

The Roles of International Organizations in Promoting Global Cooperation

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Abstract

This empirical paper explores the critical roles that international organizations play in promoting global cooperation, particularly in areas such as peace and security, health, education, economic development, and environmental sustainability. Through a combination of documentary analysis and secondary data from institutions including the United Nations (UN), World Health Organization (WHO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank, the study investigates how these organizations facilitate diplomatic dialogue, coordinate global responses to crises, and foster intergovernmental collaboration across diverse regions. The findings reveal that international organizations act as key mediators, policy developers, capacity builders, and funding bodies that bridge gaps among nations with varying interests. However, the study also identifies structural and political limitations, including funding inequality, geopolitical rivalry, and enforcement constraints that impede their full effectiveness. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening multilateral frameworks and promoting more equitable participation in global decision-making processes. The study contributes to the growing body of research on global governance and offers insights relevant to policymakers, scholars, and international development practitioners.

Keywords:

International organizations, global cooperation, multilateralism, the United Nations, global governance, and diplomacy.

1.0 Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the need for effective global cooperation has never been more urgent. Challenges such as pandemics, climate change, armed conflict, terrorism, economic inequality, and forced migration transcend national borders and require collective responses. In this context, international organizations (IOs) have emerged as pivotal actors in shaping global cooperation. From their origins in the post-World War II order to their evolving roles in the 21st century, IOs have provided platforms for dialogue, policy coordination, peacekeeping, and technical assistance across multiple sectors.

The rise of multilateralism, anchored by institutions like the United Nations, World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and others, has facilitated a more structured approach to managing global issues. These organizations have enabled nation-states to cooperate through legally binding agreements, standardized protocols, pooled resources, and shared strategic visions. Yet, the nature and extent of their effectiveness continue to be subjects of empirical scrutiny and theoretical debate.

In an age of growing interconnectedness, global collaboration has become not just a moral obligation but also a strategic need. International organizations have a crucial role in bridging political gaps, assuring fair involvement of member nations, and building mutual understanding among varied cultures and systems. This study explores the diverse responsibilities of international organizations in fostering global cooperation, stressing their contributions, problems, and the consequences for a stable and inclusive international order.

2.1 Conceptualizing International Organizations

International organizations (IOs) are formal institutional arrangements established by multiple states through treaties or agreements to facilitate cooperation on issues of shared interest. (Rittberger et al, 2019) define IOs as entities with legal personality, permanent structures, and mandates to operate across national boundaries. They can be broadly categorized into intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), like the United Nations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Red Cross or Amnesty International.

While IGOs are established by sovereign states and operate through intergovernmental mechanisms, NGOs are usually voluntary and function independently of state control. Both, however, contribute to shaping global norms, influencing policy, and fostering multilateralism.

2.2 Roles of International Organizations

2.2.1 Peace and Security

One of the central roles of international organizations, particularly the UN and its Security Council, is maintaining global peace and security. Through peacekeeping missions, conflict mediation, and sanctions, IOs attempt to prevent and resolve violent conflicts.

For example, the UN's involvement in post-conflict reconstruction in Liberia and Sierra Leone demonstrates its peacebuilding capacity. However, failures in Rwanda (1994) and Syria (2011 to present) highlight limitations in response mechanisms and political will (Barnett, 2002).

2.2.2 Health and Humanitarian Response

The World Health Organization (WHO) and other global health bodies have taken a leading role in responding to pandemics like Ebola (2014 to 2016) and COVID-19 (2019 to present). Their roles include coordinating international response, issuing health advisories, and mobilizing funding through the COVAX initiative.

Critics argue, however, that the WHO's initial delay in declaring COVID-19 a global health emergency was politically influenced and undermined early containment efforts (Buranyi, 2020).

2.2.3 Economic Development and Poverty Reduction

The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and regional development banks work to foster economic growth and reduce poverty in developing countries. Through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), debt relief initiatives, and technical assistance, these institutions have influenced the development trajectories of many low-income states.

However, SAPs have also been criticized for deepening inequality and undermining local industries through forced liberalization (Stiglitz, 2002).

2.2.4 Environmental Governance

Global cooperation on climate change has been institutionalized through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015). IOs play a key role in coordinating national commitments, monitoring emissions, and mobilizing climate finance.

