allowing them to remain engaged in politics, even when they pretend not to.

Delving into the inner dynamics of global governance, this book develops an analytical framework on why IOs “hate” politics by bringing together practices and logics of depoliticization in a wide variety of historical, geographic and organizational contexts. With multiple case studies in the fields of labor rights and economic regulation, environmental protection, development and humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, among others this book shows that depoliticization is enacted in a series of overlapping, sometimes mundane, practices resulting from the complex interaction between professional habits, organizational cultures and individual tactics. By approaching the consequences of these practices in terms of logics, the book addresses the instrumental dimension of depoliticization without assuming that IO actors necessarily intend to depoliticize their action or global problems.

For IO scholars and students, this book sheds new light on IO politics by clarifying one often taken-for-granted dimension of their everyday activities, precisely that of depoliticization. It will also be of interest to other researchers working in the fields of political science, international relations, international political sociology, international political economy, international public administration, history, law, sociology, anthropology and geography as well as IO practitioners.

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# **Why International Organizations Hate Politics**

Depoliticizing the World

**Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens**



**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2021  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Louis, Marieke, author. | Maertens, Lucile, author.

Title: Why international organizations hate politics: depoliticizing the world/  
Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021. |

Series: Global institutions | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020053780 (print) | LCCN 2020053781 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781138607866 (hardback) | ISBN 9780429466984 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: International agencies. | Organizational behavior. |

Political participation. | World politics.

Classification: LCC JZ4850.L68 2021 (print) | LCC JZ4850 (ebook) |

DDC 341.2–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020053780>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020053781>

ISBN: 9781138607866 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781032004242 (pbk)

ISBN: 9780429466984 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9780429466984

Typeset in Times New Roman

by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

**To Arielle and Jeannette**



**Taylor & Francis**

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<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

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# Foreword and acknowledgements

After ten years of extensive readings on international organizations, fieldwork in Geneva, New York, Nairobi, Port-au-Prince, research interviews as well as informal discussions with IO practitioners, the relentless debate over IO “apolitical” nature has progressively emerged as a fundamental topic worth dedicating a book to.

Although we were at the time studying very distinct IOs (ILO, UNHCR, UNEP, DPKO, trade unions and employers’ organizations, etc.) and looking at different questions (representation and representativeness, international labor standards, securitization of the environment), our discussions would almost always revolve around heuristic similarities between our analysis, among which the issue of depoliticization stood out.

In 2016 we were invited to contribute to a special issue dedicated to (de)politicization and IOs edited by Franck Petiteville for *Critique internationale*, which provided a first opportunity to discuss the topic at length and benefit from the fruitful insights of the other colleagues who took part in the project. It eventually led to an article on UNDP and UNEP depoliticization practices and logics co-authored by Lucile and Raphaëlle Parizet and another on the paradox of depoliticized representation at the ILO by Marieke.

We then ran a broader “academic test” by holding a panel on “International Organizations and the Art of Depoliticization” at the International Studies Association Convention in Baltimore in 2017. This panel comforted us in the topic’s salience, but also that depoliticization could, and should, be seized *in practice* in a great variety of contexts.

Having tested our academic duo on multiple occasions, we decided to take on the challenge of exploring depoliticization within IOs in a more systematic and encompassing manner. To put it bluntly we wanted to look at an elephant that had been in the room for a long time, meaning that we had to take the apolitical claims so often heard by IO scholars seriously. We did not intend to build a “grand theory” on the subject. Rather we want to offer an analytical framework which will be robust enough to sustain our claim that depoliticization is an essential feature of IO action, but also open for transposition and reinterpretation in contexts and cases overlooked in our book, including domestic ones.

This book would never have existed without the inputs of all those IO practitioners who opened the doors of their professional world, even allowing for participant observation, and agreed to talk about their activities, dilemmas and beliefs during numerous and lengthy interviews. We thank them for their trust, availability and commitment and hope our analysis does not infringe too much on their vision of IOs.

We could not have faced such a challenge without the contribution and goodwill of our colleagues and friends (most of the time both!) who spent time on reviewing, discussing and challenging our hypotheses and findings (in alphabetical order): Mélanie Albaret, Fanny Badache, Bertrand Badie, Monique Jo Beerli, Alix Defrain-Meunier, Kari de Pryck, Guillaume Devin, Marie-Françoise Durand, Leslie-Anne Duvic-Paoli, Milena Dieckhoff, Youssef El Chazli, Stéphanie Ginalski, Jean-Christophe Graz, Auriane Guilbaud, Emmanuel Klimis, Rahel Kunz, Marylou Hamm, Sidney Leclercq, Mathilde Leloup, Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, Benoît Martin, Frédéric Mérand, Raphaëlle Parizet, Franck Petiteville, Vincent Pouliot, Bob Reinalda, Marie Saiget, Jean-Philippe Thérien, Quentin Tonnerre, Simon Tordjman, Anaëlle Vergonjeanne and Philippe Vonnard. We are particularly indebted to Leah Kimber for her crucial help in the finalization process. We take full responsibility for remaining (possible) mistakes.

Over the years researching and writing, we were lucky to be part of the research group on multilateral action (GRAM) which benefited from Guillaume Devin's inspiring commitment. Not only did it give us the opportunity to participate in numerous publication projects, seminars and conferences, which have sharpened our analysis, it also provided the most considerate and respectful environment scholars could wish for.

As we were preparing this book, we took part in a number of workshops that proved very useful in receiving quality feedback to fine-tune our demonstration. We would like to thank the audience members at the various places where we presented the project, including the ISA conference in Baltimore, the Centre for International Peace and Security Studies at McGill University and the University of Montréal, the CERI seminar on international organizations at Sciences Po Paris, the CRHIM lunch-seminar at the University of Lausanne and the Swiss political science association annual conference in Luzern. As our daily and uncompromising audience, we are very thankful to our students whose comments and questions helped us refine and clarify our argument.

At a more practical level, Lucile benefited from the financial support of the *Bureau de l'égalité* of the University of Lausanne allowing her to focus mainly on the project in the Spring 2019. Thanks to this grant, she was very fortunate to be a visiting fellow at the Montreal Centre for International Studies (CERIUM), which provided the best possible working environment to start writing this book. Marieke is particularly indebted to Sciences Po Grenoble and the PACTE research laboratory for funding conference trips, hosting a workshop on international organizations in 2016 and granting her a six-month research sabbatical which was decisive to finalize this manuscript.



Thanks to the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)'s commitment to Open Science, this book is available online for free; this is a tremendous opportunity to share our work widely. The Faculty of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Lausanne also provided a generous subsidy to cover for language editing service. We are deeply grateful to Iris Fillinger for taking on the hard job of proofreading our English writing. Thank you for your very thorough work and kindness. We are also thankful to Claire Maloney at Routledge and Giovanna Kuele managing the Global Institutions series for their dedicated assistance. Finally, we are very grateful to Thomas Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson for their insightful feedback and for supporting the project from the very start.

We owe special thanks to Valérian Pasche and Emmanuel Taïeb for their humor, patience, support and critical ear. We dedicate this book to Arielle, born during the arduous writing process, and to mamie Jeannette for her irreplaceable (almost) century-old wisdom. We cannot thank them enough.

# List of abbreviations

<b>AICHR</b>	ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>CBD</b>	Convention on Biological Diversity
<b>CILSS</b>	Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel
<b>COP</b>	Conference of Parties
<b>CVR</b>	Community violence reduction
<b>DEPI</b>	UNEP Division of Environmental Policy Implementation
<b>DESA</b>	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
<b>DEWA</b>	UNEP Division of Early-warning and Assessment
<b>DFS</b>	United Nations Department of field support
<b>DOS</b>	United Nations Department of operational support
<b>DPA</b>	United Nations Department of political affairs
<b>DPKO</b>	United Nations Department of peacekeeping operations
<b>DPO</b>	United Nations Department of peace operations
<b>DWCP</b>	ILO Decent Work Country Programmes
<b>ECHA</b>	United Nations Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs
<b>ECOSOC</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Council
<b>ELI</b>	Environmental Law Institute
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>G20</b>	Group of Twenty
<b>G4</b>	Group of Four
<b>G77</b>	Group of 77
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>GMO</b>	Genetically modified organism
<b>GNP</b>	Gross national product
<b>HDI</b>	Human Development Index
<b>HDI-IP</b>	Human Development Index for Indigenous Peoples
<b>IAEA</b>	International Atomic Energy Agency
<b>IBC</b>	International Bioethics Committee
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IGN</b>	Intergovernmental Negotiations framework

<b>IISD</b>	International Institute for Sustainable Development
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>IO</b>	International organization
<b>IOC</b>	International Olympic Committee
<b>IOE</b>	International Organisation of Employers
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IR</b>	International Relations
<b>ISO</b>	International Organization for Standardization
<b>JIU</b>	Joint Inspection Unit
<b>MDG</b>	Millennium Development Goal
<b>MINUSTAH</b>	United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti
<b>MNE</b>	Multinational enterprises
<b>MOOC</b>	Massive open online course
<b>MoU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>MSU</b>	United Nations Mediation Support Unit
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NEPA</b>	Afghanistan's National environmental protection agency
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>PBSO</b>	United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office
<b>PHARE</b>	EU Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy
<b>PISA</b>	Programme for International Student Assessment
<b>REC</b>	Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SEA</b>	Sexual exploitation and abuse
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UN Habitat</b>	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
<b>UN Women</b>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
<b>UNAIDS</b>	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
<b>UNAMIR</b>	United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda
<b>UNDG</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Group (previously United Nations Development Group)
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNDRR</b>	United Nations office for Disaster Risk Reduction
<b>UNECE</b>	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
<b>UNEP</b>	United Nations Environment Programme

<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNFCCC</b>	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations Refugee Agency
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>UNITAR</b>	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>UNU</b>	United Nations University
<b>UPU</b>	Universal Postal Union
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WIPO</b>	World Intellectual Property Organization
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization



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# Introduction

## Depoliticizing the world

- **The puzzle behind IO apolitical claims**
- **The political nature of IOs in debates**
- **Capturing the politics of IO depoliticization: practices and logics**
- **Why read this book**
- **Chapter overview**

*“We don’t do politics!”* Every researcher embarked in the field of international organizations (IOs) has heard this at least once from international bureaucrats, governmental delegates or civil society representatives engaged in multilateral negotiations. From narrow technical problems that led to the creation of the first IOs to highly sensitive topics such as democracy, security, trade or the environment, IOs—their member states, secretariats and staff—use supposedly apolitical techniques to enhance and control international cooperation. However, while they tend to minimize the political dimension of their actions, they implicitly acknowledge their political commitment. IOs are inherently embedded in the politics of international relations: they constitute sites of contradiction between states; they provide a framework for the mobilization of non-state actors such as transnational activist networks or multinational corporations; they play a key role in shaping global problems and the governance system to deliver multilateral responses. In other words, IOs cannot be reduced to apolitical mechanisms established to facilitate international cooperation. This paradox is the *starting point* of this book, which explores the process of depoliticization performed by and within IOs.

In this introductory chapter we set up our conceptual and methodological framework. The first section addresses empirical and theoretical puzzles: we question taken-for-granted apolitical claims observed during our fieldwork within the United Nations (UN) and discuss the IO politics drawing on recent work on (de)politicization. The following section presents main trends and gaps identified in the literature addressing IOs and depoliticization. The third section outlines arguments on the dynamics of depoliticization within IOs by defining depoliticization as a political process enacted through practices with different logics of action and presents the multi-case study approach applied in this book. While the final section provides an overview of the chapters, the fourth section lays out the different ways to read this book.



## The puzzle behind IO apolitical claims

International organizations are at the forefront of the art of doing politics while pretending not to. In this book we approach IOs as the most institutionalized expression of multilateral cooperation. We consider IOs as inclusive of both inter-governmental and transnational relationships. IOs can be defined as the “concrete manifestation of regularized international relations,”<sup>1</sup> bringing “stability, durability and cohesiveness”<sup>2</sup> through their role as a coordination mechanism instated in a founding act (treaty, charter, status) and enacted through a material framework (headquarters, funding and staff).<sup>3</sup> To this institutional perspective, summarized through Hurd’s trypic on IOs as actors, fora and resources,<sup>4</sup> we add a socio-historical view which considers IOs as a “social construct, an interim solution to demands for collective action resulting from the combination of self-serving strategies and moving objectives.”<sup>5</sup> Such compromise allows for a comprehensive understanding of IOs both in their institutional environments and in the rich social complexity of international relations. We are interested in analyzing the concrete action of IO secretariats and the mundane and everyday practices of their staff, as much as the hierarchical process of negotiating between IO members in different institutional settings over time. The book delves into the inner dynamics of IOs, often considering them as entities in their own right when studied through official discourses and positions developed by their secretariats or as institutional arrangements in which world politics unfold.

Among the many cases addressed in this book we would like to open with a brief foray into our fields of research: The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), two organizations in which we witnessed depoliticization practices *at work*.

In June 2011, Lucile Maertens held a three-month research assistant position with UNEP for participant observation. The small UN program was established in 1972 “to serve as a focal point for environmental action and co-ordination within the United Nations system.”<sup>6</sup> Since 1999 it has been sending teams of experts to evaluate the state of the environment in post-conflict countries. During the observation the coordinator supervising these activities from Geneva introduced UNEP as a provider of “a *neutral* and *science-based* environmental assessment to determine the damage and risks.”<sup>7</sup> A year later the director of the Post-conflict and disaster management branch in charge of conducting these evaluations explained in an interview that UNEP was “more accepted” because it was “less political,” its neutrality being highly appreciated in the sensitive contexts in which it intervenes.<sup>8</sup> Looking at these assessments, not only does UNEP provide detailed empirical data on environmental damage such as natural resources depletion and soil contamination, but it also frequently concludes reports with recommendations for policymakers. Its 2003 assessment in Afghanistan stated that “strong and well-equipped environmental authorities are needed,”<sup>9</sup> while its 2007 report on Sudan suggested the need to “invest in environmental management to support lasting peace in Darfur, and to avoid local conflict over natural resources elsewhere in Sudan” and urged to “build capacity at all levels of government and

improve legislation.”<sup>10</sup> These very political recommendations contradict the apolitical claims of UNEP’s staff.

Between 2011 and 2013, Marieke Louis attended the annual International Labour Conferences and other ILO meetings in Geneva. The purpose of her research was to identify the logic underlying the ILO’s tripartite structure and various representativeness claims made by ILO members. While conducting interviews with government representatives, trade-unionists and employers’ delegates, interviewees manifested resistance when they perceived a “political” conceptualization of representativeness entangled in power relations. In an interview conducted in 2013, a government representative of Canada vehemently insisted on the civil servant apolitical, primarily non-partisan, character of his position as a delegate to the ILO: “It’s an executive position within the public service of Canada, so *it’s not a political position*, it’s a public service position [...] *none of this position is political*.”<sup>11</sup> In other instances, interviewees insisted that the issues they had to deal with were not political: “In the ILO, we are *not here talking of political issues per se*. We are talking about technical, labor-related issues.”<sup>12</sup>

These examples are not unique. They indicate a pattern observed in many cases where IO actors—secretariats, staff, consultants working for IOs or within their institutional arrangements as well as members, delegates, observers—see their role as being outside the realm of politics. Such prevalent apolitical claims in multilateral settings stem from a two-fold dilemma. First, while IOs deal with core political issues, politics are mainly perceived as an obstacle to the achievement of the idea(s) conveyed by these organizations. Thus, IO staff often defend their impartiality and member state representatives may favor technical over political debates. Second, to fulfill the “noble” cause of international cooperation, IOs are likely to distance themselves from the “dirty business” of politics. Yet, by acting with discretion away from national political battles, public opinion and the media, they conceal the choices and biases that shape their activities while failing to answer the growing demand for transparency, accountability and democracy at the international level. Overall, the IO negative stance toward politics raises the following paradox: how to get away with politics while being embedded in it at the same time?

To address this puzzle, this book draws on the concept of depoliticization,<sup>13</sup> broadly understood as the process in which a situation, an actor or an issue is considered outside of politics and framed as apolitical. We approach depoliticization as a political process which consists in minimizing, concealing, even eliminating politics within IOs. Before we provide further detail on our analytical framework, here is the three-fold research question guiding this book: *how, why and to what end* do IOs present their action as outside the realm of politics? In other words we approach IOs as political actors and arenas and do not subscribe to the depoliticized reading of their action: the question we raise is neither “are IOs apolitical?” nor “is IO action depoliticized?” but rather “how do IOs perform depoliticization and what are the consequences of IO depoliticizing moves?” We show that depoliticization is performed through individual and collective practices yet is incorporated in institutional and professional logics which transcend instrumental

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motives. We explore concrete ways by which a wide range of IO actors claim apolitical engagement in various contexts. Then, we address the consequences of these practices for IOs themselves and more broadly for global governance. By unveiling IO practices and logics of depoliticization, the book takes their apolitical claims seriously and questions the politics of IOs, arguing that depoliticization is a political process by which IOs act in and on the world.

To account for IO apolitical claims it would be tempting to draw a distinction between supposedly political and apolitical IOs. Within the vast world of IOs some, like the United Nations Security Council, are perceived as political because they deal with worldwide security issues while others, like the ILO or the World Health Organization (WHO) are not, given the more technical and specialized nature of their activities. However, by doing so we would reproduce commonplace functionalist-driven classifications of IOs based on oppositions between technical versus political activities, power versus welfare organizations and high versus low politics.<sup>14</sup> Like many before us we argue that such distinctions limit our understanding of multilateral processes.<sup>15</sup> This book takes an alternative path. Neither do we consider that every activity performed by and within IOs is political nor that IO actors necessarily have a strategic interest in concealing the political character of their actions. Rather we address the *politics of depoliticization* enacted by and within IOs.

To capture the politics of depoliticization this book adopts an inclusive view on politics. Without revisiting the debates about the essence of politics, as natural or social, autonomous or omnipresent, we consider as part of politics the activities which eventually have an impact on the daily lives of a broader collectivity because they involve considerations on the legitimacy of detaining power, exercising authority and delivering adequate policies.<sup>16</sup> Politics encompasses both specific sites and individuals revolving around the state, the government, political parties and elites in general but also includes ordinary,<sup>17</sup> mundane, not conventional even informal<sup>18</sup> dimensions. Such a view relies on the premise that politics is both an assemblage of specialized and professional activities and a dimension of our social interactions that is not always explicitly framed as being political,<sup>19</sup> especially when the issues or the actors involved are not seen as part of politics. Therefore, the frontiers of politics are never delimited once and for all: what is political or not depends on the socio-historical context in which specific issues are enunciated and debated.<sup>20</sup> In other words, if politics is not necessarily everywhere, everything can *become* political under certain circumstances. The political qualification is less an attribute to designate a profession or an arena and more an on-going process that can never be taken for granted. One emblematic example is the increasing influence of experts who can serve depoliticization or politicization moves, depending on which expertise, and how and by whom it is used.

The added-value of an inclusive definition of politics is three-fold: it first encompasses both cooperative and conflictual dynamics which rely upon the premise that politics requires *spaces* for *debates* opening the possibility for contrasting viewpoints and disagreement.<sup>21</sup> Second, it goes beyond partisanship and the domestic level as the only relevant space for political action, including IOs.

Third, while it does not associate politics with a specific regime, liberal, representative, democratic or authoritarian, it approaches decision-making and the exercise of power as critical sites of politics.

Most of the literature challenging static definitions of politics has looked into processes of politicization as a social activity through which certain practices and issues are integrated into the sphere of public policies or considered as political. Such a perspective requires paying attention to the unstable frontiers of the political field, as well as classifying activities performed by individuals and institutions shaping the delimitation of politics.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Mérand refers to “political work” as “the practice of trying to carve out a space for political agency in an environment that is heavily constrained by bureaucratic rules, international norms, and intergovernmental power structures.”<sup>23</sup> This approach questions power, knowledge, access and control over the definition of political matters.<sup>24</sup> Politicization is thus observed in discussions, debates, controversies and conflicts both in public and private spheres.<sup>25</sup> In this book we propose to explore the reversed processes through which such signals of politicization fade or even disappear. To do so we rely on the concept of depoliticization.<sup>26</sup>

Depoliticization is an “essentially contested concept.”<sup>27</sup> Although research on depoliticization is not recent, new developments have emerged since the end of the 2000s, the first wave of work being attributed to Hay and the second to Wood and Flinders.<sup>28</sup> In the book which inspires the title of the present volume, *Why We Hate Politics*, Hay identifies three phases of depoliticization: the governmental depoliticization or the process of delegation; the public depoliticization which appears in the privatization of public sectors; and the private depoliticization, or the denial of the problem.<sup>29</sup> Building on his work, Wood and Flinders allege that “depoliticisation occurs when the debate surrounding an issue becomes technocratic, managerial, or disciplined towards a single goal, and hence changed in content.”<sup>30</sup> They determine the following three faces of depoliticization: the governmental depoliticization, or “the withdrawal of politicians from the direct control of a vast range of functions, and the rise of technocratic forms of governance;”<sup>31</sup> the societal depoliticization, or the end of public debates; and the discursive depoliticization where a single discourse with a single interpretation of the problem remains.<sup>32</sup> These categories feature valuable pointers to approach depoliticization in IOs: delegation and the role of technocrats form an inherent dimension of the institutional functioning of IOs; denial of the problem combined with a single interpretation is also a relevant lens to analyze the way IOs select and frame global problems. In this book, we suggest a combination of these elements while relying on a more generic definition of depoliticization. Based on Hay’s original work, Fawcett and al. suggest that “depoliticisation can be defined as the set of processes (included varied tactics, strategies, and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue.”<sup>33</sup> Building on this definition, we explore depoliticization in processes through which objects are framed as apolitical, issues are driven outside the political realm and actors minimize, avoid or conceal the political dimension

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of their action. More specifically, we rely on the above-mentioned work and add to it by accounting for these processes in the field of IOs.

This book explores the ways in which IOs enact depoliticization, capturing how “depoliticisation works in practice.”<sup>34</sup> Moving from the idea that political activities are performed by political elites, it does not consider depoliticization as enacted solely by diplomats or IO heads but investigates other professionals including intermediate-level management. It focuses particularly on IO politics pertaining to exercising power and authority, acknowledging responsibility, managing resources of influence (knowledge, representation, time) and facing debates, confrontation and conflicts over alternative or diverging worldviews and subsequent political decisions. Despite growing interest, research on depoliticization remains limited in the field of International Relations (IR). Yet, since politics is essentially a matter of context and content there is no reason to exclude certain actors and arenas, like IOs, from the scope of our analysis. Moreover, “the proliferation of global depoliticisation norms”<sup>35</sup> stressed by Hay invites us to unveil the machinery of global depoliticization and integrate IOs into the burgeoning study of depoliticization and global governance.<sup>36</sup> Grasping such processes and the inherent tension between the political action of IOs and their apolitical claims requires an analytical approach drawing on depoliticization studies and IO scholarship.

### **The political nature of IOs in debates**

IR scholars have discussed IO politics at length. Although this book cannot review all debates, we draw attention to the literature that has, at least partially, addressed depoliticization and IOs. While they do not always rely on the concept of depoliticization, we can learn from three trends in IO studies to better understand the politics of IO depoliticization.

### ***Revisiting functionalism***

The relationship between IOs and (de)politicization was first questioned by functionalist scholars such as Mitrany,<sup>37</sup> Claude<sup>38</sup> and Haas<sup>39</sup> though only indirectly as an answer to the Realist primacy of the nation-state and national politics.<sup>40</sup> For Mitrany functionalism rests on the idea that a “technical” approach to international political problems could promote peace by neutralizing the politicization of issues and by organizing interdependence.<sup>41</sup> However, the functionalist’s main concern was not whether IOs contribute to depoliticization processes but under which conditions states could achieve peace. Their answer was that IOs facilitate international cooperation outside the political realm. As stressed by Haas: “functionalists, in the specific sense of the term, are interested in identifying those aspects of human needs and desires that exist and clamor for attention outside the realm of the political.”<sup>42</sup> After the First World War, the ILO supposedly technical approach to peace, focusing on labor and welfare, gave strong support to the doctrine of “welfare internationalism” as a “veritable ideology of functional,

depoliticized international governance<sup>743</sup> embodied by other so-called technical agencies of the late 19th century such as the Universal Postal Union (UPU).<sup>44</sup> However, while promoting a depoliticized approach to global problems, functionalists still acknowledge the inevitability of politics. For Haas, “the process by which a given activity becomes non-controversial is itself a political matter, derived not from initial consensus but from initial conflict, which may shake down to a consensus as a result of national redefinition of need.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, the functionalist approach relies on the assumption that technical cooperation will eventually soften and even eliminate political conflicts by virtue of integration and spill-over effects. Functionalists remain convinced that a “crucial distinction between the political and the technical, the work of the politician and that of the expert”<sup>46</sup> is possible.

Critics of the functionalist approach on IOs were numerous. For Cox, the “exaltation of the technical expert”<sup>47</sup> and opposition between the technicians (the “good guys”) and the politicians (the “bad guys”) vested in conflicting interests pertain more to a wishful, even utopian, thinking than a scientific one.<sup>48</sup> In other words, it works as an ideology concealing IO politics and power relations that structure international relations. In a more nuanced way, Groom and Taylor stress the limitation of distinguishing between political and apolitical activities, specifically between power and welfare and high and low politics, given the entanglement of these issues.<sup>49</sup> In their post-functionalist theory of international governance, Hooghe, Lenz and Marks approach politicization as an exogenous process whereby IOs are contested.<sup>50</sup> While contestation is not *per se* negative or positive, their findings show differentiated outcomes according to which groups are criticizing IOs. Politicization might have negative effects on IOs if critics, like for instance, the radical right, attack the core principles of multilateralism. Their work reinforces the traditional functionalist claim arguing that the more specific and scientific an IO, the less vulnerable it is to the negative effects of politicization.

Questioning whether politicization is *good* or *bad* for IOs is not the purpose of this book. However, following Steffek and Holthaus,<sup>51</sup> we agree that functionalism should be revisited not as a theory of IOs but as a logic sustaining IO tendency to claim their apolitical character. In other words, to understand depoliticization in the context of IOs, the functionalist position must be taken seriously given that it remains a common discourse among many IO staff and members, as discussed in Chapter 4. Moreover, while functionalist theories may seem outmoded, they pioneered in identifying forms of autonomous bureaucratization and the importance of professional experts. They also paved the way to more recent trends in the literature considering IOs as part of an anti-politics machine and sites of expert knowledge production.

### ***Anti-politics and bureaucratic multilateralism***

Drawing on the sociology of organizations and anthropology of development, two complementary trends in IR have challenged the functionalist accounts by questioning the apparent neutrality of IOs.



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In line with the critical perspective developed by Cox, Jacobson et al.,<sup>52</sup> followed by Reinalda and Verbeek,<sup>53</sup> IO scholars progressively opened IOs' "black box," scrutinizing (political) internal processes at play. As pioneer importers of Weberian sociology to analyze IOs, Barnett and Finnemore laid the cornerstones for the study of IOs as international bureaucracies<sup>54</sup> challenging "their ability to present themselves as impersonal and neutral—as not exercising power but instead serving others."<sup>55</sup> In their 2004 book *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* which inspired the subtitle of this volume, they address the "myths of impartiality or value-neutral technocracy" behind IO staff's wish to be "perceived as apolitical technocrats"<sup>56</sup> and identify the resources available to achieve this goal.

Drawing on different case studies Barnett and Finnemore first shed light on the myth of IO neutrality and the subsequent dilemma IOs face:

there often is no neutral stance one could take in many of the situations IOs confront, yet IOs need to find one in order to *maintain the claim that they are impartial and are acting in a depoliticized manner*. The fact that they are legitimated by a myth of depoliticization is a source of stress for IOs when impartial action is impossible.<sup>57</sup>

They further challenge the supposedly neutral character of solutions advanced by IOs as in the case of the International Monetary Fund (IMF): "These solutions were not, however, purely technical and value-neutral; they aimed to reconstitute these economies to conform with the market-dominated models that have become known as the Washington Consensus."<sup>58</sup>

Secondly, echoing the work on the bureaucratization of international interventions,<sup>59</sup> Barnett and Finnemore hint at the IO resources available to act in a depoliticized manner, namely authority (delegated, moral and expert). Delegated authority helps IOs to present their action as a result of their members' requests. Moral authority "allows IOs to present themselves as depoliticized and impartial."<sup>60</sup> As for expert authority, while the authors point to specific techniques such as quantification and categorization, they also show that expert authority "enables IOs to be powerful by creating the appearance of depoliticization. By emphasizing the 'objective' nature of their knowledge, staff of IOs are able to present themselves as technocrats whose advice is unaffected by partisan squabble."<sup>61</sup> They even conclude: "The greater the appearance of depoliticization, the greater the authority associated with the expertise."<sup>62</sup> While their work does not openly explore depoliticization processes *per se*, they undeniably pave the way for further research on the politics of IO depoliticization.

Such a critical take on IO apparent neutrality is also advanced by scholars in development studies who question the politics of international aid.<sup>63</sup> Proposing an anthropology of "the international 'development' apparatus" implemented in Lesotho, Ferguson describes the "anti-politics machine" through which international interventions reduce issues such as poverty to a technical problem.<sup>64</sup> Showing the difficulty in solely addressing these programs in terms of

intentionality or results, he draws on Foucault to analyze the complex interaction between intentional plans, unacknowledged structures and chance events that produces “unintended yet instrumental elements in a resultant constellation that has the effect of expanding the exercise of a particular sort of state power while simultaneously exerting a powerful depoliticizing effect.”<sup>65</sup> He shows that the development industry in which IOs such as the World Bank play a key role depoliticizes both the issue at stake, in this case poverty, and the actor expanding its power, the state: “By uncompromisingly reducing poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of ‘development’ is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicized in the world today.”<sup>66</sup> Building on Ferguson’s argument and drawing on Foucault, the anthropologist Birgit Müller shows how the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) neutralized the controversies over the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) also by “promising technical solutions.”<sup>67</sup> She further argues that the FAO “self-eliminates its democratic political role”<sup>68</sup> while depoliticizing conflicts. She traces how the FAO strategically positioned itself as an honest broker in the negotiations over GMOs to eventually favor pro-GMO interests in the 1990s. The organization relied on a combination of expert knowledge to frame food as a technical (both scientific and technological) issue, despite the opposition of many civil society actors whose participation was both encouraged and controlled by the organization.<sup>69</sup>

Ferguson’s conclusions have been criticized for not taking into account the “agency of actors in development at every level” and for diverting attention from “the complexity of policy as institutional practice, from the social life of projects, organisations and professionals, from the perspectives of actors themselves and from the diversity of interests behind policy models.”<sup>70</sup> By showing the overlapping logics behind IO depoliticization this book intends to incorporate these criticisms while challenging IO discourses which tend to reduce political issues to technical ones, especially through expert knowledge and technicization.

### ***Expertise, knowledge production and technicization***

A last trend of research addresses expertise, knowledge production and technicization. Some of this work does not directly deal with depoliticization and mainly focuses on international bureaucracies, IO secretariats and staff, experts and professional cultures, overlooking states and governmental delegates. Yet it supplies useful insights to identify how IOs enact depoliticization.

IO scholarship has extensively addressed expertise by looking at experts working in and for IOs, as discussed in Chapter 1. It questions the influence of technocrats’ ideas and the role of expert networks in the establishment of the multilateral system<sup>71</sup> and explores the trajectories of individual experts and knowledge networks within IOs.<sup>72</sup> While much of the work focuses on the process of knowledge production within IOs,<sup>73</sup> recent studies explore how IOs mobilize expertise and depend on expert knowledge.<sup>74</sup> Depoliticization comes to the fore among

the different modes of knowledge utilization by international bureaucracies that Littoz-Monnet identifies.<sup>75</sup>

One way IOs mobilize expert knowledge is by emphasizing the technical dimension of an object, or technicizing it. Technicization can be defined as “an activity of articulation of technical and political registers [...] and a tool for political legitimation.”<sup>76</sup> According to Dufournet, the “technical management of an issue” is a form of depoliticization since it fixes the issue in a context of administrative regulation to avoid “putting it into politics.”<sup>77</sup> Flinders and Wood associate depoliticization and technicization, asserting that “the great promise of technicity, however, was that unlike theological, metaphysical, moral and even economic questions—that are forever debatable—purely technical problems have something refreshingly factual and neutral about them.”<sup>78</sup> The work on depoliticization and global governance addresses this promise of technicity. Papadopoulos, for instance, focuses on technocratic ruling in the case of depoliticization in multilevel governance. He insists on the role of technocrats, including experts and bureaucrats, and asserts that “depoliticisation can be considered at its peak when technocrats dominate the process, when its pluralism is limited, when it is shielded from the ‘shadow of hierarchy’, and when there are no ‘fire alarms’ to alert and trigger open debates.”<sup>79</sup> For Stone, the process of “scientization” is also a tactic of depoliticization in global governance.<sup>80</sup> She demonstrates how “‘science’ or ‘causal knowledge’ is deployed to reduce conditions of ‘uncertainty’,” allowing experts to enter policy deliberations with “their tactical input to governance [being] legitimized by their professional accreditations, high-level educational qualifications, or scientific recognition.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, scholars identify technicization as a potential vector of depoliticization performed by IOs avoiding cleavages and hiding behind supposed neutrality.<sup>82</sup> Like the work previously mentioned, these studies mostly focus on knowledge networks, experts and their professional agency and shed light on expert profiles and IO practices surrounding expert knowledge. Stone also argues that depoliticization arises “from technocratic distancing tactics” that are “practised by international civil servants, government officials, and various experts” in global governance.<sup>83</sup> This book builds on their conclusions while extending technicization and knowledge mobilization in the hands of IO members.

### ***Depoliticization and IOs: a burgeoning field of research***

Debates on IOs and depoliticization are not entirely absent in IR. Promoting technocracy at the expense of detrimental state-centered politics, functionalists consider IO depoliticization as a condition for international cooperation. Critically addressing IO apparent neutrality, the work on bureaucratization and management of global issues implies that depoliticization is a tactic for international bureaucracies to impose a specific worldview. Research on the politics of expertise in IOs describes depoliticization as a daily professional practice embedded in technicization processes and IO organizational cultures. While this work approaches depoliticization in a peripheral way, studies directly addressing depoliticization

and IOs as their core enquiry are sparse. We identify three types of research which have fed our analysis.

Various case studies first offer in-depth empirical analysis based on one or two organizations,<sup>84</sup> investigating how IO action can contribute to the depoliticization of their activities and the issues they are working on. Each study points to various practices and logics of depoliticization: downplaying an apparently sensitive topic, putting forward the economic utility of an issue, stressing the functionality of certain practices such as consensus and pragmatism while stigmatizing dissent. In an attempt to conceptualize depoliticization more broadly based on a comparison between two IOs, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UNEP, Parizet and Maertens develop a two-fold analysis which lays the foundations of the conceptual framework developed in this book. They suggest considering depoliticization as an assemblage of practices such as technical interpretation, neutral dissemination and field interventions, and identify three logics of depoliticization.<sup>85</sup> This book continues this first conceptualization work while providing a more detailed and fine-grained framework.

Secondly, other studies focus on one specific dimension in the depoliticization process, such as expertise and IO discourses. This is the case of Stone's work on depoliticized global governance mentioned earlier,<sup>86</sup> as well as Littoz-Monnet on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and WHO<sup>87</sup> and the contributors of her edited volume on the politics of expertise in IOs.<sup>88</sup> Investigating bureaucratic expansion at UNESCO and WHO, Littoz-Monnet identifies various tactics to conceal the political nature of IO activities: framing global action as natural, linking the new issue domain to the organization's mandate, mobilizing expertise, technicalizing issues and acting as "neutral brokers."<sup>89</sup> Her demonstration reinforces conclusions drawn in anthropology on the role of IOs as "neutral brokers" which show how IOs can dissolve conflicts and eliminate controversies to create a "gloss of harmony" through homogenized discourses, search for compromise, global norms, technical procedures and standards.<sup>90</sup> Earlier work, notably in French, also addressed IO depoliticization by dissecting IO discourses through the study of their reports,<sup>91</sup> like Siroux's work on the World Trade Organization (WTO)<sup>92</sup> and Perrot's analysis of a 2000 joint report published by the UN, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the IMF on international development goals.<sup>93</sup> While these studies explore the role of expert knowledge, discourses and networks in great detail, they tend to confine depoliticization to expertise and international bureaucracies.

Finally, some articles question the tension between politicization and depoliticization in IOs. This is the case of Petiteville's work which shows that most IR theories favor viewing IOs as depoliticized actors. While Petiteville identifies a number of vectors of depoliticization, mostly articulated around IO technocratic and bureaucratic power, he demonstrates the inherent ambiguity between depoliticizing moves and IO politics. He argues that the quest for eradicating politics is vain and suggests looking at IO resilient politicization.<sup>94</sup> Such work provides a thorough literature review in sociology, political science and anthropology about

IOs while remaining mainly conceptual. Drawing on pioneer literature, this book endeavors to account for IO depoliticization in a systematic way by identifying and understanding depoliticization through its practices and logics within the institutional and political environment of IOs. To do so we approach depoliticization as a political process enacted by and within IOs.

### **Capturing the politics of IO depoliticization: practices and logics**

The literature review highlights at least two things: depoliticization is neither a new nor an isolated phenomenon on the international stage. Like Stone, we agree that: “The depoliticization of global governance is both an undirected trend and a deliberate tactic of IOs, governments and non-state actors.”<sup>95</sup> Therefore, we do not presume that depoliticization is an essentially strategic or unintentional process. We contend that it can be both, depending on the situation. We argue in this book that depoliticization has political meaning and political implications for IOs. Thus, the fact that this volume prioritizes the study of IOs and depoliticization rather than politicization is not and should not be seen as contradictory to the assumption that IOs are essentially political actors. Focusing on depoliticization rather than politicization is an attempt to account for the claim generally made by IOs that they are not involved in politics. This research interest and topic selection should therefore not be misinterpreted as an ontological claim that IOs are *apolitical*, quite the contrary. Other studies on humanitarian and religious actors have used the concept of “militant apoliticism” to stress the ambiguity of apolitical claims and how they can, directly or indirectly, serve a political agenda and a strategy of public engagement to defend a specific cause.<sup>96</sup> While “apolitical” indicates being outside the political realm (or, at least, claiming to be), “depoliticized” qualifies an element deprived of political character; it is this process of deprivation that we seek to capture with the concept of *depoliticization*. Neither should it be considered that trends of depoliticization are incompatible with politicization processes: they both address IO politics in the making. For instance, in defining politicization mostly in terms of public mobilization, contestation and controversies, authors like Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt, but also Rixen and Zangl, shed light on the increasing politicization of the international sphere. Based on different case studies, they converge in explaining politicization as a result of the increased authority of international institutions without sufficient legitimacy (international economic institutions are particularly targeted).<sup>97</sup> Likewise, Mérand suggests a typology of political work within the European Commission that turns “non-political issues into political issues” and where “conflict is assumed, uncovered, or created, and becomes a source of decision.”<sup>98</sup> Politicization and depoliticization are both at work within IOs and deserve our attention, together and separately. We hope that upon reading this book the reader will acquire a deeper understanding of IO politics through a comprehensive analysis of depoliticization processes.

To make this argument requires an encompassing approach accounting for both the concrete enactment of the process of depoliticization *and* its consequences.

We thus propose a two-fold framework: the first part of this book dedicated to depoliticization practices accounts for the *how* of depoliticization, the second part focuses on depoliticization logics to answer the *why* and *to what end* of depoliticization. Figure I.1 summarizes the categories of depoliticization practices and logics introduced throughout the book.

Barnett and Finnemore wrote that “IOs work hard to preserve this appearance of neutrality and service to others.”<sup>99</sup> This book first delves into this “hard work” by drawing mostly on practice theory. Building on the practice turn in IR, we refer to practices as general classes of action that are socially developed, reproduced over time, embedded in organized contexts and which can be individually or collectively performed, especially through organizations.<sup>100</sup> The practice turn often relates to the transposition of Bourdieu’s sociology into the field of IR. However, we do not claim to specifically rely on Bourdieu’s legacy:<sup>101</sup> we rather consider practice as a heuristic concept emphasizing what is at stake in IO everyday activities and develop an epistemological and methodological framework to study such organizations. We draw on the characteristics identified by Adler and Pouliot<sup>102</sup> to analyze practices through which depoliticization is enacted.

We refer to depoliticization practices as socially meaningful patterns of action which deny or conceal contingency, choice and deliberation. We identify three main categories of depoliticization practices deployed by and within IOs: expert-, format- and time-related. First, depoliticization is performed through practices which consist in claiming apolitical status on the basis of expert knowledge while reducing political complexity by interpreting problems through technical lenses and solutions. Second, depoliticization occurs using specific formats which give apparent neutrality to its political content. Third, depoliticization is produced by controlling the timeframe and the pace of decision-making, therefore

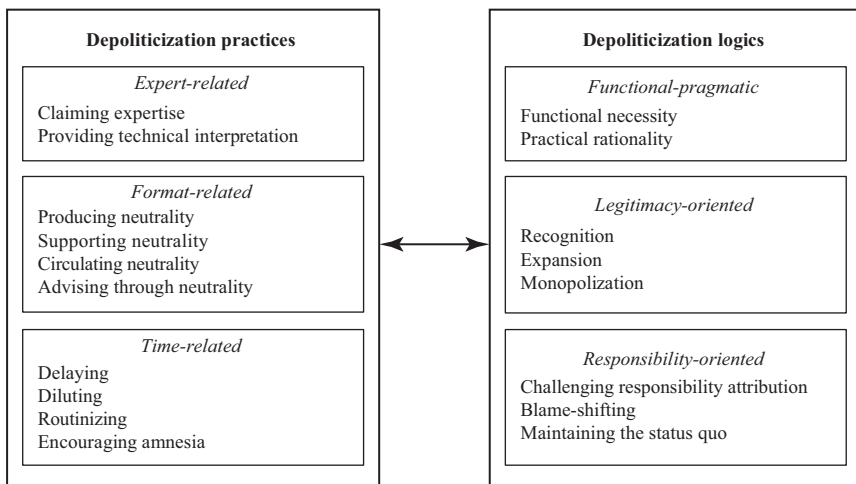


Figure I.1 Depoliticization practices and logics

diluting political momentum. The first three chapters of this book explore each category in the context of IOs. These routines and habits are socially recognized by IO actors and partners—IO staff, diplomats, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media—and rest on background knowledge taking various forms: scientific, bureaucratic, institutional, diplomatic, communicational. Their discursive and material dimensions cannot be dissociated.

However, none of these practices is *essentially in itself* depoliticizing; some are used to politicize as shown in Mérand's study of the political work within the European Commission.<sup>103</sup> It is only when enacted, purposely or not, in a specific context that they contribute to depoliticization. That being said, identifying practices does not imply leaving aside the *reasons justifying and meanings attributed to* these practices whether we consider them largely unintentional, unanticipated and the product of pre-existing knowledge and structures, or as the result of well-planned strategies, compromises or adaptive tactics.

To further develop our understanding of the depoliticization process, the second part of the book investigates the logics of depoliticization. In contrast with the notion of practice, the concept of logic in IR and political science is fuzzy. It is used in both singular and plural forms<sup>104</sup> relating to a great variety of political processes, though without a clear definition. There are discussions on the logic of collective action, the logic of the state, the logic of practicality and practical logics,<sup>105</sup> the security logic(s), the neoliberal logic, etc. The implicit assumption behind the use of logic is that actors, institutions or an entire policy field rely upon a specific way of reasoning, functioning and ordering things. Actors may follow such logic to guide and justify their actions, without necessarily adhering to a rationalist pattern. In other words, logic is not equivalent to logical thinking.<sup>106</sup> It is nonetheless consistent with the dominant framework enacted through specific practices and values that characterizes the policy field in which actors or institutions are involved, hence the importance of studying organizational cultures and ideologies. Pouliot defines the logic of practicality in the field of security communities as the logic that makes what is to be done appear “self-evident” or commonsensical.<sup>107</sup> Logics *support* practices giving them meaning and direction even if actors and institutions do not necessarily control them. Additionally, we argue that logics of action comprise both the expectations, i.e. what actors expect from a specific practice, and the ensued concrete outcomes, intended or not.

We refer to depoliticization logics as the driver of depoliticization practices and the concrete consequences for actors and issues at stake. We unveil three main categories of depoliticization logics at play within IOs: being pragmatic, monopolizing legitimacy and avoiding responsibility. First, depoliticization is performed as a functional and pragmatic answer to needs and constraints following a form of practical rationality. Second, depoliticization supports legitimacy assertion and expansion while being reinforced by the monopolization of a policy field. Third, depoliticization challenges responsibility attribution and tends to strengthen existing power relations. The logics supporting IO depoliticization practices reveal the potentially unintended consequences for IOs and more broadly global governance. Thus, referring to depoliticization logics does



not necessarily imply adopting a rationalist perspective on IOs. Moreover, while addressing the *logics* of depoliticization is not the same as identifying the *causes* of depoliticization, it nevertheless aims to account for the larger social meaning of depoliticization practices. Whether this meaning is evident and anticipated by IOs or is the product of non-intentional actions remains open and can only be answered in reference to specific situations. It differs from addressing the success of depoliticization practices, which would require to consider actors' intentions and audiences' reception. In other words, we look at the depoliticizing effects of practices in a given context rather than asserting that IO depoliticization is successful, as we conclude in Chapter 7.

