



# International bureaucracy and the United Nations system: introduction

International Review of Administrative  
Sciences

2021, Vol. 87(4) 695–700

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00208523211038730

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ras](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ras)**Svanhildur Thorvaldsdottir** 

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany

**Ronny Patz** 

Hertie School, Germany

**Steffen Eckhard** 

University of Konstanz, Germany

## Abstract

Built on the administrative system of the League of Nations, since the Second World War, the United Nations has grown into a sizeable, complex and multilevel system of several dozen international bureaucracies. Outside of a brief period in the 1980s, and despite growing scholarship on international public administrations over the past two decades, there have been few publications in the *International Review of Administrative Sciences* on the evolution of the United Nations system and its many public administrations. The special issue 'International Bureaucracy and the United Nations System' aims to encourage renewed scholarly focus on this global level of public administration. This introduction makes the case for why studying the United Nations' bureaucracies matters from a public administration perspective, takes stock of key literature and discusses how the seven articles contribute to key substantive and methodological advancements in studying the administrations of the United Nations system.

## Keywords

international bureaucracy, international public administration, United Nations

---

## Corresponding author:

Svanhildur Thorvaldsdottir, Faculty of Social Sciences, Geschwister-Scholl-Institut (GSI) for Political Science, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) Munich, Office: G102, Oettingenstrasse 67, München, Bayern 80538, Germany.

Email: [thorvaldsdottir@gsi.lmu.de](mailto:thorvaldsdottir@gsi.lmu.de)

## The United Nations as a system of international bureaucracies

The administrative size and scope of the United Nations (UN) system is often overlooked in both public administration and UN scholarship (Elmandjra, 1973). While this system has long been seen as originating in post-Second World War multilateralism, an increasing body of literature traces the roots of the UN civil service back to the League of Nations (Gram-Skjoldager et al., 2020), the first ‘great experiment in international administration’ (Ranshofen-Wertheimer, 1945), or even earlier (Reinalda, 2020). Today, the administrations of the UN system range from agency headquarters (HQs) in New York, Nairobi, Geneva or Vienna, to peacekeeping, humanitarian or development operations all across the globe, with total expenses reaching USD56 billion in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of staff size, the UN system surpasses the European Union’s (EU’s) supranational administration (see the 2012 *IRAS* special issue edited by Ongaro, e.g., Ongaro, 2012), with official UN staff statistics reporting a total of 114,119 UN system officials at the end of 2019 in 38 different UN system agencies (UNSCEB, 2020). These data exclude many short-term staff (less than one year), consultants and around 30,000 street-level staff working for the UN’s Palestine refugee agency (Thorvaldsdottir and Patz, 2021). The majority of UN staff work outside global HQs. Eckhard and Parížek (2020) counted 1674 UN system operations in 885 cities or towns in 2015, and in 2019, only 30% of staff in the official statistics were registered as working in HQs. HQ staff shares range from 100% in UN Climate Change, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change’s (UNFCCC’s) secretariat (see also Goritz et al., 2021), to 6% in the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and UN Migration Agency (IOM). Of the 70% of staff working outside HQs, over a fifth work within projects. In some agencies, project staff make up over 80% (UN Development Programme (UNDP)) or over 90% (IOM) of the total.

## Past research on UN system bureaucracy

Since the path-breaking work of Barnett and Finnemore (2004), which focused on various UN system bureaucracies, the study of international bureaucracy and international public administration(s) has significantly advanced conceptually, theoretically and empirically (Bauer et al., 2017; see also Finnemore, 2021). Between 2004 and 2014, the number of academic publications with an explicit interest in international public administrations (IPAs) tripled as compared to the previous 40 years (Eckhard and Ege, 2016). International relations and public administration scholars increasingly join forces to study international bureaucracies (Fleischer and Reiners, 2021), resulting in more problem-driven and less discipline-specific research on IPAs (Ege et al., 2021b). A growing number of monographs compare multiple UN bureaucracies (Bayerlein et al., 2020; Eckhard and Jankauskas, forthcoming) or investigate the entire UN system (Patz and Goetz, 2019).