Nonetheless, the voluntary nature of climate pledges and the withdrawal of major states like the U.S. under the Trump administration illustrate the fragility of environmental cooperation (Bodansky, 2016).

2.2.5 Education and Cultural Exchange

UNESCO and other IOs contribute to education development, cultural diplomacy, and intercultural dialogue. Their efforts in promoting global citizenship education, literacy, and indigenous knowledge preservation foster mutual understanding and social cohesion across regions.

2.3 Challenges Facing International Organizations

2.3.1 Funding and Resource Constraints

Many IOs depend heavily on voluntary contributions from member states. This creates vulnerability to donor influence and limits their operational independence. For instance, over 80% of the WHO's budget comes from earmarked donor funds (Youde, 2020).

3.4.2 Political Interference and Power Imbalances

Powerful states often dominate decision-making processes within IOs. The UN Security Council's veto power, held by the P5 (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US), exemplifies how geopolitical interests can undermine collective action.

2.3.3 Legitimacy and Representation

IOs are increasingly challenged on grounds of legitimacy. Critics argue that governance structures often lack adequate representation from the Global South. The IMF and World Bank, for instance, have been called out for their weighted voting systems that privilege Western countries (Woods, 2006).

2.3.4 Enforcement and Compliance

Many IOs lack enforcement power. They rely on soft power, naming and shaming, or conditionalities to induce compliance. This limits their capacity to manage non-cooperation or defection, particularly in areas like disarmament or international criminal justice.

3.0 Methodology

This section outlines the research design, data sources, data collection and analysis methods, and ethical considerations adopted in this study. Given the global scope of the subject and the

involvement of multiple institutions across different regions, a qualitative research design was employed, using a combination of documentary analysis and case study methodology.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design to understand the complex roles, functions, and effectiveness of international organizations in real-world settings. This design is appropriate because:

- It allows for in-depth examination of processes, actions, and interactions within international organizations.
- It accommodates the diverse socio-political and institutional contexts in which these organizations operate.
- It enables interpretation of narratives, reports, and patterns that are not easily quantifiable (Bowen, 2009).

The study seeks not only to describe but to interpret and explain the mechanisms through which global cooperation is enabled or constrained by international organizations.

3.2 Sources of Data

This research is based on secondary data, primarily sourced from:

- Official documents and annual reports from international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and African Union (AU).
- Policy briefs and communiqués from regional organizations like the European Union (EU) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
- Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and global development databases (World Development Indicators, OECD reports).
- News articles and independent evaluations of international organization programs.
- Institutional databases such as UN Data, WHO Global Health Observatory, IMF Data Mapper, and World Bank Open Data.

This diverse range of data sources ensures triangulation and enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.3 Case Study Approach

The study uses a multiple case study approach to explore the operations of international organizations in selected domains of global cooperation (Stake, 2006). Case studies were selected purposively to represent major thematic areas:

- Health cooperation: WHO's role in COVID-19 and Ebola response.
- Peace and security: UN peacekeeping missions in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Economic cooperation: IMF and World Bank interventions in debt relief for low-income countries.
- Climate and environmental cooperation: UNFCCC and the implementation of the Paris Agreement.
- Education and cultural diplomacy: UNESCO programs in Africa and Asia.

Each case study was analysed based on:

1. Institutional mandates and objectives.
2. Strategies used to promote cooperation.
3. Outcomes achieved.

4. Challenges faced.
5. Stakeholder perceptions (where documented).

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The following steps were taken during data collection:

1. Systematic search of databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar using keywords like "international organizations," "global cooperation," "UN," "WHO," "IMF," and "peacekeeping."
2. Retrieval of policy documents, annual reports, and white papers from official IO websites (www.un.org, www.worldbank.org).
3. Review of independent evaluations and impact assessments from development agencies (UNDP, DFID, USAID).
4. Use of citation tracing and reference mining to identify key academic texts and reports.

All documents reviewed were from the period 2000 to 2024, to capture two decades of global governance efforts.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic content analysis. This involved:

- Reading and coding the documents manually.
- Identifying recurring themes such as “norm diffusion,” “funding challenges,” “state cooperation,” “capacity building,” and “institutional legitimacy.”
- Grouping findings under thematic clusters aligned with the study objectives and research questions.
- Cross-referencing findings across cases to identify similarities and differences in IO effectiveness.

