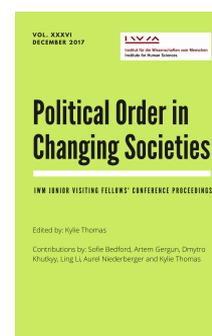


Emergence and Assimilation of Practice in Global Governance: The Example of Arms Embargo Monitoring by United Nations Panels of Experts

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Abstract: How do practices emerge and stabilize in global governance? Global governance is a vast domain consisting of an intricate web of international governmental and non-governmental organizations, think-tanks, and state agencies, some of which are furthermore characterized by internal organizational difficulties and conflicting interests. Despite this apparent disorder, practices emerge and converge across different actors involved in global governance. While one might suspect that self-interested intervention by powerful states drives this convergence, my research points to the importance of social dynamics at the level of practitioners. In this text, I synthesize some of my arguments and results.

How do practices emerge and stabilize in global governance? Global governance is a vast domain consisting of an intricate web of international governmental and non-governmental organizations, think-tanks, and state agencies, some of which – notably the United Nations – are characterized by organizational difficulties and conflicting interests. Nonetheless, practices emerge and assimilate in global governance: discourses and action patterns spread and stabilize across different institutions, are routinely reiterated and thus structure activity fields (see Adler and Pouliot 2011). The emergence of such practice implies that there are significant dynamics towards cohesion, despite the “chaotic” appearance of global governance. What promotes this cohesion? A first assumption certainly targets the most powerful nation states and their presumed capacity to streamline processes in their own interests. This explanation, as I will show, is at least, insufficient. I argue that it is necessary to combine the tracing of the evolution of a practice with the tracing of social dynamics at the practitioner level, such as social networks amongst practitioners. I have conducted such a study focusing on the example of arms embargo monitoring by United Nations Panels of Experts (Niederberger, n.d.). In the following, I synthesize some of my central arguments and results.

Let me first show the insufficiency of a state-centered “top-down” explanation of the emergence and assimilation of practice in global governance. Such an explanation seems intuitive at first: the most powerful states orchestrate global governance practice, yielding financial and political influence on international organizations and imposing the languages and procedures that are congruent with their own national interests and foreign policy doctrines.

There are two arguments against this explanation. First, the interests of various major powers are not congruent with each other. While it is possible that superpowers shape practices and discourses across the global governance system, this does not need to be a driver of convergence: superpowers might as well inscribe the dissonances that they hold amongst themselves in that system. However, not all major powers are equally willing to or skillful at playing the strings of the global governance system: Western democracies, in particular, fund numerous actors that are part of the large web of global governance (including IOs, think tanks, and NGOs), offer ideological support, and often host their headquarters. In contrast, authoritarian powers such as China and Russia tend to take, at the global level, at best a passive stance towards most such organizations, and at home often impede their work or altogether forbid them.

It might thus be sufficient to rephrase the state-centered top-down explanation: *Western/democratic* powers yield financial and political influence on international organizations and impose the languages and procedures that are congruent with their own national interests and foreign policy doctrines. The national interests of this group of states tend to have significant overlap, at least before Donald Trump’s presidency. Thus, the more active involvement of these states in global governance might explain the emergence and stabilization of practices in global governance.

However, there remains a further problem with this state-centered top-down explanation, which leads to the second argument: the causal path from national interests to specific practices in global governance is simply too long and disrupted to allow for inference from the level of national interests to the level of daily practice in global governance. Major powers might give impetus for the emergence and stabilization of certain practices in global governance and they are likely to intervene where practices cross certain red lines. But even if national interests of major powers delineate the range of the possible, that still leaves a vast range of potential outcomes and is insufficient to explain the form any given practice eventually takes. Research must therefore include other factors in order to increase our understanding of global governance.

In my research, I focus on practitioners and social networks amongst practitioners in order to explain the emergence and stabilization of practices in global governance. I conduct a case study of the monitoring of arms embargoes, notably the monitoring practice of the United Nations (UN) Panels of Experts (PoEs). PoEs are mandated by the UN Security Council to monitor its targeted sanctions. The majority of UN targeted sanctions have been taken in response to violent conflicts in Africa, which is also the focus taken here (see also Niederberger, forthcoming). PoEs are composed ad hoc and usually include five to seven experts, the majority of whom are not recruited from within the UN but from various think tanks, government agencies, IOs and NGOs. There is one PoE per

sanction regime (my study covers nine PoEs for sanctions regimes in Africa between 2000 and 2016). Each PoE is usually mandated for 12 months, after which the mandate is renewed and often the PoE partly recomposed. In the beginning of PoEs, there was no routine or standard as to how PoEs in general or their arms experts in particular should proceed; nonetheless, a pattern quickly emerged.

A central part of my study consists of tracing the professional networks of the arms experts on PoEs. To this end, I identify work colleagues and co-authors of PoE arms experts from the time before they joined PoEs. This includes links to other PoE arms experts that were established before joining PoEs (the “inner” network) and links to persons who did not themselves join the PoEs (the “outer” network). Of interest are not all bilateral links but larger groups (social network analysis would speak of “clans:” networks where everyone is linked to everyone else or at least most are linked to most). I likewise trace the evolution of the practice of arms embargo monitoring on PoEs, but also of the related work conducted by the outer network segments of the influential clans.

I show that a few specific networks have gained dominance on PoEs over time, occupying the arms expert positions on most PoEs. Due to their dominant position on PoEs, these networks can then base PoE practice on their own work that they conducted prior to joining the PoEs. Since these networks have been represented on most PoEs, they can furthermore assimilate practice across the different PoEs. They benefit from a cycle of recognition, in which the outer parts of the networks refer to PoE reports or publicly express recognition for PoE practice, while PoEs include work produced by the outer parts of the network in their reports.

This has contributed to a professionalization of arms embargo monitoring, where the dominant networks further pursue the improvement of arms trade monitoring, solidifying also their own positions as leading experts in the field. With this professionalization, the practice of arms embargo monitoring and investigations into illicit arms trades became significantly more technical over time: it has moved from an initial concern with the fueling of civil wars that was still mostly grasped as a political phenomenon, towards forensic procedures for tracing small arms. This development towards more technical procedures shows itself in the production of guidelines and manuals by the respective networks and drives assimilation and stabilization of practice.

In sum, the case study thus shows that several dynamics that play out along networks of practitioners foster emergence and assimilation of practice in the analyzed case: First, the emergence of practice within PoEs facilitated by the predominance of some networks of practitioners. Second, the assimilation and mutual recognition of PoE practice and practice in the non-governmental sector, again along practitioner networks that reach into the non-governmental sector. Third, the evolution of practice from technical towards political concern, also facilitated by the interplay between the inner segments of the networks (those who are PoE members) and the outer segments (those who continue to work from NGO/think tank positions).

With this result, the study suggests that in order to understand emergence and assimilation of practice in global governance, attention needs to be directed at practitioners and practitioner networks. This will, in the next step, require including a different set of power relations below the level of international politics: if networks at practitioner level shape the precise form that practice in global governance takes, then we must turn our attention towards more profound sociological dynamics that explain how such networks form, who becomes a member, and why some become more influential than others.

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