In *IRAS*, past research on UN system bureaucracies has addressed general management (Scheman, 1981), administrative models, culture and values (Beigbeder, 1997), administrative coordination (Ahmed, 1956; McLaren, 2001; Reymond, 1983), growth

(Feld and Kilbourne, 1977), staffing (e.g. McLaren, 1996; Reymond, 1983) and leadership (Beigbeder, 1985). Most of these studies were mainly descriptive and focused on the core UN Secretariat rather than the diverse UN agencies or the different policy domains in which they are active. Only recently have UN bureaucracy studies turned to more policy-oriented research questions (Hickmann et al., 2019).

## **Advancing the public administration perspective on the UN system**

This special issue advances current scholarship through a dedicated international public administration perspective on the UN system. Each article makes theoretical, conceptual, methodological and/or empirical contributions to studying UN system bureaucracies through research designs ranging from a single agency, to comparative, to systemwide.

Combining *survey* and *process-tracing* methods, Ege et al. (2021a) find *bureaucratic influence* in important decision-making processes of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). *Surveying* national administrations in 80 countries on 15 UN system bureaucracies, the study by Busch et al. (2021) shows that the *influence* of these bureaucracies' policy advice depends on how well it is tailored to member states' policy concerns. In a third contribution on bureaucratic influence, Goritz, et al. (2021) combine *survey* and *Twitter data* in an *inferential network analysis* of the influence of the UNFCCC secretariat. All three articles discuss the limitations of measuring actual, attributed or inferred influence of international bureaucrats, inviting future research on the different dimensions of international organizations' bureaucratic influence.

Two contributions use *text-as-data* methods to study linguistic aspects of bureaucratic speech-making in the UN General Assembly (Gray and Baturo, 2021) and the differentiated use of sentiment in the annual reporting of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). (Thorvaldsdottir and Patz, 2021). Both contributions use bureaucratic language as the dependent variable, while leaving open the impact that language may have on the audience(s) of speeches and reports.

Based on a UN systemwide study of geographic representation of UN staff based on personnel statistics, Eckhard and Steinebach (2021) contribute to the debate about the politicization of staff in the UN. They show that indicators measuring bureaucratic merit in recruitment decisions can offer a stand-alone explanation of geographic representation. This raises questions of organizational procedures and potential for reform, which Grohs and Rasch (2021) trace in their study of organizational, budgeting and human resources reforms in the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the ILO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). They find that the four bureaucracies show many post-Weberian features, as well as convergence in reform dynamics across UN agencies.

Overall, the contributions in this special issue clearly demonstrate the growing diversity of research methods, including large-scale surveys (Busch et al., 2021), network analysis (Goritz et al., 2021), text as data (Gray and Baturo, 2021; Thorvaldsdottir and Patz, 2021) and mixed methods (Ege et al., 2021a), for studying UN bureaucracies as single or interrelated public administrations. There is growing interest in the relations between UN bureaucracies and diplomats or other national officials (Busch et al., 2021; Gray and Baturo, 2021; Thorvaldsdottir and Patz, 2021), as well as in dynamics that reveal inter-bureaucracy, systemwide or multilevel dynamics (Eckhard and Steinebach, 2021; Grohs and Rasch, 2021), and various studies also attempt to operationalize and measure bureaucratic influence. Future research on international bureaucracy and the UN system could combine these diverse efforts through increased interdisciplinary cooperation (Ege et al., 2021b; Fleischer and Reiners, 2021). One avenue of such research could be exploring and explaining the emergence of UN systemwide bureaucratic networks and influence dynamics.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

This special issue is the result of a collaboration within the Research Unit 'International Public Administration' (grant number FOR 1745, see: <http://ipa-research.com>) funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

### ORCID iDs

Svanhildur Thorvaldsdottir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6776-4393>  
Ronny Patz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0761-086X>  
Steffen Eckhard  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5320-0730>