In terms of empirical demonstration the book delves into the politics and inner dynamics of multiple IOs. While each chapter is titled in reference to a specific practice or logic at play, the approach is empirically inductive and based on case studies. Chapters review the relevant literature then draw on multiple case studies including ours. Original research relies on a series of qualitative methods including participant observation,<sup>108</sup> discourse analysis<sup>109</sup> applied to IO written production and archives and semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors over the last ten years. The originality of this approach lies in the balance between original empirical case studies on different organizations to support our argument and taking stock of other IO studies.<sup>110</sup>

In terms of specific case studies, we rely on well-developed empirical research in IO literature and on less documented case studies. We approach IOs in their institutional environments re-embedding their action in time and in wider political and social contexts, mindful of power relations and the complexity of IO everyday enactment. Some cases adopt a *longue durée* perspective to yield insights on the evolution of depoliticization practices over time. While each case will not be explored at length, we are able to provide a broad perspective on IO action, thereby addressing a wide audience interested in global politics.

The demonstration advanced is based on various case studies without comparing them *stricto sensu*. These cases rely on solid qualitative research, but since they have been conducted within the framework of different research projects, data are not perfectly comparable. We therefore do not present a structured comparison, nor do we enunciate a strict typology. What we propose instead is *an analytical framework to make sense of practices and logics encountered within IOs on numerous occasions and in a great variety of contexts*.

## Why read this book

This book is a first attempt to provide an analytical framework on IOs and depoliticization, bringing together practices and logics of depoliticization in a variety of historical, geographic and organizational contexts. Against a depoliticized reading of IOs, this book demonstrates that their apolitical claims are worth questioning: IO practices have depoliticizing effects that unveil the ways IOs function in world politics. It argues that depoliticization is enacted in a series of overlapping practices, resulting from the complex interaction between professional and



individual habits, organizational cultures and individual tactics. Such analysis sheds light on mundane and everyday activities often overlooked in IR despite the significance of their depoliticizing effects. By approaching these consequences in terms of logics, we propose to address the strategic dimension of depoliticization without assuming that IO actors wake up every morning with a clear objective to depoliticize IO action or global problems.

On the other hand, addressing IO depoliticization through a broad analytical framework inevitably generates frustrations, as it leaves a number of blind spots. First, adopting a multi-case approach forces us to be selective in terms of empirics. Thus, readers should not expect a thorough introduction to each IO mentioned in the book. Moreover, as this book compiles a heterogeneous literature, our purpose is not to defend a specific approach on IOs or a specific IR school of thought. Second, the book scarcely addresses important global governance issues such as migrations, inequalities, arms control and military-related issues in general, with the exception of peacekeeping. We do not infer that these topics matter less, rather that we would welcome more work on depoliticization in these specific policy fields. Third, as the book primarily focuses on intergovernmental organizations, there is little insight into the relationship between depoliticization and civil society actors except for developments on the ILO and some boxes dedicated to international NGOs. Finally, as depoliticization is our primary focus we do not tackle politicization practices and logics also at play within IOs, disregarding “resilient politics”<sup>111</sup> and the political work that tries “to carve out a space for political agency” within IOs.<sup>112</sup> While the conclusion sketches out contestation and resistance that hamper depoliticization within IOs, the book does not fully address the limits of depoliticization. Yet, while the practices and logics analyzed in the book do not claim to be exhaustive, they account for a wide range of significant aspects of IO action. This book can, therefore, be read from different perspectives and disciplinary approaches (political science, international relations, international political sociology, international political economy, international public administration, history, law, sociology and anthropology).

For IO scholars this book suggests new ways to address IO politics by elucidating one often taken-for-granted dimension of their everyday activities which is depoliticization. Moreover, we are confident that the analytical dimension of this book could support further research on IOs to fully grasp the variety of the phenomenon. Finally, as it also relies extensively on research emanating from the French-speaking field of IR, it constitutes a doorway to different, yet complementary, research traditions. This book will offer IO students an overview of the diversity of domains of IO intervention by linking them to core debates of contemporary global governance in a manner that remains accessible and synthetic.

For non-IO scholars and students, this book can either be seen as an introduction to IOs or, and maybe more interestingly, as a complementary study of (de)politicization processes. While IOs are no longer “terra incognita” for social scientists, they are still perceived as non-regular and even odd entities following their own properties and logic of action. “De-insulating” IOs from IR studies allows us to reinstate them, both in their specificity and banality, in the broader

social sciences. Given the omnipresence of international politics in our everyday lives, without overestimating IO influence or centrality on domestic politics, we nonetheless argue that IOs are an essential part of politics and that we should not consider them as a mere by-product of domestic politics or a completely external and autonomous process.

Finally, this book also targets the wider audience of IO practitioners without whom this work would not exist. By bringing specific practices and logics of action to the fore in a more analytical perspective, we engage in a debate on the political meaning and implications of their professional activities.

## Chapter overview

This book successively explores practices and logics of depoliticization within IOs. The first part of the volume singles out three main categories of practices: expertise and technical interpretation (Chapter 1), neutral formatting (Chapter 2) and time gain (Chapter 3). The second part identifies three depoliticization logics: following a functional-pragmatic path (Chapter 4), asserting legitimacy (Chapter 5) and avoiding responsibility (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 concludes by stressing the limits of depoliticization processes. Every chapter reviews more specific scholarship on each sub-issue and provides an introductory table summarizing the main argument.

In the first part of the book, each chapter details the specific practices through which depoliticization is enacted. Chapter 1 on expertise and technical solutions revisits the link between knowledge production on which IOs build their expert profile and their subsequent technical interpretation of world problems. Claiming expertise, we argue, does not only rely on objective resources such as quantified standards or indexes; it also allows IOs to position themselves as apolitical actors often silencing the political, economic, social and cultural complexity of the problems at stake. Chapter 2 on formatting neutrality explores the link between neutrality and depoliticization by unpacking the ways neutrality is produced, supported and circulated, with a focus on the material and conceptual supports of IO discourses. It concludes with the practice consisting in turning neutral information into political recommendations by resorting to a variety of “best practices.” Chapter 3 on time gain and momentum loss unveils an often-neglected aspect within IO literature: the ways IO members and bureaucracies play on time to delay, dilute and routinize the political content of their action, thereby demobilizing actors and eventually encouraging amnesia of the most sensitive debates. This chapter takes on a more historical view to show the effects of time on the progressive depoliticization of specific reforms and international negotiations.

The second part of the book identifies three types of logics, analyzing not only *how* IO depoliticization unfolds but also *why* and to *what end*. Chapter 4 details a first logic articulated around a functional-pragmatic nexus of action. It revisits the sectoral as well as need-based architecture of the IO system by exploring the link between depoliticization and the ways IO actors put forward a problem-oriented attitude as well as practical rationality, therefore justifying their action.

Chapter 5 considers depoliticization as both a consequence and a cause of IO quest for legitimacy. It addresses the politics of legitimation and delegitimation performed by and within IOs by distinguishing sequences of recognition, expansion and monopolization and the instrumental character of depoliticization therein. Chapter 6 leads the analysis further into the politics of legitimation by questioning IO ambiguous stance on responsibility. It argues that responsibility avoidance, in the shape of blame-shifting tactics and emphasized ambiguities over the representative nature of IOs, is both a driver of depoliticization and a consequence of depoliticization practices. One of the often unintended results consists in maintaining the status quo and power relationships in global politics. Chapter 7 concludes by sketching out the limits of IO depoliticization and suggests ways to understand resilient politics while opening discussions to deepen the research agenda on IOs and depoliticization.

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**Part I**

# **Practices of depoliticization**



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# 1 Asserting expertise and pledging technical solutions

- **Claiming expertise**
- **Providing technical interpretation**

To fulfill their mission, IOs have to produce an interpretation of the problems they are mandated to solve. This interpretation is most often technical and legitimized by IO claimed expertise: it conceals the political choices, epistemological positions as well as individual and professional biases and routines of their secretariats. This chapter shows how IO technical interpretation depoliticizes the process of knowledge production and identifies depoliticization practices based on expert knowledge.

For decades, the literature has debated the ambiguous relation between expert knowledge and politics and the dual process of scientification of politics and politicization of science.<sup>1</sup> Early work focused on the multiple meanings of knowledge utilization<sup>2</sup> while questioning the benefits and risks of technocracy.<sup>3</sup> In the case of IOs, expertise is conceptualized either as a resource available for IOs to enhance their input and output legitimacy<sup>4</sup> or as an attribute of IO authority<sup>5</sup> and identity. The latter justifies their ability to bring supposedly apolitical solutions to transnational problems, as functionalists argue.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have mostly explored this characteristic in the case of the European Union (EU) by assessing the power of technocrats.<sup>7</sup> Sociological accounts of expertise have disputed static perception of science by questioning the production of expert knowledge, with studies inspired by Foucault's concept of "knowledge-power" analyzing the structural power of expertise in society. Science and technology studies have also challenged the traditional divide between science and politics by uncovering mechanisms of co-production of natural and social orders.<sup>8</sup> In line with these critical approaches, various studies on IOs<sup>9</sup> explore expertise by focusing on three different aspects. The first trend analyzes experts within IOs, their professional trajectories, values and influence. While historians trace the role of expert networks and individuals back to the origins of IOs,<sup>10</sup> additional work identifies knowledge networks within IO professional ecologies.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, research explores the process of knowledge production within IOs in their environment<sup>12</sup> and the role of epistemic communities in putting problems on the international agenda.<sup>13</sup> Thirdly, a growing body of work looks at how IOs mobilize expertise and their dependence on expert

knowledge.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Littoz-Monnet identifies different modes of knowledge utilization by international bureaucracies: informing and guiding policy, legitimizing action, substantiating policy positions, minimizing institutional insecurity, depoliticizing action.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, in her work on global governance, Stone refers to the process of “scientization” as a tactic of depoliticization.<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, we shed light on depoliticization practices which rely on expert knowledge, alleged objectivity and technocratic neutrality. We identify a series of techniques through which IOs claim their apolitical expertise and how these claims translate into IO answers to world problems. Talking about claims does not deny the reality of expertise, and expertise only does not produce depoliticization. We rather contend, as summarized in Table 1.1, that claiming expertise may isolate IOs from politics and providing technical interpretation and solutions can reduce political complexity. We agree with Stone that “expertise is deployed to entrench a certain way of ‘seeing’ and defining problems, and the development of models and methodologies to ‘manage’ such problems.”<sup>17</sup> It is precisely this way of seeing and defining that we explore through the notion of interpretation. We thus further argue that IOs provide a technical interpretation of world problems based on their acclaimed expertise, thereby justifying their role in providing technical answers. Through quantification and categorizations, IOs silence structural and political causes while supporting their supposedly apolitical solutions. Although a technical interpretation does not necessarily suggest that a problem is only technical, it implies that technical answers can solve the issue.<sup>18</sup> Technical assistance and material support are therefore presented as value-free solutions procured to solve global problems. While this interpretation results from a mix of institutional design, path dependency and professional biases, it consists of scientific and technical assemblages, which distinguish political and technical knowledge, political actors and experts.

This chapter explores these depoliticization practices, which can be performed independently as observed in different contexts such as the FAO, the ILO, the IMF, the OECD, UNDP, UNESCO, UNEP, the UNHCR and the WTO. It mainly

*Table 1.1* Expert-related depoliticization

<i><b>Depoliticization practices</b></i>	<i>Claiming expertise</i>	<i>Providing technical interpretation</i>
<b>Definitions</b>	Portraying IOs as neutral knowledge producers and holders	Interpreting the world’s problems through technical understanding and solutions
<b>Components</b>	Internal and external resources, scientific and legal knowledge and experience	Rational and evidence-based quantified instruments, technical assistance and material support
<b>Depoliticization mechanisms</b>	Isolating IOs from political debates by professing their value-free expertise	Veiling global problems’ political causes and concealing the influence and political direction of IO interventions

focuses on dynamics within IO secretariats, instead of intergovernmental expert groups<sup>19</sup> where expert knowledge utilization is expected and has been studied in depth, and unravels the concrete techniques through which international bureaucrats, IO members and partners claim expertise and provide a technical interpretation to solve world problems. By analyzing these practices, we look at how IOs can depoliticize both their action and the issues on which they intervene.

### Claiming expertise

IOs often mobilize the multiple functions of knowledge<sup>20</sup> following the assumption that expertise is value free.<sup>21</sup> Extending Boswell's definition of expert knowledge,<sup>22</sup> we analyze IO expertise, understood here as the forms of codified knowledge produced by or involving specialists who are recognized to hold skills and experience; in other words, we focus on situated expertise that can be held by many actors within IOs.<sup>23</sup> While qualifications or institutional affiliations are often stressed when claiming technical or professional expertise, we also pay attention to other forms of knowledge derived from experience that tend to be overlooked in processes of depoliticization.<sup>24</sup> Revisiting the debate about IO authority, Sending exhorts to look at UN authority as a "claim to represent the international in an impartial and neutral way"<sup>25</sup> and not necessarily as an essential attribute of its international bureaucracy.<sup>26</sup> Building on this, we supplement the body of work dedicated to experts and expert knowledge in IOs by focusing on the process of claiming expertise, as both a rhetorical exercise and an assemblage of different resources and practices, and explore the different techniques used primarily by international bureaucracies to qualify their organization as an apolitical expert.

### Tailoring an expert profile

IOs are notoriously active producers of expertise, either as a result of an explicit mandate or as an indirect consequence of their respective field of activity. By producing expertise at home, hiring professional experts and relying on their specific instruments and experience, IOs actively profess their expertise and build their expert profile, which may, in turn, depoliticize their action.

First, international bureaucracies produce their own expert knowledge. General organizations such as the World Bank provide extensive datasets that are used worldwide by researchers as well as government institutions. Regional organizations can also be requested to compile data on their member states while developing comparative analysis. Specialized IOs are also mandated to deliver updated data on their specific areas: while UNDP publishes its annual human development reports, UNEP is responsible for organizing the publication of the *Global Environmental Outlook*. Yet international bureaucracies not only produce the expertise as requested in their missions, they can also go beyond their mandate<sup>27</sup> by claiming this in-house expertise to justify their role within the international system and gain in autonomy.<sup>28</sup> For instance, in 1999, UNEP justified its first field intervention in a post-conflict setting in the Balkans by highlighting its technical

functions and expert knowledge on environmental assessments. According to a member of the team sent to conduct the evaluation, UNEP relied on its expertise and scientific competences combined with its political and diplomatic skills to convince the Russian and US ambassadors to authorize the post-conflict environmental assessment. He further explained that despite challenging governmental expectations, their work was respected because the results were “scientifically sound and politically well-balanced.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, UNEP claimed its status as a neutral expert in environmental issues to justify its intervention thereby “exploit[ing] differences in professional knowledge pools for strategic advantage.”<sup>30</sup>

Second, IOs recruit individual experts among their own staff. Indeed, international bureaucrats often meet the characteristics of an expert either by possessing extensive skills or knowledge in a particular domain or belonging to a group that shares particular expertise, knowledge, values and working methods.<sup>31</sup> Working on epistemic arbitrage, Seabrooke describes the ideal type of the economist staff expert within the IMF: “He is widely perceived as someone who ‘knows well’ in the professional ecologies around international organizations, financial institutions, and universities, as well as someone that selectively introduces knowledge from one ecology into others.”<sup>32</sup> In this case, this individual relied on a form of “professional mobilization” to successfully participate in the delineation of the relevant knowledge to inform international financial reforms. By doing so, he also provided the IMF with the apparently required expertise, drawing on knowledge from different professional ecologies. Such externally legitimated expertise then supports depoliticizing the issue at stake. In the case of UNEP, key individuals also build and claim the internal expertise of the organization. They hold a strategic position, at the intersection between practitioners, policy-oriented researchers and academics. Not only are they experts in their field of intervention, but they are also experts in bridging different professional fields and in navigating between various institutional languages and configurations. Their academic background—at least MA level, their thorough UN experience and their networks (inside and outside the organisation) provide useful resources to strengthen their positions as experts.<sup>33</sup> These individuals therefore contribute to the “scientization” tactic that is crucial in IO depoliticization.<sup>34</sup>

Third, IOs claim their own expertise based on a set of legal-procedural arguments that are specific to each organization. They profess their authority in fixing the rules of the game and delimiting the frame of political debates. For instance, Fresia shows how UNHCR legal experts resort to the technical aspects of international law to prevent the re-negotiations of contested standards: “By shifting towards legalistic and formalistic discussions, they thereby contributed to the depoliticisation of some debates, which otherwise would have led to complex discussions over the political, economic or cultural constraints related to the development of refugee rights, and the articulation of international norms with national norms, economic constraints and cultural contexts.”<sup>35</sup> This legal-procedural expertise may also be confronted with a “pure” scientific expertise and even dismiss it. Both become then intertwined in an attempt to domesticate each other. The case of the WTO dispute settlement illustrates this logic through which the

organization discretely reaffirms the preeminence of its legal expertise, based on an accumulation of jurisprudence derived from its treaties. The dispute on genetically modified organisms (GMO) started in 2003 with a complaint filed by the United States, Canada and Argentina against the trade restrictions imposed by the EU. In their account of the debates, Bonneuil and Levidow demonstrate the discrete dismissal of scientific expertise, mostly deriving from biology, ecology and toxicology. Even though the selection process of experts was very much controlled by the parties involved, this scientific expertise on GMO was discarded under procedural and legal arguments grounded in the 1995 Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) set up by the WTO.<sup>36</sup> They hence conclude that: “While scientists play a leading role in core activities of the scientific arena, such as peer-review, they are mere guests in the dispute settlement arena.”<sup>37</sup> In this case, legal expertise is used as a legitimizing practice as it avoids engaging with scientific knowledge. While science can become the theater of significant controversies,<sup>38</sup> legal expertise, embodied by the WTO panels which have the final word in the dispute, can be an even more powerful tool to depoliticize the debate.

Finally, IOs justify their expertise as a result of past experience. Following the first intervention in Kosovo in 1999, UNEP relied on its previous missions to justify its role for the future: “It was clear from the outset that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as part of the overall response by the United Nations, would give its support to the people and authorities of Afghanistan by offering its expertise in post-conflict environmental assessment and analysis.”<sup>39</sup> UNEP then constantly reaffirmed its “success stories” as a source of output legitimacy. The case of the UNHCR also provides a similar example. In September 2009, António Guterres, head of the UN Refugee Agency at the time, expressed his wish for the UNHCR to act as the last resort organization in relief of natural disasters’ victims within the humanitarian aid cluster “Protection”<sup>40</sup>—a responsibility that was so far shared between the UNHCR, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF).<sup>41</sup> This unexpected position advocated during the Executive Committee annual meeting followed previous moves to promote the UNHCR’s experience-based expertise to justify its growing role in natural disaster assistance: “This is mainly due to its local or regional capacity for a particular location, and because of its *global expertise* in emergency response in the field of protection, emergency shelter, camp management and other humanitarian protection related activities.”<sup>42</sup> The political nature of this change of mandate is then concealed by the justification of an expertise based on former experiences.

Many examples show how IOs can profess their expert profile by publicizing their knowledge and experience. Recent research even shows the considerable pressure put on experts to conceal their ignorance and “to bury doubts and inconsistencies into technical judgments and diagnostics calibrated to secure the possibility of controversial projects.”<sup>43</sup> Exploring the case of the IMF “rescue” plan in Greece, Pénet argues that risk ignorance is a strategic resource for IOs to



legitimize their action and bypass accountability restrictions.<sup>44</sup> In other words, even when expert knowledge is lacking or insufficient, IOs may uphold their expert profile to avoid political controversies.

### ***Building on external expertise***

While IOs produce their own in-house expertise, they also strengthen their position as neutral experts by mobilizing external expertise. While Chapter 2 further discusses IO neutrality, here we explore how IOs constantly rely on external expertise by outsourcing knowledge production to experts or groups of experts who do not already work for the organization. We distinguish three types of external expertise on which IOs build to claim their neutrality: experts affiliated with research organizations within civil society (academia, think tanks, NGOs, private sector, research and development services, etc.); experts working for another IO; non-scientific experts whose expertise is based on traditional knowledge and/or experience.

Resorting to external expertise is not a new phenomenon. Multiple reasons may explain the use of external consultants and experts. According to Clavin, this integrative process was already present at the time of the League of Nations especially when it came to economic and financial questions, where the League gathered politicians with a “heterodox community of experts from banks and the academe (albeit adhering in some measure or other to the tenets of liberal economics).”<sup>45</sup> This has become a common practice within the UN. In 1974, the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), the UN independent external oversight body, conducted the first study on the use of experts and consultants. It shows the growing expenditure dedicated to these in the UN Secretariat’s regular funds between 1962 and 1972, also highlighting a qualitative evolution with a growing variety of services performed by external contractors.<sup>46</sup> While noting the uneven use of outside expertise by UN offices, they conclude that “recourse to this type of temporary assistance is excessive, that it could be made far more beneficial to the United Nations, and that in many cases the money appropriated for it could be put to far better use were more effective controls exercised.”<sup>47</sup> The reports produced afterwards, in 1982, 2000, 2012<sup>48</sup> and 2014, show the sharp increase in the use of external experts, especially based on extra-budgetary expenditure, despite multiple resolutions by the General Assembly regretting “the tendency towards excessive use of consultants, in particular in areas where in-house expertise is available.”<sup>49</sup> The progress report prepared in 1982 indicates that for more than half of the cases the main purpose for which consultants were hired was “[s]pecial analytical studies.”<sup>50</sup> One of the reasons explaining the success of such outsourcing practices, we argue, lies in the depoliticization mechanisms embedded within the resort to external experts. Studying UNESCO’s growing involvement in bioethical standards, Littoz-Monnet precisely shows that international bureaucrats rely on external expertise to ensure that the deliberations are grounded in scientific argumentation (and not political) thereby concealing the political decisions of addressing this issue in the first place.<sup>51</sup> Her example demonstrates the depoliticizing function of external expertise, or as she puts it: “international bureaucrats may mobilize

external expertise in order to uphold the appearance of the apolitical character of their actions.”<sup>52</sup> Stone gives other examples where not only individual experts but also networks of experts, or knowledge networks, are “a scientization tactic of global governance” contributing to further depoliticization.<sup>53</sup> Yet external expertise does not stem only from research organizations and scientific experts but also from other IOs.

IOs establish coordination mechanisms and partnerships that provide epistemic authority and depoliticization power based on the recognized expertise of other IOs. For instance, in his study of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS, Nay highlights how the UNAIDS secretariat assembled expert knowledge from its different cosponsors—WHO, UNESCO, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Food Programme (WFP), etc.—gaining a significant “technical influence” despite not having “the political legitimacy, technical expertise or financial capacity to build leadership on policy development in the field of HIV/AIDS.”<sup>54</sup> UNEP provides another example of claimed expertise based on partnerships with other IOs. As a small organization within the UN system, UNEP relies on experts from academia and think tanks and from other IOs to expand its own expertise in the field of environmental security. From 1999 to 2016, it established multiple partnerships inside and outside the UN to claim its position as an expert, as summarized in Table 1.2. On the one hand, the program strengthened the legitimacy of its work on environment and security by establishing a panel of experts on peacebuilding and the environment with the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD),<sup>55</sup> by working closely with academic partners, and by actively participating in launching a knowledge platform on environmental peacebuilding<sup>56</sup> and a massive open online course (MOOC) on Environmental Security and Sustaining Peace.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, it also created a series of partnerships with other IOs, mostly within the UN system, that brought complementary expertise. For instance, it jointly published reports on women, natural resources and peacebuilding with UN Women, on the role of natural resources in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration with UNDP and on natural resources, conflicts and mediation with the UN Department of political affairs (DPA). Likewise, it consulted with the Departments of peacekeeping operations (DPKO) and of field support (DFS)<sup>58</sup> on its report on the Blue Helmets and the environment. By capitalizing on the renowned and legitimate expertise of other IOs, UNEP claims its own expertise over these topics while avoiding the political debates around its involvement in new areas. While other examples show the progressive formalization of experts’ involvement within IOs,<sup>59</sup> the case of UNEP also reveals the critical role of key individuals and their personal relationships as a number of these partnerships actually result from personal bonds between staff from different IOs. Table 1.2 proposes a typology of UNEP’s key partnerships with external expert institutions on environment and security: extended in-house expertise based on partnerships with UN service bodies mandated to support UN programs and agencies; co-constructed IO expertise induced by collaboration between different IOs; and externally built expertise with non-IO partners.

Table 1.2 UNEP expert network on the environment and security (1999–2016)

	<i>Extended in-house expertise</i>	<i>Co-constructed IO expertise</i>	<i>Externally built expertise</i>
<b>Institutionalized partnerships within the UN system</b>	UNEP-OCHA Joint Unit: <i>Environmental Emergencies</i>	UN-EU Project: UNEP, UN-Habitat, UNDP, DPA, DESA + IOM, <sup>60</sup> EU: <i>Natural resources and conflict prevention</i>	
		EnvSec Initiative: UNEP, UNDP, UNECE + REC, OSCE, NATO: <i>Environmental security in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and South-Eastern Europe</i>	
<b>One-off partnerships</b>	UNITAR: <i>Online training on peacekeeping and the environment</i>	FAO: <i>Pesticides and human security</i>	Columbia University/Earth Institute: <i>Environmental management in Haiti</i>
		OCHA-IOM-UNU-CILSS: <i>Climate change, conflict, migration in the Sahel region</i>	
<b>Long-term collaborations on a specific topic</b>	UNDG-ECHA: <i>Natural resources management in transition settings</i>	UN Women-UNDP-PBSO: <i>Gender, natural resources and peacebuilding</i>	ELI-McGill University-Tokyo University: <i>Environmental peacebuilding</i>
		UNDP: <i>Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration and natural resources</i>	
		DPKO/DFS: <i>Peacekeeping and the environment</i>	
<b>Long-term overall collaborations</b>		PBSO: <i>Natural resources and peacebuilding</i>	IISD: <i>Experts panel</i>
		DPA: <i>Mediation unit</i>	

Source: synthesis from the authors.<sup>61</sup>

Discussing IO expert authority, Barnett and Finnemore note that “technical knowledge and expertise need not be ‘scientific’ in nature to create autonomy and power for IOs.”<sup>62</sup> Here we argue that IOs also rely on non-scientific experts whose expertise is based on traditional knowledge and/or experience. This practice draws on individual testimonies that may complement representative processes and organizational dynamics but are primarily linked to personal experience and therefore cannot be challenged around political arguments. On several occasions, the ILO gave room and visibility to the testimonies of civil society members as was notably the case in 2011 during the negotiations of the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers where domestic workers themselves gathered in local NGOs were asked to provide an experience-based knowledge on the reality of domestic work in developing countries.<sup>63</sup> This was a strategic way for the ILO, especially the workers’ group and the governments in favor of a new legal standard, to act on domestic work based on the claimed individual expertise of affected people. “Traditional knowledge” is another type of non-scientific expertise increasingly used within multilateral arenas. As recalled by Foyer and Dumoulin, traditional knowledge has been historically mobilized in different bodies such as the FAO, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). While it was mostly absent from climate negotiations, they observed a significant change during the 2015 Conference of parties (COP21) with the Paris Agreement stating that “adaptation action” should be based on “the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems” (Article 7, §5). More importantly, this inclusion aligns Western scientific knowledge with traditional knowledge therefore challenging the “narrow profile of knowledge” considered useful and legitimate in the climate arena dominated by specific scientific sciences and numerical modelling.<sup>64</sup> This trend expands the pool of external expertise to which IOs can resort, as implied within *UNEP and Indigenous Peoples: A Partnership in Caring for the Environment* that states: “UNEP also respects the valuable inputs that these holders of traditional knowledge and heritage—gained through transgenerational experiences and observations—can contribute to environmental assessments and sustainable ecosystem management.”<sup>65</sup>

### *Isolating expertise from politics*

While the literature in IR does not always acknowledge the blurred boundaries between expert knowledge and politics, IOs tend to further isolate expertise from politics, thereby reinforcing their supposed neutrality.

Two examples illustrate how IO members and international bureaucrats deliberately distance themselves from politics. First, after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, UNEP’s environmental recovery program relocated its office to Port-Salut in the south of the country, a few hours from the capital Port-au-Prince. UNEP was the only UN body to locate its main office outside the capital: its specialized mandate and narrow expertise enabled the organization to escape the national decisional center. This decision allowed the organization to distance itself from other UN agencies in the

capital where the lack of coordination was highly criticized and it concretely isolated the program from national politics while bringing more legitimacy to its collaborations with local partners and its commitments to environmental protection at the local level. Furthermore, this new location helped the team dissociate itself from the peacekeeping mission responsible for the cholera outbreak.<sup>66</sup> In other words, UNEP preserved its status of apolitical expert by geographically distancing its office from the country's political center. This example is another form of "distancing tactics" used by international civil servants, government officials and experts.<sup>67</sup>

Second, not only do IOs resort to expertise, they also use the *lack of expertise* to avoid politically sensitive situations and disconnect expertise from politics, like in the case of the ILO debate on asbestos. In 2006, ILO members negotiated a Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention (Convention 187) in order to clarify the ILO policy and encourage members to ratify the relevant ILO conventions. While a tripartite consensus had been found to limit the use of asbestos, a last-minute amendment was added on the elimination of future use of all forms of asbestos. This amendment was supported by workers' representatives, a majority of governments and, more importantly, the ILO secretariat. The idea was to protect workers from asbestos exposure and to prevent future asbestos-related diseases and deaths. This proposal immediately provoked the opposition of the employers' group, with the support of the Canadian, Swiss and Chinese governments arguing that "such a ban raised a complex specialized debate" including questions of a "technical," "scientific/medical" and "socio-economic" nature as well as "legal" questions on the jurisdiction of the ILO. They required additional "expert opinion" that the ILO was not in a position to provide.<sup>68</sup> Eventually, the resolution banning asbestos in the future was adopted. Such debates reveal strategies used by IO members to avoid worldwide and comprehensive political debates (here involving technical issues) by isolating the political aspects from the more scientific (here medical) aspects of the problem. But in this case, expertise is used by members as an attempt to diminish the political and economic sensitiveness of the matter.

These tactics are constantly reinforced by the overstated distinction between experts, bureaucrats and political actors. Indeed, despite the evidence of blurred boundaries between expertise and politics,<sup>69</sup> many IOs continue to defend a vision of expertise as being neutral and value-free: by claiming neutral expertise, international bureaucrats isolate themselves from political debates. In other words, it is a depoliticization tactic that relies on their status of brokers,<sup>70</sup> or intermediaries between science and policy makers.

### **Providing technical interpretation**

Not only do IOs claim expertise, they also provide technical interpretations of the world that have multiple depoliticization effects. IOs can depoliticize causes of international problems by silencing their socioeconomic ramifications and focusing on technical dimensions: as a process of translation<sup>71</sup> into a technical framing,

technicization puts the emphasis on the apparent technical character of an issue at the expense of its political roots. A significant number of IO secretariats offer technical services to their members. Through these supposedly apolitical interventions, IOs suggest addressing the world's most pressing problems by putting forward (their) technical solutions while concealing the political dimensions of their interpretation. Furthermore, these interventions sometimes frame highly political issues such as justice and elections as technicalities with IOs "replaying politics in technical terms"<sup>72</sup> and participating in a form of "anti-politics machine."<sup>73</sup> This section questions depoliticization as a way of switching IO political action into technical support provided to state and non-state actors.

### *Reducing the world to numbers*

Studies on policymaking tend to focus on tensions between technicization and quantification and the uses of sophisticated policy instruments such as indicators and benchmarking.<sup>74</sup> There is a growing interest in the role of numbers in global governance,<sup>75</sup> especially in the context of big data.<sup>76</sup> In the field of IOs, quantification has been addressed as a feature of IO expertise. Many case studies explore specific indicators such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>77</sup> and UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>78</sup> or focus on the utilization of quantified instruments and of statistical expert knowledge by an entity like the FAO,<sup>79</sup> the IMF<sup>80</sup> or the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).<sup>81</sup> Ward, for instance, provides a unique overview of "behind-the-scenes data-compilation activities of the UN" from 1945 until the early 2000s, showing how the UN statistical ideas and practices progressively addressed an increasing number of policy areas.<sup>82</sup> Some studies further capture the social production of statistics by and within IOs. Drawing on Desrosières's work on quantification,<sup>83</sup> they show the decisions behind the production of numbers and question the professional dynamics at the root of the quantification processes.<sup>84</sup> They reveal the political impact the figures have on the reality they are supposed to portray.<sup>85</sup> They also examine the managerial technocracy of global governance, often using Foucault's work on governmentality and considering these instruments as a *dispositif* to exercise power in international politics. Defining expert authority as a means for IOs to create "the appearance of depoliticization," Barnett and Finnemore draw on the case of the IMF and assert that "quantification vastly enhances the power of these claims of objectivity and impartiality."<sup>86</sup> The sole production of statistics does not necessarily lead to depoliticization. IOs can also fail to produce successful quantified indicators.<sup>87</sup> Yet, we argue that quantification plays a dual role in this process: it reduces the world to numbers thereby transforming political causes into technical issues and it creates the appearance of a depoliticized interpretation produced by IOs.

UNEP's work on natural resources and conflict illustrates the role of quantification as a depoliticizing technique. In its first report on peacebuilding and natural resources, UNEP quantifies the causal relation between the environment and conflict by relying on different statistics to attest the role natural resources play in

triggering and financing conflicts. For instance it states that: “preliminary findings from a retrospective analysis of intrastate conflicts over the past sixty years indicate that conflicts associated with natural resources are twice as likely to relapse into conflict in the first five years.”<sup>88</sup> UNEP’s team attempted to quantify the contentious links between conflicts and natural resources as a way to dismiss personal biases or organizational preferences since stronger links would justify a larger involvement in the program. Indeed, UNEP drew on these numbers to advance strong arguments justifying its role as *the* UN environmental expert in conflict affected areas.<sup>89</sup> Although the above-mentioned report recognizes the complex socio-economic dimension of conflicts, the use of quantified numbers tends to oversimplify the relation between natural resources and conflict: the numbers isolate the environmental factor within a complex entanglement of other socio-economic causes. Quantification naturalizes the causes of conflicts while creating the appearance of a depoliticized expertise provided by environmental experts. This quantification process echoes the work of Porter on science and numbers. Porter shows how experts rely on quantification to reduce the subjectivity of their work through “mechanical objectivity.”<sup>90</sup> IOs can rely on numbers to objectify the world and situate their role in regard to the identified problem. The objectivation also translates into a form of normalization as seen in the case of the FAO’s comprehensive efforts to “categorise and measure ‘hunger’” which, Müller argues, transformed “the hungry person” into “a statistical unit.”<sup>91</sup>

The production of indicators is another example of ways IOs reduce the complexity of the world. Questioning the role of indicators as a “technology of global governance,” Davis et al. analyze the cases of the World Bank Doing Business indicators and UNDP’s HDI. They identify four salient characteristics to study indicators: first, they pay attention to the name of the indicator and the associated power over the phenomenon it is supposed to represent; second, they analyze the rank-ordered structure defined by the indicator; third, they focus on the simplification process; fourth, they study indicators as tools for evaluation. Indicators are, therefore, presented as “efficient, consistent, transparent, scientific, and impartial,”<sup>92</sup> concealing the political decisions that led to the creation of such indicators. We introduce the case of the HDI created and produced by UNDP in Box 1.1 to illustrate the depoliticizing effects of IO indicators.

### **Box 1.1 The Human Development Index: a depoliticized indicator**

Multiple studies explore the genealogy of the HDI and its political impacts while criticizing its narrow definition of development based on a combination of three proxies for human capabilities in terms of health, education and income.<sup>93</sup> Despite multiple changes since the indicator’s launch in 1990, it always gives equal weight to the three variables (as for 2019): life expectancy at birth, expected years of



schooling and mean years of schooling, gross national income per capita (at purchasing power parity). The HDI is a result of more than 30 years of debates on the meaning of gross domestic product (GDP) as an indicator for development and “represented a significant shift from a focus on utility to a focus on welfare.”<sup>94</sup> However, its limited definition of development reflects the views of its principal architect Mahbub ul Haq, who had a long experience with the World Bank. Against Amartya Sen’s<sup>95</sup> objection to have a “crude composite index” that was an “oversimplification,” Haq replied: “We need a measure of the same level of vulgarity as GNP—just one number—but a measure that is not as blind to social aspects of human lives as GNP is.”<sup>96</sup> According to Sen, Haq wanted a “broad vehicle that accommodated many theoretical approaches but did not necessarily resolve their differences.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, he wanted to avoid political debates around the definition of what human development entails. More precisely, Parizet shows how UNDP selects which issues around HDI are politically debatable and which are not. Reviewing its 1997 development report, she notices how UNDP considers the definition of the poverty line as a political issue while excluding the measures for health and education from the political debate.<sup>98</sup> In her work on the UNDP Country office in Mexico, she further questions the way the HDI is used as a depoliticizing tactic. In cooperation with a national partner, UNDP created the HDI for indigenous peoples in Mexico (HDI-IP): it relies on the same variables to quantify the development of indigenous peoples while overstating the differences between the results for the Mexican population overall and indigenous peoples. According to her, it silences the political debates around indigenous peoples raised during the Zapatistas uprising in 1994 by limiting the issue of development to technical dimensions such as access to health infrastructure.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, in its report on the human development of indigenous peoples in Mexico, UNDP relies on more than 70 tables, figures and graphs with 62 of them translating overstated comparison between data on indigenous peoples and on non-indigenous peoples.<sup>100</sup>

Numbers are undeniably useful to raise attention to global trends such as inequalities and forms of injustice. Yet, their social functions should not prevent a critical analysis of their production and uses. Quantification and standardization<sup>101</sup> are negotiation processes whose political nature tends to disappear once standards are set up and numbers proclaimed. It is not only what is put into numbers that should



be considered as a depoliticizing tactic but the entire “politics of calculation”<sup>102</sup> that excludes all the elements that cannot be measured.

Models precisely illustrate the selective dimension of such quantification and standardization practices. They have become privileged means for IOs to communicate on their goals but also as an evaluation tool to demonstrate the success of their programmes, in a quantified manner, based on series of indicators. It is particularly manifest in the case of the World Bank but also of the UN through its development goals (MDGs/SDGs). Studying the increasing resort to models in the governance of agriculture and food security, especially in the context of climate change, Cornilleau convincingly shows the competition at stake among experts and IOs to impose one model over another; for instance, equilibrium models relying on neo-classical economic premises confront integrated models which focus on the interactions between human activities and the environment.<sup>103</sup> While such battles among experts often remain invisible to the public, they show the potentially political nature of models as they express different visions of science.

In her work on the international domain of disaster risk reduction, Revet explores the different techniques used to quantify “natural” disasters and to create a common language between professionals in the field.<sup>104</sup> She identifies two main international databases on “natural” disasters: EM-Dat (Emergency Events Database) and NatCatService, which have been recently challenged by *Desinventar*, a database conceived as a localized platform. NatCatService produced by the reinsurance company Munich Re initially focused on financial, economic and material losses, excluding data on events such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti where very few properties were insured. Used and financed by different IOs, EM-Dat collects data on events occurred worldwide since 1900 deemed of international public concern. Yet, by focusing only on major events, EM-Dat restricts its understanding of disasters to natural hazard or its significant consequences: according to the “objective” criteria of “10 or more people deaths,” or “100 or more people affected/injured/homeless,” or “Declaration by the country of a state of emergency and/or an appeal for international assistance.”<sup>105</sup> Against this restricted definition, *Desinventar* proposes to focus on vulnerability and exposure by gathering information on local events. Today, the UN office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, formerly known as UNISDR) draws on both EM-Dat and *Desinventar* to quantify disasters worldwide. Describing the “hard work” to produce a common framework around “natural” disasters, Revet also recalls the long history of quantification and standardization both during the colonial era and the establishment of the very first IOs and, therefore, notes that international standardization cannot be reduced to a reproduction of a neoliberal logic. She further renews the debate on international standardization by showing the internal disputes behind the production of such indicators and datasets. While she rightly unveils the political nature of these decisions,<sup>106</sup> we argue that these internal debates do not reverse the depoliticizing effects of the technical interpretation produced by IOs especially if debates remain *internal*. As there are no public records of these discussions, oppositions and doubts within the expert community and the politics of “fact-making”<sup>107</sup> are concealed.

### *Compartmentalizing problems and solutions*

Not only do IOs make technical interpretations of the world's problems based on numbers and simplifications, they also suggest that technical knowledge can solve these problems. Here we argue that depoliticization is a technique used by IOs in the competitive process of agenda setting "in which all policy actors and stakeholders seek to frame 'policy problems' and to influence the identification of appropriate 'solutions' to these problems."<sup>108</sup> IOs accompany their technical interpretation with technical and managerial solutions<sup>109</sup> they are able to provide following a sectoral approach. Professional biases, organizational cultures and sectoral expertise might lead an IO to focus on a specific aspect while avoiding the entanglements of multiple socio-political dimensions requiring the organization to compete with other actors or even lose its legitimacy in addressing an issue, as further discussed in Chapter 5.

The transformation of IO technical interpretation into technical solutions is also seen in the tendency to frame their analysis as a form of "diagnostics"<sup>110</sup> from which goals are defined, possibly without political debates. Conditional support is an example of IO intervention that often tends to emphasize reaching technical goals instead of political results. This highlights the role of indicators addressed earlier: an IO develops a set of indicators and declares the objectives "technically" reached once the indicators are fulfilled even if they do not translate into concrete political impact. In the field of development economics, the increasing use of evidence from randomized evaluation by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF does not remove the depoliticization effects of conditional support. As shown by Jatteau, donors want "evidence-based" feedback on the effects of international aid, thus transforming the consensus around the (highly criticized) solutions promoted by Washington into consensus on the methods used to evaluate field projects. Yet, these evaluations also rely on the idiom of neutrality and expertise, recalling the "mechanical objectivity" identified by Porter.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, they often tend to focus on publishing results rather than providing real political impact on the ground.<sup>112</sup> In other words, the mere fact of *acting*, publishing a report or intervening directly on the ground, often seems at least as important as the substance. For instance, organizing elections may appear to be the main objective, although a majority of the population does not vote or opposition parties refuse to participate, as was the case in Burundi in 2010 where the international community "technically validated" the general elections<sup>113</sup> (see below). While aiming to satisfy demands for transparency and accountability, IOs focus on monitoring and managerial evaluation techniques which rely on narrow indicators. These are seen as objectively measurable and practically more achievable, even though they break down socioeconomic and political processes into minimal targets that do not, in fine, account for the larger picture in which they are embedded. The case of the UN development goals illustrates how IOs can manage to transform complex objectives into narrow indicators. In 2015, 15 years after the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the UN General Assembly adopted the universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an attempt to redefine the global governance agenda.<sup>114</sup> These goals result from

a simplification exercise taking place under the UN umbrella which is seen as emblematic of the influence of the new public management doctrine disseminated both at the national and international levels since the 1970s.<sup>115</sup> According to Speich Chassé: “Comparative economic statistics were very important in turning the whole world into something readable.”<sup>116</sup> The Open Working Group on the SDGs composed of 30 states managed to schematize, both analytically and visually, the sustainable development agenda into 17 Goals and 169 targets, thereby transforming complex development matters into schematic categories. The framework was intentionally meant to be “measurable” but also “few in number and easy to communicate and understand.”<sup>117</sup> It relied on the overarching injunction to agree on “a metric with far-reaching implications for humanity and our planet” that could not “be beholden to political considerations.”<sup>118</sup>

The case of the ILO technical assistance in China also illustrates how IOs manage to depoliticize, here labor policies, through decontextualized indicators and goals. In the 2000s, the ILO initiated the Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCP) as a concrete application of ILO conventions and policies within the framework of the Decent Work agenda.<sup>119</sup> In sharp contrast to the “one size fits all approach” of the Bretton Woods institutions, the DWCP were meant to reflect the priorities of each country in relation to labor and employment policies in accordance with both ILO strategic goals (employment, norms, social protection and social dialogue) and UN development goals.<sup>120</sup> In the last DWCP 2016–2020 period negotiated with China, sensitive political issues such as the respect of freedom of association or autonomy of workers’ and employers’ organizations from the state were carefully avoided in the ILO’s reports and recommendations.<sup>121</sup> We can, at best, consider that they were disseminated throughout the “institutional reforms” and “the rule of law” items (see Table 1.3). The different priorities, outcomes and indicators to measure progress in terms of social policies are

*Table 1.3* ILO Decent Work Country Programme in China: Depoliticizing national labor policies

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*Country Priority 3. Strengthen the rule of law and the realization of fundamental principles and rights at work*

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Outcome 3.1 Institutions for negotiating working conditions, protecting labour rights for all workers, and for preventing and resolving labour disputes are improved, in line with international standards and the Chinese laws and regulations

Indicator 3.1.1 Coherence of laws and regulations on harmonious labour relations, collective negotiations and protection of workers in non-standard forms of employment strengthened

Indicator 3.1.2 Promote the development of collective negotiation and a collective contract system and build harmonious labour relations through the tripartite labour relations coordination mechanism

Indicator 3.1.3 The mechanism for minimum-wage fixing reviewed and improved

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*Source:* Adapted from the ILO Report on the China Decent Work Country Programme, 2016–2020, 33.

formulated in a general way, without any allusion to the political situation except on the positive role of both government and social partners to implement reforms. Thus, depoliticization occurs through a paradoxical tactic of contextualization and decontextualization: while the ILO stresses the need for *national* strategies and diagnostics on each member's situation, apparently refusing the "one size fits all" approach, the recommendations and reports are then formulated in a rather vague and imprecise way (see also Chapter 2) without referring to specific reforms in a given political context, even when addressing potentially sensitive issues such as the strengthening of the rule of law. In other words, IOs can conceal highly political reforms behind supposedly objective goals and technical solutions and thereby depoliticize their own interventions.