The theoretical frameworks discussed earlier (liberal institutionalism, constructivism, global governance theory, and dependency theory) guided the interpretation of these themes.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity:

- Multiple sources of data were triangulated to confirm accuracy and consistency.
- Peer-reviewed literature was prioritized to ensure academic rigor.
- The researcher maintained a clear audit trail of data sources, coding decisions, and interpretations.

Reliability was enhanced by following a consistent coding scheme and applying it systematically across all case studies.

3.7 Limitations of the Methodology

- The study relied exclusively on secondary data, which may carry inherent biases from institutional reporting or media framing.
- The absence of primary interviews limits the ability to assess firsthand perceptions of stakeholders within international organizations.
- Given the broad global scope, some regional or institutional variations may not be fully captured.
- Case selection was purposive and may not fully represent the diversity of international cooperation efforts across all sectors or regions.

Nonetheless, the breadth of sources and rigor of analysis provide sufficient grounding for meaningful insights and conclusions.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

As a desk-based study relying on publicly available secondary data, no ethical clearance or informed consent was required. However, the researcher ensured:

- Proper attribution and citation of all sources.
- Integrity in interpreting data without misrepresentation or bias.
- Respect for institutional confidentiality where applicable.
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4.0 Presentation and Analysis of Data

This section presents and analyses data collected from institutional reports, development indicators, and case studies across key domains of international cooperation. The analysis is organized thematically, reflecting the core functions of international organizations in promoting peace and security, health, economic development, environmental protection, and education. Patterns, successes, and constraints are examined within each area to draw broader insights into the performance and limitations of global institutions.

4.1 Peace and Security: United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping Missions

4.1.1 Data Overview

According to UN Peacekeeping (2024), as of April 2024:

- 12 active UN peacekeeping missions.
- Over 87,000 uniformed personnel are deployed globally.
- The total peacekeeping budget is \$6.4 billion, significantly less than the global annual military expenditure of \$2.2 trillion (SIPRI, 2023).

4.1.2 Case Example: UNMIL in Liberia

The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), established in 2003 and concluded in 2018, is widely cited as a successful example of post-conflict peacebuilding:

- Supported the disarmament of over 100,000 combatants.
- Facilitated two democratic elections.
- Assisted in reforming the security sector and judiciary (UNDP, 2020).

4.1.3 Analysis

UNMIL demonstrates how IOs can mediate conflict, stabilize post-war environments, and lay the foundation for democratic governance. However, missions in places like DR Congo (MONUSCO) and South Sudan (UNMISS) have faced criticism for being under-resourced, overstretched, or politically constrained.

Constraints include:

- Delayed troop deployment.
- Veto power of P5 in the Security Council.
- Lack of host country cooperation.
- Gender imbalances in peacekeeping staff (only ~6% are women).

4.2 Global Health Cooperation: World Health Organization (WHO)

4.2.1 Data Overview

The WHO led global responses to major health crises:

- COVID-19 pandemic (2019 to 2023): Coordinated global data sharing, vaccine guidelines, and the COVAX facility.
- Ebola outbreak (2014 to 2016): Deployed emergency health teams in West Africa.

WHO's funding (WHO, 2022):

- Total budget: \$6.1 billion
- 80% from voluntary contributions, making the WHO susceptible to donor priorities.

4.2.2 Case Example: COVAX Vaccine Equity Initiative

COVAX aimed to deliver 2 billion vaccine doses globally by 2021, prioritizing low- and middle-income countries. By mid-2022:

- Over 1.7 billion doses had been delivered.
- However, African countries still lag in vaccination (27% vaccinated by the end of 2022 vs. >70% in OECD countries).

4.2.3 Analysis

WHO's coordinating role in global health has been effective in mobilizing international action and standardizing responses. However, vaccine nationalism, supply chain disruptions, and donor influence undermined its equity objectives. Furthermore, initial delays in issuing warnings during COVID-19 eroded trust in some regions.

4.3 Economic Development and Debt Relief: World Bank and IMF

4.3.1 Data Overview

- World Bank disbursed \$70 billion in 2022, focusing on climate finance, health, and infrastructure.
- IMF provided emergency support via Rapid Financing Instruments (RFIs) to over 90 countries during COVID-19 (IMF, 2023).