### Note

1. See: <https://unsceb.org/total-expenses>

### References

- Ahmed LN (1956) The role of the United Nations Administrative Committee on Co-ordination in the co-ordination of the programmes and activities of the United Nations and the specialised agencies. *Progress in Public Administration* 22(3): 95–118.
- Barnett MM and Finnemore M (2004) *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bauer MW, Knill C and Eckhard S (2017) *International Bureaucracy: Challenges and Lessons for Public Administration Research*. Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bayerlein L, Knill C and Steinebach Y (2020) *A Matter of Style: Organizational Agency in Global Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Beigbeder Y (1985) The operational, administrative and political role of the secretary-general of the United Nations organization. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 51(4): i–ii.
- Beigbeder Y (1997) Challenging the administrative values of the United Nations organizations. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 63(3): 335–344.
- Busch PO, Feil H, Heinzel M et al. (2021) Policy recommendations of international bureaucracies: The importance of country-specificity. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4). DOI:10.1177/00208523211013385.
- Eckhard S and Ege J (2016) International bureaucracies and their influence on policy-making: A review of empirical evidence. *Journal of European Public Policy* 23(7): 960–978.
- Eckhard S and Jankauskas V (forthcoming) *The Politics of Evaluation in International Organizations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eckhard S and Parížek M (2020) Policy implementation by international organizations: A comparative analysis of strengths and weaknesses of national and international staff. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 1–17. DOI:10.1080/13876988.2020.1813032.
- Eckhard S and Steinebach Y (2021) A matter of merit or nationality? Staff recruitment and geographical representation in international organizations. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4). DOI:10.1177/00208523211031379.
- Ege J, Bauer MW and Wagner N (2021a) How do international bureaucrats affect policy outputs? Studying administrative influence strategies in international organizations. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4), [page numbers as in final IRAS issue].
- Ege J, Bauer MW, Bayerlein L et al. (2021b) Avoiding disciplinary garbage cans: A pledge for a problem-driven approach to researching international public administration. *Journal of European Public Policy*, DOI:10.1080/13501763.2021.1906300.
- Elmandjra M (1973) *The United Nations System: An Analysis*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Feld W and Kilbourne LB (1977) The UN bureaucracy: Growth and diversity. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 43(4): 321–333.
- Finnemore M (2021) Conclusions to the special issue on International Bureaucracy and the United Nations System. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4).
- Fleischer J and Reiners N (2021) Connecting international relations and public administration: Toward a joint research agenda for the study of international bureaucracy. *International Studies Review*, epub ahead of print, 22 January. DOI:10.1093/ist/viaa097.
- Goritz A, Jörgens H and Kolleck N (2021) Interconnected bureaucracies? Comparing online and offline networks during global climate negotiations. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4). DOI:10.1177/00208523211022823.
- Gram-Skjoldager K, Ikonomou HA and Kahlert T (2020) *Organizing the 20th-Century World: International Organizations and the Emergence of International Public Administration, 1920–1960s*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gray J and Baturo A (2021) Delegating diplomacy: Rhetoric across agents in the United Nations General Assembly. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4). DOI: 10.1177/00208523211997560.
- Grohs S and Rasch D (2021) Administrative convergence in the United Nations system? Patterns of administrative reform in four United Nations organizations over time. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4). DOI:10.1177/00208523211018781.
- Hickmann T, Widerberg O, Lederer M et al. (2019) The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat as an orchestrator in global climate policymaking. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(1): 21–38.

- McLaren RI (1996) Fifty years of staffing the UN Secretariat: Three stages in the quest for merit. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 62(1): 63–73.
- McLaren RI (2001) UN reform through coordination by the ACC: The continuing saga of the king and the barons. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 67(2): 313–322.
- Ongaro E (2012) Editorial introduction: Managerial reforms and the transformation of the administration of the European Commission. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 78(3): 379–382.
- Patz R and Goetz KH (2019) *Managing Money and Discord in the UN: Budgeting and Bureaucracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ranshofen-Wertheimer E (1945) *The International Secretariat; A Great Experiment in International Administration*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Reinalda B (2020) *International Secretariats: Two Centuries of International Civil Servants and Secretariats*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Reymond H (1983) The representation of nationalities on the Secretariat of the United Nations. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4): 49(4): 349–360.
- Scheman LR (1981) Management in international organization: Is there order in world order? *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 47(1): 15–26.
- Thorvaldsdottir S and Patz R (2021) Explaining Sentiment Shifts in UN System Annual Reporting: A Longitudinal Comparison of UNHCR, UNRWA and IOM. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 87(4). DOI:10.1177/002085232111029804.
- UNSCEB [United Nations Chief Executive Board] (2020) Personnel statistics, data as at 31 December 2019. CEB/2020/HLCM/HR/12, 4 September <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3884998?ln=en>.

**Svanhildur Thorvaldsdottir** is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Technical University Munich, Germany.

**Ronny Patz** is a Senior Lecturer at Hertie School in Berlin, Germany.

**Steffen Eckhard** is Assistant Professor of Public Administration and Organization Theory at the University of Konstanz, Germany.