Finally, IOs propose to solve world problems by using instruments<sup>122</sup> that tend to decontextualize a situation besides providing an often single-sectoral approach. Elshiry and Allawattaga, for instance, analyze the "techno-managerial" approach developed by the OECD based on "a politics of mobilizing apparently non-political or technocratic and scientific means to promote a political ideology and, thereby, depoliticize politics."<sup>123</sup> They show how such an approach disconnects the process of policymaking from its context while watering down specificities into broad economic and technical questions.<sup>124</sup> This conclusion echoes the work on depoliticization and post-conflict international aid. In the case of Burundi, for instance, Leclercq analyzes the international state-building model and the consequences of such a "depoliticized and technocratic process" that transforms the political stakes in a post-conflict setting "into a technical, problem-solving matrix issue."<sup>125</sup> Since its independence, Burundi has been suffering major cycles of inter-ethnic political violence. In 1993, a large-scale civil war erupted after the assassination of the first Hutu President—the Tutsi minority had been holding political power until then. In August 2000, the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi concluded a series of talks organized with the support of the international community. One of the Hutu rebel forces won the 2005 elections but in 2010 was accused by opposing parties of massive electoral fraud. In 2015, a bid of the President for a third term led to protests and new episodes of violence. Unpacking the international state-building practices and their effects on democracy, Leclercq argues that "the ecosystem of international statebuilding practices strongly favour means over ends, form over substance."<sup>126</sup> He further demonstrates how depoliticization and decontextualization have very little transformative impact and more importantly widen the subversion space for domestic actors who performed an authoritarian shift *thanks to* the state-building agenda,<sup>127</sup> illustrating the potential counterproductive effects of depoliticization as explored in Chapter 7.

### ***Delivering technical assistance***

A broad range of solutions provided by IOs consists of technical assistance and material support. In this section, we contend that these resources allow IOs to engage at national and local levels while presenting these interventions as

apolitical. Scholars have mostly looked into technical assistance stemming from the EU as developed in Box 1.2. Here we present two additional cases that illustrate interventions presented as purely technical and proof of the apolitical nature of IO action: the environmental assessments performed by UNEP and the material support offered by UNDP.

### **Box 1.2 The European Commission technical assistance**

Since the end of the Cold War, the European Commission has been increasingly involved in foreign policy through technical assistance services that mostly consist in sending short and long-term experts and advisors, organizing sectorial conferences and training programs at the country level.<sup>128</sup> For instance, with the PHARE program (Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy),<sup>129</sup> the Commission was able to define the priority sectors for Western aid, the nature of the assistance, the conditions of its distribution and implementation and the actors in charge of its application. According to Robert, it systematically translated its assistance programs in technical terms intending “to present its work as the rational implementation of knowledge and methods ‘scientifically’ indisputable.”<sup>130</sup> She further argues that the institutionalization of the program in the 1990s shows the Commission’s ability to articulate technical and political idioms.

Focusing on the Task Force established in 2011 to coordinate technical assistance to deliver the EU/IMF adjustment program in Greece, Hamm shows the continuation of the Commission’s external activities presented as technical. She demonstrates how the principle of transparency as an ultimate goal can circumvent representative democracy by privileging the rationalization of public policies: “Presenting transparency as an end in itself leads to a form of negation of the political. The priority is not the political debate by which a collective governs itself, but the efficiency of the ‘corporate state’.”<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, the Commission’s service dedicated to technical assistance assumes a supposedly neutral role of intermediary with missioned experts on the ground perceived as a source of efficiency bringing incentives and skills.<sup>132</sup> Yet, the Commission plays an active (political) role in shaping the reforms of the Greek public sector but not without resistance (see Chapter 7).

Technical assessments are key in setting the baseline from which political reforms can be conceived, such as illustrated by UNEP environmental assessments. UNEP conducts environmental evaluations at the field level in “post-crisis situations:”

concretely, since 1999, the program sends teams of experts to assess the state of the environment and identify risks and opportunities in post-conflict situations and after a disaster. In the former case, the team assesses the environmental damage resulting directly or indirectly from armed conflict. Such evaluations have been conducted first in the Balkans, then in other regions and countries including Afghanistan, Sudan, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. UNEP also intervenes in the aftermath of a disaster, on its own or in partnership with OCHA through the Joint Unit on environmental emergencies—ecological disasters of natural and human origin. These field studies assess both the environmental degradation and the potential risks for human beings while making suggestions for rehabilitation. In both situations (post-conflict and post-disaster), the organization claims to produce “neutral” assessments<sup>133</sup> and provide technical expertise, despite tackling very political issues such as peace treaties or natural resource governance reform. These assessments can be transformed into environmental recovery programs where UNEP provides technical assistance to its national and local partners as a form of daily guidance<sup>134</sup> where it can actively (but discreetly) influence environmental policies, as is the case in Afghanistan, Haiti and Sudan, and more recently in Colombia. Answering a request by the government of Colombia, UNEP has identified areas to support the implementation of the peace agenda, post-conflict recovery and sustainable development with the following activities:

Technical recommendations and training for the effective implementation of peacebuilding projects; Strategic environmental assessments of post-conflict interventions; Advice on measures to improve social, economic and environmental conditions for the extractive sector and to remediate damaged caused by illegal operations; and Strengthening of the institutional and technical capacities for the Participatory Territorial Planning and Monitoring, which includes improving public access to environmental information.<sup>135</sup>

In other words, through technical environmental assessments, UNEP has established its role as a political advisor on key issues such as peacebuilding, reforms in the private sector and education. UNEP thus offers technical assistance to national and local stakeholders, which acts as a tool for political intervention. Assessments and advice presented as belonging to the technical sphere can additionally be supplemented by material support that produces concrete conditions for implementing IO solutions and prescriptions.

Another form of assistance consists in providing material support, as in the case of UNDP in Mexico. In her work on the UNDP country office in Mexico, Parizet challenges the program's narrative around the material resources it provides to its national “partner” in charge of the development of indigenous peoples. Indeed, UNDP has procured the department in charge of indicators with computers, software and licenses because, according to its staff, the development of indicators, such as the HDI for indigenous peoples, requires specific computing equipment.<sup>136</sup> Yet, Maertens and Parizet question this justification and argue

that UNDP material support is by no means purely technical as claimed by its staff but rather “constitutes a tool of UNDP’s political strategy for intervention in a national space [...] on what is the ‘right measure’ of development.”<sup>137</sup> These three examples illustrate some of the techniques used by IOs to provide services to their members and partners outlined essentially as technical. While technical assistance and assessment missions on the ground are able to directly shape political decisions, material support helps create the conditions for applying IO suggested solutions.

## Conclusion

Technocratic ideas were highly influential in the creation of the first IOs, especially during the interwar period.<sup>138</sup> It is, therefore, no surprise that expertise is an essential feature of IO identity and productions. Much work has been dedicated to capturing the role of experts and expertise mobilization by and within IOs. We decided to take it a step further and look more closely at the relationship between expertise and depoliticization, and question the process of claiming expertise. Indeed, the chapter explored how IOs not only use expertise as a resource but also position themselves as experts within the international system and in doing so participate in a two-fold process of depoliticization. First, IOs deny their political agency by limiting their role to bringing expert knowledge based on internal and external expertise. In other words, they depoliticize the process of knowledge production. Recent work even emphasizes the role of ignorance in IOs<sup>139</sup> suggesting further research on the ways experts not only claim but also conceal knowledge as part of IO expert-related depoliticization practices. Second, IOs propose a technical interpretation of international public problems and technical solutions to address these issues. They silence the complexity of the world’s most pressing problems by turning political and structural causes into technical dimensions. They also depoliticize their role in the framing of global problems by mobilizing sophisticated policy instruments<sup>140</sup> and in the procurement of so-called technical solutions and assistance.

These depoliticization practices partially result from the constraining environment in which international bureaucrats evolve while depending on institutional designs and professional ecosystems (as will be discussed in Chapter 4). They can also be challenged by attempts to (re)politicize issues essentially framed as technical. While this chapter focuses on highlighting depoliticization practices based on expertise and technical interpretation, we argue that the technical and political are constantly entangled in IO action and should be studied as such to shed light on the mundane and overlooked practices through which IOs do politics.

## Notes

- 1 Peter Weingart, “Scientific Expertise and Political Accountability: Paradoxes of Science in Politics,” *Science and Public Policy* 26, no. 3 (1999): 160.
- 2 Carol H. Weiss, “The Many Meanings of Research Utilization,” *Public Administration Review* 39, no. 5 (1979): 426–431.



- 3 Frank Fischer, *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990).
- 4 Mónika Ambrus, Karin Arts, Ellen Hey and Helena S. Raulus, ed., *The Role of "Experts" in International and European Decision-Making Processes: Advisors, Decision Makers or Irrelevant Actors?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 6.
- 5 Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).
- 6 See Chapter 5.
- 7 Claudio M. Radaelli, "The Public Policy of the European Union: Whither Politics of Expertise?," *Journal of European Public Policy* 6, no. 5 (1999): 757–774; Mónika Ambrus, Karin Arts, Ellen Hey and Helena S. Raulus, ed., *The Role of "Experts" in International and European Decision-Making Processes: Advisors, Decision Makers or Irrelevant Actors*; Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Why States Act through Formal International Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 1 (1998): 3–32.
- 8 Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and the Social Order* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- 9 In the field of development studies for instance, della Faille, La France-Moreau and Paradis-Charette identify five ways by which expertise has been addressed in the literature: as a legitimization tool, as a source of authority, as a guide for interpretation, as framework for producing norms, as an institutional routine facilitating depoliticization. Dimitri della Faille, Valérie La France-Moreau and Laurent Paradis-Charette, "Discours à propos du rôle de l'expertise dans les processus de prise de décision en développement international," *Politique et Sociétés* 35, no. 2–3 (2016): 215–237.
- 10 Johan Schot and Vincent Lagendijk, "Technocratic Internationalism in the Interwar Years: Building Europe on Motorways and Electricity Networks," *Journal of Modern European History* 6, no. 2 (2008): 196–217; Sandrine Kott, "Les organisations internationales, terrains d'étude de la globalisation. Jalons pour une approche socio-historique," *Critique internationale* 52 (2011): 9–16; Davide Rodogno, Bernhard Struck and Jakob Vogel, ed., *Shaping the Transnational Sphere. Experts, Networks and Issues from the 1840s to the 1930s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).
- 11 This work mainly draws on Bourdieu's notions of fields, capital and recognition but also on Abbott's sociology of professions. Diane Stone, "'Shades of Grey': The World Bank, Knowledge Networks and Linked Ecologies of Academic Engagement," *Global Networks* 13, no. 2 (2013): 241–260.
- 12 Christina Boswell, *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge: Immigration Policy and Social Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 13 Ernst B. Haas, *When Knowledge Is Power: Three Models of Change in International Organizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Epistemic communities have been particularly explored in the field of environmental studies.
- 14 Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, "Expert Knowledge as a Strategic Resource: International Bureaucrats and the Shaping of Bioethical Standards," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2017): 584–595; Boswell, *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge: Immigration Policy and Social Research*; Ambrus et al., ed., *The Role of "Experts" in International and European Decision-Making Processes: Advisors, Decision Makers or Irrelevant Actors*.
- 15 Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, "Production and Uses of Expertise by International Bureaucracies," in *The Politics of Expertise in International Organizations: How International Bureaucracies Produce and Mobilize Knowledge*, ed. Annabelle Littoz-Monnet (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–18.



- 16 Diane Stone, "Global Governance Depoliticized: Knowledge Networks, Scientization, and Anti-Policy," in *Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance*, ed. Paul Fawcett, Matthew Flinders, Colin Hay and Matthew Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 95.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 94.
- 18 Yannick Barthe, "Le recours au politique ou la problématisation politique 'par défaut'," in *La politisation*, ed. Jacques Lagroye (Paris: Belin, 2003), 479.
- 19 Such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, expert groups on drugs at the UNODC and the United Nations Security Council sanctions committees' expert groups.
- 20 Weiss, "The Many Meanings of Research Utilization"; and Boswell, *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge: Immigration Policy and Social Research*.
- 21 "The attraction of knowledge and expertise in development policy resides in commonly held beliefs that science is value free, hence independent of the uses to which it is applied. Such distinctions demarcate science from non-science, facts from values. A more fruitful approach is to see the 'shades of grey' and address the quite complex set of relationships meshing the 'white' world of researchers and the 'black' domain of policy makers." Stone, "'Shades of Grey': The World Bank, Knowledge Networks and Linked Ecologies of Academic Engagement" 242.
- 22 Christina Boswell, "The Role of Expert Knowledge in International Organizations," in *The Politics of Expertise in International Organizations: How International Bureaucracies Produce and Mobilize Knowledge*, ed. Annabelle Littoz-Monnet (New York: Routledge, 2017), 19–36.
- 23 Corinne Delmas, *Sociologie politique de l'expertise* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).
- 24 Yves Sintomer, "Du savoir d'usage au métier de citoyen?," *Raisons politiques* 31 (2008): 115–133.
- 25 Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance*, 5.
- 26 Willy Beauvallet and Sébastien Michon, "Des eurodéputés 'experts'? Sociologie d'une illusion bien fondée," *Cultures & Conflits* 85–86 (2012): 123–138.
- 27 Littoz-Monnet, "Expert Knowledge as a Strategic Resource: International Bureaucrats and the Shaping of Bioethical Standards." See also Chapter 6.
- 28 "Second, monopolize expertise knowledge. Certain international organizations enjoy autonomous influence on international policies, because they have acquired expert status in a certain policy field. An international organization should thus try to develop an expert capacity in the areas in which it operates." Bertjan Verbeek, "International Organizations. The Ugly Duckling of International Relations Theory?" in *Autonomous Policy Making by International Organisations*, ed. Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek (New York: Routledge, 1998), 22.
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## 2 Formatting neutrality

- **Producing neutrality**
- **Supporting neutrality**
- **Circulating neutrality**
- **Advising through neutrality**

Neutrality is an essential feature of IO legitimacy. Scholars have discussed IO neutrality for many years, some defending it,<sup>1</sup> even advocating for new ways of being neutral.<sup>2</sup> Multiple IOs draw upon this legacy and present themselves as neutral, even though many studies have shown that neutrality is essentially “contextually based”<sup>3</sup> and “a matter of constructed image.”<sup>4</sup> Other research also challenges IO staff’s neutrality claims<sup>5</sup> and show that “principles like neutrality and impartiality which justify passivity and inaction are forms of intervention that can contribute to unwanted outcomes.”<sup>6</sup> While academics and practitioners have often used neutrality and impartiality interchangeably,<sup>7</sup> recent studies have renewed the debates over their conceptual distinction by exploring the evolution of the norm of impartiality in UN peacekeeping.<sup>8</sup> For Paddon Rhoads, the commitment to pre-established rules distinguishes impartiality from neutrality which “requires withholding judgment” and “refers to the apolitical and non-active character of a person’s role.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, neutrality is approached as a passive attribute that prevents taking a position, whether parties are in conflict or not. We draw on this distinction to explore the supposedly neutral nature of some specific IO productions and the role of neutrality attribution in depoliticization. In practice, neutrality is historically rooted in humanitarianism and is one of the fundamental principles of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) created in 1863. While the ICRC considers impartiality as primarily applying to non-discriminatory action, it defines neutrality as follows: “In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.”<sup>10</sup> To avoid taking sides international bureaucrats commonly call on the first part of this definition to support their position and preserve the trust of member states. Claiming neutrality, IOs position themselves as facilitators, bringing together stakeholders to negotiate standards and implement policies without taking sides, as explored in Chapter 4. IO secretariats also comply with the second DOI: 10.4324/9780429466984

part of the definition, which is to avoid political controversies. They do so using various tactics, among which claiming expertise plays a critical role, as explored in Chapter 1.

In this chapter, we argue that neutrality is not only a matter of content and substance, although most studies tend to focus on this dimension, it is also a matter of specific formats produced and diffused by IO secretariats that actively shape IO assumed neutrality. We examine the vehicles of IO discourses and the materiality of the supports they rely on,<sup>11</sup> taking into account the “diverse set of rhetorical and material activities” in which international actors engage.<sup>12</sup> In her pioneer work on the UN fourth world conference on women (the 1995 Beijing Conference), Riles studied such supports and formats and drew attention to “the character and aesthetics of information, the manner in which information is elucidated and appreciated, its uses and its effects,” demonstrating the relevance of an ethnographic take on artifacts of institutional life in the study of transnational actors and their mundane practices.<sup>13</sup> Privileging these often-overlooked practices and objects in global governance, we question the materiality of IO productions and analyze their role in depoliticization. Indeed, IOs rely on a large variety of supports that they introduce as being below politics unlike resolutions or recommendations. These resources include reports, as one of the most common forms taken by IO productions, factsheets, maps, as well as a wide range of training material. IOs also develop various products based on the use of new information and communication technologies. Websites, online databases and e-learning platforms are now part of modern administration both at domestic and international levels.<sup>14</sup> Building on the growing literature on IO products,<sup>15</sup> we explore the different formats and how they acquire, support and circulate IO apparent neutrality. We further look at the way IOs disseminate their discourses by questioning the conceptual vehicles they use: universal values, simple narratives, success stories, lessons learned and best practices are all specific ways of circulating a discourse that tend to depoliticize its content. We explore original empirical examples mostly from the ILO, UNEP and UN peace operations with the case of the ILO Helpdesk holding a particular position as it exemplifies a process of neutral formatting from the production of the design to the circulation of best practices. The chapter first sheds light on the mechanisms by which IOs produce, support and circulate neutrality showing that the supposedly neutral character of these formats and modes of diffusion contribute to depoliticizing their content and the role of IOs as discourse producers. It then addresses the process of turning neutral information into political recommendations understanding the IO advisory role as a depoliticization practice. These practices are summarized in Table 2.1.

### **Producing neutrality**

In Chapter 1, we show that IOs allege their expertise and, in doing so, tend to depoliticize their action. Going further, this first section explores the concrete process of producing a supposedly neutral discourse, based not only on the content and scientific substance of that discourse, but also on its format. We argue that IOs



Table 2.1 Format-related depoliticization

<i>Depoliticization practices</i>	<i>Producing neutrality</i>	<i>Supporting neutrality</i>	<i>Circulating neutrality</i>	<i>Advising through neutrality</i>
<b>Definitions</b>	Conceptualizing abstract vehicles	Relying on ready-to-use formats	Facilitating accessibility and re-appropriation	Turning information into political suggestion
<b>Components</b>	Generalizations, simplifications and experience-based justifications	Informational and universal supports	Reversed ownership and proximity	Recommendations and best practices
<b>Depoliticization mechanisms</b>	Reducing the political space for debates and contradictions	Concealing the political dimension of their content	Displacing political agency	Disguising political advice and guidance

produce neutral vehicles by generalizing, simplifying and building on past experiences that reduce the political space for debates and controversies.

### ***Drawing general and simplified conclusions***

While drawing general conclusions is not necessarily a depoliticization technique, it often decontextualizes the depicted social reality through a (not always transparent) selection process. International bureaucrats justify providing general and simplified conclusions to accommodate diverging views on political issues or to answer politicians' expectations for action-oriented and evidence-based tools. Justified or not, simplification generates depoliticizing effects on the phenomenon IOs intend to streamline. IO productions propose rules of thumb to disseminate their understanding of a specific situation, from poverty<sup>16</sup> to environmental risks, for instance. These often take the form of opaque words and abstraction, as in the case of World Bank reports which heavily rely on nominalizations, taking “‘actions and processes’ and turn[ing] them into ‘abstract objects’.”<sup>17</sup> We argue that IOs rely on generalizations and simplifications to convey a sense of neutrality to their discourse in two ways: transforming individual cases into general rules which conceal their specificities; and transforming a general issue into an individualized experience to conceal the structural dimensions of the problem at stake. In both cases, IOs do not expressly disclose their role in the selection process at the root of these supposedly neutral verdicts: they obscure political choices, epistemological positions as well as individual and professional biases. Eventually, these generalizations are transformed into simple narratives that contribute to the depoliticization of IO discourses.

The ILO Helpdesk for Business on International Labour Standards (thereafter, the Helpdesk) provides an interesting example of using a supposedly neutral format to foster regulation of multinational enterprises (MNE) by an IO. The Helpdesk is an online platform launched by the ILO in 2010 to promote its 1977 Declaration on Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy (thereafter the 1977 MNE Declaration). It presents itself as a “neutral place” for companies and trade unions to discuss issues of mutual concern.<sup>18</sup> It consists of a free and confidential service whereby anyone can contact the ILO secretariat to receive information on the application of ILO standards on MNE as well as a dedicated website providing information, practical tools and training opportunities. The Helpdesk Manager is an international civil servant holding this position since the creation of the website, thereby favoring thorough institutional memory. While the secretariat “limits” its role to answering (all) questions asked by users, it selects those it considers most relevant to a wider audience. These are anonymously published online in the form of a Questions and Answers (Q&A) in order to attribute neutrality on the posted content (see Table 2.2). The Helpdesk relies on this much-preserved confidential character considered as an essential feature of its success: it is believed to be a way to generate trust between the regulator (the ILO) and the regulated (MNE primarily). The confidentiality clause guaranteed by the Helpdesk is two-fold: the inquirer's identity remains undisclosed online, and the Helpdesk Manager is the

Table 2.2 The ILO Helpdesk Q&amp;A system

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**Query 1:** When does a company breach ILO conventions?

**Question:** A company operates in countries which have not ratified ILO conventions. The company respects the local law and as a consequence does not respect ILO conventions related to freedom of association (for instance, in China) or discrimination against women (for instance, in Oman sultanate). If the company cannot engage in dialogue with government, to what extent can it be considered as a breach of ILO conventions? What should the company do?

**Answer:** Companies should “obey national laws and regulations, give due consideration to local practices and respect relevant international standards.” ILO MNE Declaration, §8. In many situations, national law may not be in line with international labour standards, but does not actually block a company from respecting the principles contained in international labour standards and the MNE Declaration. For instance, a law may allow employing persons as young as 12 years of age but not impede a company from setting its own internal policy to not hire anyone below 15 years of age.

In other cases, national law may act as a genuine barrier to respecting the principles contained in international labour standards. In situations where the law or its implementation is genuinely in conflict with international norms of behaviour, companies may consider seeking to influence relevant organizations and authorities to remedy the conflict. National employers’ organizations may be able to help. A list of national federations can be found here: <http://www.ioe-emp.org/en/member-federations/index.html>.

Where it is not possible for a company to influence change, and where not following these norms would have significant consequences, *it may wish to consider, as feasible and appropriate, reviewing the nature of operations within that jurisdiction.*

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*Source:* ILO Helpdesk, [https://www.ilo.org/empent/areas/business-helpdesk/faqs/WCMS\\_475067/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/empent/areas/business-helpdesk/faqs/WCMS_475067/lang-en/index.htm), emphasis added.

only person to know the origin of the query and the inquirer. Indeed, the information is revealed neither to their superiors nor to the members of the ILO Governing Body. With specific queries carefully retrieved, the Helpdesk publishes a series of responses aimed at providing guidance to *all* concerned parties (not only the inquirer): “The logic of the platform is that even though the replies are confidential and private, we are a public institution, and it’s our mandate to create public goods [...] and this service allows to transform into public goods what has been private conversations.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the ILO draws general answers based on individual requests while using confidentiality to project neutrality on its answers.

IOs also tend to draw general conclusions through a reversed process of individualization. In his study of the World Bank’s annual World Development Reports, spanning from 1979 to 2013, Felli analyzes the evolution of the genre, style and ideational content of the Bank’s discourse on resilience. He first notices that after 2005 the term “resilience” increasingly appears in boxes and graphs. He then mentions two examples taken from the World Development Report published in 2013: in the first, the report provides a developmental positive story of a family of three generations in Indonesia that illustrates how household members can collectively increase their resilience; in the second, the box tells the story of a fictional family as

a “modern tale of risk and resilience,” or, as Felli concludes, it invents “an ideal-typical family to illustrate the meaning of resilience.”<sup>20</sup> Both illustrations stage success stories from which the Bank draws conclusions. Though reports rarely use the word resilience for an individual, the authors’ interpretation of resilience on an individual level precisely proceeds from an individualization of a general conclusion. Rules of thumb are embodied in individualized experiences as if they applied to anybody, especially since IO reports often resort to a form of “oscillation and alliance between clarity and vagueness” as highlighted by Perrot.<sup>21</sup> By focusing on individual experiences, IOs conceal the structural dimensions of a specific issue while drawing general conclusions on the most appropriate ways to address it. Generalizations are then transformed into simple narratives which isolate one problem, one cause and one solution, through an almost “clinical” description of reality.<sup>22</sup>

Analyzing persisting violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Autesserre questions the “uncomplicated story line” produced by international interveners.<sup>23</sup> She sheds light on three narratives that dominated the discourse on this country and oriented intervention strategies: “a primary cause of violence, the illegal exploitation of natural resources; a main consequence, sexual abuse against women and girls; and a central solution, reconstructing state authority.”<sup>24</sup> Multiple reasons explain the success of such simplistic frames: journalists and policy makers need “brief and straightforward presentation of the situation,” “aid organizations need to raise funds” and interveners rely on simple narratives to deal with the conflict’s complexity and the poor quality of information.<sup>25</sup> But Autesserre also shows the unintended consequences of powerful, simple tales: the focus on natural resources overlooked all the other relevant causes and the target on one category of victims and on state reinforcement excluded all other necessary measures. She therefore concludes: “because of these exclusive focuses, the international efforts have exacerbated the problems that they aimed to combat.”<sup>26</sup> Not only can IOs produce and circulate simple narratives, they also give a sense of neutrality to their discourse by resorting to generalizations and simplifications based on either individual cases transformed into general rules, or rules of thumb embodied in individualized experiences.

### ***Building on past experiences***

IOs maintain a form of neutrality by building on past experience: they label their experiences as “success stories” and defend changes based on “lessons learned.” In doing so, they avoid tackling issues directly, which could push them to take sides and lose their seeming neutrality. In the case of the UN, the complexification and expansion of its field interventions led to “many auditing and other reports produced by the UN and humanitarian actors seeking to rationalise their processes or reflect upon lessons learned from past practice.”<sup>27</sup> By using past experiences to justify present and future decisions, the possibility of political debate shrinks since experience has shown that this was the right path to follow.

The case of UNEP shows the key role of successful past experiences to justify present decisions. After its first post-conflict environmental assessment in Kosovo

in 1999, in its following reports the organization systematically drew on that experience to justify its on-going appointments in this type of activities as if UNEP continuous engagement were logical, and thus not debatable.<sup>28</sup> This way, UNEP avoided criticism against its new field of activities. Success stories are created by constant reference to achievements which tend to deflect discussions of content: if they were successful, there should not be any debate about replicating them. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 3, IOs tend to selectively present past experiences and unilaterally choose the criteria of success. The case of the UN SDGs is another example of this process. The SDGs' orchestrators developed a storytelling around their negotiation process that transformed it into a genuine success story, as illustrated in the account of Paula Caballero, one of the acknowledged instigators of the SDG process.<sup>29</sup> She described the negotiations as a "long journey," "nothing short of a most remarkable miracle" given the "intense" and "contentious" discussions<sup>30</sup> it generated, as well as the "promise of a revolution."<sup>31</sup> However, the "seemingly insurmountable" political obstacles and considerations<sup>32</sup> are never explicit. What counts in such depoliticization tactics is not to deny the political *complexity of the process*, but rather to silence it and underscore the *simplicity of the outcomes*.

Another way IOs build on the past to neutralize current disputes is by relying on "lessons learned." Through different institutional mechanisms based on internal oversight and external assessments, IOs regularly aim to draw lessons from experience. This terminology is used by a large number of IOs like the UN Secretariat. For instance, the former Department of Field Support (DFS) used the category "lessons learned" to describe the environmental strategy implemented by UN peacekeeping operations in reducing their ecological impact. Since 2015, the environment has become a priority for DFS: it created a specialized team in the office of the Under-Secretary-General and released an environmental strategy in November 2016 to further promote the implementation of its 2009 environmental policy. While the environmental strategy is an internal document constantly updated, DFS produces a series of brief documents to summarize the strategy and its achievements. In one of them, DFS presents the environmental initiatives adopted in its missions as resulting from the "lessons learned from previous waste management experiences with local solutions."<sup>33</sup> Thus, resorting to "lessons learned" produces neutrality by limiting the present agency to collecting past experience to project on future activities. Moreover, these "lessons learned" legitimize current and future environmental practices as if they *only* resulted from past experiences, whereas the environmentalization of UN peacekeeping is a more controversial process.<sup>34</sup> Neutrality stems from denying the possibility to contradict, since one cannot debate with the past. From such "success stories" and "lessons learned," IOs make up "best practices," which act as ultimate supposedly neutral guides.

### **Supporting neutrality**

Neutrality is also achieved with various tools IOs use to disseminate their views of the world: they rely on seemingly only informational and universal formats

to avoid partisan controversies. These products are sometimes introduced as “guidance”<sup>35</sup> tools, which recommend putting in place easy and daily activities to achieve broader goals, therewith avoiding political debates associated with these objectives.

### ***Providing information***

IOs create a significant number of products intended to inform the audience about a specific issue or the organization’s activities.<sup>36</sup> Each format has its objectives and targeted audience and relies on different techniques to defend its informational value. The most common IO products are reports, manuals, factsheets, technical guidelines, training material, online platforms and visual productions (pictures and videos). Three characteristics support their neutrality: they are instructive, practical and advisory.

UNEP, for instance, produces a significant number of publications presented as purely instructive and meant to inform member states about global environmental transformations.<sup>37</sup> In the field of environmental security, the program has set up a knowledge platform called “Environmental Peacebuilding” in partnership with the Environmental Law Institute (ELI), the University of Tokyo and McGill University. The platform promotes a series of books on natural resources and peacebuilding produced by UNEP and its partners while proposing a library of “country assessments,” “toolkits & guidance” and “briefs & development.”<sup>38</sup> The Joint UNEP/OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) Environment Unit also provides such supports on the Environmental Emergencies Centre database.<sup>39</sup> The unit asserts presenting “independent, impartial advice and practical solutions”<sup>40</sup> for environmental emergencies with tools and guidelines, technical expertise, training and assessments. The instructive language of IO supports also appears in the production of specific data visualization tools like maps, process charts, tables, diagrams, etc. For instance, in a desk study dedicated to climate change, migration and conflict in the Sahel region, UNEP includes a series of maps that support its interpretation on the connection between these issues while concealing the heated discussion behind the production of these maps. UNEP produced the maps in collaboration with the University of Salzburg’s Center for Geoinformatics (Z\_GIS) to identify the areas most affected by changes in climate (precipitation, temperature, drought and flood). Besides these individual maps, the report includes a map that ties in all types of changes to identify “hotspots” while adding extra layers on population trends and data on conflicts (see Figure 2.1).<sup>41</sup> The production of the map was strongly debated within the team and revealed the discomfort of some members in using all these different data on the same map.<sup>42</sup> Yet, these disputes are concealed from the readers of the report. When analyzing IO data visualization, the choice of scales, projections and even colors needs to be assessed as a decision to present results one way instead of another.<sup>43</sup>

In another report, UNEP summarizes its findings on the role of natural resources in armed conflicts in Figure 2.2. The first two columns rely on schematic categories opposing peace and conflict and separating the different phases

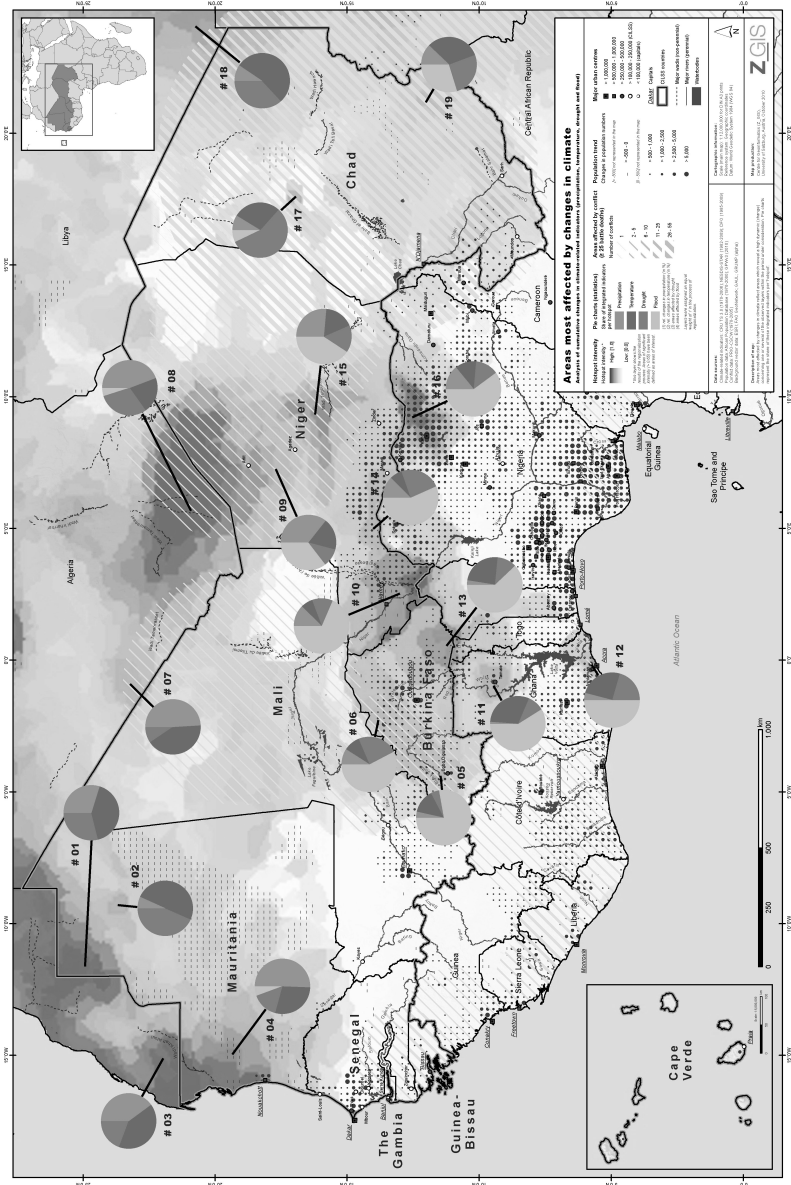


Figure 2.1 UNEP mapping climate change, migration and conflict in the Sahel. Source: UNEP, *Livelihood Security. Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in the Sahel* (Geneva: UNEP, 2011), 50–51.



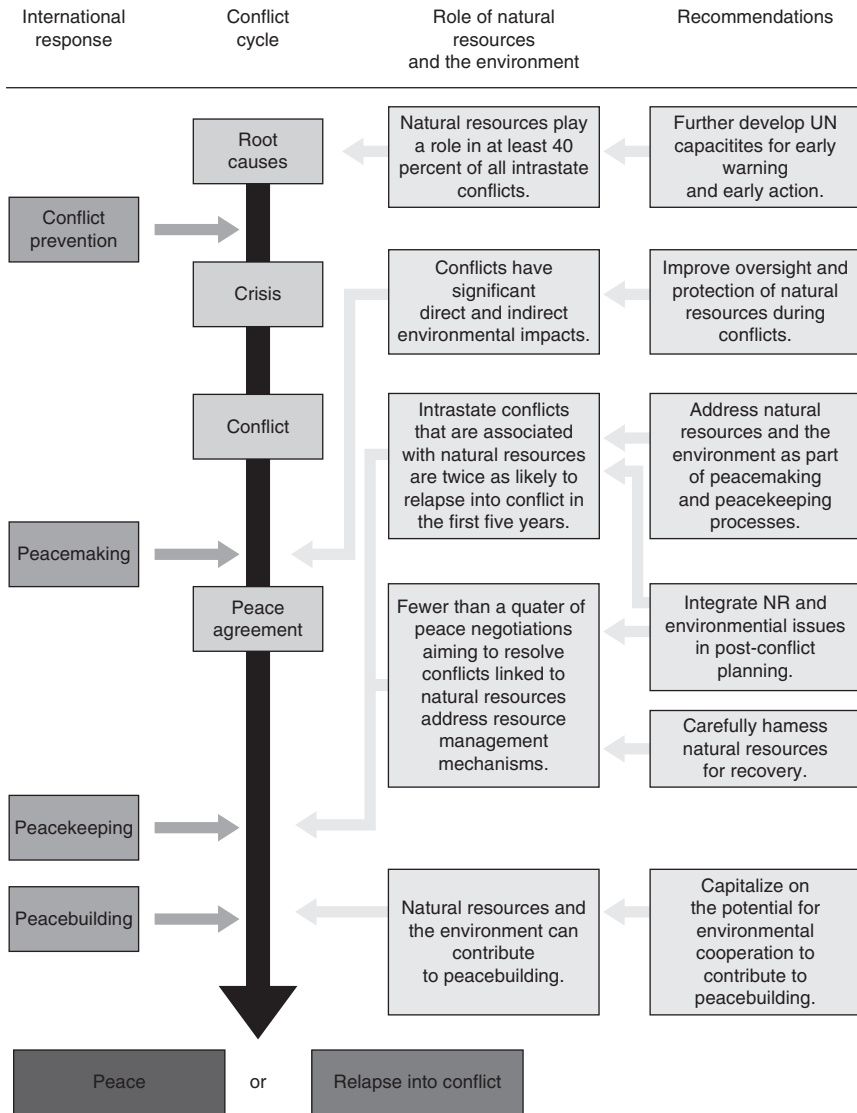


Figure 2.2 UNEP schematic pattern on natural resources and conflict. Source: UNEP, *From Conflict to Peacebuilding. The Role of Natural Resources and the Environment* (Geneva: UNEP, 2009), 30.

of the “conflict circle” (root causes, crisis, conflict, peace agreement) on a linear process in connection with traditional international responses (conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding). While the fourth column includes recommendations, whose political nature is acknowledged in the section



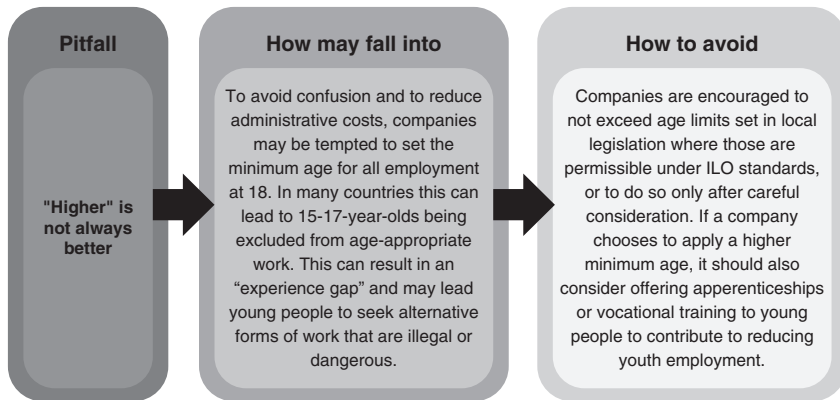
title “Conclusions and policy recommendations,” the third column is presented as a list of scientific conclusions based on statistics and general statements which do not address contextual and structural causes. In both cases, the publications render a simplified analysis which conceals the role of political actors and governance structures behind the apparent neutral and instructive nature of the mapping exercise<sup>44</sup> and of simplified categories.<sup>45</sup>

IO productions are often presented as practical or practitioner-oriented, labelled as “toolboxes” or “templates.”<sup>46</sup> They defend a pragmatic approach based on a functionalist understanding of the role of IOs in world politics, as further explored in Chapter 4. UNEP provides training programs specifically for practitioners: online training open to all but targeting UN staff and partners; direct training with UN practitioners; and training offered to government officials and local actors. In terms of online training, in partnership with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR),<sup>47</sup> UNEP created a course based on its report *Greening the Blue Helmets: Environment, Natural Resources and UN Peacekeeping Operations*.<sup>48</sup> The module provided a practical introduction to the ecological footprint of peace missions while discussing the links between the environment and conflict and the role of peacekeepers on that matter. On the same topic, the UN–EU partnership on natural resources and conflict prevention produced six factsheets, also called “toolkit and guidance for preventing and managing land and natural resources conflict.” Presented as “practical guidance notes,”<sup>49</sup> they address highly political issues such as land and conflict, extractive industries and conflict, renewable resources and conflict, strengthening capacity for conflict-sensitive natural resource management and conflict prevention in resource-rich economies.<sup>50</sup> A summary note proposes “practical guidance to assist in thinking through how natural resource management principles and practices can feed into transitional analysis and planning frameworks”<sup>51</sup> of UN interventions. It even suggests “diagnostic tools to assist those on the ground in deciding where and when such issues need to be addressed, how this can be done, what type of roles the UN can take on, and how the UN can support other actors.”<sup>52</sup> Behind a practical orientation, these products recommend ways of addressing natural resources and conflict which are not value-free.

Finally, IOs defend the informational value of their productions by underscoring their advisory dimension. The case of the ILO Helpdesk thoroughly illustrates this strategy. With the anonymized Q&A system described earlier, the ILO moves away from politicized naming and shaming strategies. Such strategies are mostly favored by trade unions and NGOs which target a specific company in breach of ILO conventions by launching a campaign to denounce the violation of international regulations and, eventually, to lead the company, especially multinational ones, to trial. To the contrary, through the mediation of the Helpdesk Manager, who has to consult the different relevant services before answering the received queries, the ILO manifests a more collaborative and preventive course of action. For instance, in the sub-section dedicated to child labor, the ILO secretariat makes considerable efforts toward the business community to avoid a judgmental and accusatory tone, although the topic is a recurring and highly political

subject, both in terms of labor standards and human rights at the international level (see Figure 2.3). In the 70-page long *ILO-IOE Child Labour Guidance Tool for Business. How to Do Business with Respect for Children’s Right to Be Free from Child Labour* published in 2015, the business community is addressed not as an actor responsible for child labor but as a key player in ending this “challenge faced by business.”<sup>53</sup> By doing so, the ILO presents itself more as an *advisor* rather than a *judge*: while both the advisor and the judge are deemed to be impartial, the latter determines the responsibility of one of two parties involved in a particular conflict while the former withholds judgment and advises on a favored course of action to solve or avoid conflict. In other words, the ILO relies on the advisory idiom to assert the neutrality of its online support system while providing information on highly political debates around the application of ILO standards on multinational enterprises.

By presenting their productions as informative, targeting practitioners and relying on the idiom of practicality and the “depoliticised language of guidance,”<sup>54</sup> IOs rely on formats which tend to conceal the political nature of their content.



**i** **Where can I find more information?**

- ILO Conventions, including minimum age, hazardous work lists and other standards are explained in **Section B.2** and **Annex A**.
- OHCHR: ***The corporate responsibility to respect: An interpretative guide*** (New York, 2011). Available at: [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR.PUB.12.2\\_En.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR.PUB.12.2_En.pdf). The guidelines has been published with the approval of John Ruggie and contains further ideas about how companies can deal with conflicting domestic and international standards (pp.78-79).

Figure 2.3 ILO-IOE schematic steps to prevent child labor. Source: ILO and IOE, *How to Do Business with Respect for Children’s Right to Be Free from Child Labour: ILO-IOE Child Labour Guidance Tool for Business* (Geneva: ILO, 2015), 30.

***Claiming universality***

The supports employed by IOs to disseminate their discourse also gain on neutrality by claiming universality. Indeed, IOs rely on universal media both materially and ideationally: they develop supports accessible to a large audience, even more thanks to new information and communication technologies, and exploit universal concepts tentatively presented as neutral and beyond political debate.

Since their creation, IOs have been addressing a global audience requiring a wide range of techniques to transcend language and cultural barriers.<sup>55</sup> Their secretariats, therefore, developed translation systems based on multiple official languages while using pictures to both document the life of the organization and illustrate IO publications (see Figure 2.4).<sup>56</sup> More recently, new technologies have changed the way we communicate especially at the global level, and as of today IOs have reached a critical virtual presence. They produce official websites in multiple languages in which they document their daily activities while distributing various and regularly updated resources on their policy field. They are active on social media where they publicize by-products of original productions such as reports, programs, campaigns, including quotes, key data, posters, maps or graphs,<sup>57</sup> with which specific ways of communicating about their activities are promoted.<sup>58</sup> Though images reflect culturally based codes, pictures can be used as a way to by-pass language barriers,<sup>59</sup> and online resources are promoted as worldwide accessible media.

The ILO Helpdesk is an example of such a “universally” accessible platform. In 2007, using the 30th anniversary of the MNE Declaration as a window of opportunity, ILO constituents urged the ILO secretariat to be more proactive in the promotion of the 1977 MNE Declaration. They wanted to reassert the primacy of the organization in the set-up of international labor standards considered as “the ‘intellectual property’ of the ILO.”<sup>60</sup> These discussions resulted in a project of Helpdesk to provide a uniform and centralized interpretation of the implementation of international labor standards by enterprises. While requesting the creation of a new service, members remained rather vague about its formal and material characteristics. Whereas some suggested that the ILO become more sophisticated and use multidimensional techniques in its informational activities, there was no discussion about the role of new technologies in promoting ILO standards by increasing the range of distribution and accessibility.<sup>61</sup> It appears that the establishment of an online device is primarily due to ILO staff’s initiative. When designing the Helpdesk, the ILO secretariat was aiming to reach the broadest audience possible and enhance the visibility of the ILO and its 1977 MNE Declaration. When launching the Helpdesk’s website in 2010, the ILO staff and some members were, therefore, concerned about the attractiveness of the platform. They wished to move away from traditional austere webpages listing legal instruments and datasets and justified their initiative on the explicit request made by some ILO members to have a more “user-friendly” and visible webpage.<sup>62</sup> And indeed, the Helpdesk can be accessed immediately through the ILO welcome page which is a strategic and most wanted spot: “[this] permanent place on the website is a real

valuable estate. Other programs are fighting like crazy to be on the homepage.”<sup>63</sup> As of February 2019, the service had answered a total of 1,098 individual queries (128 for the period 2017–2018). More than three quarters stemmed from MNE and almost half originated from Western Europe. However, a majority of web visitors come from the Americas. Looking at the website activity since 2011, the number of yearly visits multiplied by eight, increasing from 19,717 in 2011–2012 to 152,218 in 2018–2019 (with an overall total of 578,787 visits over the 2011–2019 period).<sup>64</sup> Worldwide access helps the organization assert its neutral position as a service provider for *all* members. Yet being accessible online does not eliminate the political dimension of the content of this supposedly universal support.

