

International Organisations and Development

Classification, Role and Functions of International Organisations Lesson IV

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Classification

A minimum definition of IOs:

a formal, continuous structure established by agreement between members, whether governmental representatives or not, from at least two sovereign states with the aim of pursuing the common interest of the membership.

The vast and heterogeneous reality of IOs can be broken down into subgroups according to three criteria:

1. Membership
2. Aims and activities
3. Structure.

Membership of IOs

- The first distinction is among those IOs which are interstate or intergovernmental, those whose membership is non-governmental and those with mixed membership.
- Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs):
They are usually the same as interstate organisations but some IGOs allow membership by countries which are not sovereign states but which have some kind of government structure (originally, this was the intention of the League of Nations). A further specification can also be made for relations between governmental actors that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of their governments (Transgovernmental organisations or TGOs, e.g. Inter-Parliamentary Union)
- Transnational organisations (TOs):
They must have an actor who is not an agent of a government for at least one of their members (e.g. ILO). They can also have only non-governmental members (NGOs, e.g. Greenpeace, International Olympic Committee).

Aims and activities

- Most international organisations, be they IGOs or NGOs, usually have their aims stated in the basic document by which they have been established (this is not to say that an organisation has no other aim except the stated ones).
- Their aims range from the general and extensive to the specific and particular.
- Nye (1972) uses a threefold division: 1) military security, 2) political organisations, 3) economic organisations. However, in some cases there is a clear overlap of aims.

Structure

- The internal structure can be more or less egalitarian depending on whether 1) they differentiate between a member and another, 2) they have a limited membership or not, 3) they have weighted voting or they adopt majority or unanimity decisions, 4) certain members have veto rights.
- Some IOs have built institutions that can take some independent decisions (e.g. the UN Secretary General, the EU Commission), others have not.
- They can have a purely governmental organisation (IGOs), a purely non-governmental organisation (NGOs), or a mix of both.

The three major roles played by IOs

- Instrument
 - An instrument used by its members for ends that can be either broad or specific (e.g. war avoidance, to manage problems of transnational scale, enhance trade)
- Arena
 - They provide arenas or forums where actions (negotiations, decision, etc.) take place
- Actor
 - They are actors (whose independence varies according to cases) able to influence the course of actions

Depending on the scope and efficiency of such roles, IOs can be influential actors of rule-making/rule-application/rule-adjudication, as well as of more informal functions (socialisation, sharing information, etc.).