IOs also develop tools that might be considered as conceptually universal. In their work on global governance, Pouliot and Thérien explore the (de)politicizing role of universal values based on the adoption of the MDGs and negotiations around the UN Security Council reform. They shed light on the ubiquity of universal values in those debates by pointing out how actors constantly refer to the general interest (a dimension further explored in Chapter 4) and “use the idiom of universal values to communicate and justify their viewpoints publicly.”<sup>65</sup> In addition, they show that the appeal of rhetoric in universal values derives from an attempt to depoliticize global governance. While they argue that such rhetoric eventually brings politics back,<sup>66</sup> we insist here on the use of universal values perceived as “neutral” vehicles by IOs. Indeed, we agree that the content of universal values is always contentious and may create more politicization than depoliticization. Yet, IO staff and members keep applying universal values as a functional vehicle to avoid controversies and partisanship, as shown in Box 2.1 in the case of sport handled as a universal and apolitical value. As Pouliot and Thérien assert by rephrasing Cox, “universal values are always for someone and for some purpose.”<sup>67</sup> In the case of IOs, universal values act as a form of vessel which conceals the political dimension of its content.

### **Box 2.1 Sport: a “universal” and “apolitical” value**

Sport is another example of a supposedly universal value presented as a neutral tool to avoid politics, even holding the ambition to promote peace among nations. Sport history scholars have shown numerous discourses of “apoliticism” claimed by international sports organizations,<sup>68</sup> such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Since the re-establishment of Olympic games in Athens in 1896, the IOC has asserted that “Olympic neutrality” and the universal nature of sport embody the pacifist ideals of Pierre de Coubertin. For instance, Keys analyzes the advocacy campaign led by the IOC in the 1980s at the UN General Assembly for the adoption of a declaration banning Olympic boycotts which impacted the games in the 1970s and 1980s greatly. In the draft declaration put forward by the IOC, the Committee used the “moral

cloaking of the Olympic games”<sup>69</sup> and its non-discrimination principle. Media at the time described the attempt as “IOC Seeks UN Backing in Depoliticizing Games.”<sup>70</sup> The campaign’s failure was no surprise for Keys: “After nearly a century of loudly proclaiming that it was above politics, the IOC now chose to combat ‘politicization’ of the Games in the world’s most politicized body.”<sup>71</sup> After the Cold War, the UN system became more favorable to the IOC. Long diplomatic endeavors within the organization gave way to a series of partnerships within UN agencies and programs such as the UNHCR, UNDP, FAO and ILO.<sup>72</sup> Observance of the “Olympic Truce” was recognized by the General Assembly on several occasions,<sup>73</sup> and the UN declared 1994 the International Year of Sports and the Olympic Ideal.<sup>74</sup> In 2009, the IOC obtained permanent observer status in the General Assembly.<sup>75</sup> In the 2010s, the Assembly adopted a series of resolutions<sup>76</sup> that recognize “the valuable contribution of sport in promoting education, sustainable development, peace, cooperation, solidarity, fairness, social inclusion and health at the local, regional and international levels.”<sup>77</sup> Sport is considered as a “means,”<sup>78</sup> or vehicle, whose neutral nature is useful to silence political disputes between participants.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the supposedly neutral and universal nature of sport is put forward at the UN, notably concealing highly political decisions that surround the organization of international sport events such as the Olympic games.

### **Circulating neutrality**

Informational and universal formats accompany circulation techniques through which IOs disseminate their discourse. Indeed, IOs avoid controversies by using communication tactics by which they redirect political responsibility on the audience by reversing ownership and creating a form of proximity. In other words, they rely on the passive nature of neutrality to displace the active agency on the audience.

### ***Reversing ownership***

In most cases where IO secretariats rely on the idiom of information, they take on the role of knowledge holder: they produce information which they circulate in a vertical relationship. Yet, we argue that IOs also develop horizontal relationships with their audience by reversing ownership on the political nature of the exchange. Their involvement is passively neutral, while the audience plays an active role. First, international bureaucrats present their action as “answering needs” while promoting self-regulation. Second, they develop “audience-oriented” tools where

the audience is framed as initiating the political activity—decision-making, debating specific topics, etc.

When the ILO Helpdesk was first set up in 2009, it took on the form of a basic email address and phone number meant to collect questions pertaining to the application by companies of international labor standards. It took the website a whole year to become operational. According to the Helpdesk Manager, this bottom-up approach was a deliberate choice made by the ILO: “the questions that we had already received allowed us to accumulate enough material to launch the website. [...] Everything we do is on the web but this time, we made a conscious effort. [...] It is maybe the only portal that was made from the point of view of the users.”<sup>80</sup> The emphasis on a Q&A system is a part of the ILO strategy to appear neutral. Neither the secretariat nor the constituents are supposed to make up questions on the interpretation of ILO instruments: “The way the Helpdesk operates is that we don’t make up questions, we only answer real ones.”<sup>81</sup> The ILO presents itself as a simple answer-provider in a bottom-up approach: if demand creates supply then the IO cannot be accused of trying to influence companies or other actors in an authoritative way. Unquestionably, the ILO has already paved the way for such a demand through the implementation of a complex normative framework at the international level. However, in the case of the Helpdesk, the organization produces guidelines by altering the hierarchical character of the relationship between the ILO and MNE. Indeed, although their relationship is not purely horizontal since the ILO remains the main provider of information and technical assistance, the Helpdesk makes the ILO look much more like a neutral *supplier* rather than an *inspector*.

Training programs are another example where IOs bring neutrality to their action through audience-oriented services. While in the ILO Helpdesk case users are responsible for questions asked and thus information delivered on the online platform, self-learning systems depend on trainees’ willingness. In other words, the trainees are made responsible for decisions to implement IO advice and suggestions. In this way, IOs appear as neutral brokers instead of discourse producers. For instance, non-mandatory online training precisely reverses the ownership of the decision, thereby concealing the role of the organization. For example, the UN–EU partnership on natural resources and conflict developed four modules on that topic hosted by the UN System Staff College (UNSSC). The UNSSC is a UN program which was set up in 1996 as a part of a joint operation between the United Nations and the ILO and which became independent in 2002 after the General Assembly’s approval. Its mission is “to contribute to a more effective, results-oriented and agile United Nations through learning, training and knowledge dissemination.”<sup>82</sup> These modules focused on measures to implement as a part of a development programme to resolve conflicts over natural resources:<sup>83</sup> it is thereafter the responsibility of the trainees to apply the proposals in on-going and future projects.

Since November 2010, the ILO Helpdesk’s webpage has become more sophisticated and resourceful for users, redirecting them toward other various ILO products: codes of practices, guidance documents, leaflets, questions and answers,

online-training courses organized by the ILO International Training Center in Turin<sup>84</sup> (e-learning sessions, webinars). The ILO has produced various webinars: on HIV and AIDS in the workplace, on the eradication of forced labor, on global supply chains, on disability at the workplace, on equal pay and on children and youth in hazardous work. In collaboration with the Turin International Training Center, it participated in the English, French and Spanish language e-learning module “Business and Decent Work: An introduction to the MNE Declaration.” The aim of these tools is to inform users on the right course of action while shifting the responsibility of implementing, or not, ILO recommendations directly on MNE (as primary users of the platform). In addition, the emphasis on e-learning and learning-by-doing reinforces the argument for self-regulation by MNE through a better understanding of public regulatory frameworks such as the MNE Declaration. These audience-oriented modes of diffusion help create the image of a neutral IO while depoliticizing the circulated content.

### ***Creating proximity***

IO communication strategies have evolved over time, along with information and communication technologies. Dissemination is an essential feature of IO daily activities both inside and outside the organization. On the one hand, IOs publicize their productions to the world; on the other hand, each department works at the dissemination of their own activities within their organization. In the UN system, for instance, the reports published by the Secretary-General collect inputs from all concerned services and departments, each of them advocating for better visibility of their work and field of interest. IOs employ different dissemination techniques that tend to lessen the political content of their discourse. Among them, informal conversation, daily guidance and storytelling create a form of proximity between IOs and their audience.<sup>85</sup> We further argue that this proximity tends to displace political agency toward the audience and, therefore, participates in depoliticizing IO action.

The ILO Helpdesk illustrates the way IOs can foster proximity with their audience. The traditional approach of the MNE Declaration relies on a follow-up mechanism consisting of surveys sent by member states to the ILO. In contrast, the Helpdesk creates a new proximity between the ILO and the business community where governments are relatively marginalized from the process and social partners are only indirectly consulted. Indeed, the Helpdesk provides a platform where the ILO can directly interact with companies without going through the filter of the governments and social partners. In order to avoid being accused of helping either companies in their corporate social responsibility marketing strategies or trade unions and NGOs in their dispute settlements, which could be interpreted as a way to “take sides,” the conversations between the ILO and MNE have to remain confidential. Reciprocally, while the ILO is not allowed to disclose any information on the identity of the requester, the latter cannot publicize the content of its “private conversations” with the Helpdesk. In other words, a company, a government, a trade union or an NGO cannot use its informal exchanges with



the ILO to legitimize its practices.<sup>86</sup> The conversational mode of interaction thus gives a sense of neutrality to the organization's action. Other publications, such as the ILO guide dedicated to child labor available on the Helpdesk platform, also rely on this mode of communication assorted with schematic summaries such as Figure 2.3. Without assuming that businesses are concerned about child labor, the document starts with seemingly "checkup" questions such as: "How could my business be involved with child labour?" "who is this guidance tool for?" or "can this guidance tool help me make the business case to colleagues?" While it presents the company as potentially ignorant of the problem and, therefore, not fully responsible, it also relies on the conversational mode assuming that the company can be a potential partner willing to share and circulate information and good practices on a larger scale. It resorts to a personal mode such as "my business," "can this help me?" or "where can I find more information?" to further a sense of proximity between what the IO does and its target audience.

The ILO guide also illustrates the day-to-day guidance that IOs aim to provide through continuous presence and services made available *every step of the way* to their members. Indeed, the last part of the document consists of a list of seven practical steps for companies to take in order to prevent child labor impacts. Each step is broken down into a list of sub-steps, including "diagnostic questions," "pit-falls to avoid" and "hard questions." The tool is designed for companies to self-evaluate the quality of the measures undertaken and draw upon existing practices and detailed schemes. The document combines practical, non-accusatory, partnership-oriented styles to circulate the various norms adopted by the ILO related to the eradication of child labor while creating the feeling that the organization is here to assist companies every step of the way. The permanent assistance made available to IO partners is also evident in the case of UNEP. As part of its field environmental recovery programs, UNEP offers day-to-day technical assistance and advice. For instance, in Afghanistan, it delivers environmental management technical training to the national environmental protection agency (NEPA), government officials and UN personnel. It also provides daily guidance to NEPA staff by "mentoring government counterparts."<sup>87</sup> This gives UNEP critical access to government officials: while relying on the proximity created with national actors, it can contribute in defining key issues on NEPA's agenda and shape its practices in terms of environmental policies.

The growing use of storytelling in IO publications is another way of creating proximity with the audience. We argue that storytelling is used as a neutral diffusion technique because of the informal nature of this communication mode based on individual cases. In the aforementioned example of the World Bank World Development Report, the box on the fictional family providing a "modern tale of risk and resilience" precisely exploits the storytelling mode to foster proximity with the readers.<sup>88</sup> This is all the more efficient because the authors used a fictional case with generic characteristics to which the audience could relate. On the one hand, storytelling appears as a neutral mode of diffusion since it does not carry a direct political message but tells the story of an individual case. On the other hand, storytelling proceeds from a personification that concretely embodies



conceptual ideas, such as resilience: in other words, it circulates political content hidden behind an individual and informal mode of communication. The case of the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers adopted in 2011 is a good example of how individual stories can be used to support a potentially universal regulatory tool (also see Chapter 1). On this occasion, the Domestic Workers commission members invited several NGOs to make statements on their members' experience as domestic workers. The representative of the International Domestic Workers' Network stated that "like many others, she had been abused as a domestic worker."<sup>89</sup> Likewise, the representative of Defence for Children International, also speaking on behalf of Anti-Slavery International, and the spokesperson of the Migrant Forum in Asia both opened their speeches by relating their experience: the first as a former child domestic, the latter as a nine-year domestic worker.<sup>90</sup> Two years later, in 2013, a woman speaking on behalf of the NGO Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing made a speech during one of the plenary sessions of the International Labour Conference starting with these words:

My name is Nohra Padilla. I am a recycler. Since I was 8 years old, I have been making a living from recovering things I find in rubbish—the third generation of my family to do so. There are more than 24 million recyclers like me in the world, young people, women, old people, migrants. We are the product of the economic and social crisis, of technological and industrial developments that went wrong.<sup>91</sup>

Here, the ILO's strategy is clearly to rely on these individual experiences in order to persuade the audience that more regulation of domestic work is needed. The people invited to talk are identified as (women) victims of an unfair socio-economic system. While each story is placed in a broader context and narrative of economic exploitation, resorting to individual experience makes this kind of statements very hard to contest or contradict (by employers for instance): using legal or political justification would run the risk of appearing distant and disconnected from the people the Convention is supposed to protect. This process relies on the use of consensual and emotional images used as unquestionable evidence of required action (see Figure 2.4). Resorting to individual and emotional testimonies,<sup>92</sup> storytelling becomes a powerful strategic tool which dodges political and legal controversies and depoliticizes the debate by creating a sense of proximity with the people concerned and pointing to a self-evident solution, in this case, implementing strong protection.

### **Advising through neutrality**

Despite the apparent neutrality of the dissemination techniques used by IOs, all the above-mentioned examples show how IOs can turn supposedly neutral information into political recommendations through the selection of the most appropriate ways of doing things.



*Figure 2.4* ILO-IOE illustration of child labor: an example of visual depoliticization.  
 Source: ILO and IOE, *How to Do Business with Respect for Children’s Right to Be Free from Child Labour: ILO-IOE Child Labour Guidance Tool for Business* (Geneva: ILO, 2015), 8.

***Political recommendations in disguise***

The ambivalence of neutrality production and dissemination consists of the very thin distinction between information and recommendations contained in IO products. While a recommendation, even a voluntary and non-binding one, entails a normative aspect since states or companies “should” adopt it, an information is supposed to describe a situation in a factual way, thereby minimizing discussions on the right interpretation. However, the boundary between what actually happens and what should happen is not always clear-cut. While IOs make an important distinction between normative instruments (conventions, recommendations, resolutions, declarations) and practical informative tools, we argue that the normative and informative dimensions are always intertwined. Indeed, when IOs claim to diffuse information based on the description and examination of factual

events, which they do to some extent, they also give advice and recommendations on the right, even the best, course of action. They follow what Larsen calls a form of “guidance culture” with guidelines reflecting “a distinct and expanding field of international normativity with distinct characteristics as well as real social effects” and which displace power and reframe political disagreement in neutral terms.<sup>93</sup> Concretely, while traditional normative instruments adopt an explicit normative tone, the supposedly neutral and informational IO products combine information *and* normative recommendations.

The ILO mixes information and recommendation. For instance, in the Q&A system, the ILO presents itself as a benevolent and impartial advisor. The query reproduced in Table 2.2 describes a frequent situation whereby a company may justify the non-respect of international law first because of the primacy of national law, second because of the lack of government cooperation. This is a crucial aspect of the MNE regulation: international conventions only apply to states while non-state actors should abide by national legislation. In the answer, the ILO secretariat does not directly address the question “to what extent can it be considered as a breach of ILO conventions?” Quoting the relevant paragraph of the MNE Declaration stating that companies should obey national legislation while only giving “due consideration” to relevant international standards, it seems clear that the answer to the question should or at least could have been “no, strictly speaking, it is not a breach of ILO conventions.” Yet the ILO adopts a different strategy: it insists on the second part of the question “what should the company do?” It therefore provides a short list of measures the company could, not *should*, take in order to conform to international legislation. For instance, it includes not employing anyone below the age of 15 even though national legislation allows it, engaging in a dialogue with the relevant employers’ federations which are members of the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) (and represent employers primarily within the ILO) and even considering changing the nature of its activities and relocating them (“it may wish to consider, as feasible and appropriate, reviewing the nature of operations”) to a country that respects international legislation. In spirit with the 1977 MNE Declaration, the ILO engages in a sensitive debate over the responsibility of the Declaration’s application, or non-application, in a depoliticized way. It gives political advice in disguise by pointing at numerous decisions a company could take to conform to international standards, even if these standards are not binding and governments do not respect them.

The blurred line between information and recommendation also results from the format of IO publications. Almost every report published by an IO today, even the most technical ones, contains a section dedicated to “recommendations.” As Rist puts it: “We would be misled by taking the neutral term ‘Report’ literally. Because this it is not a description, but a prescriptive text, made of injunctions, orders, advice, even threats.”<sup>100</sup> Based on the analysis of a World Bank’s report, he underlines the use of the imperative mode, the verb “must” and impersonal phrasing (passive forms in the English version) to highlight the prescriptive character of such a report. UNEP’s environmental assessments constitute another example of the blurriness between information and recommendation. UNEP conducts two types of environmental assessments. First, it assesses the environmental damage

in post-conflict situations. Second, it provides evaluations on the state of the environment in the aftermath of a natural disaster (like in South-East Asia after the 2004 Tsunami). Within UNEP, all “post-crisis” environmental assessments are conducted by the same department but usually by different teams. In both cases, UNEP presents its assessments as “neutral”<sup>101</sup> even though its recommendations touch on political issues such as peace treaties or natural resource governance reform. For instance, in its 2003 post-conflict environmental assessment in Afghanistan, UNEP suggests recommendations on environmental management:

For the government of Afghanistan to address effectively the great environmental challenges faced by the country, strong and well-equipped environmental authorities are needed to guide and design new environmental management tools and policies, as well as monitor the implementation of protection and restoration projects.<sup>102</sup>

Using both the passive form and the verb “need,” the report prescribes much more than it informs. UNEP then declares, as its first recommendation, the need to “recognize environmental rights in the national constitution.”<sup>103</sup> The transformation of information into political recommendations is all the more critical in this case since UNEP provides day-to-day advice to Afghan government officials: the daily guidance is therefore far from “neutral.” Likewise, in its assessment of Sudan, UNEP’s first two general recommendations are: “Invest in environmental management to support lasting peace in Darfur, and to avoid local conflict over natural resources elsewhere in Sudan” and “Build capacity at all levels of government and improve legislation to ensure that reconstruction and economic development do not intensify environmental pressures and threaten the livelihoods of present and future generations.”<sup>104</sup> The blurred distinction between information and recommendation in IO reports also echoes Perrot’s work on IO language. Analyzing the 2000 joint report by the UN, the OECD, the World Bank and the IMF entitled *A Better World for All. Progress Towards the International Development Goals*, Perrot points to the “cotton language”<sup>105</sup> (to characterize diplomatic language) used by international organizations that “deproblematize the world and ignore the cumbersome reality.”<sup>106</sup> Going further, we argue that IO reports can depoliticize the world while giving very political recommendations on how to manage it.

### ***From “best practices” to the only possible practice***

Both in their written publications and in their institutional design, IOs have increasingly referred to “best practices” they aim to identify, collect, disseminate and reproduce with the support of dedicated teams and services. A growing corpus of literature explores these “best practices” as a form of governance instrument.<sup>107</sup> This literature shows how “good” and “best practices” are designed as rational and bottom-up devices that act both as guides for action as well as legitimization tools.<sup>108</sup> Even though these practices propose a pragmatic approach that can help overcome issues of fragmentation in global governance,<sup>109</sup> they also build on their

supposed experience-driven neutrality to suggest, or even impose, the best way to behave. Indeed, “best practices” are presented as results of experiences processed by the institution through learning from former successes and mistakes. While the idiom “best practices” limits political space for debates by drawing on the past, it also transforms “neutral” information into political recommendations. We therefore argue that “best practices” constitute a depoliticization technique performed by IOs which influence international political action.

Drawing on various examples in multiple areas, Bernstein and van der Ven propose a detailed and critical understanding of the role of “best practices” in global governance. They identify the following four characteristics: “First, best practices derive legitimacy from existing practices. Second, they root their legitimacy in the appearance of consensus. Third, they emphasize broad procedures over specific prescriptions. And fourth, they rely on incentives instead of coercion to steer their targets.”<sup>110</sup> While considering “best practices” as a mode of governance, they highlight the source of their legitimacy in practical experience, as opposed to expertise, for instance. For them, “best practices largely represent a consensus on the best *existing* practices, not on the types of practices that *should* or *could* be in place.”<sup>111</sup> Yet, following a “practice-oriented logic,” IO “best practices” act as a form of political guidance by selecting which practices *should* be performed. Building on Bernstein and van der Ven’s focus on best practices’ incentivizing function, we further argue that they consist of a prescriptive mode of action for international bureaucrats, IO members and partners while pretending their content to be neutral and pragmatic.

In the case of UN peacekeeping missions for instance, “best practices” provide a platform to disseminate environmental standards in a context of governmental reluctance. Indeed, despite their 2009 Environmental policy, the Departments of peace operations (DPO) and of operational support (DOS) face multiple challenges in implementing a sound environmental approach to prevent ecological damage resulting from the peacekeepers’ presence in the field.<sup>112</sup> Using the idiom of “best practices” facilitates the dissemination of their recommendations. On their website, DPO and DOS first insist on their financial constraints before mentioning their experience in environmental management in conflict settings adding that: “Best practices and case studies from the field are shared with all missions through a dedicated Community of Practice and dedicated training.”<sup>113</sup> “Best practices” are used to guide peacekeepers’ behaviors without raising debate on the recommended practices. In this case, the UN Secretariat relies on depoliticization to reduce their ecological impact while overcoming some member states’ opposition to strong environmental standards for UN peace missions,<sup>114</sup> echoing Bernstein and van der Ven’s conclusion that “governance through best practices has both positive and negative consequences.”<sup>115</sup>

The idiom of “best practices” as used by international bureaucrats, therefore, transforms supposedly neutral information into incentives toward the best (and only) course of action. This process does not only address IO members as illustrated by the case of WHO presentation of breastfeeding in its “10 facts on breastfeeding” available online (see Box 2.2). Through the combination of natural,

### **Box 2.2 “Breast is best:” WHO and the depoliticization of breastfeeding**

WHO, in close partnership with UNICEF and the support of many NGOs such as the famously controversial Leche League,<sup>94</sup> has been instrumental in the promotion of breastfeeding. Initially thought of as a development-oriented issue,<sup>95</sup> “the ‘breast is best’ mantra” has been shaping every national policy, including within industrialized countries, since the 2000s.<sup>96</sup> In 2016, OHCHR even erected breastfeeding as a universal value by qualifying it as “a human rights issue for both the child and the mother.”<sup>97</sup> Yet, we contend that WHO resorts to depoliticization tactics in the way it presents breastfeeding. For instance, it adopted an evidence-based strategy to support the recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months. The “10 facts on breastfeeding”<sup>98</sup> updated in 2017 start as follows: “Breastfeeding is one of the *most effective* ways to ensure child health and survival. [...] WHO actively promotes breastfeeding as the *best* source of nourishment for infants and young children.” It then enumerates 10 “facts” in order to stress the scientific and objective character of the recommendation on breastfeeding, supported by many references to medical journals and studies such as “breastfeeding protects infants from childhood illnesses” (fact 2). Based on this scientific evidence, WHO is then able not only to formulate large recommendations but also to identify very concrete and intimate (best) practices in order to “guide” women to breastfeed. Moreover, WHO denounces many “routine practices, such as separation of mother and baby, use of newborn nurseries,” which “make it harder for mothers and babies to breastfeed” (fact 8). While being universally enhanced, the promotion of breastfeeding has been highly individualized: it has now become a key characteristic of what the feminist scholar Hamilton depicts as “the ‘good’ attached mother.”<sup>99</sup> This presentation of breastfeeding does not leave space for controversies or debates since every alternative practice is depicted as second-best, potentially dangerous and economically biased. The WHO case once again shows how IOs can format apparent neutrality by combining individualized general conclusions while relying on support and circulation techniques based on universal (online) access.

scientific and even intimate elements, IOs are also able to provide strong recommendations to both states and individuals, while eliminating socially constructed and politically controversial practices.

## Conclusion

IOs as institutional arrangements exist through their bureaucracies and the physical presence of offices and staff, their concrete field activities and written productions. They publish reports, factsheets, training material and other artifacts in which they circulate their understanding of the world. In this chapter, it is less the content of the discourse presented in the documents than their supposedly neutral formats that we explored. While all reports do not pretend to be neutral, detailed attention to the specific formats provides a better understanding of depoliticization and of IO practices overall. Case studies precisely illustrate how IOs produce, support, circulate and transform neutrality. The categorization of specific practices into “best practices,” “lessons learned” or “success stories” also participates in lessening the actual meaning of these practices and their political implications.

Yet, the apparent neutral nature of these dissemination tools does not protect IOs from criticism. Staff, other organizations, member states and actors from civil society may contradict the discourse produced in these documents and challenge the dominant narrative. These dissemination techniques do not always succeed in reducing the political space for debates and contradictions, in concealing the political dimension of their content, in displacing the political agency and in disguising political advice and guidance. But because of their depoliticization potential, these mundane modes of dissemination deserve our scrutiny. Further research should, therefore, pay closer attention to the format and the materiality of IO productions.

## Notes

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### 3 Gaining time and losing momentum

- **The delay**
- **The dilution**
- **The routine**
- **The amnesia**

Recent discussions on a “temporal turn”<sup>1</sup> in the study of world politics invite us to take the question of time seriously in our understanding of political action, both at national<sup>2</sup> and international levels.<sup>3</sup> IO scholarship has almost exclusively considered temporal dimensions as contextual and external elements. In this chapter, we investigate the construction and perception of temporal constraints and opportunities at the level of IO practices. Doing so, the aim is not to engage in ontological and ethical discussions about the nature of time,<sup>4</sup> but rather to interpret the effects of time as it is experienced and used within IO contexts. A closer look at IO temporal habits questions the rather linear, static, disruptive, changing, progressive or regressive character of their political action.<sup>5</sup> Since Elias’s seminal essay on time,<sup>6</sup> much of the existing work on time and politics suggests a strong though equivocal relationship between the time pace of political action and policy outcomes. In IR, the influence of time on political processes has been scrutinized in the study of peace negotiations<sup>7</sup> and expanded to broader aspects of world politics (security, environmental studies, ethics, etc.).<sup>8</sup> However, few scholars discuss the role of time, as both a chronological and social determinant of action, *within* international institutions.

Research in historical institutionalism has renewed the literature on path-dependency, timing and sequences, and continuity and change within institutions.<sup>9</sup> Applying these concepts to evaluate the scope and success of reforms undertaken *over* time within IOs, scholars shed light on patterns of stability, gradual modes of change and institutionalization processes.<sup>10</sup> However, historical institutionalism inspired work does not fully capture the *effects of time* on organizational dynamics and how co-constructed time constraints and opportunities are perceived by and impact individuals who experience the extended process of reform in their daily activities. Hence the appeal to articulate, in a more systematic way, historical institutionalism with practice theory in the study of change within IOs in order to show “how the web of practices affords actions that are determinant in obtaining the institutional outcome.”<sup>11</sup>

DOI: 10.4324/9780429466984

Some recent studies attempt to conceptualize the spatiotemporal contexts in which IOs evolve and the specific temporalities they shape in return.<sup>12</sup> For instance, analyzing UN planning instruments for humanitarian action applied in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, Verlin questions IO “strategic use of time” to (re) produce norms and power relations.<sup>13</sup> Goetz and Meyer-Sahling also provide an engaging analytical framework which stresses the specificities of international (here, European) institutions compared to national ones in relation to time.<sup>14</sup> They argue that the absence of a dominant political cycle, tied to elections for instance, results in a lack of mobilization of political actors: “Mobilization [...] is made difficult in the absence of a dominant cycle that could help to settle conflicts over the allocation of actors’ time to clear temporal priorities.”<sup>15</sup> Considering mobilization as a key feature of politicization *and* IO ability to play with time, we draw on this work to further investigate the temporal factor and its links with depoliticization within IOs.

We contend that delaying discussions, postponing decision-making or enlarging negotiations’ timeframe are commonly used by both IO member states and secretariats as depoliticization practices. Actors who have the most to lose in negotiations and reforms rely on these tactics to depoliticize sensitive issues. Depoliticization in this case proceeds from a dilution of political stakes and a routinization of urgent matters. This eventually leads to a process of institutional fatigue and, more surprisingly, amnesia. We hence see time as a relational element that shapes the way IOs function as much as it is constructed by IO practices. Its opportunistic or constraining value is co-constructed and, therefore, should be considered a critical component of depoliticization practices. In this chapter, we study these practices in the context of IO negotiations. We approach negotiations as a common practice of discussions and debates. International negotiations are not confined to large official negotiations in the fields of international trade, nuclear weapons or the environment; they encompass a much broader social reality within IOs as spaces of permanent negotiations.<sup>16</sup> While negotiating is one of the core functions of IOs, it is also an ambivalent practice. On the one hand, when state representatives decide to put an issue on the agenda, they acknowledge its political relevance. On the other hand, they may depoliticize negotiations by institutionalizing the process through the creation of various commissions, committees, working groups which tend to fragment the negotiation process by adding more actors and more issues on the table. The “big picture” as well as the core issues initially at stake are scattered as a result of never-ending debates. While member states are key players in these practices, international bureaucracies also play a critical role in the depoliticization process as they provide the negotiation framework and maintain the continuity of these debates. Yet, despite this institutional apparatus, and in the absence of transmission procedures, issues fade from everyone’s memory. Beyond this paradox, we argue that institutional amnesia is an efficient depoliticization practice that reinforces delaying, staggering, watering down and routinizing tactics. Table 3.1 summarizes these imbricated and reinforcing depoliticization mechanisms supported and advanced by states as well as international bureaucracies and IO partners. While they do not follow a specific

Table 3.1 Time-related depoliticization

<i>Depoliticization practices</i>	<i>Delaying</i>	<i>Diluting</i>	<i>Routinizing</i>	<i>Encouraging amnesia</i>
<b>Definitions</b>	Postponing decision-making	Staggering and watering down processes	Integrating high-paced exceptional processes into routines	Discouraging and silencing past debates
<b>Components</b>	Institutionalization and accumulation	Complexification, duplication and discontinuity	Routinization and institutional fatigue	Selective memory and memory loss
<b>Temporal dimensions</b>	Extending time	Scattering time	Repeating and slowing down	Resetting processes from the start
<b>Depoliticization mechanisms</b>	Decreasing political momentum	Dissipating political content	Losing political interest	Forgetting past political debates

linear order, these processes can be cumulative as one can facilitate the other. They proceed from institutional and professional habits and path-dependency as well as deliberate moves.

To illustrate these different time-dependent depoliticization practices we draw on multiple examples: the long-lasting reforms of the ILO Governing Body, the IMF quota system, the UN Security Council and the climate change negotiations as well as other punctual cases like UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).<sup>17</sup> All cases share the feature of having been (and for some still being) considered highly political: either as a collective emergency or as a crucial feature of IO legitimacy. Yet the agenda setting process extended over time has, intentionally or not, lessened the urgency of managing or solving these issues.

### **The delay**

Depoliticization happens when political relevance of issues and reforms at stake is recognized but depreciated. On the one hand, IOs acknowledge the legitimate requests of (mostly) unsatisfied states by providing specific structures and resources like time, rooms, staff, reports, for brainstorming and negotiating future reforms. On the other hand, they do not set up credible deadlines for the process to take place or they postpone decision-making, thereby devaluating the potential outcomes of the negotiations. Thus, depoliticization does not necessarily consist in creating a taboo or denying the legitimacy of a debate,<sup>18</sup> but in making the discussions go on as long as possible.

### ***Institutionalizing negotiations over time***

IOs tend to downscale political questions and take the risk of losing political momentum by assembling a specific apparatus designed for negotiations, and by extending them over long periods of time. It is well-known for climate change, for instance, that Gemenne qualifies as a case of “permanent negotiation” that constantly evolves with an unclear desired outcome.<sup>19</sup> At the national level, Brulle also demonstrates the ability of the US climate change counter-movement to “institutionalize delay” to prevent government policy actions on that matter.<sup>20</sup> We shed light on three cases emblematic of this process within IOs: the reforms of the UN Security Council, of the ILO Governing Body and of the IMF quota-based representation system. These organizations originated in diverse historical contexts and have different mandates: security, social, economic, financial. Yet they all have to address similar challenges regarding the unequal distribution of power among their members and their lack of representativeness<sup>21</sup> which directly affect their legitimacy in the eyes of their members and beyond. As a consequence, for many decades now, these three institutions have put the reform of their executive organs on their agenda. The reform of the ILO Governing Body is a century-old debate. In the 1960s, debates became more intense while being progressively institutionalized, as with the UN Security Council and the IMF. This momentum



coincided with the Cold War dynamics and process of decolonization, leading to an increase in their membership.

From the start, members recognized that they had to adopt a long-term view on these issues and refused to set deadlines. In the case of the ILO, the process of reform started in the 1920s after the first protests of non-European countries' representatives which felt inadequately represented.<sup>22</sup> In the 1960s, the reform of the Governing Body was purposely called "the reform of the structure," thereby insisting on the wide scale of these negotiations.<sup>23</sup> After the first discussions and following the interwar period reform, the debate over the composition of the Governing Body was officially (re)launched at the beginning of the 1960s, primarily in response to the pressure of newly admitted countries—later to become the G77—as well as the Soviet Union; this continued well into the 1980s. In 1986, the adoption of a constitutional amendment substantially reforming the Governing Body apparently put an end to the debate. However, the amendment was never enforced due primarily to the lack of ratification by the most powerful countries; thereafter debates took place periodically, in 1995 and again in 2007, to try to find alternative solutions to the *de facto* abandonment of the 1986 suggested reform and of more than 20 years of negotiations. This whole reform process eventually led to the enlargement of the Governing Body: from 24 members in 1919 (12 from the governments, 6 from the workers and 6 from the employers) to 122 since 1995 (56 from the governments, 33 from the workers and 33 from the employers, with different voting status). However, if we only consider the proportion of governments within the Governing Body, it represented 28.6% of the ILO total membership in 1919 and 29.9% today.<sup>24</sup>

The discussion concerning the distribution of quotas and subsequent influence of respective member states—meaning that members' uneven voting power derives from their financial commitments—was institutionalized at the IMF by a general quota review implemented every five years: since the fourth quinquennial review in 1965, the quotas have constantly been raised, meaning that states' financial contributions increase and quota shares are realigned.<sup>25</sup> The last major reform to date, known as the "reform package," occurred in 2010 in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>26</sup> It was considered as a "landmark" reform by both members and staff as well as by academics who were justifiably more skeptical in terms of concrete outcomes, for it challenges the preeminence of the most powerful states, in particular the United States,<sup>27</sup> and increases the relative voice of countries with lower quotas.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the reform of international financial institutions overall, not only the IMF, was resurrected as an "urgent" matter, as suggested by many resolutions adopted by the G20<sup>29</sup> and the UN General Assembly.<sup>30</sup> However, in the absence of a general consensus among members, and to allow time for the reform to be implemented, the IMF Executive Board adopted several extensions to the initial deadline.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding the UN Security Council, the question of its enlargement generated tensions during the San Francisco conference which resulted in the creation of the UN, and was raised again in 1957 at the UN General Assembly.<sup>32</sup> Its initial membership comprised five permanent members with veto power—China, France, Russia (the USSR at the time), United Kingdom, United States—and six

non-permanent members elected each year by the General Assembly for a two-year term following a pattern of geographic representation. The reform was subsequently postponed until the 1963 adoption of the resolution which amended article 23 of the Charter and finally led to an enlargement of the Council with the addition of four non-permanent seats in 1965 bringing it to the current number of ten.<sup>33</sup> Although some states—India, Japan and other non-aligned states—attempted to put the reform on the agenda of the General Assembly again in 1979, the discussion was postponed year after year,<sup>34</sup> reemerging in the 1990s. Following the 1992 UN Secretary-General’s report *An Agenda for Peace*, a resolution was adopted by consensus that same year on the “Question of Equitable Representation on and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council” followed by the creation in 1993 of an open-ended working group in charge of negotiating the reform of the Security Council.<sup>35</sup> In 2007, to keep the issue on the agenda, negotiations on the reform were moved to a new forum: the Intergovernmental Negotiations framework (IGN) which opened in 2009.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of the ILO, the working group in charge of negotiating the reform of the Governing Body caused controversy: while members asked for an extension of its mandate by insisting on the progress made over time, others expressed their skepticism and warned against the loss of credibility resulting from a constant prolongation of the discussions. The views expressed by the spokesperson of the Workers’ group in 1980 (15 years after starting the negotiations) exemplify this ambivalent spirit:

I think that it would almost be a *demonstration of incapability* on the part of all of us if, after such long discussions, in the next or next-but-one election we still had to proceed according to the old system. [...] We support the proposal that the Working Party be given a further extension of its terms of reference, but we are doing this in view of the fact that we feel that *by 1981* we have to reach a conclusion.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned above, it will take another six years before an amendment is finally adopted.

The same ambivalent logic holds true in the case of the UN Security Council. In 1997, the President of the General Assembly, Ismael Razaly (Malaysia), stated that the open-ended working group on the reform of the Security Council “should not be seen as a place for endless talk—that would give the United Nations a bad image.”<sup>38</sup> In the 2004 Working Group report, the President specifies, in his concluding remarks, that in spite of the “impasse” hindering the reform process, changes of procedures could contribute “to increasing the pace of work of the Group” and that the Group “should set a deadline for concluding its work.”<sup>39</sup> More recently, declarations were made by diplomats urging that talk “now needs to be followed with action to achieve credible progress,” pointing out the gap between the “little progress” achieved and the time spent on negotiating the reform.<sup>40</sup> However, in 2017, the President of the General Assembly issued a letter to the UN members in which he declared: “I am confident that the rich discussion

held during this session and the final outcome will help *maintain the momentum* in taking the IGN forward towards the much-needed comprehensive reform of the Security Council."<sup>41</sup>

These three examples depict long-lasting and highly institutionalized negotiations. What looked like a political recognition of the original claims progressively discredits these demands. As time goes by no significant reform has been adopted. IO members, especially those who have an interest in maintaining the status quo, postpone the moment or even the possibility of decision-making, by weakening the political momentum. Acknowledging the key role of mobilization in the process of politicization,<sup>42</sup> we consider these delaying tactics as depoliticization practices which are further strengthened by the accumulation of reforms and reports.

### *Accumulating reforms and reports*

IOs are often criticized for their inertia, portrayed as arenas where talk prevails over action. However, we argue that depoliticization does not result from the absence but rather the accumulation of (limited) reforms or reform proposals over time. Such process resonates with what historical institutionalists characterize as “layering,”<sup>43</sup> meaning a process of adding reform elements without challenging the institutional core. Yet, as the following cases show, accumulation does not necessarily imply that actual change, even gradual, is occurring. The practice of accumulating also reveals the quantitative dimension of reform outputs through which the most controversial issues are progressively buried. This multiplication renders negotiations more complex as positions and alliances evolve over time. In the case of the ILO, the composition of the Governing Body endured the following changes: the list of “states with chief industrial importance,” which are *de facto* permanent members, has been modified more than ten times since the creation of the organization in 1919; five constitutional amendments were adopted in 1922, 1953, 1962, 1972, 1986 modifying the composition of the Governing Body, the latter having not yet been implemented as mentioned earlier, as well as one amendment to its general standing orders adopted in 1995 and various resolutions in 1964, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985. Yet this list does not even mention nor take into account the significant number of reports and reform proposals issued during the negotiations—notably on the number of permanent seats, enlargement, voting procedures and majorities, the autonomy of tripartite groups and regional representation—for which the ILO secretariat published substantial notes and practical handbooks compiling the various discussions and reform proposals.<sup>44</sup> While the debate has been dormant since the 1990s, it is still occasionally reactivated, thereby generating new discussions and suggestions for reforms, however not leading to any decisional impact.<sup>45</sup>

In the case of the UN Security Council, a kind of “reform activism” began in the 1990s under the 1997 Razali Plan, named after the aforementioned President of the General Assembly. It was immediately followed by alternative proposals emanating from the G4 (Germany, Japan, Brazil and India), the African Union or the United for Consensus Group (led by Italy). In 2004, the UN High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change once again raised the issue of the Security Council reform,

suggesting two new formulas (model A and model B) for expansion. Introducing the report to the UN General Assembly, Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated: “I have long argued the need for a more representative Security Council. It is disappointing that, for more than ten years, little or no progress has been made towards this.”<sup>46</sup> In 2017, the IGN issued a six-page memorandum entitled “Elements of Commonality and Issues for Further Consideration on the Question of Equitable Representation and Increase in the Membership in the Security Council and Related Matters.”<sup>47</sup> This document *reminded* members of the significant milestones in the process of negotiations, including key resolutions and decisions adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1992, 1993, 1998, 2005, 2008, and 2016 pertaining to the reform, as well as the different informal meetings held by the IGN.

Since the IMF general review in the 1950s, quotas have been increased nine times.<sup>48</sup> However, these decisions did not put an end to the debate as new changes are expected to be introduced in further review processes.<sup>49</sup> Like in the ILO, the IMF secretariat, with the support of the legal and policy, strategy and review departments, is involved in the production of substantial 40- to 60-page reports detailing analysis of the situation on governance and quota reform, a summary of previous reforms as well as various proposals under examination.<sup>50</sup> In 2009, the authors of the report recognized that they had to select information because they were confronted with such a wide scope of inputs that it resembled “a laundry list.”<sup>51</sup> These documents embody the negotiation process while providing material and tangible traces of past and current reforms.

In all three cases, the accumulation of working-papers, reports and reforms, or reform proposals, reinforces the impression that the organization takes these issues seriously and safeguards the memory of discussions even in the absence of substantial progress. These publications seem to disclose a near *political* outcome whereas, in fact, they pertain to a postponing process with depoliticizing effects. These delaying techniques are ambivalent as they keep IO members and staff “alert” and thereby *aware* of these reforms through the intensive production of reports and the adoption of transitional reforms. However, rather than an actual attempt to revive the reform, delaying practices keep the project in a kind of “artificial coma,” contributing to a process of dilution of the politics at stake.

## **The dilution**

Depoliticization occurs by leaving the process unresolved over a long period of time while increasing its complexity and making any agreement harder to reach. This dilution results from procedural and substantial complexification: IO members and staff add sophisticated proposals without addressing the most sensitive issues directly. In addition, the duplication of forums leads to overlaps between different negotiation processes and institutions.

### ***Procedural and substantial complexification***

Complexity is a constitutive feature of negotiations. While there is no such thing as a simple negotiation, we argue that it is frequent for multilateral actors to make it look

more complex than it really is. Furthermore, we see this complexification as contributing to depoliticizing the reform process. IOs complexify these processes by adding either new steps to follow and actors to include (procedural complexification) or new issues and sophisticated technical instruments (substantial complexification) to the discussion. Assembling multiple layers of negotiations waters down the core political content being debated. Thus, IO members and staff tend to lose sight of the most important and political issues at stake, which are never really tackled and solved.

An element of complexity relies on the amount of issues addressed in a negotiation. So-called reform packages are emblematic of this intimate link between complexification, dilution and eventually depoliticization. Reform packages refer to a common practice consisting of conditioning a reform to the acceptance or refusal of other sub-reforms, often presented as more technical, tied to the broader issue initially at stake.<sup>52</sup> Reform packages are introduced as a way to maximize the time dedicated to negotiations and increase the visibility of reform proposals. Often presented as a way to foster compromise among states with different agendas, reform packages sometimes produce the opposite effect. In the case of the ILO, the aforementioned “reform of the structure” mixed issues like the enlargement of the number of permanent seats, with other procedural matters such as voting procedures and majority rule, the autonomy of tripartite groups but also regional representation. In the case of the UN Security Council reform, the most controversial questions, adding new permanent seats and revising the use of the veto, were linked to interconnected issues. For instance, included were discussions over the relationship between the Council and the General Assembly, the transparency of the Council’s working methods, new categories of membership and regional representation, thereby mixing substantial issues—the legitimacy and relevance of the distribution of power established after the Second World War—with procedural ones—the Council’s working methods. Not surprisingly, the 2017 IGN report stresses: “Nothing is agreed, until everything is agreed.”<sup>53</sup> This sentence symbolizes a commonplace IO dilemma: as time goes by, negotiations and reports address a growing number of topics while incorporating previous reforms, proposals, drafts and amendments. This cumulative mechanism, typical of reform packages, which was also used in the IMF quota review, maintains some continuity over the years and aims to achieve a certain degree of coherence in outcomes. However, it also leads to a dilution of the political issues at stake. Instead of increasing chances for compromise, reform packages open new paths for discussions and disagreements and reinforces the likelihood of new deadline extensions and delays. In the case of ECOSOC, Defrain-Meunier identifies a similar process, through the addition of complementary questions and procedures, which delays the accreditation of NGOs which applied for an observer status. Rather than openly refusing to grant them the consultative status which might open the door to contestations, ECOSOC postpones the decision-making thanks to procedural complexification.<sup>54</sup>

Another key aspect of complexification can be found in the attempt to seemingly simplify the reform process by using quantified instruments, thereby transforming the political dispute into a matter for experts as explored in Chapter 1. In

the case of both the ILO and the IMF, disputes occurred while assessing the best way of measuring and adjusting the economic power of each state. In the ILO, intense debates took place in the 1920s and again in the 1970s on the weight of various indicators to measure industrial power: a minor change in the weighting of one indicator (demographic size, for instance) could lead to a radically different ordering of the most industrialized nations holding a permanent seat.<sup>55</sup> Between 1983 and 2008, the IMF added four formulas to complete the original formula used to calculate and allocate quota shares, though this did not prevent the subsequent introduction of an entirely new quota formula.<sup>56</sup> Eventually, in both cases, it is the GDP that has become the key indicator of industrial importance and quota measurement. Whatever formula is used, the aim is to transform the question of representativeness into a complex economical or even mathematical issue. As attested by ILO and IMF reports, such discussions involve complicated measurement procedures, managed primarily by statisticians and economists, that even the most committed state representatives and international civil servants might find hard to work with and, therefore, to pass on to their successors.

Another example can be drawn from the international climate regime. Retracing 20 years of international negotiations on climate change, Aykut and Dahan shed light on the process of “globalization of the climate problem,” which brought new issues and actors into the climate discussions. While the process increased the number of actors willing to be involved in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, it spread the attention among a myriad of other topics making it more difficult to reach an agreement.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the complexification of debates diluted the political content of the negotiations, thereby generating other multiple and often technical sub-issues while a growing number of stakeholders automatically complexified both the procedural and substantial dimensions of the negotiations. Studying the summit COP21 held in Paris in 2015, Aykut et al. further argue that “climate conferences take up an ever-growing number of issues, from debates about development, energy and forest to biodiversity, global inequality and urban planning, among others.”<sup>58</sup> This process involves an ever-increasing number of actors with contrasting interests and consequently further dilutes political stakes into more sub-negotiations.

### ***Duplication and discontinuity***

Another key process which contributes to staggering political decisions is the duplication of committees, groups and teams in charge of the issue and the discontinuity that results from mandate overlaps, hierarchical distribution and constant back-and-forth between parties involved in the process.

While duplication might be justified by a rational division of labor, it inevitably increases the risks of overlaps between different bodies and ultimately the loss of political substance, especially if members do not communicate in a systematic manner. In the 1960s, the reform of the ILO Governing Body was discussed simultaneously in two different committees: one linked to the Governing Body, the other to the International Labour Conference where all ILO members annually



meet. While these parallel entities reveal the lack of trust between the two ILO organs,<sup>59</sup> they also limit the ability of each body to propose and advance reforms, leading to the slowing down of the process and, once again, increasing the chances of losing political momentum. In the case of the UN Security Council, in 2007 the President of the General Assembly designated a first group of facilitators to act in the negotiations in their personal capacities. According to Pouliot, the fact that all came from small states with relatively little interest in the reform (Chile, Cyprus, Croatia, the Netherlands and Tunisia) can be considered as “an established way of depoliticizing negotiations.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, it deliberately hampered the process by selecting actors unable to push the reform forward. Not surprisingly, the report issued by this first group of facilitators was judged inadequate by several members, including the powerful G4 members, but also the United States, and the African group: they denounced several omissions and asked for a new group of facilitators to be designated. The story repeated itself after the nomination of two new facilitators whose report was once again judged either incomplete or unfair.<sup>61</sup>

Discontinuity is another feature that tends to water down the political content of IO negotiations and productions. It results from the number of parties involved, the hierarchical functioning of these organizations and staff turnover. The writing of a report by UNEP illustrates the discontinuity that produces depoliticization. In 2008, the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Conflict visited the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) for a mission aimed “at spotlighting the effects of climate change, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and other challenges facing the countries of the Sahel.”<sup>62</sup> During the mission, he pointed out the challenges of human security and localized conflicts in the region in the context of climate change, leading UNEP Executive Office to “promise” a report on this topic.<sup>63</sup> However, the Executive Office made that decision without consulting with UNEP teams and without considering the organization’s financial and human resources. Thereafter followed a back-and-forth process, common in the production of UN reports, watering down political content while dissimulating authorship, as revealed by a close look at the production chain of the report. The project was first delegated to temporary research assistants (MA students). They proposed a first synthesis to the project manager who then left the service. An external consultant was subsequently hired to cut the initial text and try to make it more coherent. The result was handed over to a new team member (P3 position) who reworked the content with the help of research assistants and a consultant on a short-term contract. The revised draft was then sent to various partners and members of a reviewing committee (other UN agencies, think tanks, NGOs, but also regional organizations). After the team integrated their comments, the unit director (P4 position) revised the draft with the person in charge of the branch’s strategy (P4 position) and communicated a final version to the other unit directors (mostly P5 positions) and the branch director (D1 position). The subsequent revised version was sent to the director of the Division in Nairobi (D2 position). A go-ahead from the Executive Director’s office was then required for the official publication of the report. This production chain gets even more complex when a report is written in partnership with several UN agencies. In some cases, the

report is presented to the organization's Executive Committee where its member states are invited to comment on the draft before publication.<sup>64</sup> While discontinuity affects the final report's consistency, as acknowledged by UNEP staff, it also waters down the most politically sensitive elements cut out during the reviewing process. For instance, issues around property rights and land ownership have been less prominently addressed in the final version compared to the initial ambitions of some of the key authors.<sup>65</sup>

We saw that dilution, as a depoliticization practice, is two-fold: it staggers negotiations and report production while watering down their political content. Not only does dilution lead to a loss in the understanding of the political issues at stake, it also tends to paralyze debates.

## **The routine**

Routinization is a critical feature of depoliticization. What is at some point in time considered to be an exceptional and unique moment in the life of the organization, often judged necessary due to significant changes in international politics (decolonization, economic crisis, etc.), becomes a *normal* and *repeated* element within the IO institutional routine. Routinization partly results from the institutionalization of negotiations and adjunction of reforms and reports over time. However, it differs from the two previous practices—delay and dilution—in that the loss of political interest results from the slowing down of high-paced exceptional processes by repeating them through a form of routinized management. In this section, we explore the characteristics of recurring emergencies and their consequences. We then discuss institutional fatigue of this routinization process which we consider to be a key aspect of the relationship between time and depoliticization. The tendency to present every seemingly new development as an urgent matter normalizes what was considered an exception and results in institutional fatigue experienced by IO members, staff and partners, leading to a decline or even a loss of political interest and mobilization.

## ***Recurring emergencies***

The study of politicization processes closely analyzes the pace of political focus: the moment and the duration of this concentration is critical in understanding political mobilization and agenda setting processes. Events such as elections, economic crises, wars, pandemics or environmental disasters, because they are perceived as exceptional, tend to attract political attention and trigger consensus over the necessity to act. In this section, we shed light on an ambivalent yet common phenomenon occurring within IO: recurring emergencies leading to a routinization of what was once considered exceptional. The notion of recurring or routine emergency is frequently used to describe situations (mostly in warfare or conflictual contexts) in which the perpetual facing of a latent threat generates a state of constant vigilance and preparedness.<sup>66</sup> Taking it a step further, we suggest that similar processes are at work within IOs as a way to legitimize pushing some



issues to the top of the agenda and maintaining the attention of members and staff. Yet the complexity of the problems added to the various delaying and dilution practices explored before leads to a routinization of these so-called emergencies. The most important thing then consists in maintaining a state of vigilance without necessarily addressing the political causes of the issue at stake while international bureaucracies act as mere managers of recurring debates.

The routinization of emergencies results from the transformation of an exceptional issue into a repeated occurrence falling from the top of the agenda into business as usual. The case of the political rights of women in the context of the UN General Assembly illustrates this transformation. Between 1946 and 2016, the General Assembly adopted 345 resolutions on women's rights. Yet, the accumulation of these decisions rests more on a form of routinized management rather than on an increased politicization. Analyzing the (de)politicization of the political rights of women within the institution, Tordjman follows the evolution of the topic and shows how it moved from a priority and exceptional issue into a recurring theme progressively losing political interest and attention.<sup>67</sup>

The transformation of emergencies into routines also depends on the cyclical dimension of IO action. In January 2014, the IMF Executive Board issued a statement regretting the delay in implementing the quota reform engaged in 2008–2010, which emerged in the context of the financial and economic crisis. In this declaration, it reiterated “the importance and *urgency* of the 2010 Reforms for strengthening the Fund’s effectiveness and legitimacy.”<sup>68</sup> This sentence shows the dual process of recognition and depreciation that characterizes depoliticization: members recognize that action is required as quickly as possible, yet without combining the demand with fixed deadlines (since they can be postponed) or credible political sanctions. It thus creates a cycle of self-defeating reforms. It is all the more striking in the IMF case since it is unlikely to pass considering the United States opposing the reform (which is never mentioned in the IMF reports).<sup>69</sup> This paradox shapes an ambivalent working atmosphere for both IO members and staff. On the one hand, they push themselves to act by negotiating and submitting proposals and urge IO bureaucracies to deliver reports that end up accumulating knowledge and recommendations while justifying this intensive work production by the crisis (such as in 2008). On the other hand, this sense of emergency lies in contradiction to the wide scope of issues under discussion: IO members and staff are well aware that reaching a consensual decision will take time. This echoes other studies on the cyclical dimension of time within IOs, demonstrating the oscillation between continuous time-pressure under which participants work and opportunities to gain time provided by a high number of meetings<sup>70</sup> occurring within IOs as permanent sites of negotiations.

Thus, these recurring emergencies result in two phenomena which trigger depoliticization: first, IOs create confusion about what political priority and emergency actually mean; second, in failing to acknowledge the lack of political will and leadership concerning certain issues these routinization practices discourage member states and staff from mobilizing efforts.

### *Institutional fatigue*

The practices of postponing, slowing down decision-making or multiplying “false” emergencies within IOs have a tangible impact on members. Among these, institutional fatigue is one of the most interesting yet overlooked phenomena that helps us to understand the progressive decline of political willingness and mobilization within IOs as actions are considered unrewarded and fruitless.<sup>71</sup> Here, we approach institutional fatigue as tiredness, lassitude and frustration at having to deal with the same issue over and over *and* the indifference and detachment which result from being confronted with the same matter regularly. Institutional fatigue is experienced at individual and collective levels and reinforces depoliticization within IOs by minimizing the urgent and exceptional character of an issue while shattering political interest among members, staff and civil society.

The UN Security Council reform provides a concrete example of institutional fatigue which has been stressed by both practitioners and academics. For instance, the permanent representative from Russia at the UN describes the paralysis of negotiations of the open-ended working group on the reform as follows: the “same issues, though not without certain nuances, (were) being discussed over and over again.”<sup>72</sup> For Luck, “the reform conversation today revolves around remarkably similar questions” thereby generating a feeling of (pointless) recurrence.<sup>73</sup> As rightly emphasized by Weiss:

Since its establishment in 1993, the entity with the lengthiest name in the annals of multilateral deliberations—the Open-Ended Working Group on the Question of Equitable Representation and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council and Other Matters Related to the Security Council—risks also setting a record for continuing to go nowhere for the longest period of time. This entity is a microcosm of a perpetual problem in the organization as a whole.<sup>74</sup>

In the case of the ILO, delegates also express a feeling of lassitude, comparing the negotiations to a “dialogue of the deaf,”<sup>75</sup> denouncing the “mirage” of reform and the fact that “the prolongation of the status quo, though it may satisfy some, will only aggravate the sense of frustration on the part of the Third World countries which may feel that their views carry little weight” and calling for a “miracle” to settle the reform.<sup>76</sup> In 1985, one year before the adoption of the 1986 amendment, the government representative of Malaysia expressed that: “the extremely lengthy and slow negotiations on structure had left many observers angry, frustrated and disappointed. [...] The situation should not be allowed to drag on in this inconclusive way. The credibility of the Organisation was at stake.”<sup>77</sup> Today, some members even consider re-opening the debate on the Governing Body reform a waste of time. After agreeing on the most consensual reforms in 1995, including enlargement and regional representation, the most controversial aspects of the 1986 amendment, especially the suppression of the category of states with chief industrial importance, are considered either out-of-date or negatively connoted. When asked about the future of the 1986 amendment, the government representative of France, a state

which holds a *de facto* permanent seat, even asserted that it would be better to suggest a new amendment, rather than to stay focused on an “*old text* going from failure to failure.”<sup>78</sup> He adds, oscillating between exaggeration and lassitude: “when a text is presented 50 times, it is a matter of obstinacy, and it won’t pass the 51st time. And this means that the problem needs to be addressed differently.”<sup>79</sup> For the government representative of Belgium, a state without a permanent seat, the time-dimension is also crucial and plays a rather discouraging even stigmatizing role for those who would like to re-activate the “fight:” “we fought on this for a long time and now we are depleted of energy. When nothing moves, one can be obstinate, but eventually life goes on. You have to be patient in international relations.”<sup>80</sup> The same holds for the government representative of Mexico: “We do favor this amendment, but we are not going to take position to reactivate it. It was a long time ago and now there are other priorities. It’s a bit old and it’s not debated anymore except by the African group.”<sup>81</sup> Not only do they lose energy; these actors also have to adapt their position to new priorities and cannot be at the forefront of these “fights” after so many years of failure, reinforcing the depoliticization of earlier debates.

In both cases, repetition of the same discussions on multiple occasions has decreased political interest and transformed an urgent item into a routinized issue that causes institutional fatigue reinforcing depoliticization dynamics.

### **The amnesia**

The history of multilateral institutions has been documented by both scholars and international bureaucrats using a number of mechanisms to store archives, monitor and report activities and collect lessons learned as discussed in Chapter 2. Yet historians also reveal the cyclical nature of some debates shedding light on a form of partial or complete institutional amnesia. Institutional amnesia can be defined as “the intentional or unintentional ways in which government agents and organizations or non-government agents and organizations no longer remember or record policy-relevant lessons from the past.”<sup>82</sup> This definition draws on current research on public policies that echoes the seminal work of the famous anthropologist Douglas in her account on how institutions “remember and forget.” According to Douglas, “weak or strong, memory is sustained by institutional structures:”<sup>83</sup> in other words, institutional practices and choices support what could, at first, seem a pure individual or psychological process. Building on this, we argue that by selecting or forgetting the memory of past processes, IO members and staff perform depoliticization. Institutional amnesia can be considered as a consequence of previous practices of delay, dilution and routinization. But it might also be encouraged and even orchestrated as its own tactic by IO members with the help of the secretariat (and vice versa).

### **Selective memory**

When telling their story to the outside world through official publications, websites or audiovisual media, IOs, like other institutions, select the moments of their

lives to display. We further argue that selective memory works as a depoliticization practice, sometimes even resulting from unconscious biases of long-experienced delegates and staff.

During interviews with ILO members on the reform of the Governing Body conducted between 2011 and 2013, only a few remembered the debates and issues well, though some potentially had a major stake in the reform, because they might either lose their seat or, on the contrary, gain one if the 1986 amendment were to be ratified. For instance, one Japanese delegate confessed that he had to research the topic before the interview because he realized he did not know much about it.<sup>84</sup> When asked what she thought of the future reform and 1986 amendment, the US delegate answered:

We don't have a position at this point on it, it's not something someone has been giving active thought on, and so I couldn't tell what our position is. [...] People are aware that it's out there you know, but there are other issues, you know, that preoccupy people. [...] *I don't really know the details*; that's why I am a little bit hesitant responding here because it's not something I spent any considerable time looking at.<sup>85</sup>

This excerpt specifically reveals the selective memory transmission as stressed by Douglas who recommends the need to pay particular attention to the “skills” available in any given society in order to “store” public memory or, on the contrary, “reject” some features from it: “To watch these practices establish selective principles that highlight some kinds of events and obscure others is to inspect the social order operating on individual minds.”<sup>86</sup>

Looking at ILO storage practices, it appears that the secretariat has attempted to reactivate the memory of its members. For instance in 2007–2008, after many requests from the African group to relaunch the 1986 amendment ratification process, the ILO secretariat set up a webpage entirely dedicated to the past and present of the reform.<sup>87</sup> The format of an online public platform is equally interesting: while it could attempt to reach a broader audience and rely on civil society to keep that memory alive, it also risks being buried in the billions of web pages available on the internet today. And though the organization was celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2019, there was no mention of this reform in the debates and initiatives marking the ILO century.<sup>88</sup>

### ***Memory loss***

After organizing long discussions and spending many resources on time, people and money, one could expect that these never-ending talks would at least foster awareness among IO members and staff on the issues at stake. Quite paradoxically though, we argue that in some instances, a process of institutional amnesia can be observed thereby completing the circle of depoliticization. This is especially true when much time has passed without yielding significant decisions or change.

Despite numerous mentions of memory loss in empirical studies on IOs, institutional amnesia remains an overlooked and undertheorized dimension. Following Stark and Head's typology, we argue that this amnesia can be both a strategy promoted by those who have more to lose *and* a context-driven process. It results from a decline of the political momentum and a loss of "story-tellers" who can propagate historical lessons.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, staff turnover plays a significant role in the production of institutional amnesia. IOs without transmission and learning mechanisms thus maximize the risks for the reproduction of past debates. When asked about the system put in place to mitigate the non-ratification of the 1986 amendment in the ILO and ensure better representation for every state, the government representative of Belgium stated: "I don't know exactly how it goes. We have to redefine the rules to rotate among us" before adding, almost ironically: "we do have written rules, but nobody can find them! They are back home, in our archives, and nobody can find them because it hasn't been renegotiated for at least 15 years."<sup>90</sup> This kind of statement is not unique. As mentioned earlier, during the interview process many delegates admitted that they either did not know or did not remember the details of the reform since it had not been at the forefront of the agenda in many years. In other words, institutional amnesia acts as a depoliticization tactic: when the memory of past processes is lost, it possibly resets debates from the beginning and reintroduces old solutions as new answers.

As previously seen with the UNEP issued report, staff turnover affects institutional memory as it creates discontinuity which tends to dissipate the political coherence and content of an IO production. Institutional memory loss reinforces routinization by constantly reintroducing past practices presented as novelties. The work of Atlani-Duault on HIV/AIDS programs led by international development agencies in former Socialist Republics, for instance, illustrates the deliberate loss of institutional memory as a depoliticization tool. Through a double ethnography within these IOs and the "beneficiary" civil societies, she observed that IO staff tended to forget their initial work of contextualization, a sort of *bricolage* based on the organization's objectives and the local context's specificities, as well as the micro-practices of resistance by local actors challenging the norms of good governance. She further shows that the loss of institutional memory serves the purpose of IOs to promote a smooth vision of their norms as being evident, neutral and universal.<sup>91</sup>

Institutional amnesia can, therefore, be approached as a depoliticization practice: it does not only result from depoliticization by losing political momentum, it actively produces depoliticization by eliminating past (political) debates, whether memory loss was intentional or not.

## Conclusion

One of the aims in this chapter was to draw attention to the often-overlooked time dimension in the study of IOs. To capture the multiple ways in which IO depoliticization connects with time, we identified four practices: delaying, diluting, routinizing and encouraging amnesia. As for the practices discussed in the

previous chapters, they do not necessarily need to occur simultaneously or consecutively. Time is a constructed resource that IO actors can draw from to enact political agendas, these being in favor or against the politicization of an issue. Besides the different components and mechanisms of depoliticization unveiled in this chapter, we suggest that the effects of time on depoliticization have to be considered in relation to the cyclical dimension of IO activities. Applied to the process of (de)politicization, this cycle could be summarized along the following steps: raising awareness, mobilizing efforts, complexifying issues, forgetting the problem.

Time is key in seizing IO activities within their broader political environments and historical evolutions, both in terms of change and continuity. Further research should integrate time as a critical analytical dimension of any reform project. For instance, we suggest going a step further than considering only the time gap between the moment a claim for change is formulated and the moment the IO actually takes action. We encourage taking a closer look at the impact of time on individuals and groups, especially in terms of (de)mobilization, weariness and frustration, dimensions that are often concealed in IO analysis although they can be empirically documented. This approach could renew our understanding of political will and leadership in multilateralism by looking at the overlapping of concurrent time paces and frames within IOs.

## Notes

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**Part II**

# **Logics of depoliticization**



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## 4 Following a functional-pragmatic path

- **Functional necessity**
- **Practical rationality**

The belief that effective cooperation can only be achieved by focusing on the “living realities” of society while rejecting ideologies and bypassing political logic is key to understanding IO action. According to Mitrany, IOs play a significant role in fostering cooperation and peaceful relations when they take the form of “functional arrangements” and eventually lead to the creation of “specific and separate functional agencies.”<sup>1</sup> They increase interdependencies among states but also, and above all, among people. Thus, they thrive to gradually overcome political logics and divisions:

The political lines will then in time be overlaid and blurred by this web of joint relations and administrations. [...] the functional approach [...] should help to shift the emphasis from political issues which divide, to those social issues in which the interest of the peoples is plainly akin and collective; to shift the emphasis from power to problem and purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Functionalism and depoliticization reinforce each other: depoliticization is meant to achieve functional cooperation while the claim of functionality legitimizes depoliticization. Accordingly, functionalist scholars such as Mitrany, Haas or Claude, to name a few, conceptualized international cooperation by opposing politics to expertise, power to welfare, interests to needs and diplomats to IO professionals. Criticisms are numerous, and all stress the artificial and hardly applicable character of these oppositions. According to Groom: “the distinction between power and welfare relations, while analytically attractive, is not founded in practice. But nor is the facile assumption that politics consists of power relations.”<sup>3</sup> Cox even goes as far as referring to the “unconscious logical fallacy” of functionalism, whose theoretical propositions conceal a more political federalist project.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is neither to reinstate functionalism as a relevant theory for cooperation nor to stress its limitations. Rather it is to demonstrate that IOs rely on functional arrangements and functionalist justifications that can lead to depoliticization: for instance, they claim to answer needs and bring technical



and scientific solutions instead of political ones while offering help to apply practical solutions on the ground. The different techniques by which IOs depoliticize their action follow a functionalist perspective on how international cooperation would best be enhanced and organized.

Moreover, we go further in the analysis by qualifying this logic of depoliticization as pragmatic, in the sense of being oriented toward achieving concrete actions. Although pragmatism has become increasingly salient in IR scholarship, it has never developed into a coherent theoretical edifice.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, while Mitrany himself used to refer to pragmatism to describe the renewed spirit of cooperation after the Second World War,<sup>6</sup> most authors do not take functionalism into account when relying on a pragmatist approach to study IR.

In the field of global governance, a functional approach emphasizes the problems IOs should solve and the specific needs they must answer without taking politics and ideologies into consideration. On the other hand, pragmatism recognizes that social action is not necessarily grounded in well-established normative principles derived from a certain ethics or ideology and thus requires to “move away from theoretical preoccupations to practical problem-solving” and consider “the concrete problem situation and the way of coping with it.”<sup>7</sup> A pragmatic logic of action, therefore, transforms experience and experimentation into the primary motives for action. When confronted with a specific problem, not only do actors not necessarily prioritize between values and means, they also tend to consider the means at hand, or their actual capacity to act through professional cultures, habits and skills and their own creativity,<sup>8</sup> as much as the (anticipated) practical effects. Contrary to the determinism in functionalist theories, which assumes that functions are either self-evident or can be defined beforehand, pragmatism banks on the constant adaptation of actors when confronted with a constraining *and* changing environment.

Despite these differences, we insist on the complementarity between functional and pragmatic logics of action. We argue that IO depoliticization practices follow a functional-pragmatic dynamic: depoliticization appears as both necessary and accommodating for IO actors performing their tasks following a form of practical rationality. By referring to practical rationality we do not intend to re-open a debate that goes beyond the scope of this book. Our intent is to qualify the type of rationality at stake when goals and ends are the primary motives for action, without implying that this rationality rests purely on instrumental and strategic calculations. It echoes Pouliot’s work on the logic of practicality which reminds us that practices often result from an “inarticulate, practical knowledge that makes what is to be done appear ‘self-evident’” and that “most of what people do, in world politics as in any other social field, does not derive from conscious deliberation or thoughtful reflection—instrumental, rule-based, communicative, or otherwise.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, practical rationality reconciles the two ideas that practicality is “ontologically prior to instrumental rationality since the latter is not *a priori* inscribed in human beings’ minds but historically constituted in habitus and fields”<sup>10</sup> yet without dismissing the concept of rationality but rather qualifying it.

Table 4.1 Functional-pragmatic depoliticization

<i>Depoliticization logics</i>	<i>Functional necessity</i>		<i>Practical rationality</i>	
<b>Objectives</b>	Achieving IO specialized mandates		Pragmatic problem-solving	
<b>Justifications</b>	Answering people's needs	Obtaining states' permission	Bypassing controversies	Facilitating cooperation
<b>Consequences</b>	Fragmenting the international system		Stigmatizing politics	

This chapter unpacks the logics sustaining IO depoliticization practices justified by functional necessity and practical rationality. Building on various cases from the 19th to the 21st centuries in the fields of telecommunication, labor, development, environment and peacekeeping, it first demonstrates that IOs, and especially their bureaucracies, present their action as dictated by functional necessity. In other words, they justify their existence and intervention by defining their action as a concrete answer to specific needs while following the constraints of their mandate and institutional designs. The chapter then shows that IO depoliticization practices fall under a form of practical rationality: staff and members can favor depoliticization when it is perceived as a pragmatic way to bypass controversies and facilitate cooperation. IOs enact practical rationality by adopting an accommodating stance on global problems which is opposed to a divisive, biased and uncooperative political attitude. In return, however, IO depoliticization increases fragmentation within the system and contributes to stigmatizing politics (see Table 4.1).

### Functional necessity

The creation of an IO is often justified by the need to coordinate different actors requiring a platform to interact and negotiate over their shared problems and interests.<sup>11</sup> Yet, by focusing on needs presented as essential and urgent, IO actors shrink the space for political debates as necessity is, by definition, indisputable and perceived as a prior motive for action. At the same time, depoliticization is justified by the claimed necessity to answer the needs of states and societies (later framed as the *people* in the UN Charter, for instance), as the primary recipients of international public action and policies. In this section, we first show that IOs and especially their bureaucracies put forward the *necessity* to act, often related to a context of environmental, economic, social or humanitarian emergency, justifying depoliticization and concurrently reinforcing it.<sup>12</sup> IO depoliticization practices also help gain access and approval from member states, with regard to their sovereignty and potential intrusion into domestic politics. Drawing on a broader historical perspective, we further contend that the functional logic has contributed to the fragmented global governance system under which IOs have operated from

the end of the 19th century until the present time which reinforces the depoliticized stance of IOs on global problems.

### ***What people need***

Necessity is one of the key features of the functional-pragmatic logic depicted in this chapter. Indeed, the focus on needs rather than political ideas, moral principles and national interests, is often presented as critical in fostering international cooperation. According to Mitrany: “the functional approach emphasizes the common index of need. There are many such needs which cut across national boundaries and an effective beginning could be made by providing joint government for them.”<sup>13</sup> For Steffek and Holthaus, Mitrany’s functionalism builds on this “welfarist” premise to legitimize IOs.<sup>14</sup> They further explore the link between the inception of IOs and the rise of “welfare internationalism” as a “veritable ideology of functional, depoliticized international governance”<sup>15</sup> mainly promoted by people working for international bureaucracies who assert that IOs should focus first and foremost on the material needs of individuals rather than on conflicts among states.<sup>16</sup> The claim to answer people’s needs lies at the core of IO mandates, their legitimacy resting on their *proximity* with “the people” presented as the primary and most important beneficiaries of IO action. The resort to such general and universal categories (also explored in Chapter 2) justifies adopting a depoliticized stance which avoids controversies on the differentiated political interests and hierarchies at play in the shaping of IO policies.

The ILO, which Mitrany considered the “typical functional organization,”<sup>17</sup> is perhaps the organization in which this logic reached its climax. It may sound quite paradoxical, however. Indeed, when considering the various political influences leading to the creation of the ILO, most scholars agree that the ILO came about as a direct response to the Bolshevik Revolution in order to contain its diffusion throughout Europe<sup>18</sup> and that it “was thus ‘politicized’ from its birth.”<sup>19</sup> Though this anti-Communist legacy would last and structure debates well into the 1990s,<sup>20</sup> it was not necessarily presented as such by the organization.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, ILO founders developed the argument of popular proximity to differentiate it from the League of Nations. In April 1919, the British politician George Barnes, one of the founders of the organization, declared about the ILO and its unique tripartite structure gathering not only governments but also representatives of workers and employers: “We believe that our scheme will give life and strength and vitality to the League of Nations by bringing it in contact with the daily life of the people.”<sup>22</sup> The rhetoric on people’s needs can consecutively be found on many occasions. During the Cold War, the ILO developed the Basic Needs development strategy. Launched in 1976 as a part of the ILO World Employment Program, this initiative focused on employment as the primary factor to access basic human needs: food, clothing, housing, education and public transportation. Within the ILO this need-based approach was resurrected in 1999 with the Decent Work Agenda which, until today, remains the ILO’s worldwide slogan. In 2000, ILO Director General Juan Somavía referred to decent work as “work which enables people to support the

*minimum needs* of their families, including education, health and shelter, as well as the rights to a pension and to decent treatment.” Those needs, he argued, were “reasonable aspirations for all human beings, which the global economy has been unable to fulfil, resulting in a backlash to globalization.”<sup>23</sup> In 2008, decent work was integrated into the first UN MDG as part of the global fight against poverty and is now listed as one of the 17 SDGs (SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth). In addition, Somavía insisted on the necessity to deepen the conception of security beyond economic and social dimensions. He developed the idea of “people’s security,”<sup>24</sup> which echoes the concept of “human security” coined by UNDP a few years earlier,<sup>25</sup> as a way to restore the significance of welfare issues within the broader multilateral agenda as an indispensable condition of peace. This strategy enacts what we identify as “social multilateralism” to characterize the shift in IO action toward more inclusive policies, both in terms of issues and actors.<sup>26</sup> By asserting that “conditions of social stability and harmony require the satisfaction of certain human needs,”<sup>27</sup> IOs adopt a more intuitive and pragmatic understanding of security which supports depoliticization by shifting the focus on needs and necessity.

As suggested by Emmerij, the rhetoric on human needs is to be found in the broader development strategy advanced by the UN.<sup>28</sup> After the UNDP launch of the Report for Human Development in 1990s, the 1995 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development forged the international recognition of basic human needs of the most vulnerable as one crucial aspect of the UN mandate.<sup>29</sup> These steps paved the way for the MDGs launched by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, perpetuated today with the SDGs. Death and Gabay’s account of the MDGs/SDGs supports the argument of a project directly targeting people’s apparent needs and lives:

it is possible to interpret the MDGs not simply as at risk of missing their targets, or of promoting an impoverished and partial version of development, but rather as an ambitious series of biopolitical and material interventions into the lives, bodies, and spaces of the developmental subjects summoned by the goals, that is, young women, slum-dwellers, the hungry, and so on.<sup>30</sup>

Without dismissing other interpretations on the MDGs/SDGs as emblematic of the diffusion of neoliberal ideas and, more particularly, the doctrine of new public management within international institutions,<sup>31</sup> such a Foucauldian perspective on the MDGs/SDGs, which builds on biopolitics and governmentality, shifts the focus to the ways IOs (here the UN) justify their intervention and gain direct control on people by targeting the (supposedly) basic needs of the most vulnerable. The idiom of “human needs” materializes in the visual rhetoric developed by IOs and NGOs.<sup>32</sup> The iconography of hunger and famine is an example of the use of images to represent humanitarian needs in order to justify the international community’s interventions. IO work becomes unquestionable in the face of graphic human suffering and economic exploitation (see, for instance, Figure 2.4 in Chapter 2). This approach mirrors our argument of a functional-pragmatic logic of depoliticization: the more IOs focus on the contingent necessity to answer

needs, the less relevant political debates on the merits of their interventions become.

In sum, depoliticization is valued as a way to pragmatically address human needs and justify IO intervention. While it is not the place here to *assess* the concrete realization and outcomes of these programs, we argue that the emphasis drawn by IO secretariats on non-controversial needs is key to legitimize their action, and, above all, to bypass the potential resistance of members states.

### ***What states want (or are willing to accept)***

Not only do IOs address people's needs, they often, and more importantly, answer their members' expectations. Depoliticization follows a two-fold dynamic: it results from IOs accomplishing their function as a supposedly independent third party while allowing international bureaucrats to gain their members' approval to intervene.

Discussing the UN long pledge to neutrality, Orford quotes the second UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld: "The commitment to neutrality meant more broadly 'that the international civil servant, also in executive tasks with political implications, must remain wholly uninfluenced by national or group interests or ideologies.'"<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the premise behind the depoliticization appeal lies in the perceived benefits of IO neutrality: rephrasing Abbott and Snidal, being neutral means being more acceptable.<sup>34</sup> Beyond the theoretical debate on neutrality discussed in Chapter 2, the inclination of IO personnel toward neutrality as proclaimed by Hammarskjöld, whether it is framed explicitly in terms of impartiality or neutrality, and its alleged benefits or virtues, is shared among most IO staff.<sup>35</sup> They remain attached to the idea that: "being perceived as neutral and independent can help create a 'humanitarian space' that protects aid workers in the field and facilitates their access to populations at risk on all sides of a conflict."<sup>36</sup> Analyzing the creation of the UN Mediation Support Unit (MSU) in 2005, Convergne shows that the transformation of mediation practices within the UN and more particularly the shift toward a more expert and professionalized approach on conflict mediation is due to the reluctance of certain states which fear external interference: "Sensitivities over external interference and the need for the parties' consent have led the MSU to depoliticize mediation so as to make it more acceptable and to preserve its legitimacy to intervene."<sup>37</sup> However, this trend has led to "an increasingly technocratic and depoliticized approach to peace, in which international expertise is preferred to the input of local actors, and political issues are cast as technical problems."<sup>38</sup>

Barnett and Snyder's work on grand strategies of humanitarianism has been key in identifying a consequentialist logic behind the supposedly "noninstrumental logic" put forward by practitioners and scholars to justify IO "neutral" and "apolitical" approach.<sup>39</sup> Building on this, we see depoliticization as a political enterprise implemented by international bureaucrats to meet their member states' expectations and sometimes bypass their oppositions. In other words, depoliticization also helps IOs accomplish their "job," be it humanitarian assistance, human

rights violation monitoring or environmental protection. Without taking the neutrality and functionality claims at face-value, apparent neutrality is, indeed, often necessary for an IO to complete its operational tasks. According to Mitrany, the characteristics of the functional approach “help to mitigate the obstinate problem of equal sovereignty. In this approach it is not a matter of surrendering sovereignty, but merely of pooling so much of it as may be needed for the joint performance of the particular task.”<sup>40</sup> Depoliticization, therefore, serves to bypass politics, and especially the political sensitivity ensued from the sovereignty principle, and obtain the support, or at least the tacit approval, of member states.

Drawing on this functionalist idiom, UNEP justifies its depoliticization practices, presented in Chapters 1 and 2, for pragmatic reasons within the intergovernmental context. Since 1999, UNEP has been involved in activities related to environmental protection in conflict or post-conflict settings. Most of its work in this field is framed as merely technical, expertise-based and, most interestingly here, practitioner-oriented. According to its staff, the preference for a technical approach helps obtain the necessary approval of member states to intervene at the field level. It is suggested that states accept UNEP interventions with more ease because of the technical and depoliticized nature of the organization, claiming that UNEP is “more accepted” because it is “less political.”<sup>41</sup> For Conca and Wallace, the specific context in which UNEP sends its team of environmental experts explains the program’s approach: “UNEP’s depoliticized, technically oriented approach is not surprising given the politicization surrounding all aspects of international intervention, no matter how benign and altruistic aid efforts may seem to some in the international community.”<sup>42</sup> UNEP apparent neutrality is appreciated in the post-conflict context where it operates: “in the aftermath of a conflict, everything is politicised,” therefore states expect “a neutral and science-based environmental assessment to determine the damage and risks.”<sup>43</sup> The coordinator of the EnvSec initiative pointed to the same governmental constraints. Established in 2003 by UNEP, the partnership of different IOs<sup>44</sup> works on environmental security in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and the Balkans. While carefully avoiding talking about security, states praised the focus on environmental issues instead of political ones in Central Asia and Afghanistan, where much of the work at the end of the Cold War did actually tackle security matters.<sup>45</sup> Not surprisingly, Sandei describes the EnvSec initiative as “very pragmatic and action-oriented.”<sup>46</sup> For UNEP, the “very technical, results-oriented” approach even follows a utilitarian logic. First, not only is neutrality often necessary to obtain member states’ approval, it can also be a precondition to get funding to finance the operation. Second, according to UNEP staff, by bringing technical skills, the organization intends to be “useful.”<sup>47</sup> It provides a unique expertise in the UN system by accomplishing a specific and separate function within the UN architecture. The technical and depoliticized approach to security and environmental issues, therefore, enables UNEP to intervene at the field level while giving a specific role to the organization within the (fragmented) UN system.

In sum, depoliticization helps IOs secure their role of supposedly neutral third party while facilitating governmental approval.

***From specific needs to specialized organizations***

One of the key principles of the IO configuration inherited from the 19th century is the specialization and division of labor enabling IOs to fulfill certain functions, understood both as activities and ends in themselves.<sup>48</sup> In the multilateral system, IO founders and members therefore stress the technical *services* that IOs can provide at the expense of the political *duties* that states should fulfill. By shifting the focus on needs and the services provided by IOs, the functionalist claims pave the way for a depoliticized architecture of global governance where technical and sectoral functions prevail. While this logic leaves the creation of a multiplicity of specialized agencies unchallenged, the fragmentation that results from this specialization and division of labor reinforces depoliticization by isolating multilateral responsibilities, as further discussed in Chapter 6.

The belief in the virtues of technical sectoral cooperation as a way to bypass political logics considered to be divisive is illustrated by the first international technical agencies burgeoning at the end of the 19th century. In his work on the birth of the Universal Postal Union (UPU) in 1874, Laborie shows the overlapping of operational matters (equipment of postal services to handle new heavy traffic) and political questions (private versus state ownership of the postal service) in the establishment of a global system of parcel post between 1873 and 1913.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the objective of the UPU was functionalist by essence. It aimed at facilitating the worldwide circulation of mail across political borders in “a single postal territory,”<sup>50</sup> an objective based on the belief shared by a growing international community of postal officers that “postal networks would strengthen economic and cultural interdependence, which would in turn integrate peoples separated by spatial and political contingencies into a family of humankind.”<sup>51</sup> The case of the UPU is, therefore, emblematic of the dual articulation between politics and technique: it couples an ambitious political project consisting of the harmonization of national legislations to facilitate exchanges, an essentially liberal project typical of the “first globalization” depicted by Berger,<sup>52</sup> and very specific tasks assigned to IOs requiring the involvement of professionals and experts, and not just diplomats.<sup>53</sup>

The logic of specialization and the separation of social, economic and political tasks continued and deepened in the League of Nations’ system.<sup>54</sup> Yet the UN Charter went a step further in constitutionalizing the principle of specialized agencies to promote international and social cooperation (art. 55 and 57, chapter IX of the UN Charter). The UN founders followed this functionalist spirit:<sup>55</sup> with its ECOSOC, the UN is responsible for acting as an economic and social regulator based on the coordination of specialized agencies. However, this ambition has never fully materialized. On the contrary, economic and social cooperation is, until today, characterized by a high degree of fragmentation. It involves IOs and *ad hoc* multilateral arrangements with different histories and organizational cultures,<sup>56</sup> such as the UN, the Bretton Woods institutions and, today, the G20, which exert a high degree of autonomy. ECOSOC and the UN



General Assembly have proven unable to effectively coordinate these different organizations, resulting in the absence of consistent orientations in the field of social and economic cooperation.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the functional logic of cooperation encourages the creation of “specific and separate” agencies with complementary but distinct functions which increases the depoliticization of IO action. In his critical account of the UN system, Gordenker contends that functionalist notions enlarged “the list of specialized agencies” thereby creating the complex “international machinery” that we know today: “The names alone of the system’s organizations suggest overlaps and complexities.”<sup>58</sup> Pointing out the evolution of specialized agencies into “separate organizational cultures,” Gordenker questions the functionality of the UN system and talks about a “UN clan” to support global governance given that each institution protects its autonomy.<sup>59</sup> The purpose of the UN reform launched in 2006 by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, under the evoking title “Delivering as One and UN System-Wide Coherence”<sup>60</sup> is a direct answer to this fragmented evolution: “We recognize that implementing these reforms will involve significant challenges and sometimes the sacrifice of individual interests for United Nations agencies, funds and programmes. They will need to work more closely and effectively with the rest of the United Nations system in the interests of a greater common good.”<sup>61</sup> More recently, the management reform initiated by UN Secretary-General António Guterres revived debate about UN fragmentation. In May 2017, Erik Solheim, UNEP Executive Director at the time, briefed his staff on the first UN Chief Executive Board meeting since the newly elected Secretary-General took office. In his letter deliberately publicized on social media he stated: “This is not about the ‘One UN’ initiative. It is about recognizing that *few outside the United Nations are interested in all our different entities*. They logically assume that the *first half of our name means we already work together* to promote our common values and deliver concrete results for people.”<sup>62</sup> While mocking rivalries and competition between UN bodies, Solheim, who only stayed two years in office,<sup>63</sup> advocated for “a new culture across every level of staff and management” where “[e]verybody contributes, whatever your job category, your level and your main tasks.”<sup>64</sup> However, Solheim’s call for institutional changes faces the increase in technical complexity, the duplication of agencies and programs, especially during the Cold War, and the strengthening of organizational autonomy over time which have rendered dialogue and mutual understanding of each IO’s activities much harder and costlier to achieve. Such divisions are even reproduced within IOs, as Hanrieder shows in the case of WHO presenting a path-dependent “fragmentation trap” which hampers centralizing reforms.<sup>65</sup> Justifying the emergence of multiple specialized agencies, the functional logic tends to hinder a thorough transversal political debate on UN priorities which intensifies the depoliticization of world politics.

While strongly criticized as dysfunctional, such a fragmented system, based on specific needs and sectoral services, facilitates depoliticization over the attribution of missions and functions while depoliticization helps sustain the functional division of labor.



### **Practical rationality**

IO professionals often intervene as problem-solvers without arousing the political sensitivity of their member states, despite making recommendations on the best course of action. Building on Lecler, Morival and Bouagga's definition of international professionals,<sup>66</sup> we consider IO professionals as individuals whose daily activity is essentially linked with IOs and who claim specific knowledge about multilateralism. We argue that IO depoliticization practices derive from the practical rationality. On the one hand, being pragmatic is perceived as a way to avoid controversial debates and ultimately achieve the mandate's objectives. On the other hand, the focus on technical and concrete issues is exacerbated in order to promote cooperation over a specific topic even if the underlying political problems between the parties are not addressed. The denomination of the first IOs as "technical" organizations reveals the belief that shared problems could best be addressed through technical solutions by avoiding arousing the political sensitivity of states fearing potential sovereignty loss. In other words, emphasizing this kind of practical rationality is strongly anchored in the assumption that technical issues will help reconcile diverging views, whereas political debates are seen as divisive.<sup>67</sup> In this section, we demonstrate how practical rationality supports the enactment of depoliticization practices to bypass controversies and facilitate cooperation while generating a discourse that stigmatizes politics and politicians.

### ***Bypassing controversies***

According to Barnett and Finnemore, IOs "present themselves as impersonal, technocratic, and neutral—as not exercising power but instead as serving others."<sup>68</sup> As seen in previous chapters, IO personnel rely on expertise, informational dissemination techniques, universal values and technical assistance, presenting their activities as merely instructive or supportive.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, in the 1970s, research on the IMF and World Bank showed how their officials tried to avoid political questions and controversies notably on consequences pertaining to economic interventions like loan-making, thereby defending the "myth of 'economic rationality'."<sup>70</sup> Here we show that these depoliticization practices are pragmatic and accommodating techniques to bypass political debates and deflect controversies.

The work of Parizet on the UNDP country office in Mexico illustrates the way an IO relies on depoliticization to avoid political debates.<sup>71</sup> Like other IOs, UNDP has to gain governmental authorization for its field activities and Parizet shows how it had to work its way through controversial debates around indigenous issues to invest the national space. For instance, in its reports, UNDP refuses to address indigenous peoples' mobilization, more specifically the Zapatista movement. The country office justifies its position as an "impartial observer" non-interfering in "sensitive" issues as shown by this interview with a consultant on human development: "We must have a neutral position. UNDP cannot participate in internal problems. So conflicts and social movements, the Zapatista movement, including

their historical aspects, are excluded from the analysis of the development of indigenous populations, even if, as we know, in Mexico this is very important.<sup>72</sup> In other words, UNDP avoids controversial debates to ensure its presence in the field, even if it means excluding critical elements in its analysis.

The strategy set up to put the environment on the agenda of UN peacekeepers is another example of depoliticization practices to pragmatically avoid controversies. In 2012, when UNEP published its report on *Greening the Blue Helmets*, the UN Security Council had debated environmental issues on several occasions but had been unable to reach consensus on a resolution. On the one hand, debates over the security implications of climate change had been highly controversial opposing those in favor of the Security Council's involvement and those defending a discussion in other (universal) arenas, namely the UN General Assembly and the UNFCCC. On the other hand, the Council had refused a generic approach to the issue of natural resources and conflicts preferring a case-by-case *ad hoc* approach.<sup>73</sup> Confronted with such oppositions, UNEP struggled in pushing forward an agenda on environmental peacebuilding. More specifically, its team in Geneva had hoped to produce a report on peacekeeping and the environment to address "natural resource risks and opportunities for more effective peacekeeping."<sup>74</sup> Yet, it was unlikely that member states would agree on a report dedicated to such a controversial issue. To bypass politics, UNEP watered down the political content of its report by gathering *low* and *high politics* issues in the same publication. Indeed, officials interviewed at UN headquarters frequently qualify the environment as oscillating between low politics, with few stakes and often related to technical dimensions, and high politics, with critical policy implications considered as being extremely important. Therefore, following advice from DFS in New York, UNEP decided to include a section on the ecological footprint of UN peace missions and a section dedicated to the original issue at stake, namely the role of natural resources in conflict and the consequences for peacekeeping, in the same report. The environmental impact of the mission was seen as more "practical"<sup>75</sup> and less controversial than the issue of natural resources and conflict. In this case, UNEP downgraded the political dimension of its project by associating low and high politics to avoid controversies. Subsequent activities on UN peacekeeping and the environment replicate such a pragmatic depoliticization logic.<sup>76</sup>

In both cases, depoliticization relies on the implicit rationality that "the end justifies the means."

### ***Facilitating cooperation***

Depoliticization can foster cooperation between different actors, be it member states with contradictory interests or IOs with contrasting perspectives on a specific issue. IOs gather opposing parties around an apparent technical and practical agenda to promote cooperation.<sup>77</sup> For Abbott and Snidal, the functional role of IOs as neutral facilitators is a reason why states act through formal international organizations: "IOs provide neutral, depoliticized or specialized forums."<sup>78</sup> They

take the IAEA as an example: “the superpowers could discuss technical nuclear issues within the IAEA without the intrusion of high politics, even at the height of the Cold War.”<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, IO independence allows them “to operate as a *neutral* in managing interstate disputes and conflicts.”<sup>80</sup> This perception persisted throughout the Cold War as highlighted by Orford: “The UN and other humanitarian internationalists understood themselves to be impartial and neutral actors, intervening to maintain peace and protect life with the consent of those they governed.”<sup>81</sup> To this day, IO staff mostly share the view of IOs as a third party, which gives them the responsibility and legitimacy to act as mediators: “The UN understands itself as neutral and impartial—a mediator between factions (an expansive term that can encompass elected governments, insurgents, revolutionaries and *génocidaires*) unable to reach consensus.”<sup>82</sup> The argument on IO depoliticization is three-fold: first, depoliticization results from international bureaucrats claiming their status as apolitical mediators; second, depoliticization practices precisely help construct an image of a third party; third, depoliticization is perceived as a pragmatic tool to enact the role of a neutral facilitator. In practice, these various dynamics often overlap with and reinforce each other.

The case of UNEP illustrates the perceived role of depoliticization in cooperation activities. Indeed, UNEP personnel based in the Geneva section working on environmental peacebuilding consider the focus on technical and practical issues as a means to water down the contentious dimension of political disputes. This perception is prevalent in the field of environmental policies *and* studies. Indeed, after the seminal work by Conca and Dabelko on “environmental peacemaking,”<sup>83</sup> there has been a growing interest in the pacifying functions of environmental issues. For instance, Maas, Carius and Wittich approach the environment as a platform for dialogue between parties in conflict. In a very functionalist way, they argue that technical cooperation over environmental issues considered as low on the political agenda can “create a social space in which representatives of conflict parties can meet, discuss issues and cooperate with a view to developing (or creating) common solutions.”<sup>84</sup> This view has been directly invoked by UNEP. In a UNEP report jointly published with DPA and addressed to mediation practitioners, the executive summary states:

Importantly, natural resource conflicts are often more amenable to mediation than disputes where ideology or ethnicity are the main driving factors. Indeed, finding consensus and building alliances over natural resources is often easier because natural resources shape economic incentives that transcend other divides.<sup>85</sup>

In concrete terms, in its work on soil and water in the occupied Palestinian territories, the organization fostered dialogue among the two sides, starting with the technical actors in charge of these issues. According to a high-ranking official, UNEP should facilitate interactions first among technical actors such as managers and engineers before political representatives.<sup>86</sup> These interactions would lead to

stronger ties between actors, promoting mutual cooperation. Other staff members further argue that UNEP could be a central actor in mediating conflicts over natural resources by establishing itself as a neutral and technical entity.<sup>87</sup> Depoliticization performed by and within UNEP therefore follows a logic combining practical *and* technical rationality: a technical approach in the field of security and the environment facilitates cooperation while helping gain approval for field interventions. A similar logic is at work in the case of the Arctic Council introduced in Box 4.1.

#### **Box 4.1 The Arctic Council: a depoliticized cooperation forum**

Created in 1996, the Arctic Council is almost a textbook case of cooperation enhanced by functional and pragmatic logics of depoliticization. With competing and conflicting states, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States, in a highly sensitive region, cooperation seemed, at least on paper, quite unthinkable. Yet, as shown by Escudé,<sup>88</sup> the Arctic Council was created as a high-level forum to tackle environmental issues such as climate change and sustainable development. The Arctic Council's members developed flexible working methods and soft-law mechanisms which led to a variety of results:

- *publication of scientific reports* on the Arctic that include, for instance, the production of regional maps used by the UN;
- *adoption of normative standards* like the 2013 Agreement on Cooperation on Marine Oil Pollution Preparedness and Response in the Arctic;
- *contribution to UN programs and conventions* such as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants.

Less institutionalized than an IO *stricto sensu*, the Arctic Council deliberately moved away from security issues inherited from the Cold War context and avoided getting involved in political crises, such as the Ukrainian revolution in 2014. The Arctic Council exemplifies the “strength of flexibility”<sup>89</sup> which facilitates cooperation over the long term.

The UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti, MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti from 2004 until 2017) provides another example of this instrumental use of supposedly depoliticized environmental issues to promote cooperation and peace. After a failed program of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, the UN Security Council requested the mission to reorient its efforts “towards a comprehensive community violence reduction programme adapted to local conditions.”<sup>90</sup> Among the community violence reduction activities, one

pillar concerned job creation and environmental protection through rehabilitation of community infrastructures.<sup>91</sup> While the request for better environmental infrastructure came up during the focus groups organized with the local communities, the interdisciplinary community violence reduction team also saw environmental rehabilitation as a potential “pacification tool.”<sup>92</sup> The rationale was four-fold: gang members would be less likely to engage in violence (i) with a paid job, (ii) because of the socialization effects of working together on the same project, (iii) as a result of the tiredness of the renovation efforts and (iv) they would symbolically benefit from contributing to a project good for the community.<sup>93</sup> The program also allowed the mission to access gang members in the informal settings of the environmental renovation projects.<sup>94</sup> It is not the place to discuss the actual outcomes of this program, but the depoliticization dimension is evident: the MINUSTAH pragmatically relied on a low political issue, environmental rehabilitation, to achieve a very political objective, namely community violence reduction.

We saw that depoliticization follows a practical rationality logic that facilitates cooperation by watering down political disagreements, but by doing so, reduces the space for political grievances and debates. By depoliticizing contentious debates, IOs run the risk of focusing on a limited agreement, while more important political questions are neglected.

### *Stigmatizing politics*

Practical rationality eventually transforms into a kind of aversion to politics. Indeed, IOs tend to adopt a functionalist vision of world politics when their members and secretariats stigmatize political discussions for being “divisive and prejudicial to community building,”<sup>95</sup> justifying states’ withdrawal from specialized IOs perceived as too political.

International civil servants *or* member state representatives abide by this form of practical rationality, especially when they reaffirm the distinction between “political,” “specialized” or “technical” issues and IOs, as suggested in interviews conducted at the ILO between 2010 and 2013 on the issue of representativeness. Regardless of their divergence of opinion on representativeness within the ILO Governing Body (see Chapter 3), interviewees unanimously considered this question to be not only clearly political but also potentially dangerous. Members supported this view by arguing that the ILO was first and foremost a “specialized agency [...] with a concrete mandate”<sup>96</sup> and with “other issues that preoccupy people” to deal with.<sup>97</sup> According to the government representative of Nigeria (a state with open ambitions in terms of improving its representation within the ILO): “we are not here talking of political issues *per se*. We are talking about technical labour-related issues [...] politically it [representativeness] is a sensitive issue and must be seriously and delicately managed and handled.”<sup>98</sup>

At a broader level, the case of states’ withdrawal from IOs, more specifically from *specialized* IOs, illustrates how depoliticization comes with a form

of stigmatization of politics. Indeed, by exacerbating their “apolitical” nature, IO secretariats have given their members the opportunity to criticize any sign of actual politicization. Thus, states can publicly boycott an IO which does not serve their interests sufficiently by accusing it of having become too politicized in the first place, while they actually may follow their own (often covert) political agenda. Recent examples include the 2018 simultaneous withdrawal announcement of the United States and Israel from UNESCO and the US boycott of the UN Human Rights Council that same year. These cases show the extent to which politics can be used to accuse IOs of being dysfunctional and deviating from their original *purpose* and *function* as if politics is essentially wrong. The declaration made in June 2018 by US ambassador Nikki Haley justifying the decision to leave the UN Human Rights Council was explicit in that regard:

The world’s most inhumane regimes continue to escape scrutiny and the Council continues politicising and scapegoating of countries with positive human rights records in an attempt to distract from the abusers in their ranks. For too long the Human Rights Council has been a protector of human rights abusers and a cesspool of political bias.<sup>99</sup>

This echoes past statements made during the Cold War and the US withdrawal from various specialized agencies (1977–1980 from the ILO, 1982–1983 from the IAEA and 1984–2003 from UNESCO). When US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sent the notice of withdrawal to the ILO Director General in 1975, he denounced: “The increasing and excessive politicization of the Organization: questions involving relations between states and proclamations of economic principles should be left to the UN and other international agencies, while the ILO should work to improve the conditions of workers.”<sup>100</sup> According to US officials, the ILO gave up its original specialized mandate by letting states take advantage of the majority rule to pass resolutions condemning *apartheid* in South Africa and the coup d’état in Chile and, above all, taking sides in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (in addition to admitting the Palestine Liberation Organisation as an ILO observer). Supportive of the US decision, the Israeli workers’ representative warned ILO members of the dangers of imitating the UN and becoming “second-class politicians:”

If we continue in the way we began the last year instead of fulfilling our duties to the working people in the world who suffer from unemployment and who are waiting for us to do something to raise the standard of life, and if we imitate the United Nations and become second-class politicians of the world instead of really doing our job, this is the end of our Organisation and we shall disappoint all those millions who are looking to us with hope.<sup>101</sup>

In this statement, the Israeli representative stresses the *functional* mission of the ILO (raising the living standards of workers) by emphasizing the logic of people’s needs explored earlier, and opposes this logic to the rather degrading political one

diverting the organization from its more noble mission. Once again, the functional distinction between political and technical agencies is stressed. Yet, as Imber notably states in his seminal work on the US retreat from the ILO, UNESCO and IAEA: “For the USA to denounce the tyranny of the majority and decry the introduction of party politics into the agencies does not only represent a desire to revive functionalism. The toughness of the response adopted also demonstrates a willingness to use power in the conduct of this policy.”<sup>102</sup> This historical precedent is emblematic of the dual logic between politicization and depoliticization occurring within IOs, which consists in stigmatizing politics while pursuing a political agenda. Following Rondot in her account of renewed criticism addressed to UNESCO for being a politicized organization,<sup>103</sup> we see IOs as inevitably trapped in a “politicization/depoliticization” dilemma: on the one hand, they are criticized for being too politicized and ostensibly taking side with some countries (such as Palestine in the UNESCO case); on the other hand, the same organizations are criticized for their tendency to follow the lowest common denominator and thus lack concrete solutions. In other words, being pragmatic and following practical rationality through depoliticization does not fully protect IOs from criticisms.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we unraveled the complex entanglement of functional and pragmatic logics of action laying behind the practices through which IOs have enacted depoliticization since the end of the 19th century. These logics operate as structuring principles which divide the world of IOs between political/ideological and technical/practical, the latter being perceived as favoring cooperation while the former is considered detrimental to pacified relations thereby justifying depoliticization. As functional necessity undermines the relevance of political debates and the practical rationality of international bureaucrats sustains a pragmatic and accommodating stance to solve global problems, they encourage, and even value, depoliticization. Thus, while functionalism as a theory of international cooperation may have found its limits, it still infuses both the rhetoric and activities of IOs as it largely sustains the professional and organizational cultures of their staff.

One innovative aspect of this chapter consists in suggesting a bridge between the “outmoded” functionalist epistemology and the pragmatic turn in IR in order to capture the objectives and consequences of depoliticization processes. A question remains open however: to what extent might politically sensitive issues be dealt with according to a problem-solving rationale that puts forward a logic of needs and cooperation without either denying the political aspect of the problems at stake or stigmatizing politicians as essentially incompetent, incapable of compromise and therefore untrustworthy? As stressed by Cox, functionalism leads to a simplistic dualism between the “good guys” and the “bad guys:” “The good guys are the technicians, who are interested in the practical concrete things, who are useful. The bad guys are the politicians and the diplomats, who seem to have a vested interest in war and misunderstanding.”<sup>104</sup> This dual perception still holds significant impacts on the way IOs work.



## Notes

- 1 Functionalism has become less prominently followed in IR and social sciences in the recent years. It was, however, resurrected in the 1980s by scholars like Groom and Taylor as an alternative to theories of power politics. A. J. R. Groom and Paul Taylor, ed., *Functionalism: Theory and Practice in International Relations* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1975), 1; Guillaume Devin, "Que reste-t-il du fonctionnalisme international? Relire David Mitrany (1888–1975)," *Critique internationale* 38 (2008): 137–152.
- 2 David Mitrany, "The Functional Approach to World Organization," *International Affairs* 24, no. 3 (1948): 359.
- 3 A. J. R. Groom, "Functionalism and World Society," in *Functionalism: Theory and Practice in International Relations*, ed. A. J. R. Groom and Paul Taylor (New York: Crane, Russak, 1975), 99.
- 4 Robert W. Cox, *International Organisations: Their Historical and Political Context. Three Lectures Delivered to the ILO Internship Course* (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 1964), 31.
- 5 Harry Bauer and Elisabetta Brighi, ed., *Pragmatism and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.
- 6 "Now we are in a pragmatic mood that scorns formal rules and restrictions." Mitrany, "The Functional Approach to World Organization," 354.
- 7 Kratochwil, "Making Sense of International Practices," 46.
- 8 Cécile Lavergne and Thomas Mondémé, "Pragmatismes: vers une politique de l'action située," *Tracés. Revue de sciences humaines* 2, no. 15 (2008): 5–22.
- 9 Vincent Pouliot, "The Logic of Practicality: A Theory of Practice of Security Communities," *International Organization* 62, no. 2 (2008): 258.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 276.
- 11 Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2001).
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- 13 Mitrany, "The Functional Approach to World Organization," 358.
- 14 Jens Steffek and Leonie Holthaus, "The Social-Democratic Roots of Global Governance: Welfare Internationalism from the 19th Century to the United Nations," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no.1 (2018): 119.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 121.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 361; and Amy Hewes, "Functional Representation in the International Labor Organization," *American Political Science Review* 22, no. 2 (1928): 324–338.
- 18 James T. Shotwell, "The International Labor Organization as an Alternative to Violent Revolution," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 166 (1933): 18–25.
- 19 Yves Beigbeder, "The United States' Withdrawal from the International Labor Organization," *Industrial Relations* 34, no. 2 (1979): 224.
- 20 Sandrine Kott, "ILO: Social Justice in a Global World? A History in Tension," *International Development Policy* 11 (2019): 21–39.
- 21 The ILO opens its doors to the USSR in 1934 and to the vast majority of Socialist countries after the Second World War.
- 22 ILO, *Official Bulletin* 1 (Geneva: ILO, 1919–20), 310.
- 23 *Keynote Statement by Juan Somavía to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in Bangkok* (document TD(X)/Misc.9), 15 February 2000, 2. [https://unctad.org/en/Docs/ux\\_tdxm9.en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/Docs/ux_tdxm9.en.pdf).
- 24 Juan Somavía, *People's Security. Globalizing Social Progress* (Geneva: ILO, 1999).

- 25 Guillaume Devin, "Que reste-t-il du fonctionnalisme international? Relire David Mitrany (1888–1975)," 140.
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- 37 Elodie Convergne, "Learning to Mediate? The Mediation Support Unit and the Production of Expertise by the UN," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2016): 191.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 39 Barnett and Snyder, "The Grand Strategies of Humanitarianism," 147.
- 40 Mitrany, "The Functional Approach to World Organization," 358.
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- 43 Interview, UNEP (Geneva, March 2012).
- 44 The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) (OSCE website, *Environment and Security Initiative Environment and Security Initiative—ENVSEC—At a Glance*, 10 November 2016, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/280421>). For more information on the history of the initiative see: Judith Nora Hardt, *Environmental Security in the Anthropocene: Assessing Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2017).

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## 5 Monopolizing legitimacy

- **Recognition**
- **Expansion**
- **Monopolization**

In the vision statement supporting his candidacy for the UN Secretary-General position, António Guterres opened with this assertion: “The [UN] Charter is the source of the United Nations’ *unique legitimacy* and provides guidance for its every activity.”<sup>1</sup> Legitimacy is often defined in a relational way as “the belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed.”<sup>2</sup> Since Weber, legitimacy is a central concept in political science to capture the dynamics by which an authority, individual or collective, *justifies* its exercise of power. As Kauppi and Madsen rightly state:

If one is to understand contemporary global governance, it is important to take on board Weber’s basic insight that authority comes in many forms and what makes a certain practice of power legitimate is the process through which an authority justifies its exercise of power and gains social acceptance. In other words, legitimacy should not be understood in essentialist terms but is in practice both relational and procedural.<sup>3</sup>

While acknowledging the centrality of authority in IO scholarship,<sup>4</sup> this chapter focuses on the politics of IO legitimation through which IO authority is made socially accepted. Examining the interlinkages between legitimation and depoliticization, it explores the instrumental dimension of depoliticization practices to obtain and eventually monopolize legitimacy.

Research first questioned IO legitimacy through its sources,<sup>5</sup> one of the leading distinctions being between input/procedural legitimacy and output/results or performance legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> In parallel, scholars study IO legitimacy, either by focusing on their normative legitimacy or by investigating their sociological/social legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> For Tallberg and Zürn, normative legitimacy refers to an IO’s “right” to rule while social legitimacy deals with the beliefs and perceptions of a given audience.<sup>8</sup> Conceptualizing audiences as including both state and non-state actors, recent work aims to evaluate IO social legitimacy with survey data.<sup>9</sup> These studies

are mostly interested in learning *whether IOs are* legitimate and *under which circumstances* they are (de)legitimized. This work, however, does not fully capture the “politics of legitimation and delegitimation” and, consequently, as stressed by Hurd, supports an “apolitical perspective” on IOs by making for “a depoliticized idea about the political framework of international institutions and practice that constitute the actually existing global order.”<sup>10</sup> Such criticism has been partially addressed in recent research on IO self-legitimation, which brings organizational identity and practices to the foreground and highlights modes of self-legitimation, for both internal and external audiences.<sup>11</sup> In this chapter we question the politics of IO legitimation by analyzing the connection between IO legitimacy and depoliticization practices.

We follow a long tradition in IO scholarship that has addressed legitimacy in parallel with other key issues such as autonomy<sup>12</sup> and accountability<sup>13</sup> (Chapter 6 discusses the latter along the issue of responsibility.) Instead of looking at whether IOs are legitimate or not, we approach legitimacy as the ability to act in a policy field and look at the role of depoliticization practices in building such capacity. We address legitimacy as both a consequence and a source of depoliticization and develop a two-fold puzzle.

First, the chapter explores how depoliticization contributes to legitimation processes. Our analysis shows that IOs may assert their legitimacy in the context of high competition through depoliticization practices. IOs compete for multiple reasons:<sup>14</sup> while funding is a key driver of competition, organizations also challenge each other to impose their framing, views and policies on a given topic, especially in times of crisis. Each IO then tries to be recognized as the sole and most legitimate actor. To survive in a competitive environment, IOs attempt to expand their jurisdiction and to monopolize their field of activity. Researching the field of bioethics, Littoz-Monnet has shown such processes based on the case of the WHO and UNESCO.<sup>15</sup> We contend with her that depoliticization practices, therefore, help gain recognition to preserve and expand an IO mandate by suppressing the opportunity to question the organization’s legitimacy. Gains in legitimacy may, thus, justify depoliticization practices.

Second, we explore the reversed process by which legitimacy claims have (potentially unintended) depoliticizing effects. As a result of a monopolized legitimacy acquired by an IO, alternative actors, policies and multilateral arrangements are overlooked, if not entirely delegitimized. Indeed, by institutionalizing a monopolistic position, IOs exclude alternatives and limit space for debates.

Based on empirical case studies essentially in the fields of economic and human development, environmental protection, global health and regulation of multinationals, we show that international bureaucracies’ depoliticization practices expand IO legitimacy and, in return, the monopolization of legitimacy comes at the expense of competitors and alternative ways of doing and thinking in global governance. This dual process is apparent in three different depoliticization logics: recognition, which preserves IO relevance by confining competition and reinvesting old skills; expansion, which facilitates IO mission creep justified by necessity and projected expertise; and monopolization, which secures a



monopolistic position by professing technical requirements and proclaiming the best way to address global problems (see Table 5.1). In all three logics, depoliticization may consequently be reinforced by a gain in legitimacy as it closes space for debates and discredits alternatives. This chapter supplements the broad literature on IO legitimacy by analyzing multiple ways in which secretariats, specific departments or units are recognized as legitimate in their field of action through depoliticization.

## **Recognition**

In this section, we explore the connection between depoliticization and the logic of recognition<sup>16</sup> by which IO action is legitimized. As an audience-oriented process, recognition is difficult to capture empirically, especially when audiences are multiple and diverse, as is the case with IOs.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, we suggest examining recognition as a logic of action through which IOs deploy depoliticization practices to preserve their relevance. Such perspective echoes Schemel's work on global institutions as "adaptive hybrids" as an explanation of IO survival and resilience.<sup>18</sup> Examples drawn from the fields of labor, the environment and global health show two trends. Depoliticization practices help limit competition by focusing on restricted competence and roles. They are justified by IO historical skills which their staff and members reclaim and update in a constrained and changing political and institutional environment. In both situations, depoliticization enhances IO recognition.

### *Avoiding competition*

IOs notoriously evolve in a competitive and constraining environment: they compete for delegated authority from member states, financial and human resources as well as public attention. In this context, depoliticization practices confine competition and preserve IO relevance within the international system. International bureaucracies rely on alleged competence to stay in the game in their respective fields, sometimes with mitigated results. IOs also position themselves in comparison with other actors to preserve their role in the multilateral system, assuming a supposedly apolitical position which avoids competition.

IOs limit competition by focusing on competence, which derives from their mandates and experience, two aspects which hardly come under discussion: for instance, even if their method of intervention is debatable, the UNHCR has the mandate and acknowledged competence to work with refugees, whereas the WTO is recognized as the competent voice on global trade. By alleging competence, IOs avoid political debates: it decreases rivalry among international actors and helps international bureaucracies preserve their relevance even in a competitive environment. At the beginning of the 1990s many organizations began competing more intensively in the field of social regulation which for almost half a century had practically remained under the sole umbrella of the ILO. Issues such as health and safety at work,<sup>19</sup> corporate social responsibility and human resources

Table 5.1 Legitimacy-oriented depoliticization

<i>Depoliticization logics</i>		<i>Recognition</i>		<i>Expansion</i>		<i>Monopolization</i>	
<b>Objectives</b>	Preserving relevance		Expanding mandate		Securing monopoly		Proclaiming the one best way
	Avoiding competition	Reinvesting old skills	Claiming necessity	Projecting expertise	Professing technical requirements	Discredit of alternatives and control over legitimacy aspirations	
<b>Justifications</b>	Asserted legitimacy		Increased legitimacy		Reinforcing depoliticization		Discredit of alternatives and control over legitimacy aspirations
	Asserted legitimacy		Increased legitimacy		Reinforcing depoliticization		
<b>Consequences</b>		Asserted legitimacy		Reinforcing depoliticization		Discredit of alternatives and control over legitimacy aspirations	

management<sup>20</sup> (see Box 5.1) or social protection<sup>21</sup> began to be addressed by other IOs which started to develop their own instruments and deploy programs in these fields. Not only did these organizations implicitly challenge the ILO's monopoly, but they also provided a different conception of labor-related issues. For instance, Gasnier studies the rivalry between the ILO and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) since the 2000s, due to the establishment of an ISO standard on occupational health and safety management systems (ISO 45001). She argues that, beyond institutional debates over mandates and regulation instruments, the conflict between ISO and the ILO is essentially a political one. It opposes two conceptions of labor relations and democracy. Whereas the ILO model recognizes the asymmetrical relationship between workers and employers and promotes social dialogue and collective bargaining as the best way to establish international standards, ISO ignores the question of power relationships and promotes a managerial approach to standard setting based on eliminating risk from the workplace.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the ILO relies on the idea of social democracy enacted through its tripartite structure, whereas ISO promotes a technical conception of democracy based on inclusiveness, emphasizing the centrality of firms and relevant stakeholders rather than social partners.<sup>23</sup> IO members and secretariats are aware of the political nature of these differences. Many criticisms stemming from the ILO questioned the legitimacy of ISO, as an international yet non-governmental organization, to challenge the ILO on a core aspect of its mandate. For instance, France and Bangladesh rejected the legitimacy of ISO on the ground that a "private organization" gathering "special interests" could not interfere with standards set up by a tripartite organization like the ILO.<sup>24</sup> Yet, rather than addressing this competition as a political issue, where contradicting (and potentially irreconcilable) conceptions of labor rights and democracy were at stake, each organization put forward its unique regulatory approach, experience and competence to assert its respective legitimacy to act, given its initial mandate and own institutional mechanisms. In 2013, the ILO and ISO agreed on a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on social responsibility issues with the purpose of reminding ISO of the hierarchy of norms between the ILO's international labor standards and ISO standards.<sup>25</sup> The document also acknowledged the need to "enhance complementarity in the exercise of the ILO's mandate and ISO's mission"<sup>26</sup> legitimizing *both* organizations to set up standards as long as they did not conflict with each other. In 2017, however, the ILO decided to terminate the MoU on the ground that ISO did not recognize international labor standards as a superior normative reference.<sup>27</sup> In this case, the logic between depoliticization, competence and recognition is evolving. IO members depoliticized the debate on occupational safety and health by focusing on competence in order to preserve each organization's respective relevance. Depoliticization was instrumental to both the ILO and ISO to preserve their respective mandates rather than engage in an uncertain political battle. Though it became inevitable to openly recognize the diverging views between the organizations, an open confrontation of the two political systems and visions of labor regulation was avoided. As the ILO/ISO case shows, international

cooperation can be highly competitive, and depoliticization practices may play a significant role in limiting competition and preserving legitimacy.

Depoliticization practices also position IOs in a changing environment where power dynamics are shifting. To avoid direct competition, international bureaucracies sometimes present themselves as “apolitical forums:” they refrain from criticism of actors already in place while preserving their legitimacy to be a part of the game. Littoz-Monnet clearly demonstrates this process by comparing the WHO’s and UNESCO’s involvement in the field of bioethics.<sup>28</sup> She points to a differentiated use of depoliticization practices based on the distinction between “first mover” and “late mover” organizations. She shows that first movers, in this case, UNESCO, frame their intervention as a necessity and connect it to their mandate while late movers, here the WHO, position themselves as “neutral facilitators” or brokers, therefore avoiding open competition with other actors engaged in the field. As this example shows, the significant role of depoliticization to strategically position the organization cannot be understood without exploring the institutional context in which the organization evolves. As shown in Box 5.1, not only may depoliticization help confine competition, but competition can also have depoliticizing impacts.

### **Box 5.1 When inter-organizational competition depoliticizes: the regulation of multinational corporations**

The case of MNE regulation illustrates the way *depoliticization of a highly political issue* may occur as an unintended consequence of competing IOs. As mentioned in Chapter 2, regulating MNE has become a competitive field since the 1970s during which the UN, the OECD and the ILO started to conceive and produce their own codes, guidelines and declarations to set up guidelines for the economic and social activities of MNE. In 1999, the UN launched the Global Compact as a voluntary and incentive framework for companies to comply with human rights and the UN development goals. In 2011, the UN came up with the Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights, also known as the Ruggie Principles. In the meantime, each IO has updated and strengthened its own instruments following a specific approach.<sup>29</sup> While the OECD adopts a positive and encouraging stance on MNE activities as a source of investment and economic growth, the ILO remains much more critical of MNE and concentrates on preserving workers’ rights. The ILO’s focus on social and labor rights remains distinct from the UN framework that tackles human rights more broadly. This competition has led to a heterogeneous *compilation* of instruments, making it difficult to understand whether they dismiss or complement each

other or whether each institution is sufficiently legitimate to regulate MNE (the ILO, UN and OECD rely on very different representativeness, for instance). In this case, competition among IOs has not created a space for debate over different visions of the political economy of MNE activities.

### ***Reinvesting old skills***

By reinvesting skills and avoiding direct debates over a possible mandate extension, IOs may acquire a strategic position and secure their legitimate role within the multilateral system. Examples from the field of environmental and climate governance illustrate precisely how depoliticization helps position an IO as a relevant actor at the table of a new and trendy topic.

First, IOs preserve their relevance when they incorporate emerging issues into their traditional activities. Since the 1990s and the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, it has become almost impossible for any IO to avoid environmental issues even when they seem to fall outside the scope of its initial mandate. As the environment became a sort of relevance test for the next century, many IOs such as the World Bank<sup>30</sup> or the OECD,<sup>31</sup> whose mandate was directly or indirectly considered in potential contradiction with environmental protection, engaged in reforms characterized as “greening” strategies.<sup>32</sup> The ILO was particularly challenged by the environmental imperative as the transition toward supposedly sustainable economies was seen as a threat to industrial growth and employment, while the quest for productive jobs could contradict environmental protection.<sup>33</sup> In the 2000s, the ILO secretariat developed a compromise solution by promoting “green jobs” as a way to reconcile the goal of decent and productive jobs and environmental protection.<sup>34</sup> In 2013, the concept was officially endorsed by its members in an ILO “landmark resolution”<sup>35</sup> on sustainable development, decent work and green jobs. The definition of green jobs remains vague, as is often the case when IOs address controversial and political issues. However, rather than engaging in a normative debate the secretariat, in collaboration with other UN agencies, undertook measures to promote an ILO environment-friendly strategy by producing internal expertise based on the relationship between the environment and labor market as well as setting up programs and activities on the topic. Thus, depoliticization occurs by cautiously avoiding discussions about the structural causes of environmental degradation like productivity, industrial jobs, etc. It thereby allows the organization to contribute, even in a peripheral way, to environmental governance. In doing so, the ILO has successfully kept its role and legitimacy when confronted with a problem which could potentially challenge its foundations. The ILO reinvested its core competence on labor, while addressing the relevance test brought by environmental issues. Such a depoliticizing move deflects two types of open criticisms: those opposed to a

mandate extension since the ILO's greening strategy is not presented as such but as a renewal of its skills over an unavoidable critical topic; and the ones criticizing the organization's inability to adapt to emerging issues. Such process is also at play in the participatory turn implemented within the World Bank (Box 5.2).

**Box 5.2 Avoiding criticism:  
the participatory turn at the World Bank**

Analyzing the participatory shift at the World Bank, Nay shows that the increasing concern of the organization for reaching out, through consultative and reviewing mechanisms, to NGOs and civil society dates back to the 1980s. At the time, the World Bank was the target of many criticisms on the negative social impact of its development policies on the ground, especially the structural adjustment policies.<sup>36</sup> "Capturing" the participatory paradigm has, therefore, been a strategic way for the organization to revisit its field of action and reassert its social legitimacy. This strategy is visible in the framing of the "new social policies"<sup>37</sup> of the World Bank, which include new dimensions such as housing or pensions in the eradication of poverty. Merrien notices a shift in the World Bank's discourse on the need to reconcile economic growth with social welfare. While he characterizes this move as a sign of "political pragmatism" and "theoretical cease-fire" rather than the emergence of a new consensus,<sup>38</sup> Merrien's analysis is consistent with our argument on depoliticization as a legitimation tactic in facing external protests and internal divergences. In the case of the World Bank, it was marked by the relative decline of market ideology which was overly dominant in the 1980s and the space given to other approaches such as the new institutional economy and theories on social capital. These approaches might still be considered as part of the World Bank's resilient<sup>39</sup> neo-liberal vision but in a less obvious politicized manner. Moreover, such depoliticization practices had significant results in terms of mandate expansion since the World Bank is now recognized as a legitimate actor in the field of social protection (but not without criticism).<sup>40</sup>

Second, IOs and their bureaucracies reinvest their old skills to preserve their relevance in a competitive environment. Hall's work is a compelling illustration of the ways IOs may assert their legitimacy through such practices while opening paths toward mandate expansion. She compares the UNHCR and IOM's engagement in the climate regime and explains IO involvement in another policy field as a result of organizational types, either normative or functional. She then demonstrates that the IOM's engagement resulted from the organization's will to gain

support and resources and “to be relevant to states by engaging with top global issues.”<sup>41</sup> Looking at the IOM’s engagement in the climate regime, we argue that the organization relied on depoliticization techniques to stay relevant and expand its mandate. Indeed, Hall mentions the extensive research and publication work conducted by the IOM on climate change and migration and the Director General’s emphasis on IOM’s expertise in the field of environmental displacements during IOM first participation in the COP15 in December 2009 in Copenhagen. She concludes that “IOM expanded its operations and in 2009 prepared a compendium showcasing over a hundred activities on climate change and migration, including many that had only a tenuous link to IOM’s migration mandate, such as soil conservation in Haiti and youth employment programs in Senegal.”<sup>42</sup>

These cases underpin the logic of recognition behind depoliticization practices: IOs can preserve their relevance and assert their legitimacy by avoiding inter-organizational competition and reinvesting their core competence and old skills. Not only do IOs preserve relevance by depoliticizing their engagement in a new field of action; they also manage to expand their activities.

## **Expansion**

Scholars have long theorized IO expansion. For Barnett and Finnemore, IOs “exhibit mission creep. They wander far from their original mandate and to new terrains and territories.”<sup>43</sup> Numerous case studies scrutinize *why* an IO expands its mandate. As summarized by Hall, the literature offers three explanations: member states’ encouragement; substantive issue linkage between the original mandate and the new activity; quest for resources to ensure IO survival.<sup>44</sup> While her work supplements these assumptions by looking at organizational types,<sup>45</sup> most of the literature focuses on the reasons explaining IO mandate expansion.<sup>46</sup> Here we seek to address *how* IOs expand their policy field and gain legitimacy to intervene in a new domain by claiming necessity and projecting expertise. The increase in legitimacy therefore justifies IO depoliticization.

### ***Claiming necessity***

Mandate expansion, or mission creep, is likely to cause opposition and resistance by IO constituents as much as IO competitors, whether they are other IOs, private actors or NGOs. International bureaucracies rely on depoliticization practices to facilitate the expansion of their activities. IOs can present such expansion as a necessity for answering external needs, be they exceptional circumstances or governance gaps, thus avoiding debates over the legitimacy of this extension in a new field of activity.

IOs expand their mandate by demonstrating the necessity of such intervention. The case of the UNHCR’s involvement in the protection of natural disaster victims in the 2000s illustrates how an IO can justify its expansion by virtue of external needs and gaps in the global governance architecture. For the first time in its history, the UNHCR participated in relief operations dedicated to natural



disaster victims in the aftermath of the 2004 South-East Asia tsunami. At the time, its secretariat justified the involvement which went way beyond its original mandate by invoking the magnitude of the catastrophe, member states' incentives, as well as the UN Secretary-General's request.<sup>47</sup> According to Ruud Lubbers, High Commissioner from 2001 to 2005: "The magnitude of this disaster is so enormous and shocking that we will do everything we can to join the international community in bringing help as rapidly as possible to the victims of these gigantic waves."<sup>48</sup> To do so, the organization received governmental contributions and official invitations to participate in the relief assistance delivered in countries where the UNHCR had been working with refugees and internally displaced persons in the past.<sup>49</sup> In this context, the agency defended its operation as being "rare"<sup>50</sup> and the situation "special,"<sup>51</sup> insisting that the "UNHCR, whose mandate is to protect, assist and find solutions for refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, said it had taken the *exceptional decision* to provide its resources and operational expertise to help natural disaster victims."<sup>52</sup> Necessity would override political agency and justify this (supposedly) exceptional intervention.

After this "unprecedented"<sup>53</sup> operation, the UNHCR nevertheless kept participating in relief efforts in the aftermath of natural disasters. To justify the continued expansion, the organization capitalized on its expertise and experience, as discussed in Chapter 1, and identified a governance vacuum to fill:

In terms of natural disasters, most clusters, including shelter and camp coordination and management, have clear leads. There is still a gap, however, with respect to protection at the field level. UNHCR, already in charge of coordination at the global level, has the demonstrated ability and willingness to fill that gap [...] Natural disasters carry less risk of controversy than other aspects of our protection work. Essentially, we would be extending the scope—and reliability—of our support to governments, at their request, in matters where we already have significant experience.<sup>54</sup>

By focusing on external demands and governance gaps on so-called less controversial issues, IOs may conceal the political decisions and implications of their expansion. The argument justifying mandate expansion based on governance gaps was also key in UNEP's intervention in Afghanistan developed in Box 5.3. In most cases, necessity claims are supplemented by a demonstration of expertise relevant to the new policy field.

### **Box 5.3 Expansion where nobody would go: the case of UNEP in Afghanistan**

As a small organization within the UN system, UNEP intended to fill a gap by intervening in the field of environmental protection in a context where it was not perceived as a priority. After its 2003 post-conflict

environmental assessment in Afghanistan, UNEP opened a country-office to bring “technical assistance to set up a national environmental agency”<sup>55</sup> in a country where “environmental education and awareness were essentially non-existent.”<sup>56</sup> Since then, UNEP’s support has “expanded to focus on rebuilding structures of governance and on addressing urgent urban environmental and natural resource management issues.”<sup>57</sup> More generally, UNEP has extended its work through the creation of its Environmental cooperation for peacebuilding unit based in Geneva. This unit addresses, among other issues, the link between natural resources and conflict<sup>58</sup> and the issue of conflict mediation.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Projecting expertise***

Not only do IOs claim necessity to justify their expansion; they also profess their expertise to extend their field of action. In her work on mission creep and expertise, Littoz-Monnet argues that international bureaucracies mobilize external expertise which gives them authority to act while depoliticizing debates.<sup>60</sup> Building on her demonstration, we further argue that mandate expansion can be justified by the ways IOs project their expertise, meaning that they profess an extensive set of skills extrapolated from their traditional expertise. By acquiring external expertise, mobilizing internal expert knowledge and reinterpreting mandated competencies, depoliticization practices are instrumental in extending IO legitimacy.

Multiple examples show how IOs perform depoliticizing moves by acquiring external expertise to facilitate mission creep. For instance, Littoz-Monnet studies UNESCO’s growing involvement in bioethical standards and shows how international bureaucrats rely on expertise to expand their organization’s mission beyond its original mandate. She distinguishes internal expertise, which allows expansion in areas closely related to the original mandate, from external expertise, which facilitates expansion in areas not obviously related to the mandate. In the case of UNESCO, she demonstrates that “[e]ntrepreneurial bureaucrats within UNESCO were able to create creep in bioethics by mobilizing external experts in the field and capturing their skills.”<sup>61</sup> In the 1990s, Frederico Mayor, director-general of UNESCO, created an *ad hoc* expert group on bioethics called International Bioethics Committee (IBC) gathering 36 high profile scientific experts in bioethics. While benefiting from the epistemic authority of the group, UNESCO managed to avoid the politicization of debates by delegating the drafting of its Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights to the IBC and legitimized its intervention in the field of bioethics.<sup>62</sup> A similar process was observed within the World Bank when the organization intended to expand its mandate to conflict management: it recruited professionals with specific expertise in this domain to facilitate the creation of a new area of intervention within the organization.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, studies on

the European Commission show the critical function of expertise to assist expansion in policy fields formerly conceived as outside of European prerogatives.<sup>64</sup>

IOs tend to mobilize their traditional expertise to facilitate mandate expansion, as shown in the case of UNEP. UNEP's mission is "to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations."<sup>65</sup> It offers support activities to "increase the capacity of governments to use environmental information for decision making and action planning,"<sup>66</sup> its mandate mainly focusing on coordination, data collection and circulation. In other words, it is not an operational mandate. However, since 1999 UNEP has been conducting post-conflict environmental field assessments on the ground of its technical expertise. According to a member of the first team established to lead an assessment in the Balkans, UNEP was selected to conduct the operation with UN Habitat because it was a "more technical organization," contrary to the WHO and the IAEA, both more bureaucratic with longer procedures.<sup>67</sup> Not only did the technical profile of the organization allow the first expansion, but it also served as a justification to institutionalize the new field of action. Indeed, after its first operation evaluating the environmental consequences of NATO's bombings in Kosovo, UNEP was assigned a follow-up study to assess the use of depleted uranium: the permanent program highlighted the technical aspect of this highly sensitive issue and thereafter became the leader on depleted uranium. It conducted similar investigations in other countries, carrying out new post-conflict environmental assessments, first in the Balkans, then in Central Asia and Africa, before the team became a permanent unit in December 2001. In other words, UNEP expanded its field of action to interventions in post-conflict settings relying on its initially normative mandate, expertise and technical skills.<sup>68</sup> Since then UNEP has gained the permanent approval of its member states: "post-conflict assessment" appears on the 2004 "Indicative list of main areas of technology support and capacity-building activities" in the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building. States requested the executive director "to further strengthen the ability of [UNEP] to assess environmental impacts in post-conflict situations" and "to make the necessary arrangements in order to enable [UNEP] to conduct post-conflict environmental assessment at the request of the concerned State or States."<sup>69</sup> UNEP depoliticized the decision to extend its mission by making it look like a given thanks to its expertise and experience, and then secured the approval of its member states but not without some limitations (see Chapter 7).

IOs also reinterpret their expertise to justify expansion. In this case, depoliticization helps decrease resistance against IO mission creep by member states, other organizations and civil society. In her study of UNESCO's involvement in the protection of cultural heritage in conflict areas, Leloup demonstrates the use of depoliticization tactics to ease member states' opposition. As in the field of bioethics, UNESCO first focused on highlighting the connection between its original mandate and the new domain: it insisted on its status of expert in cultural heritage and its function of coordination to legitimize addressing the multiple destructions committed between 2012 and 2015 in conflict areas, especially in Iraq, Mali and

Syria. It managed to seize the opportunity to expand its role to crisis management by reinterpreting its mandate: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”<sup>70</sup> According to Leloup, this move allowed the organization to bypass criticism of politicization due to Palestine’s new membership: as expert and coordinator UNESCO managed to move beyond its internal crisis by addressing the external challenge of cultural destructions in a depoliticized way. And like in the case of UNEP, the organization expanded its mandate and gained the legitimacy to enact a more operational role by being recognized as a “humanitarian actor” and as a broker between headquarters and field operations.<sup>71</sup>

By relying on external demands and projecting their expertise, IOs perform depoliticization practices which facilitate mandate preservation and mission creep. These tactics tend to provide undisputed legitimacy by suppressing questions over an IO’s *raison d’être* in a specific (new) field of action.

### **Monopolization**

According to Verbeek, the monopolization of “expertise knowledge” is one of the “major tools of influence” of IOs.<sup>72</sup> For him, “certain international organizations enjoy autonomous influence on international policies, because they have acquired expert status in a certain policy field.”<sup>73</sup> We argue that field monopolization related to expertise is inextricably linked to depoliticization. Monopolization refers to the process through which an actor obtains a privileged position and acquires uncontested legitimacy to act in a policy field. It derives from various material and symbolic resources such as knowledge and expertise, leadership and strategic alliances with both state and non-state actors in a given political and institutional context. IOs, we contend, can institutionalize a monopoly through depoliticization: depoliticization practices help IOs present their action in a specific domain as unquestionable, therefore expanding IO control over that field. In return, monopolization reinforces depoliticization by limiting the potential for debates. Hence, not only does depoliticization dismiss potential rivals through technicization, but it also suppresses alternative voices and modes of action by selecting the most appropriate way of acting in global governance often presented as the *one* best way.

### ***Professing technical requirements***

While depoliticization allows IOs to gain undisputed legitimacy to act in their new field of action, it may also silence opposition and guarantee a monopoly over that field: this happens almost mechanically in a system of labor division where each specialized organization has its entitled domain as discussed in Chapter 4. It is, thus, not surprising that certain IOs acquire the title of go-to organization for specific topics. Going further, we argue that technicization performed by IOs may have silencing effects which help obtain or reinforce a monopolistic position.

The case of the OECD reveals the instrumental role of technicization to facilitate field monopolization: the OECD has evolved from a regional economic institution into an almost generalist organization thanks to its expertise and technocratic networks. It used its statistical and economic expertise to expand in new territories such as education, corruption, development and labor.<sup>74</sup> Schmelzer notably shows that far from remaining passive vis-à-vis criticism on the narrow quantitative approach taken by the OECD on growth, the organization responded by developing research programs on social indicators based on the concept of “quality of life.” Starting in the 1970s, this program led to the *Society at a Glance* series since 2001 and the publication in 2011 of the *Better Life Index*, an interactive social indicator database, which compiles data on 11 dimensions including economic, social, educational and political aspects. In other words, the OECD succeeded in “quantifying quality.”<sup>75</sup> Despite internal skepticism about these developments, primarily due to the initial lack of expertise of the OECD on social concerns, the organization has become a central player in new areas such as education through its Centre for Educational Research and Innovation,<sup>76</sup> leading to the PISA surveys.<sup>77</sup> Not only have these surveys become worldwide tools for domestic public policies, even for non-OECD countries, they by far exceed UNESCO’s expertise and historical authority on this matter.<sup>78</sup> According to Zapp, UNESCO’s smaller research capacity has played a detrimental role in the organization’s loss of relevance in the field.<sup>79</sup> In their historical overview of the OECD, Leimgruber and Schmelzer also highlight how the organization’s acclaimed economic approach, presented as above domestic politics, has been key in its hegemonic quest:

The Organization’s authority in public debates derives to a large degree from the authority of economic expertise, which in the case of the OECD is framed as detached from national interests and thus devoid of a particular economic ideology. And in this regard, the OECD’s key task was (and is) to define good economics and the ruling norms of adequate government behavior, not only for its member countries but, increasingly, for the entire globe.<sup>80</sup>

Other examples show the process where a monopolistic position ensures enough legitimacy to expect technical requirements, and ultimately excludes other actors and their views. For instance, Parizet’s ethnographic study within the UNDP’s country office in Mexico illustrates how the organization justified its legitimacy while restricting debates over political and sensitive issues related to indigenous peoples in Mexico.<sup>81</sup> To start, the country office excluded local actors in defining its indicators because of the “technical character” of these instruments. Parizet argues that UNDP bypassed consultation with indigenous peoples despite its own public recommendations on the matter because, according to the personnel interviewed, the process was too technical. The office justifies their exclusion from the production of UNDP report on indigenous peoples’ human development, as is confirmed by a consultant who worked on the said report: “With them [indigenous people], there is always the issue of why we didn’t write the report with them [...]

It is extremely technical, you need specific competencies, and UNDP precisely hires people according to their specific competencies to produce the reports.”<sup>82</sup> To continue, Parizet demonstrates how UNDP limited the space for contradiction while turning it into a consensual discussion among carefully chosen intermediaries. She shows that UNDP legitimizes its policies with the organization of “debates” even though actual confrontation of ideas is replaced by apparent diversity in the types of participants.<sup>83</sup> There is no contradicting view on the definition of indigenous development and the strategies proposed to promote it are presented as apolitical. In other words, UNDP’s depoliticization practices exclude relevant and concerned actors while limiting the potential for debates over its not so apolitical action in the field of indigenous peoples’ development. The work of this specific bureau in Mexico has been independently evaluated by the UNDP Evaluation office in 2017. The assessment pointed to a lack of independent funding since, like other UNDP country programs, the one in Mexico was mainly funding by the host government between 2008 and 2015.<sup>84</sup> We can, therefore, assume that some of the depoliticizing moves observed by Parizet resulted from the office’s ambition to distance itself from the government by highlighting its supposedly apolitical expertise while still obtaining the authorization to intervene, as seen in Chapter 4. For the 2017 evaluation:

[An] advantage mentioned is the *strict nature* of the organization’s delivery and evaluation processes, with their *very clear methodologies for measuring and quantifying results*. It is acknowledged that UNDP successfully brings Government representatives together with their counterparts from civil society, academia and the indigenous movement. Furthermore, it allows the opening up of spaces for dialogue between agents who, due to the nature of the institutions that they represent, may be reluctant to mutually collaborate.<sup>85</sup>

Comparing these conclusions with Parizet’s findings, we notice the performative role of depoliticizing moves. Depoliticization silenced the selection process through which UNDP chose its partners. In the name of technical expertise and its respected “impartiality,” the organization actually limited “spaces of dialogue” on the issue of indigenous development.<sup>86</sup> In the field of global health Demortain sheds light on a similar selection process between different types of expertise. Drawing on science and technology studies, he disputes “the existence of an ontological boundary between them [experts] and policy-makers, between producers and users of knowledge.”<sup>87</sup> Based on the case of WHO and food safety standards, his work captures key interactions between international bureaucrats and groups of experts and demonstrates how IOs can select certain categories of experts instead of others, silencing alternative expertise.<sup>88</sup>

Depoliticization helps an organization obtain a monopolistic position and control a field of action. Yet depoliticization and monopoly reinforce each other: once there is a legitimated monopoly over a field of action, competitors and alternative ways of doing are harder to raise.

### *Proclaiming the one best way*

The exclusion dynamics embedded in depoliticization practices concern actors as much as political solutions and ways of thinking. On the one hand, depoliticization enables the exclusion of alternative ideas and modes of operating. On the other, the expression of a legitimated monopolistic position limits debates over who has the right to a voice and who can act. Concretely, depoliticization helps select the most appropriate actors, levels and modes of action which, in turn, reinforces depoliticization.

By helping institutionalize a monopoly over a specific policy field, depoliticization discredits alternative actors. In the case of UNEP, a dual and simultaneous process of monopolization occurred. While UNEP established leadership of the first post-conflict environmental assessment at the expense of WHO and the IAEA (see *infra*), the institutionalization of this type of activity confronted two Divisions within the program, the Divisions of Environmental Policy Implementation (DEPI) and of Early-warning and Assessment (DEWA). With the growing demand to conduct assessments, the Post-Conflict Assessment Unit of UNEP was created in December 2001 within DEPI. The unit was to be based in Geneva while DEPI would be coordinating from Nairobi. DEWA, based in Nairobi, was also working in the broader field of security and the environment at the time. In 2004, it published a report titled *Understanding Environment, Conflict and Cooperation* in which it asserts that it has been working on these issues since 1994 in collaboration with the Wilson Center.<sup>89</sup> Former UNEP personnel alluded to a strong rivalry between DEWA and DEPI's post-conflict unit in Geneva, the latter eventually being chosen to implement the program's environment and security agenda. According to another staff member, the departure of a key person within DEWA actually led to the post-conflict unit takeover. While future institutional reforms would try to make units work transversally across the Divisions, in the late 2000s, DEPI held the monopoly of environmental post-conflict activities. Its action was honored with a staff award in recognition of its post-conflict assessments.<sup>90</sup> The monopoly extended outside the organization. After Kosovo, UNEP again bypassed WHO and the IAEA which were unable to commit as quickly in the sensitive issue of depleted uranium.<sup>91</sup> According to its former Executive Director, member states supported the extension of UNEP's mandate for its recognized "unique technical expertise." Not only did UNEP use this expertise and its first "success stories" (see Chapter 1) to expand its mission, it also secured the monopoly over post-conflict environmental assessments within the UN family, thus becoming the most legitimate UN organization for such evaluations. Depoliticization facilitated this monopolization while discrediting other potentially relevant actors.

The monopolization of policy action by an IO also prevents the acknowledgment of other relevant levels of action, as observed in the field of climate change. In global climate governance, the key international body is the UNFCCC whose main secretariat is located in Bonn and which organizes the yearly COPs. For Aykut and Dahan, UNFCCC's monopolization constitutes one of the elements



of the schism that characterizes global climate governance. Indeed, they show that climate change is framed as a global problem based on the pollution paradigm with a focus on CO<sup>3</sup> emissions instead of structural causes of global warming. Consequently, this framing separates the climate regime from IOs regulating economic, financial and energy issues, while “[t]his globalism has led to the exclusion of subnational initiatives and transnational networks which are willing to take climate action.”<sup>92</sup> The UNFCCC’s monopoly was expressly used by some member states to refuse to address climate change within the UN Security Council.<sup>93</sup> For instance, during an Arria-formula meeting organized in 2013 by the United Kingdom and Pakistan to discuss the “security implications of climate change” the statement on behalf of the G77 and China said: “We maintain that the UNFCCC is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.”<sup>94</sup> In the Council’s fourth open debate dedicated to climate change held in January 2019 the delegate of India reiterated this position with the provoking rhetorical question: “can the needs of climate justice be served by shifting climate law-making from the inclusive [UNFCCC] to decision-making by a structurally unrepresentative organization?”<sup>95</sup> If there are valid reasons to prefer universal arenas as opposed to the exclusive UN Security Council, this particular line of argument excludes other possible levels of action in favor of the only supposedly legitimate forum. In other words, it removes the potential for choice and deliberation. Legitimated monopoly in global governance can, therefore, have depoliticizing effects as also shown in the case of human rights at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) developed in Box 5.4.

#### **Box 5.4 Rescaling and depoliticization: the case of human rights at the ASEAN**

Gerard’s work on the ASEAN brings convincing insight on depoliticization and multi-scalar politics. Drawing on Jessop’s approach on depoliticization and politics reconfiguration, Gerard examines the impact of ASEAN’s expansion in the field of human rights. While noting that the history of ASEAN is “one of anti-politics by design,”<sup>96</sup> she questions the rescaling and restructuring of human rights governance with the establishment of ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). Human rights used to be confined to the domestic scale before ASEAN’s reform radically rescaled the issue to the regional arena. In this case, depoliticization is less a tool to facilitate expansion than a consequence of rescaling. According to Gerard, it allowed ASEAN elites to choose the most beneficial forum to represent their interests since there are no formalized rules on the relationships between the AICHR and national human rights institutions; it placed the AICHR within the ASEAN Political-Security Community instead of the Socio-Cultural Community

thus ensuring a strong hierarchical oversight; it allowed ASEAN elites to select activist representatives, mostly from state departments, and organizations to be invited in the consultations held to legitimize the AICHR, at the expense of more critical groups. Gerard concludes that the AICHR “provided ASEAN elites with a tool to manage the conflicts that have emerged from people’s increased mobilization around human rights abuses.”<sup>97</sup> This case shows how rescaling a legitimate forum to act upon a specific topic can have depoliticizing effects by suppressing alternative levels of action.

Finally, depoliticization comes with the selection of modes of action through which IOs act on the world. In Chapter 1 we specifically looked at IO technical solutions, these tools justifying IO existence and relevance within the international system. In continuation of the discussion developed in Chapter 2 on “best practices,” we contend that framing IO solutions as the best options to engage global problems reduces the potential for choice in terms of policy instruments implemented in global governance. Depoliticization may, therefore, lead to the extension of an organizational ideology dominating a field of action and suppress any alternative ways of thinking. The case of the GDP and HDI illustrates such processes of selection and domination. The OECD successfully made the GDP *the* internationally-acknowledged and for a long time undisputed indicator of economic growth.<sup>98</sup> Relying on its 50 years of experience, the OECD showed the world a successful record in terms of quantifying growth and imposing the “growth paradigm.” According to Schmelzer, the success of the OECD hegemonic quest is intrinsically related to the “technical scientific and politically neutral aura of growthmanship.”<sup>99</sup> Speich Chassé adds that, in the context of the MDGs, international bureaucrats considered the GDP per capita as an indicator of “absolute necessity in order to reduce the complexity of world economic dynamics.”<sup>100</sup> Much criticism has been raised against the GDP, but this indicator still dominates the field of development calculation; over 30 years of debate on the meaning of GDP nonetheless led to the creation of another central indicator, the HDI.<sup>101</sup> UNDP gained legitimacy with the spectacular success of its HDI (see Box 1.1, in Chapter 1). At the field level, such success led UNDP country programs to impose their way of thinking and measuring human development. In Mexico, UNDP personnel present themselves as “experts” in measuring development by producing the “*right indicator*” with “neutrality,” “objectivity” and “independence.”<sup>102</sup> By proclaiming *this* one best way, UNDP limits alternative thinking on development, and in the case of Mexico, on the “development of indigenous peoples.” Moreover, while the HDI was created to challenge the hegemonic status of GDP, it gained legitimacy at the expense of other factors defining and measuring development, but not without discussion as demonstrated by the growing interest on the new indicators of wealth.<sup>103</sup>

As these examples show, the focus on a single policy solution suppresses alternative modes of action with a dual process of depoliticization: depoliticization facilitates the monopolization of a field of action while the one best way proposed by legitimate actors in the field discredits other options, hence reinforcing depoliticization.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we questioned the process by which legitimacy becomes “a matter of fact” as asserted by Keohane and focused on cases where an IO is legitimate since “it is accepted as appropriate, and worthy of being obeyed.”<sup>104</sup> More precisely, we examined legitimacy as a political process through which IOs assert their mandate, expand their mission, exclude opponents and control specific policy fields. In this process, depoliticization is central to secure legitimacy and even a monopolistic position in the global governance system. The gain in legitimacy conferred by IO depoliticization practices does not mean, however, that legitimacy remains unchallenged and uncontested or that perceptions about IO illegitimacy disappear. IO legitimacy is perpetually renegotiated with the use of tactics such as depoliticization. In return, the way IOs obtain and monopolize legitimacy can generate depoliticizing effects. Undisputed legitimacy limits the space for contradiction by silencing alternative actors and ways of seeing the world.

Tying our analysis to traditional categories of legitimacy we can assert that depoliticization helps increase input legitimacy since it creates the appearance of neutral and expert-based methodologies guiding IO action. Depoliticization also reinforces output legitimacy since, as we will see in Chapter 6, depoliticization can help justify unsuccessful outcomes by allowing an IO to shy away from its responsibilities. Yet, the silencing effects explored in this chapter may feed criticism on IO *lack* of legitimacy, calling for a broader research agenda on the role of depoliticization in IO current legitimacy crisis (see Chapter 7).

## Notes

- 1 António Guterres, *Challenges and Opportunities for the United Nations*, 4 April 2016, <https://www.antonioguterres.gov.pt/vision-statement/>.
- 2 Ian Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 30.
- 3 Niilo Kauppi and Mikael R. Madsen, “Fields of Global Governance: How Transnational Power Elites Can Make Global Governance Intelligible,” *International Political Sociology* 8, no. 3 (2014): 326.
- 4 See Barnett and Finnemore on IO authority: Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5. Hurd also discusses legitimacy and authority as “natural complements,” looking at the implications of considering an IO as legitimate for conceptualizing authority in IR: Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council*, 30; 60–64.
- 5 Different studies attempt to classify the sources of IO legitimacy along these distinctions: input/procedural legitimacy vs. output/results or performance legitimacy

- (Fritz W. Scharpf, *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*) but also more recently throughput legitimacy (i.e., resulting from the quality of interactions between policy-makers and citizens in terms of transparency, inclusiveness and openness). Vivien Schmidt and Matthew Wood, “Conceptualizing Throughput Legitimacy: Procedural Mechanisms of Accountability, Transparency, Inclusiveness and Openness in EU Governance,” *Public Administration* 97 (2019): 727–740; pragmatic vs. moral legitimacy (Nina Hall, “Money or Mandate? Why International Organizations Engage with the Climate Change Regime,” *Global Environmental Politics* 15, no. 2 (2015): 82); democratic qualities, technocratic attributes and fair procedure and performance (Jan Aart Scholte and Jonas Tallberg, “Theorizing the Institutional Sources of Global Governance Legitimacy,” in *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences*, ed. Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand and Jan Aart Scholte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 56–74); and favorable outcomes, fairness of procedure and outcomes, procedural elements (typology developed by Hurd to summarize the literature on IOs and legitimacy. Hurd, *After Anarchy: Legitimacy and Power in the United Nations Security Council*). For a literature review on IO legitimacy, see also: Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, “The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organizations: Introduction and Framework,” *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 4 (2019): 581–606; Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand and Jan Aart Scholte, “Introduction: Legitimacy in Global Governance,” in *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences*, ed. Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand, and Jan Aart Scholte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3–19.
- 6 Scharpf, *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?*; Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*, 166–170.
  - 7 Allen Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane, “The Legitimacy of Global Governance Institutions,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 20, no. 4 (2006): 405–437.
  - 8 Tallberg and Zürn, “The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organizations: Introduction and Framework.”
  - 9 Lisa Maria Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, “The Social Legitimacy of International Organisations: Interest Representation, Institutional Performance, and Confidence Extrapolation in the United Nations,” *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2015): 451–475; Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand, and Jan Aart Scholte, ed., *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); See articles in the special issue on the Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organizations, *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 4 (2019).
  - 10 Ian Hurd, “Legitimacy and Contestation in Global Governance: Revisiting the Folk Theory of International Institutions,” *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 4 (2019): 726.
  - 11 Jennifer Gronau, “Signaling Legitimacy: Self-Legitimation by the G8 and the G20 in Times of Competitive Multilateralism,” *World Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2016): 107–145; Sarah von Billerbeck, “‘Mirror, Mirror on the Wall’: Self-Legitimation by International Organizations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2020): 207–219.
  - 12 Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek, ed., *Autonomous Policy Making by International Organisations* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
  - 13 For instance, Keohane counts accountability among the six criteria he defines to assess global institutions’ legitimacy. Robert O. Keohane, “Global Governance and Legitimacy,” *Review of International Political Economy* 18, no. 1 (2011): 102–103. See also: David Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, ed., *Global Governance and Public Accountability* (Malden: Wiley, 2005).
  - 14 Julia C. Morse and Robert O. Keohane, “Contested Multilateralism,” *The Review of International Organizations* 9, no. 4 (2014): 385–412. For a literature review on

- IOs and competition, see: Thomas Sommerer and Hans Agné, “Consequences of Legitimacy in Global Governance,” in *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences*, ed. Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand and Jan Aart Scholte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 163.
- 15 Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, “Expanding without Much Ado. International Bureaucratic Expansion Tactics in the Case of Bioethics,” *Journal of European Public Policy* (2020), pre-publication online version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1781231>; Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, “Political Bureaucracies: The Case of International Bureaucratic Expansion into Bioethics,” *Paper Presented at the International Studies Association’s Annual Convention*, Toronto, March 2019.
  - 16 Drawing on Bourdieu, Sending relies on the concept of recognition to address competition over authority in global governance. While he states that “authority designates a relation that rests on recognition,” we similarly apply recognition as a foundation of IO legitimacy. Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 19–20.
  - 17 Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, “The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organizations: Introduction and Framework,” *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 4 (2019): 581–606.
  - 18 Yves Schemeil, “Bringing International Organization In: Global Institutions as Adaptive Hybrids,” *Organizations Studies* 34, no. 2 (2013): 219–252.
  - 19 Camille Gasnier, “Élaboration d’une norme internationale de management de la santé des travailleurs: privatisation ou nouvelle forme de gouvernement transnational des conditions de travail,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie de la gestion* 16 (2017): 11–37.
  - 20 Coline Ruwet, “La RSE négociée: règles du jeu et contenus. Le cas d’ISO 26000,” *Négociations* 2, no. 18 (2012): 93–108.
  - 21 François-Xavier Merrien, “Social Protection as Development Policy: A New International Agenda for Action,” *International Development Policy* 4, no. 2 (2013): 89–106.
  - 22 Camille Gasnier, “Élaboration d’une norme internationale de management de la santé des travailleurs: privatisation ou nouvelle forme de gouvernement transnational des conditions de travail,” 14.
  - 23 Marieke Louis and Coline Ruwet, “Representativeness from within: A Socio-Historical Account of the Concept and Its Uses through the Comparison of the ILO and the ISO,” *Globalizations* 14, no. 4 (2017): 535–549; Gasnier, “Élaboration d’une norme internationale de management de la santé des travailleurs: privatisation ou nouvelle forme de gouvernement transnational des conditions de travail.”
  - 24 *Seventh Supplementary Report: Further Developments in Relation to the International Organization for Standardization. Minutes of the Governing Body*, ILO, 310th session, March 2011, para. 255 and 257. [https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/P/09601/09601\(2011-310\).pdf](https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/P/09601/09601(2011-310).pdf).
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## 6 Avoiding responsibility

- **Challenging responsibility attribution**
- **Blame-shifting**
- **Maintaining the status quo**

The question of the responsibility of and within IOs is one of the most sensitive and publicized aspects of IO action. In global politics, responsibility has been highly debated, especially in the context of international interventions set up to answer mass atrocities and genocides. The 1990s witnessed intense debates on international responsibility, sovereignty and global justice, culminating in the contentious emergence of the *responsibility to protect* concept.<sup>1</sup> It may, therefore, seem paradoxical to explore the relationship between the highly political issue of responsibility and depoliticization. This chapter takes on the challenge of investigating a two-fold question: how depoliticization practices performed by and within IOs alter responsibility attribution within the multilateral system and how these practices also reinforce depoliticization by reproducing power relationships.

Responsibility is a multi-faceted concept that entails political, legal, criminal, social, economic and even moral dimensions. Within IO literature, many scholars have adopted a legal approach on responsibility: most of them converge in stressing the current limitations of legal responsibility of IOs in international public law (see Box 6.3). The recent case where UN peacekeepers generated a devastating cholera epidemic in Haiti, has shown the limits of a purely legalistic approach in attributing responsibility. For Pillinger, Hurd and Barnett, the UN denied responsibility and used the law “as a shield against accountability.”<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, IO scholars have often preferred the concept of accountability over responsibility. Accountability requires IOs to be transparent in their activities and responsive toward their internal and external environments,<sup>3</sup> especially when criticized. This can be achieved by making information available, establishing participatory mechanisms, especially toward civil society, or independent evaluation procedures<sup>4</sup> with the purpose of avoiding power abuses.<sup>5</sup> To address depoliticization, however, accountability seems too restrictive as it is essentially a mechanism of control<sup>6</sup> which does not necessarily encompass the multiple dimensions of responsibility. While responsibility may require minimal accountability, accountability does not systematically mean taking responsibility: it is one thing

for an IO to publicly report on its activities, it is another to acknowledge potentially damaging consequences.

The question of responsibility also inevitably relates to principal–agent theories which have long been dominant in IO studies. As the principal–agent literature essentially aims to assess the degree of autonomy of international bureaucracies vis-à-vis the member states, it eventually contributes to answering the question: “Who is responsible?” by highlighting different layers of responsibility within an IO. Focusing on processes of delegation,<sup>7</sup> loss and control,<sup>8</sup> however, these theories do not necessarily account for the political processes by which responsibility is either taken, shifted or denied. Moreover, by defining IOs as essentially bureaucratic actors, there is no particular reason to hold them responsible in the same way as states.

Turning to a more generalist literature in political science, definitions of *political* responsibility established within the sphere of domestic politics<sup>9</sup> mostly remain inapplicable in the field of IOs since they are entangled in specific institutional mechanisms of trust confirmation or revocation between citizens and elected political leaders.<sup>10</sup> Even Jonas’s extensive definition<sup>11</sup> of political responsibility as a (potentially endless) process extendable to future generations is hardly applicable here, although it obviously echoes some of the great principles written in IO constitutions starting with the UN Charter Preamble: “We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

In this chapter we build on these different corpuses and approach responsibility as a process of attributing consequences to specific and well-identified individual or collective actors who may be held accountable and, as a result, be either praised or sanctioned for their decisions or actions. Drawing on Hay’s assumption that politicization is about reclaiming social processes even in the face of uneven outcomes and taking responsibility for our choices,<sup>12</sup> we approach depoliticization as both a tactic and a process through which responsibility is avoided, and sometimes denied, by and within IOs. In return, eschewing responsibility strengthens the depoliticized character of IO action as it dilutes their political agency. This conception echoes Jenkins’s account of depoliticization as “an attempt to *remove* something—whether this is to remove responsibility, politics or, more extensively, human agency. Concurrently, politicisation entails *adding* or supplementing responsibility, ‘politics’ or ‘agency’.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, this chapter is not about “who is responsible?” or whether IOs should be held responsible. Rather, it questions responsibility avoidance as both a driver of depoliticization and a consequence of depoliticization practices.

We explore these interlinkages in a variety of contexts including the ILO, UNAIDS, UNEP, the UN Secretariat, the World Bank and the WTO and identify three main ways through which this logic is at play. The first is about responsibility attribution. Depoliticization blurs representative ties within the organization to hinder responsibility attribution through the emphasis on IO professional character. We then discuss how depoliticization facilitates blame-shifting within multilateral arenas. This section analyzes the various forms of blame-shifting as a well-known logic of responsibility denial applied here in the context of IOs. Concretely, we show that IO depoliticization practices strategically or inadvertently dilute, avoid

Table 6.1 Responsibility-oriented depoliticization

<i>Depoliticization logics</i>	<i>Challenging responsibility attribution</i>	<i>Blame-shifting</i>	<i>Maintaining the status quo</i>
<b>Objectives</b>	Avoiding being held responsible	Being irreproachable	Disengaging from political debates
<b>Justifications</b>	Specialized and professionalized representation	Shared responsibility and scapegoats	Institutional and contextual constraints
<b>Consequences</b>	Blurring representative ties	Minimizing actors' responsibilities	Reproducing existing power relationships

or deny responsibility that is then shifted toward other actors, be it IO single member states or individuals. Finally, we demonstrate that IO actors tacitly support and sometimes reproduce existing power relationships by denying their political agency. In other words, IO depoliticization practices can help maintain the status quo. Table 6.1 summarizes these depoliticization logics pointing to differentiated objectives, justifications and effects with respect to responsibility avoidance.

### **Challenging responsibility attribution**

Representation is an essentially (though not exclusively) political process that raises many theoretical and practical dilemmas.<sup>14</sup> Often overlooked in the study of IOs,<sup>15</sup> representation is about enabling specific actors to stand or act (sometimes both)<sup>16</sup> for a broader group and, as a result, to hold them accountable for their actions. Representation is, therefore, closely intertwined with attributing responsibility to someone and for something.<sup>17</sup> Even in the absence of general electoral mechanisms at the international level, similar expectations are rising vis-à-vis IOs, as shown by the vivid debates on the democratization of global governance.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, within IOs, the link between representation and responsibility is tacitly acknowledged when some states justify their privileged representation in the executive organs of such institutions because of their alleged greater responsibility in the conduct of world affairs.<sup>19</sup> In this section, however, we argue that IO members can also try to avoid this type of political exposure, therefore blurring relations of representation. Depoliticization hinders responsibility attribution by minimizing and even rejecting representative ties and their consequential responsibility. A key aspect of this process consists in putting forward the specific qualifications of IO staff or member states' delegates rather than a general and delegated mandate. Another aspect of this depoliticization logic relies on the tendency to individualize representation so that IOs, as a whole, are not openly exposed to criticism.

### **Professionalizing representation**

Studies in international political sociology have analyzed IO staff and members through the lens of professions and daily activities, regarding them primarily as

international professionals as stressed in Chapter 4.<sup>20</sup> Placing emphasis on the professional character of IO staff and member states' delegates minimizes the representative ties between these individuals and the political interests they could be defending as a result of their national affiliations. While appearing to be impartial,<sup>21</sup> IO actors simultaneously eschew their responsibility thanks to the depoliticization of their individual interests.

Establishing an international bureaucracy is meant to suit the interests of *all* members of the organization. The principle of international loyalty implies eliminating ties between civil servants and their states of origin, thereby ensuring as far as possible the international civil servants' independence and impartiality vis-à-vis the member states. In other words, international civil servants should not act as "under-cover" representatives of their states of origin but be loyal to *all* member states. Studies in international public administration and especially on representative bureaucracy within IOs rely on the premise that political considerations have an impact on the selection of international civil servants but also analyze the mechanisms designed to ensure maximal representativeness of the staff vis-à-vis *all* member states and not just the most powerful.<sup>22</sup> In order to preserve staff autonomy, the status of international civil servants, in addition to guaranteeing specific privileges and immunities, insists on their professional skills and merits. Here, depoliticization works as an attempt to limit the influence of national politics on the work of IO staff. Yet, this enterprise of "denationalization" of staff members has always been tempered by other selection principles, such as equitable geographic *representation*, which is applied at the diplomatic and bureaucratic levels, as well as financial constraints. These principles tend to reintroduce national consideration and loyalty dilemmas into the bureaucracy, especially when high-level positions are at stake.<sup>23</sup>

Turning to member state delegates, the most political and representative component within IOs, we observe a similar professionalization trend with an emphasis on specific skills. Indeed, while most IO constitutions mention the roles of "representatives" and "delegates," the mechanisms of representation within IOs rely mainly on appointment and cooptation based on specific competencies rather than on free and competitive elections.<sup>24</sup> Representatives are not elected but selected on the basis of their expertise and diplomatic skills as valued by the member states. Commenting on the evolution of diplomatic practices Sending, Neumann and Pouliot point to an increasing link between two functions assigned to diplomats: representing and governing. Whereas the former values the territorial ties of state representatives, the latter essentially requires specific expertise. As stressed by these authors: "When states meet in the WHO or the IMF, delegations are typically dominated by representatives from line ministries (such as health and finance) whose claim to authority is linked to the territorial unit being represented *and* to the specific expertise over the issue-area in question."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, studies on the transformation of diplomacy insist on the increasing sectoral specialization of diplomatic activity contrasting with a somehow idealized form of universal competence held by diplomats (an idea particularly strong in France, for instance).<sup>26</sup> The claimed expertise studied in Chapter 1 dilutes the representative bond: delegates,

as much as civil servants, establish their legitimacy as apolitical actors and, in doing so, deny the dynamics of state representation supporting their position.

The choice of delegates sent by member states to the ILO illustrates the growing tendency toward more professionalized representation. In her work on the ILO executive and supposedly most “political” organ, Louis inventories the official position of approximately 250 governmental delegates at the ILO Governing Body<sup>27</sup> and shows a strong tendency for governments to send civil servants from the labor ministries rather than actual ministers,<sup>28</sup> thereby demonstrating their preference for a specialized and professional representation rather than a political and generalist one. In terms of responsibility, while these representatives have the legal capacity to take potentially binding decisions, they are not confronted with the same kind of political and mediatic exposure, or professional pressure, as high profile diplomats or other state representatives like ministers. As a former ILO legal advisor suggested, while International Labour Conferences give presidents, chief of governments, labor ministries and political leaders the opportunity to publicly show their commitment (at least for an hour or two) to the organization, these somewhat spectacular interventions give a misleading picture of who is really in charge of negotiations during actual debates.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the absence of an electoral link between the individuals who sit in IOs and the people they claim to represent has fed many criticisms on the democratic deficit of IOs.<sup>30</sup> IOs tend to mimic principles of representation which are operational at the national level but, in fact, have shown little concern for democratic representation as such. As shown by Griffin, despite a growing concern for a more democratic mode of governance, the UN Credentials Committee, in charge of examining the accreditation of states’ representatives, regards the credentials process as a formality or a “technical exercise.”<sup>31</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, some attempts intended to establish “democratic tests” of representativeness,<sup>32</sup> like for instance, in 1999, when the ILO Credentials Committee tried to link the representative character of the delegate from Myanmar with the freedom of association principle.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the general rule has been the legal accreditation of delegates without any real concern for their actual political and social representativeness. This dynamic is undeniably strengthened and even encouraged by the highly specialized functions of IOs, as explored in Chapters 1 and 4. By claiming expertise and specialized functionality, such as in the case of the ILO and ISO (Box 6.1), IO actors loosen the representation ties in a two-fold depoliticization process: IO actors avoid representation in order to appear impartial, and by relying on their professional qualifications, they hinder responsibility attribution within IOs.

### **Box 6.1 The ILO and ISO and the professionalization of representation**

Even IOs which put forward representativeness as a criterion for sending and accrediting members follow a depoliticization logic disconnecting



representation from collective mandate and responsibility. In order to select their members, both the ILO and ISO have established a similar accreditation mechanism. They consider that the organizations (employers' organizations and trade unions for the ILO, national standards institutes for ISO) to be selected should be the "most representative" within their own countries and thus make members' representativeness a constitutional requirement.<sup>34</sup> However, none of them specifies the exact criteria used to assess which organizations are "the most representative" at the national level. In addition, the technical nature of their activities impacts delegates' profiles. In both cases, specific directives and practical constraints, such as members' financial resources or availability, lead to the professionalization of representatives who become international experts within their own organizations. As the production of an ISO or an ILO standard is a long process, the dynamic of professionalization is exacerbated by the complexity of procedures and technical jargon. As a result of this technicality, we witness an increase of external consultants in the delegations. They do not hold specific representative mandates, but their presence is tied to their technical expertise or network.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Individualizing tasks***

In this section, we further explore the function of experts studied in Chapter 1, discussing the broader relation between representation, depoliticization and individualization. Not only is the professional character of IO actors emphasized at the expense of their representative ties with member states, processes of individualization disturb traditional chains of command within IOs and hamper responsibility attribution. We therefore argue that international bureaucracies and member states lower the chances of being held accountable by shifting the responsibility onto specific individuals at different levels within the organizational hierarchy. These individuals are denied a representative capacity or mandate, while they are asked to fulfill a multitude of assigned tasks (external consultant, staff member, etc.). This logic is also at work in non-governmental organizations such as the International Organisation of Employers, however without a subordinate link (see Box 6.2).

#### **Box 6.2 Individualizing representation: the case of the IOE**

The International Organisation of Employers (IOE) offers an interesting case of how resistance to take on representative functions can also apply to international NGOs. Since its creation in 1920, the IOE has

oscillated between two main functions: a function of coordination (acting like a secretariat) and a function of representation (acting like a spokesperson) of national employers' associations within the ILO. During the interwar period, the IOE secretariat provided a quite narrow interpretation of its mandate, stressing that its primary purpose was only to inform, gather and combine employers' views during tripartite negotiations but that decision-making ultimately remained the prerogative of national associations.<sup>36</sup> Yet, when asked to nominate employers' representatives to attend specific committees on politically sensitive subjects, such as unemployment during the Great Depression, the IOE secretariat insisted on the fact that the designated members sat "in their own right" and "personal capacity"<sup>37</sup> and not as representatives of business as a whole, thereby resisting any delegation of authority from national associations to a broader international body. Until today, IOE statutes stipulate that: "Each member and associate member will keep its autonomy and independence."<sup>38</sup>

The use of outsourced consultants performing IO daily mandated activities depoliticizes IO action by shifting responsibility to individuals. As mentioned in Chapter 1, already the League of Nations relied on external experts and the UN has increasingly outsourced activities to consultants and experts. In 1973, following a request by the General Assembly, the Joint Inspection Unit provided first estimates of expenditure for these activities from the UN Secretariat's regular funds between 1962 and 1972, revealing an increase of 423.6 per cent in expenditure on individual experts and consultants and of 142.5 per cent on *ad hoc* expert groups.<sup>39</sup> They added that:

the use of outside expertise has not only evolved quantitatively in the past ten years; the variety of services for which experts and consultants are used has also multiplied to the point that the term 'consultant' or 'expert' may now apply literally to any individual contracted by the United Nations to do a job which the Secretariat, for one reason or another, is unable to have performed by its regular staff.<sup>40</sup>

They further questioned the validity of the two main reasons invoked "to explain the extensive recourse to the services of outside experts," namely "the changing role of the Secretariat" and "the inability of the regular staff to meet all the demands that result from this changing role."<sup>41</sup> They showed the limits of such justifications, arguing that some projects were developed without the support, and even the knowledge, of the parent body or other relevant departments within the UN system. These conclusions were reiterated in the 1982, 2000 and 2012 reports,<sup>42</sup> the 2014 assessment even estimating that external consultants represented nearly

40% of UN workforce.<sup>43</sup> Resorting to external consultants does not necessarily aim at individualizing responsibility, though external experts carry ownership of their conclusions. According to Seabrooke and Sending, the use of outsourced consultants in IOs signals a shift from expertise and bureaucratic impartiality toward a managerial approach which gives authority to sub-contractors with specific professional skills.<sup>44</sup> We go further by arguing that it reinforces the depoliticized character of IOs by outsourcing responsibility. Consultants can be held responsible for subsequent decisions taken by the IO, potentially protecting the organization from direct criticism. This, we argue, participates in the dual dynamic of responsabilization of individuals and de-responsibilization of institutions.

The outsourcing of tasks and shift of responsibility appear in publications when IOs abnegate content ownership over reports written by external consultants. For instance, the World Bank distanced itself from results presented in the influential 2001 report by Simon Collier and Anke Hoefler on “Greed and Grievance in Civil Wars” by using the very common phrasing: “The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors.”<sup>45</sup> IOs sometimes use the same techniques with publications written by their staff, published in their name and using their logo. This is illustrated by the following quote in a 2013 World Bank report on resilience: “This work is a joint product of World Bank and [Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery] staff. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect the views of The World Bank, its Board of Executive Directors, or the governments they represent.”<sup>46</sup> It seems paradoxical for an organization to spend vast amounts of resources to publish a report whose ownership it disclaims. Such disclaimer politics inform us about the ambiguous ways IOs may push for change in a constrained environment: they delegate potentially reformist projects to specific and mostly external individuals to enable them to capitalize on a well-received outcome or distance themselves from it if criticized. As Robert puts it, based on the case of the European Commission, conclusions drawn by external consultants act as “test runs” for the sponsoring organization to assess the audience’s acceptability.<sup>47</sup>

By professionalizing representation and individualizing tasks, IO actors tend to hamper the attribution of responsibility within the organization and beyond.

### **Blame-shifting**

Blame-shifting is a well-identified and studied practice in the study of public policies.<sup>48</sup> Weaver’s seminal article on the politics of blame avoidance differentiates among eight strategies frequently adopted by politicians facing a decrease in their popularity in the US domestic context.<sup>49</sup> In the field of IOs, two of them are particularly relevant here for analyzing blame-shifting: (i) find a scapegoat or deflect blame by blaming others and (ii) circle the wagon, meaning diffuse the blame by spreading it among as many policymakers as possible.<sup>50</sup> These techniques are facilitated by the multi-actor and multi-level dimension of global governance but also by specific organizational cultures or even ideologies. In the first

case, blame-shifting can occur among states themselves, among states vis-à-vis the secretariat and the Secretary-General (and vice versa), but can also oppose states and the secretariat to individual staff members, an IO to another, or even include external actors and local conditions. The combinations are numerous and depend on the particular context in which the crises occur. In the second case, the logic is not so much to find a culprit as it is to share responsibility among as many constituents as possible. Yet, despite the huge heterogeneity of crises that IOs have had to face over the 20th and 21st centuries, one element remains stable: *blame-shifting* allows IOs as a whole to shy away from their responsibility. IOs either concentrate the guilt on specific culprits, therefore minimizing the structural causes of a crisis and the political choices upon which they rely and which maintain them, or blame the system in general, thereby discouraging specific and targeted reforms such as the set-up of robust accountability procedures. In the latter case, responsibility is first diffused, then diluted. In other words: if everybody is responsible, no one is.

### *Finding a scapegoat*

Confronted with patent crises and criticisms, IOs may attempt to minimize the negative perceptions of their (in)action and diminish their responsibility by shifting the blame onto specific actors which are part of the organization but cannot be held responsible for it as a whole. In this case, interdependency among the various components of an IO, its members, secretariat, staff and partners, tends to be downplayed. For instance, UN staff often blame member states to explain inertia in arenas such as the UN Security Council.

The recurrent and highly publicized case of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by UN Blue Helmets during peacekeeping operations provides an interesting example of blame-shifting from the organization to individuals. The UN apparently recognizes the “shared responsibility”<sup>51</sup> of staff and member states but also individualizes responsibility: it implements short-term repressive actions against the perpetrators, while minimizing the contextual and structural roots of the problem.<sup>52</sup> Commenting on the “zero tolerance” policy advocated by the UN after sexual abuses were publicly denounced, Otto argues that:

zero tolerance is more consistent with the ‘institutional survival’ of the UN rather than women’s rights and gender equity; it is reactive and seeks to remove outlier elements, without further internal reflection on how institutional structures may contribute to an enabling and silencing culture around SEA.<sup>53</sup>

In a written address to the President of the UN General Assembly in 2005, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared: “The history of peacekeeping has been one of distinguished collective accomplishment and personal sacrifice. However, this exemplary record has been clouded by the unconscionable conduct of a few individuals.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, a few peacekeepers are targeted instead

of denouncing the system of “uneven distribution of responsibilities” where “the majority of political, military and strategic risks [falls] upon those countries least able to bear them.”<sup>55</sup> Analyzing the 2005 UN Zeid Report on SEA and its follow-up, Saiget suggests that the aim was essentially to implement a stricter line of conduct on UN staff as the report insists very much on “individual disciplinary accountability.”<sup>56</sup> It took another two years to convince troop-contributing countries involved in sexual abuse to acknowledge their responsibility and collaborate with the UN Secretariat, and another ten years to see the matter addressed by the UN Security Council in its 2272 resolution adopted in 2016.<sup>57</sup> However, it did not connect these abuses to the economic and social contexts in which they were occurring: for instance, no concerns were raised about the instrumentalization of poverty and the reproduction of gender norms during peacekeeping operations.<sup>58</sup> According to Smith, the resolution is more about preserving the legitimacy and image of the UN as an institution than implementing genuine accountability toward local populations.<sup>59</sup>

Responsibility is also shifted from institutions to individuals when IO heads take the blame without the whole system being questioned, as in the case of Erik Solheim’s forced resignation as Executive Director of UNEP.<sup>60</sup> A former Norwegian politician and diplomat, Solheim took office in May 2016.<sup>61</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 4, he criticized the system’s fragmentation and inertia whilst openly condemning specific member states for their responsibility in environmental degradation,<sup>62</sup> relying on social media to gather direct support from civil society and to put pressure on UNEP’s members.<sup>63</sup> As one UNEP former staff put it, he “snubbed the member states.”<sup>64</sup> His resignation, requested by the UN Secretary-General, followed an internal audit on UNEP official travel and expenses. The report revealed that Solheim spent 79% of his time traveling, selecting illogical itineraries, like flying from Nairobi to Addis Ababa with a stopover in Oslo, incurring travel costs amounting to US\$488,519 within 22 months.<sup>65</sup> Since Solheim was at the head of the UN body in charge of promoting environmental protection, it seemed appropriate to be called out on such excessive air travel. One climate scientist even accused him of “obscene CO2 hypocrisy.”<sup>66</sup> Beyond the scandal, the case highlights the logic of individualizing responsibility. Solheim’s resignation does not question the system which allows an individual to act the way he does, nor does it acknowledge individual actions as embedded in institutional and political decisions. For instance, Solheim’s case was not used as an opportunity to suggest policies restricting air travel for UN staff. Nor did it question the cost of flying UN personnel in business class or the choice to favor New York and Geneva as multilateral hubs while IO headquarters like UNEP’s are on the other side of the world. By framing Solheim’s behavior as an individual problem and blaming him entirely, the UN Secretariat depoliticizes the debate and more generally the environmentally detrimental practices of IOs.

Responsibility is sometimes shifted by targeting scapegoats outside the multilateral system. In 2010, the MINUSTAH participated in relief efforts following the 7.3 magnitude earthquake that struck the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince on January 12. Nine months after the disaster, mismanagement of wastewater in the MINUSTAH’s Mirebalais camp, which hosted a contingent of Nepalese

peacekeepers trained in Kathmandu at the time of a cholera outbreak, triggered a cholera epidemic that killed more than 9,000 people and affected nearly 807,000 people.<sup>67</sup> In 2011, a first report commissioned by the UN Secretary-General from an independent panel of experts concluded that the outbreak resulted from “the confluence of circumstances” and was “not the fault of, or deliberate action of, a group or individual.”<sup>68</sup> The blame was *mainly* put on the local conditions that contributed to the “explosive spread” of the epidemic, since “[t]he introduction of this cholera strain as a result of environmental contamination with feces *could not have been* the source of such an outbreak *without simultaneous* water and sanitation and health care system deficiencies.”<sup>69</sup> Or as Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, puts it: “By adding this observation the experts suggested that nature, as well as Haiti’s under-development, were also to blame.”<sup>70</sup> The 2011 report incidentally insisted on the fact that “MINUSTAH contracts with an outside contractor to handle human fecal waste,” but does not question the way the contractor was selected or the oversight mechanisms set up to verify the contractor’s work, before acknowledging the insufficient sanitation conditions in the camp.<sup>71</sup> While the origin of the epidemic was scientifically documented and pointed to UN responsibility,<sup>72</sup> the UN Secretariat persisted in downplaying the role of MINUSTAH in the outbreak.<sup>73</sup> Relying on supposedly scientific uncertainty, the UN developed three different strategies to side-step the question of its responsibility, according to Alston, who dedicated his 2016 annual report to the cholera outbreak: it concealed agency by adopting phrasing such as cholera “emerged” or “occurred;” it invoked future planning to avoid debating past causes; it replaced vocabulary on responsibility with framing around “blame” in order to avoid engaging legal liability.<sup>74</sup> Alston eventually denounced the UN position as involving “denial of legal responsibility for the outbreak, rejection of all claims for compensation, a refusal to establish the procedure required to resolve such private law matters, and entirely unjustified suggestions that the UN’s absolute immunity from suit would be jeopardised by adopting a different approach.”<sup>75</sup> At the same time, some elected members at the UN Security Council were pushing for a resolution on the matter, going against the UN silencing the debate by using its diplomatic immunity. Rejecting the essentially negative view on politicization, Freedman and Lemay-Hébert analyze the everyday practices of these states “to pressure the UN to finally apologize to the Haitian victims.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, these members rejected the depoliticization of the issue. After the publication of Alston’s report, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon did apologize to the Haitian people on behalf of the United Nations<sup>77</sup> and the General Assembly adopted a resolution which recognizes that “the United Nations has a moral responsibility to the victims of the cholera epidemic in Haiti, as well as to support Haiti in overcoming the epidemic and building sound water, sanitation and health systems.”<sup>78</sup> However, neither the apology nor the resolution admitted that the UN was *politically* responsible for the epidemic. As shown by Pillinger, Hurd and Barnett, bypassing political debates through legalism displaced the issue of responsibility at the expense of individual victims of UN torts.<sup>79</sup> Such situation mirrors the contentious debates over the legal responsibility of IOs as discussed in Box 6.3.

### **Box 6.3 The legal responsibility of IOs: still a long way to go**

Engaging the responsibility of IOs for internationally wrongful acts raises legal questions related to the legal personality of IOs and their autonomy.<sup>80</sup> Despite the considerable activity of the UN International Court of Justice in its advisory opinions and the UN International Law Commission's Draft Articles on the Responsibility of International Organizations in 2011,<sup>81</sup> contemporary international law is best characterized by its indeterminacy as regards the legal rights and obligations of IOs.<sup>82</sup> Whereas the legal personality of IOs is well-settled, its implications for the responsibility of IOs are more difficult to ascertain as well as the consequences for individual victims. Attributing responsibility would require to clarify the primary obligations incumbent upon IOs, but also the respective obligations of IOs and member states while at the same time acknowledging their shared responsibility.<sup>83</sup> Despite progress in this area through the concept of "joint responsibility" within international law, it still remains very limited in its applicability.<sup>84</sup>

These cases do not only show how IOs may conceal their responsibility by following a logic of blame-shifting, they also illustrate the variety of potential scapegoats used by IOs, which can be individual, collective, institutional and, even, contextual.

#### ***Diffusing responsibility***

Other examples show how IOs can rely on a reversed process where responsibility is not targeted but diffused and, therefore, diluted among various actors constituting an IO. The denial of political agency as a form of depoliticization can drive the process of responsibility diffusion, which, in turn, may reinforce depoliticization.

The process of responsibility diffusion and dilution is well-exemplified in the climate change regime. In this case, states spread responsibility to act on climate change among themselves in ways that allow for unwilling states to hide behind the "common but differentiated responsibilities." After two decades of debates on state sovereignty over natural resources, oppositions between the Global South and the Global North over environmental protection in the 1970s have increased within the UN General Assembly.<sup>85</sup> Developing countries denounced a form of ecological imperialism<sup>86</sup> and defended their right to preferential treatment. The General Assembly recognized it in its 1974 Declaration on the Establishment of a New Economic International Order,<sup>87</sup> four years after declaring the sea-bed and ocean floor being "common heritage of mankind,"<sup>88</sup> a concept reasserted in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The "Special Situation of



Developing Countries” was a cornerstone of the Montreal Protocol finalized in 1987 following the 1985 Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer framework. Article 5 of the Protocol proposes a different timetable for developing countries to phase down the consumption and production of ozone-depleting substances. In other words, the Protocol defines a shared responsibility among the parties but a differentiated treatment in the compliance mechanism. These decisions preceded the establishment of the “principle of common but differentiated responsibilities” formalized in the UNFCCC adopted in 1992 and in Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration. UNFCCC Article 3 states: “The Parties should protect the climate system [...] in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.” The differentiation was further reinforced in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which only binds industrialized countries.<sup>89</sup> While the distinction between developing and developed countries has been increasingly questioned since the 2007 Conference of Bali, the differentiated responsibilities remain a critical feature of the international climate regime.<sup>90</sup> Without criticizing the ambition of equity embedded in this principle, we see this case as illustrative of responsibility diffusion that tends to facilitate blame avoidance and blame-shifting, especially in a multi-level governance system where accountability becomes fuzzy.<sup>91</sup> Despite its global reach, the 2015 Paris agreement<sup>92</sup> perpetuates the dilution of responsibility by restating the differentiation among states and entrusting each party to voluntarily determine its contribution.<sup>93</sup> Responsibilities are further spread among actors in charge of setting their own emission reduction goals. Despite much politicized debates over the attribution of responsibilities for global warming, the depoliticization of climate change eventually occurs by letting different actors off the hook. Indeed, the “common but differentiated responsibilities” principle can easily be used as a shield by states who are unwilling to act.

At the global level, IOs provide the opportune institutional context to diffuse responsibility among states instead of singling out the responsibility of specific actors, sectors and types of industries. Many studies on IOs emphasize processes of bureaucratic fragmentation, collective agency and, consequently, shared responsibility. For Graham: “fragmentation inside collective agents inhibits the exercise of standard principal-agent control mechanisms including agent screening, oversight, and agent sanctioning.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, as stressed by Gutner and Thompson, the question “Who is responsible when everyone is acting together and things go wrong?”<sup>95</sup> remains wide open.

The case of the UN’s reaction to genocides reveals another example of depoliticization by following the logic of responsibility dilution when confronted to a patent failure to, at the very least, protect civilians from mass atrocities. Such logic is illustrated in the 1999 Report of the Independent Inquiry on the action of the UN during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, especially the incapacity of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) to stop or at least contain the genocide. Ordered by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan with the support of the UN Security Council, the report makes an explicit effort of fact reconstruction, chronological reconstitution, restitution of both official and

unofficial debates.<sup>96</sup> Yet it remains vague, though not silent, when it comes to attributing responsibility. The main rationale is summed up at the beginning of the report:

each part of that system, in particular the Secretary-General, the Secretariat, the Security Council and the Member States of the organization, must assume and acknowledge their *respective parts of the responsibility* for the failure of the international community in Rwanda [...] The failure by the United Nations to prevent, and subsequently, to stop the genocide in Rwanda was a failure *by the United Nations system as a whole*.<sup>97</sup>

The report stresses the role of certain UN components, in particular, such as the UN Center for Human Rights and DPKO officials;<sup>98</sup> it does so by juxtaposing one after another. Indeed, the underlying argument of the report is that the international community as a whole is responsible for the genocide. In other words, while the tone of the report is rather severe and continuously underlines the “overriding failure”<sup>99</sup> of the UN, it sounds more like a collective *mea culpa* than a genuine search for specific responsibilities.

In his account of the UN responsibility during the 1994 Rwanda genocide, Barnett articulates issues of personal responsibilities (and the difficulty to recover individual responsibility) with a broader and long-lasting collective mentality encouraging denial among members of the UN bureaucracy.<sup>100</sup> Drawing on Barnett’s analysis, we suggest that not only do IO staff and member states’ representatives tend to minimize their responsibility by insisting on external interferences<sup>101</sup> or the lack of resources devoted to UN troops; they go further by substituting apology for responsibility. The first paragraph of the 1999 UN report’s conclusions states: “This international responsibility is one which warrants a clear apology by the Organization and by Member States concerned to the Rwandese people.”<sup>102</sup> Yet, as stressed by Barnett, the excuses provided by the UN are quite ambivalent with regard to acknowledging the UN responsibility: “When they offer excuses, the UN staff [in this case executive heads] and representatives on the Security Council attempt to explain that their conduct was, objectively speaking wrong, but that they were not responsible moral agents.”<sup>103</sup> Apologizing, whether at individual, national or international levels, is an ambivalent practice of recognizing one’s deeds while, at the same time, minimizing responsibility and avoiding conflicts.<sup>104</sup> Analyzing reactions to accusations of political guilt in international relations, Daase, Engert and Renner show that beyond the category of public apologies, a broad spectrum of practices and strategies are at stake (including denial) which do not necessarily involve accepting responsibility.<sup>105</sup> Here, we argue that apologizing might be a first step toward recognizing one’s responsibility; however, it can also become an end in itself that prevents from further investigating the responsibility of IOs as well as of the specific organs and individuals, precisely because they tend to deny the political character of their mission. In other words, despite the politicization of the genocide, the ensuing process of responsibility diffusion through apology concealed the essentially political character of this multilateral failure.

In sum, as responsibility is essentially about *attributing* consequences to the actions of specific actors, responsibility avoidance contributes to depoliticization by diminishing or even denying political agency. In some cases, international bureaucracies and IO members prevent the identification of a responsible actor who can be held accountable. In other instances, member states may diffuse responsibility among themselves, while members, secretariats and staff can bounce back at each other. In all cases, such processes minimize the acting capacity of each component of the system upon which IOs rely, thereby conveying an impression of fate that contradicts the very idea of political action.

### **Maintaining the status quo**

Most of the time, IOs have to accept the political circumstances in which they intervene. This pragmatic stance (see Chapter 4) relates to IO supposed neutrality and claimed impartiality (see Chapter 2). As a consequence, IOs cannot be held responsible for not facilitating major changes they were not mandated to foster. We argue that such an apolitical posture tacitly supports existing political situations and power dynamics. This argument is consistent with findings showing that blame-shifting tactics partly explain political inertia and status quo in the field of domestic public policies.<sup>106</sup> Intentionally or not, IO actors reproduce the status quo by disengaging from certain political debates and by being complicit instead of promoting alternative worldviews and structural institutional transformations. This is facilitated, even encouraged, by the fragmentation and specialization of global governance which enable them to deny responsibility or to admit only a restricted part of it, as global problems are interconnected and, therefore, cannot be attributed to only one organization. As argued by Stone, “fragmentation of policy responsibilities among a plethora of global actors and institutions compounds depoliticization.”<sup>107</sup> Reciprocally, by presenting themselves as politically *not* responsible, they give tacit consent to the existing power relationships and comfort those who benefit from it.

### ***Isolating multilateral responsibilities***

As discussed in Chapter 4, the current multilateral system is structured along a division of labor between multiple organizations with differentiated and specialized mandates. Each IO intends to address the specificities of the issue they are mandated to solve. This bureaucratic feature prevalent in modern states is reinforced at the global level in the absence of an absolute central authority. The depoliticization logic at play here is two-fold. By focusing on one narrow aspect of an issue, international bureaucracies classify and fraction global problems and may contribute to their perpetuation by acting in silos while assuming a restricted responsibility.

The division of labor between a myriad of institutions at the global level fractions multilateral responsibilities into narrow sector-specific mandates, and

prevents the comprehensive and holistic approach required to deal with contemporary global problems. In his analysis of UNAIDS, Nay proposes an example of such fragmentation within the UN bureaucratic system. Indeed, despite the UN Secretariat's advocacy in favor of a multisectoral approach, competition and lack of coordination and communication prevented such a transversal approach to AIDS. Concretely, the Secretariat struggled to challenge UNAIDS cosponsors' inclination to launch their own initiatives to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic according to their specific fields of expertise: "WHO on treatment access, UNICEF on childhood and maternity, UNESCO on formal education, UNFPA on prevention among vulnerable populations, and WFP on nutrition programmes, among others."<sup>108</sup> This trend to concentrate on the technical solutions the organization is able to provide also tends to simplify the problem to one dimension, thereby avoiding more integrative approaches. The fragmentation of responsibilities into narrow sectoral and often technical dimensions was partially overcome by UNAIDS management reforms, but this case reveals the profound tendency of IOs to avoid multisectoral approaches.

In a more critical view, Brauman assessed the way each organization "created" its own victims and problems during the international intervention following the 2004 tsunami in South-east Asia: the WHO dealt with epidemics, UNICEF with orphans, etc.<sup>109</sup> The focus on a well-known aspect might result from professional biases of IO staff as well as the organizational culture and sectoral expertise of an IO.<sup>110</sup> Yet, IOs may have no interest in bringing the complex entanglements of multiple socio-political dimensions which would push them to compete with other actors or lose their legitimacy in addressing an issue, as discussed in Chapter 5. Fragmentation of responsibility is a key feature of the humanitarian cluster reform implemented in 2005. In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, the lack of coordination among humanitarian actors was severely criticized and propelled the launch of the so-called Humanitarian Reform Agenda by the UN Secretariat.<sup>111</sup> In this new system, sectors of intervention are divided and designated leaders among the UN family are in charge of each cluster (see Figure 6.1): for instance WFP and FAO share the lead of the "Food security" cluster while UNICEF is in charge of "Nutrition." This new system, which was first implemented after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, aims to "provide clear *leadership and accountability* in the main areas of humanitarian response" in order to improve "the predictability and *accountability* of international humanitarian action" by "clearly defining the roles and *responsibilities* of humanitarian organizations."<sup>112</sup> More importantly, it claims to provide an apolitical and technical coordination.<sup>113</sup> However, as shown by Egger and others, the cluster system reproduces power relationships between humanitarian organizations, creating a dichotomy between insiders and outsiders as well as between integrated and excluded actors,<sup>114</sup> while keeping on excluding affected populations.<sup>115</sup> The institutionalization of the principle of separate tasks reinforces the fragmentation of responsibilities without necessarily solving issues of coordination but preserving the power dynamics between the different actors involved in the humanitarian sector. In other words, depoliticization through sectoral fragmentation tends to isolate multilateral responsibilities while following a logic of exclusion.

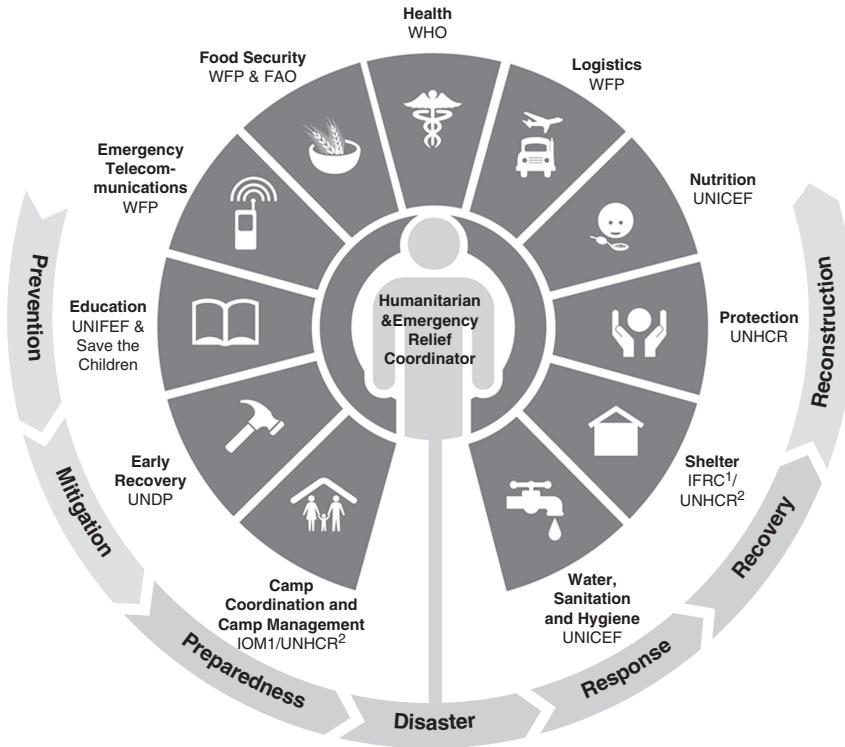


Figure 6.1 Humanitarian responsibilities in clusters. Source: *What is the Cluster Approach?* <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach>

The division of labor between the ILO and the WTO is another concrete example of how fragmentation eventually leads to maintaining the status quo while not attributing the responsibility of broader social problems, such as unemployment or social dumping, to the action of a specific IO. The WTO has often been blamed by civil society actors and trade unions for indirectly encouraging labor rights violations by relying on a strict interpretation of its mandate. This controversy was particularly acute in 1995–1996 when a part of the ILO membership campaigned to insert a social clause in multilateral trade agreements, thereby leading to strong divisions among governments and the labor movement.<sup>116</sup> In 2005, the ILO and WTO secretariats convened a joint team of economists in charge of preparing a study on trade *and* employment. Considering previous controversies, collaboration between the research departments of each organization<sup>117</sup> was allowed under the strict condition that it remains confined to the exchange of information. In 2007, an unprecedented ILO/WTO report was published under the evocative title *Trade and Employment: Challenges for Policy Research*. A

*joint study of the International Labour Office and the Secretariat of the World Trade Organization.*<sup>118</sup> While carefully stressing that the responsibility for opinions expressed in the report “rests solely with their authors” and “does not constitute an endorsement by the ILO and the WTO,” the report was presented as an essentially “technical study,” aiming to be “useful for all those who are interested in this debate: academics and policy-makers, workers and employers, trade and labour specialists.”<sup>119</sup> Complying with the request to stay outside of political debates, a strong emphasis was put on *research* and the subsequent need for an in-depth discussion of “the existing academic literature.”<sup>120</sup> The report cautiously concludes by stressing the interaction between trade and labor policies and therefore the need for greater coherence<sup>121</sup> but without prioritizing one issue (labor rights) over another (trade policies). In this case, the ILO and WTO secretariats insist upon research and academic-oriented cooperation to overcome past divergences, following the depoliticization logic confining inter-organizational competition (Chapter 5). However, it goes beyond a mere cooperative strategy as they also avoid blaming each other for promoting policies with potentially negative effects on employment. They do so by relying on a strict interpretation of their mandate, which eventually leads to fractioning multilateral responsibilities while maintaining the classic division of labor among IOs.

### ***Accepting and reproducing power relationships***

By pretending to be apolitical, IOs not only comply with the status quo, both in terms of national and international politics and within the institutional architecture of global governance, but they also contribute to its reproduction by comfort-ing historical and inherited power positions. When international bureaucracies position themselves as mere agents, even “hostages” of member states, they assert that the responsibility is not theirs. Neither do they “confront domination,” nor do they allow us to imagine an alternative, recoiling from politicization, as defined in Jenkin’s Foucauldian approach.<sup>122</sup> Yet, by evading political stances, they tacitly reproduce power dynamics within the international system.

To begin with, because of their impartiality claims, IOs disengage from political debates over uneven allocation of power and responsibilities among actors within the multilateral system. For instance, Müller asserts that the FAO “defends the status quo by playing the role of the objective and neutral broker who obscures conflict rather than making it apparent.”<sup>123</sup> Her argument reinforces Swedberg’s analysis of international economic institutions at the end of the 1980s:

the doctrine of economic neutrality stands or falls according to what the most powerful Western nations can get out of it. Till now this doctrine has served them well, mainly by allowing these countries to intervene politically and economically in the third world in a way that is fairly inconspicuous. The IMF and the World Bank, in other words, can set demands that a single state could not do without being accused of interfering politically with another.<sup>124</sup>

While the question of responsibility falls out of the scope of Swedberg's analysis, his conclusions are consistent with the logic by which IOs are used as shields by powerful member states to eschew responsibility for an action that ultimately serves their interests. A similar logic is at work in every IO whose governance structure has been designed to guarantee the most powerful countries greater influence in the decision-making process. While this observation is not surprising in the case of the UN Security Council,<sup>125</sup> it applies to many seemingly less central and influent IOs. In the case of the ILO, for instance, we saw in Chapter 3 the enduring efforts to make the group of "states with chief industrial importance" a pure economic and statistical category rather than a political one. Yet, the fact that no revision of the list has occurred since 1986, despite tremendous changes in the economic situation of member states since the 1980s, shows the political sensitivity of a debate that only African states have an interest in reactivating. In the field of global environmental politics, Dimitrov argues that states can design "empty institutions" to avoid losing face when negotiations fail and "block international policy and legitimize collective inaction by camouflaging gaps in governance and neutralizing political pressures for genuine policy action."<sup>126</sup> In other words, challenging power dynamics within the international system, whether internally (see Box 6.4) or externally, remains uncertain.

#### **Box 6.4 The IMF resistance against an independent evaluation mechanism**

Analyzing the IMF, Weaver questions the resistance of the Fund to establish an independent evaluation mechanism despite increasing internal and external demands, not only from civil society actors but also from political ones such as the US Congress which challenged the IMF's lack of transparency.<sup>127</sup> As stressed by Weaver, in addition to budget considerations, one crucial obstacle to overcome was the feeling that such an evaluation mechanism was not necessary:

Most directors, with the exception of the strong Independent Evaluation Office supporters from the Canadian and Dutch seats, dismissed the notion that Fund staff were not sufficiently self-critical in their internal evaluations. They thus rejected claims that independent (as opposed to in-house) evaluations were necessary to achieve blunt and candid reports.<sup>128</sup>

Eventually, a consensus was found in the establishment of an independent evaluation office in 2001. Yet, what is interesting in the case of the IMF is its enduring preference for internal self-evaluation processes rather than an independent evaluation<sup>129</sup> that might open windows of opportunity for challenging the Fund's methods and outputs.



As emphasized in many studies on the World Bank and the IMF, such resistance is rooted in both governance structure<sup>130</sup> and organizational culture and ideology.<sup>131</sup>

IO apolitical claims maintain and reproduce the status quo at the national level. This is especially the case of IOs intervening at the field level,<sup>132</sup> as discussed in Chapter 4. While the functional-pragmatic logic may explain the unwillingness of IO secretariats to express political positions or even openly criticize their member states, this practice tends to preserve existing power relations. The case of UNEP and its post-conflict environmental activities illustrates such an often-unintended consequence of its depoliticizing moves. UNEP presents itself as apolitical to intervene at the country level and secure governmental approval from the host country. However, by doing so, the organization is complacent about the existing political situation and gives it tacit consent.<sup>133</sup> Whether IOs should and could challenge their member states remains open and goes beyond the scope of this chapter. However, we argue that the apolitical stance defended by international bureaucracies has political effects when it comes to reconducting power dynamics. For example, invited by the Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, UNEP sent a multi-disciplinary team of experts to assess the environmental impacts of illegal extraction of minerals, deforestation and mercury pollution. The organization publicly stated: “In the last decades, different rebel groups and criminal gangs ended up controlling large swaths of Colombian territory. These groups exploited natural resources or taxed extraction and trade as a way to generate revenue to finance their operations. This led to major environmental destruction.”<sup>134</sup> In this statement, UNEP attributes the causes of environmental destruction to rebel groups only, providing a convenient narrative for the Colombian government: it does not consider nor mention the possible role of the government and local authorities in degrading the environment or in facilitating the exploitation of natural resources. While this public standpoint could result from partial knowledge and was certainly strategic to allow the organization to conduct its environmental assessment and gain access to the field, it demonstrates the critical role of UNEP in defining and possibly shifting responsibility—to benefit the Colombian government in this case—in terms of environmental degradation.

Moreover, UNEP helps reproduce existing power relationships by minimizing political responsibilities and shifting responsibility from political actors to natural conditions. Reporting on the relationship between conflicts and the environment, UNEP draws attention to the potential environmental causes of violent conflict.<sup>135</sup> Such focus on environmental causes is highly coherent with the organization’s mandate and sheds light on an overlooked aspect in conflict analysis. However, considering the environment as a cause of conflict can inadvertently drive the attention away from the political responsibilities of public actors.<sup>136</sup> Hartmann relies on such an argument to interpret UNEP’s work in Darfur. For her, in its

post-conflict environmental assessment, UNEP ignores the responsibility of the Sudanese government in the Darfur conflict, and by ignoring it, the organization implicitly approves governmental actions in the region.<sup>137</sup> At the UN Security Council in 2011, the Sudanese delegate pointed out the environment as a cause of the conflict in Darfur:

my country has suffered a conflict in Darfur that is coming to an end. I recall our previous statements to the Council to the effect that drought and desertification in that region are among the basic causes of that conflict, and that they are the results of climate change. [...] We therefore assert that the main cause of conflict in Darfur was desertification and drought.<sup>138</sup>

The focus of UNEP on environmental causes can inadvertently promote a depoliticized understanding of conflict situations and lower the responsibility of domestic political actors.

As these examples show, depoliticization can result in maintaining the status quo and reproducing power relationships whether it be a deliberate political move decided on by member states, the secretariat or the organization's staff or proceeds from unintended consequences.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have shown the co-constituted relationship between avoiding responsibility and depoliticization in a variety of contexts. Through depoliticization, IO actors shy away from their responsibilities by directly and indirectly opposing or refusing core aspects that usually define political action: making decisions, exercising power, justifying hard choices in publicly exposed situations. By resisting representation and responsibility attribution while seeking political and moral immunity, IOs attempt to maintain the fundamental tenant of neutrality on which their legitimacy relies. Yet, we demonstrate that such apolitical stances can lead to political results when it comes to power dynamics within the international system. Indeed, the insistence on broader institutional structures in which IOs evolve (fragmentation, lack of leadership, etc.) reminds us of the often-unintentional character and unexpected consequences of depoliticizing moves: tacit consent can be seen as a form of complacency maintaining the status quo and reproducing power relationships, while reinforcing depoliticization.

Whereas depoliticization might be a deliberate move to justify IO inaction or limited action in highly exposed and publicized situations, it also leads to their invisibility often accompanied by accusations of inefficiency or "lack of performance."<sup>139</sup> As Murphy argues, in order to solve existential global problems, you have to "make it someone's job."<sup>140</sup> Thus, avoiding responsibility does not always exclude politicization and can even be counter-productive as it nurtures many criticisms addressed to the lack of legitimacy of IOs. Moreover, the growing development of accountability mechanisms within IOs and the claims for a more democratic global governance make the apolitical stance less and less tenable.

As stated by Boon: “absolute UN immunity does not survive an assessment of accountability, distributive justice, or economics.”<sup>141</sup> However, the extent to which the development of accountability mechanisms leads to actual responsibility needs to be further investigated. Lastly, as IOs undeniably and constantly evolve and can be considered as agents of political change not only preserving the status quo,<sup>142</sup> the relationship between depoliticization and change should be further explored.

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# 7 Conclusion

## The politics of IO (de)politicization

- **Depoliticizing the world: so what?**
- **When politics strikes back**
- **Research agenda on IOs and depoliticization**

At the time of concluding this book, the world is facing one of its most challenging crises in recent history. While it started as a sanitary emergency with the COVID-19 pandemic, it will most probably turn into a worldwide economic and social crisis. Such a global phenomenon stresses the interdependence between health, environmental, economic and social issues and the political apparatus in which they are embedded. It inevitably demonstrates that classifications like technical versus political or low versus high politics do not hold, especially in times of crisis. Although it may seem easier at first glance to find a consensus on health or labor related issues rather than on military ones, it actually depends on the context in which problems occur. This comes as no surprise to readers familiar with Foucault's seminal work on biopolitics which highlights not only the interdependence of science and politics, but also that populations and all biological aspects of human life become the object of political regulation and, to some extent, a justification for exercising power<sup>1</sup> (not always in a democratic manner). As IO scholars, the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic urges us to reach beyond institutional classifications which *might* prove to be political: oppositions do not help unravel the situation and subsequent challenges faced by international cooperation.

This book stresses the limits of the above oppositions and proposes to systematically analyze IO apolitical claims. The objective of this last chapter is threefold: it shows how addressing depoliticization practices and logics sheds light on how IOs operate and their role in global politics; it identifies a series of limits to the depoliticizing moves performed by and within IOs that reinforce the political character of IO action; finally, it suggests future avenues for research to deepen our understanding of IO politics and depoliticization processes.

### **Depoliticizing the world: so what?**

In this book, we identify multiple ways in which IOs do politics while pretending to be outside or above the political realm. Although we take IO apolitical  
DOI: 10.4324/9780429466984

claims seriously we do not subscribe to the depoliticized reading of their action and approach IOs as political actors instead. Considering depoliticization as a political process, we unpack depoliticization enacted by and within IOs through specific practices following particular logics of action: we first account for the *how* of depoliticization, then attempt to answer the *why* and *to what end*. We argue that IO practices have depoliticizing effects that inform on the ways IOs work. Depoliticization is a resilient feature of IO action and, therefore, of international politics. It is performed by a wide range of actors in a variety of socio-historical contexts and provides a key analytical framework not only to understand IO internal and everyday politics but also to interpret the role of IOs in international relations. Following Weiss and Wilkinson on the necessity to delve deeper into the investigation of contemporary global governance, this book shows that depoliticization is one of the “myriad ways that power is exercised within such a system” and that it supports many “ideas and discourses from which power and interests draw substance as well as which help establish, maintain, and perpetuate the system.”<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the book outlines the variety of practices through which IOs depoliticize their action and the global problems they address. These practices span from the production of an expert and seemingly neutral report (Chapters 1 and 2) to the endless postponing of decision-making (Chapter 3). Most of the time these individual and organizational habits are overlooked by IO studies which tend to consider them merely as daily routines. We argue that these practices are key in order to capture the concrete ways IOs function and frame global problems,<sup>3</sup> but also as they tend to silence the political character of IO action. In that sense, practices are both instrumental and accommodating to secure IO legitimacy: they allow IOs to fulfill their tasks and help conceal their engagement in politics which may generate tensions and resistance, especially among member states.

The second part of the book then explores depoliticization logics in the crucial answer to the “so what?” question. It identifies the logics of action which bring meaning to IO depoliticization practices while emphasizing their—potentially unintended—consequences for IOs *and* global politics overall. In some cases depoliticization, based on the apparently undisputable rhetoric of needs and services, helps gain access to a contested field of action or is justified as a functional and pragmatic way to facilitate international cooperation (Chapter 4). It can appear as both necessary and practical in the eyes of IO staff aiming to achieve IO goals to answer human needs and promote international peace. In other situations, depoliticization is used as a tool to assert IO legitimacy while being reinforced by an undisputed monopoly over a policy field (Chapter 5). Whether issues are depoliticized or not, IO depoliticization practices allow them to expand their mandate and profess solutions to world problems. More surprisingly, we show how depoliticization practices challenge responsibility attribution and conceal structural and political causes of pressing world problems while international bureaucrats and IO members manage to shy away from their responsibilities (Chapter 6). In other words, the everyday practices studied in the first part of the book have a significant, yet overlooked, impact on global governance underlined in the second

part. Together they reveal how IOs operate internally and how they shape a depoliticized global governance system. In that regard, depoliticization can also be characterized as a “practical value.” This category is used by Louis in her account of the concept of representativeness within the ILO and refers to a combination of desirable goals, broad enough to embrace potentially conflictual values and ideas, sustained by specific practices. In her view, actors and institutions rely on such practical values in order to both legitimate and fulfill their tasks in an accommodating and adaptive way.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we saw on many occasions that depoliticization operates as a productive process in an instrumental way (Chapters 3, 5 and 6) and also as a professional habit (Chapters 2 and 3), sometimes even as a set of values and beliefs (Chapters 1, 2 and 4).

These findings matter for three reasons: they are empirically thorough, analytically challenging and politically significant. Thanks to numerous case studies reviewing understudied IOs as well as best known ones, the book explores the most visible and invisible<sup>5</sup> aspects of IOs including their secretariats, staff and members. The analysis relies on original qualitative data while re-reading previous work in light of an innovative analytical framework. It accounts for mundane practices digging into everyday inner dynamics of IOs while also considering the global institutional framework in which they are embedded.

By showing how even the most controversial issues such as the UN Security Council reform or the recognition of responsibility in the face of genocides could become the object of depoliticization practices, we counter the assumption that some issues and actors are *per se* or *by nature* more political than others. We rather propose analyzing depoliticization in terms of practices and logics and are confident that this approach can be transposed, adapted and complemented to study such political processes in other contexts including regional, domestic and local ones.

Finally, by focusing on IOs in a time when multilateralism is highly challenged and criticized, this book sheds light on often-unintended consequences of routines and habits which IO actors cannot necessarily reflect on. Indeed, depoliticization is not always an end in itself and some of its effects fall largely beyond what actors could reasonably anticipate. Such findings require time and distance that academic research can offer while allowing an informed and constructive dialogue with IO practitioners.

### **When politics strikes back**

While this book focuses on depoliticization, we do not imply that depoliticization practices and logics prevent processes of politicization within IOs. We rather consider the coexistence of both politicization and depoliticization dynamics as two sides of a same coin. This mirrors Petiteville’s interpretation of a dialectic relationship between politicization and depoliticization, both within and outside IOs, and supports the view that “IOs are not able to avoid the resilient forms of politicization linked to the issues they deal with.”<sup>6</sup> It also supplements the research on the “political work” and the micro-politics of IOs by unpacking the everyday work

of depoliticization in a diversity of domains.<sup>7</sup> While the book cannot review *how, why and to what end* IOs politicize the world, this section focuses on some of the limits and obstacles to depoliticization processes within IOs. Asserting that depoliticization exists and has tangible consequences does not mean that it is always a successful enterprise: neither in the sense of achieving the goals that depoliticizing actors could have expected, nor in the sense of eradicating politics, especially since it actually signals the political agency of IO actors performing depoliticization practices. We identify two main types of limits that future research could explore in further detail: depoliticization might be subject to resistance and contestation but could also be counterproductive.

### ***Resistance and contestation***

With a few case studies this section proposes to explore three ways depoliticization performed by and within IOs is disputed: resisting the stigmatization of politics, contesting the political consequences of depoliticization and challenging the dominant worldview.

One aspect of depoliticization consists in stigmatizing politics. As shown in Chapter 4, stigmatization often takes the form of a negative portrayal of political actors pejoratively depicted as “politicians” who are either incompetent and lacking expert skills or uncollaborative. Politics is reduced to the expression of ideologies and competing, even selfish, interests. Depoliticization practices thus conceal a more complex and “positive” view of politics as pertaining to the realm of cooperation, projection and even “vision” in a Weberian perspective. Far from theoretical abstraction, such a perception of politics is also claimed by certain actors within IOs actively resisting depoliticization as a stigmatization of politics. In a 2012 interview, a government representative of France in the ILO insisted on his “pride” of being a politician. The political vision he defended was both critical of the expert position and close to a Schmittian view on politics as the realm of decision: “I am proud to be a politician [...] Politics is about ‘managing the city [or *Polis* in the Ancient Greek sense].’ So yes, you need people to convey messages, and not only people who help thinking, make suggestions and hypotheses and then ask politicians to choose. Politicians choose, propose, ‘sell’ in a way, and then, they must deliver.”<sup>8</sup> This example echoes Mérand’s conception of gradual politicization when he argues that, in the context of the European Commission, some actors (Jean-Claude Juncker and Pierre Moscovici, in particular) were more publicly political than others and, more importantly, willing to restore a positive view on politics.<sup>9</sup> During the 2016 UN Secretary-General election, such a reappraisal of politics was also perceptible. The election openly aimed to increase the publicity around the debates as well as the media coverage of the candidates’ hearings.<sup>10</sup> Although this publicized election only had very limited results in terms of democratic debates,<sup>11</sup> it somehow contributed to repoliticize the momentum around UN leadership, at least in the eyes of civil society actors.

Besides, we observe more robust forms of resistance to depoliticization by contesting political and social consequences of the supposedly apolitical IO



interventions. We may witness this kind of resistance against the extension of an IO authority over a policy field. We developed this phenomenon in Chapter 5 by analyzing the “turf battle” between the ILO and ISO over health and social standards which, as of today, is still rampant. But this was also the case of UNEP when, in 2007, member states refused to name its new unit “Environment, Conflict and Peacebuilding” as the staff proposed: while claimed expertise and past experiences allowed the organization to expand its mandate to activities in the field of environmental security, member states opposed the suggested name which could potentially justify the organization’s ability to intervene in any conflict situation.<sup>12</sup> At the field level, UNEP’s partners also showed resistance against its depoliticized interventions focusing on environmental expertise, criticizing the program’s ambition to implement local projects despite its original normative mandate.<sup>13</sup> In the case of UN peacekeeping, the UN Secretariat turned to “lessons learned,” “best practices” and expertise to develop its activities aiming at reducing the missions’ ecological footprint. This focus on “low politics” was not enough to prevent criticism and resistance from some member states, like Indonesia whose delegate reminded the Secretariat of its obligation to consult its members before implementing environmental projects.<sup>14</sup> This type of contestation can be supplemented by criticism addressing the political outcomes that extend beyond the IO itself. Looking at the European Commission’s transparency policies during the Greek crisis, Hamm, for instance, highlights the resistance of some officials who questioned the political significance of the demanded measures. Despite apolitical claims, EU officials and national civil servants resisted such discourses: “criticism brings the reforms back in the political realm which involves conflicting political alternatives that have to be discussed.”<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, in her study of the FAO, Müller stresses that not all the organization’s staff agreed with its tendency to render conflicting political and economic interests technical. Resisting the “gloss of harmony,” FAO personnel went on strike in the 1970s “to protest that FAO ‘masqueraded’ as a neutral technical forum while it was promoting Green Revolution technologies.”<sup>16</sup> In these cases, IO actors or competitors resisted the gain in legitimacy that depoliticization practices facilitated. Resistance can also be rampant when, for instance, IO staff challenge functionalist divisions, refuse simplified narratives and include deeper critical stances on their activities. This was the case in 2016 when a UNEP country team challenged the discourse essentially attributing deforestation in Haiti to today’s production and consumption habits of the most vulnerable communities.<sup>17</sup> By stressing the role of agricultural supply chains and thereby the importance of economic structures, UNEP staff resisted the dominant depoliticized narrative on deforestation.<sup>18</sup> Anthropologists investigating the implementation of IO policies on the ground also demonstrate “how seemingly technical issues are re-politicised in the life of the projects.”<sup>19</sup> The reluctance to accept technicization and simplistic worldviews creates more space for social and political factors in IO understanding of global problems.

Promoting alternative views is a third way IO depoliticization is contested. This form of contestation sometimes uses the same practices which participate in depoliticizing an issue, like claiming expertise. In this regard, the struggles among

growth and development measurement indexes are emblematic of the resilience of politics within highly technical and expert debates led by IOs such as UNDP and the OECD. Such “battles of experts” demonstrate that disputes and divisions transcend the traditional frontiers of the political realm. IO depoliticization has also been challenged by social science scholars. As multiple examples presented in this book show, scholars in the field of development and humanitarian studies have been critical of apolitical claims when witnessing the silencing effects of IO dominant discourses and framing of specific issues such as poverty, human development or peacebuilding. Or as Leclercq summarizes: “As a critique and reaction to this depoliticization and decontextualization of interventions, many scholars and practitioners have recently engaged in advocating new approaches, such as *thinking and working politically* in order to ‘bring politics back’ into the equation.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, IO depoliticization can reinforce contestation against and within multilateralism including by IO personnel and partners.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Counterproductive depoliticization***

In some of the cases analyzed in this book, we can observe counterproductive outcomes of depoliticizing moves. Here, IO depoliticization practices have politicizing effects and (re)awaken space for debates, disputes and contradiction; in other words, they bring politics back.

While some practices, such as claiming expertise, may have both depoliticizing and politicizing consequences, practices clearly aiming at avoiding political debates sometimes inadvertently facilitate (re)politicization. This is the case, for instance, of the UN rules intending to have equal representation of member states’ nationals among UN employees as explored in Chapter 6. Indeed, the quota system, even if it does not apply to the majority of UN staff, incites member states to find alternative ways for nationals to work for the UN and promote their interests. For instance, the UN Junior Professional Officer Program gives states the possibility to finance entry level positions in the UN system for a minimum of two years: in this way they are able to control, at least temporarily, the process of staff recruitment rather than letting it happen through competitive exams sessions managed by the UN and funded through the regular budget.<sup>22</sup> While the quota system is intended to depoliticize recruitment and minimize representative ties between UN staff and political interests, it inadvertently incites states to bypass these rules by resorting to other means. In the domain of expertise, Gayon’s work on “the faltering expert’s credibility” within the OECD brings another example of counterproductive depoliticization practices. Thanks to a fine-grained chronological sequencing, Gayon shows how the OECD seemingly neutral expertise fostered protests against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, forcing the organization to re-adjust its agenda by producing a more acceptable discourse on sustainable development and social progress. In other words, OECD apolitical claims led to the politicization of its expertise.

The debates over the reform of the UN Security Council explored in Chapter 3 are another emblematic type of counterproductive depoliticization:

depoliticization practices can open paths to debates and disputes instead of closing them. The recurrent and enduring discussions over the composition of the UN Security Council stresses the vain attempt to depoliticize an issue like representation which is closely intertwined with democratic legitimacy and the broader idea of justice. The question can obviously not just be buried in paperwork, reports, academic studies and never-ending talks. Also, the length of the negotiations certainly plays a critical role in crystallizing the attention of member states and civil society, thereby feeding criticism about the UN's democratic deficit and ensuing lack of legitimacy. The more time is spent on an issue, the more unacceptable the absence of outcomes. Thus, what seems an interesting depoliticizing tactic at an instant  $t$ , can prove detrimental at  $t+1$ . Moreover, even in IOs less publicly exposed, such as the ILO, the debate over fair and democratic representation can always resurface as happened in 2007 (see Chapter 3). Like justice or representation, resorting to universal values can also generate counterproductive depoliticization. Indeed, while IOs may gain in neutrality by claiming universality as seen in Chapter 2, such depoliticization practices are risky as they might (re)awaken significant political oppositions. For instance, comparing the negotiations over the reform of the UN Security Council and the adoption of the MDGs, Pouliot and Thérien show that “as it attempts to depoliticize global governance, the idiom of universal values actually ends up bringing politics back to the fore.”<sup>23</sup>

Had space permitted, there is little doubt that analyzing those limits in more detail would have brought useful insights on IO depoliticization processes. Further research is necessary to explore the complex ways politics strikes back and the constant interaction between depoliticization and politicization processes within IOs since most research addresses only one of the two.

### **Research agenda on IOs and depoliticization**

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, our focus on depoliticization and our multi-case approach inevitably leaves a number of important aspects needing further exploration out of the picture. In this final section, we discuss four promising avenues this book has opened for future research.

First, by moving beyond single case studies, this book identifies general trends occurring in a large variety of institutional, geographical and temporal settings. While it does not assert that IOs operate only in a depoliticized manner, nor that depoliticization is to be found everywhere all the time, it shows that depoliticization does not concern only one type of IOs nor does it happen only during one specific period. In a number of cases, we develop diachronic analysis revealing transformations and dynamics over time and take into account the historical context in which depoliticization processes occur. Chapter 3 particularly insists on time as being a *constitutive* dimension of depoliticization. However, because we focused on the *how*, the *why* and the *to what end* of depoliticization, we did not plan to identify specific periods when politicization or depoliticization dominates, like other studies which pinpoint a trend of increasing politicization during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Such a periodization attempt goes beyond the scope

of this book and could be considered as an additional research step. Nor did we fully address the interconnections between depoliticization processes occurring simultaneously within different IOs. This calls for further research on the mutual influence and interdependence between IOs within the multilateral system (are depoliticization practices mimicked among IOs? Do some IOs influence others in performing depoliticization?). Such a perspective would probably require a more selective comparative research design to sequence phases of (de)politicization in IOs while still accounting for overlapping politicizing and depoliticizing moves. That being said, looking back at the multiple cases analyzed in this book we can list a series of facilitating conditions during which depoliticization might have been prevailing. For instance, following Steffek and Holthaus,<sup>25</sup> we think that the phases during which the functionalist project became popular deserve closer attention, especially since they tend to coincide with the aftermath of worldwide conflicts and the decline of dominant ideologies. Likewise, the rise of new public management guidelines within IOs in the 1970s also constitutes another period when depoliticization may have gained in predominance.

Second, the relationship between depoliticization and the diffusion of neoliberal ideas, translating into “managerialism,”<sup>26</sup> also constitutes a rich avenue for research, as suggested by studies on depoliticization as a form of neoliberal governmentality.<sup>27</sup> Resorting to Foucault’s concept of governmentality has proven relevant in the field of contemporary global governance.<sup>28</sup> Not only does it question the role of neoliberal ideas in promoting depoliticization (to what extent is depoliticization facilitated by the IO neoliberal turn and reciprocally?), it also aims to connect the evolution of global governance to the transformation of the state and ways of governing. As implied in the practices captured in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 and the practical rationality identified in Chapter 4, closer investigation should be undertaken to link depoliticization, reframed as a set of techniques and rationalities, to neoliberal governmentality at the global level. Such research could also further explore the role of ideas, IO staff’s internalized assumptions and organizational cultures which have been promoting depoliticization as a pragmatic way to solve global problems and facilitate international cooperation for more than a century.

Third, looking more broadly at the transformation of multilateralism, we see the extension of actors under scrutiny as a most useful research strategy. Whereas non-state actors are not predominant in the book, they are punctually considered when analyzing the role of experts, individual consultants, NGOs, trade unions, employers’ organizations, MNEs and civil society actors like domestic workers or indigenous peoples. Yet further research should expand the scope of analysis by systematically examining the role of non-state actors in depoliticization processes in global politics. For instance, while civil society is often associated with phases of (re)politicization, further research should account for their depoliticizing role as well. Such research should also explore depoliticization in the context of other modes of governance, be it bilateral aid programs often implemented through IOs,<sup>29</sup> public-private partnerships where IOs may play a key role as facilitator or active partner,<sup>30</sup> or hybrid<sup>31</sup> and informal arrangements increasingly replacing formal IOs.<sup>32</sup>

Such future work could expand our understanding of depoliticization processes in global governance by accounting for the transformation and “opening-up” of IOs.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, connecting depoliticization to the reconfiguration of state power also calls for a closer examination of the relation between depoliticization and democratic processes. While admitting that depoliticization is pervasive,<sup>34</sup> such a research avenue should not assume that depoliticization is necessarily and systematically anti-democratic as implied by Flinders and Woods when they assert that “depoliticisation refers to the narrowing of the boundaries of democratic politics.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, we approach depoliticization as a political process *performed* by specific actors in a specific context and, therefore, do not assume that it is necessarily anti-democratically determined. To put it bluntly, neither is politicization necessarily a democratic process, nor is depoliticization an anti-democratic one. An interesting way to develop such a research agenda would be to explore the paradox by which depoliticization has paved the way to discrediting IO action. Maybe a part of the answer lies in the contradiction between the IO quest for increased legitimacy and authority explored in Chapter 5 and the continuing avoidance of responsibility analyzed in Chapter 6. Such endeavor seems even more important today as IOs are particularly challenged by a wide range of actors: from populist governments to civil society movements criticizing the neoliberal model promoted by many IOs,<sup>36</sup> but also by the “globally governed”<sup>37</sup> ordinary citizens who sometimes are among the most vulnerable people, witnessing the flaws of everyday global governance.

## Notes

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- 20 Sidney Leclercq, "Between the Letter and the Spirit: International Statebuilding Subversion Tactics in Burundi," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 12, no. 2 (2018): 179 (note 6). Emphasis in original.
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