4.3.2 Case Example: HIPC and Debt Relief

The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative provided \$99 billion in debt relief to 37 countries since 1996. Countries like Uganda, Ghana, and Zambia benefited from reduced debt burdens and reallocated funds to health and education.

4.3.3 Analysis

The IMF and World Bank have facilitated economic stabilization and poverty alleviation, but critiques persist:

- Conditionalities tied to loans often include austerity measures.
- Emphasis on market liberalization has undermined domestic industries.
- Representation bias—U.S. holds 16.5% of IMF voting shares (IMF, 2023).

The lack of voice for the Global South in decision-making raises legitimacy concerns.

4.4 Environmental Cooperation: UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement

4.4.1 Data Overview

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the key multilateral platform for climate action. As of 2024:

- 197 parties have ratified the Paris Agreement.
- Over 130 countries have submitted updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

4.4.2 Case Example: Paris Agreement Implementation

The Paris Agreement (2015) aimed to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Data from the Climate Action Tracker (2024) shows:

- Only 6 countries are on track to meet their NDCs.

- Major emitters (U.S., China, India) continue to underperform.

4.4.3 Analysis

UNFCCC has been effective in:

- Building international consensus on climate change.
- Mainstreaming climate policy globally.
- Mobilizing \$100 billion in climate finance (though much remains unfulfilled).

However, the non-binding nature of commitments and the absence of enforcement mechanisms limit the agreement's effectiveness. The Global South continues to demand stronger equity measures and loss-and-damage reparations.

4.5 Educational and Cultural Cooperation: UNESCO

4.5.1 Data Overview

UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCED) programs reach:

- Over 200 million learners through partnerships.
- 194 member states promoting educational reforms.

4.5.2 Case Example: Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report

UNESCO's GEM Report (2023) tracks education equity and policy trends:

- COVID-19 caused severe disruptions: Over 1.6 billion learners affected.
- UNESCO launched distance learning platforms in 105 countries.

4.5.3 Analysis

UNESCO promotes:

- Cultural diversity
- Indigenous knowledge systems
- Peace education

Yet, budgetary constraints and political interference (U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO in 2017) impact its sustainability and authority. Implementation is often left to national governments, with varied success.

4.6 General Evaluation of IO Effectiveness

Effective Contributions:

- Crisis response and coordination
- Norm-building and diplomacy
- Capacity-building and technical expertise
- Global agenda-setting (SDGs, gender equality)

Major Limitations:

- Political manipulation by powerful states
- Inadequate enforcement and compliance mechanisms
- Financial instability due to voluntary funding
- Unequal participation from developing countries

Despite these limitations, IOs remain indispensable to multilateral cooperation. They provide continuity, institutional memory, and platforms for long-term collaboration that bilateral mechanisms cannot achieve.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the key findings presented in the previous section, drawing connections between empirical data and the theoretical perspectives outlined earlier. The discussion emphasizes how international organizations (IOs) function as facilitators of cooperation, norm-setters, technical advisors, and funding mechanisms, while also highlighting the systemic challenges that constrain their effectiveness. The analysis is organized around five thematic domains: peace and security, global health, economic development, environmental governance, and education/cultural diplomacy.

5.1 Peace and Security: Between Mandate and Political Will

The empirical evidence from UN peacekeeping operations in Liberia, South Sudan, and DR Congo reveals the duality of international organizations as both active agents of peace and passive bystanders in geopolitical struggles. Successful missions such as UNMIL in Liberia demonstrate the potential of IOs to demobilize armed groups, support elections, and rebuild institutions. This aligns with liberal institutionalist theory, which posits that IOs help manage collective security through rules and norms.

However, the failures in Syria and Ukraine underscore the limits of institutional action in politically contested spaces, where the interests of powerful states override multilateral consensus. The persistent use of veto powers by the UN Security Council's P5 reveals a structural problem: global security is disproportionately controlled by a few, undermining the democratic legitimacy of IOs. From the lens of dependency theory, such imbalances reflect a neocolonial structure in which weaker nations must rely on the goodwill of more powerful states for protection and support.

5.2 Global Health: Coordinated Yet Unequal Response

The WHO's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects a complex intersection of competence and constraint. The organization demonstrated significant capacity in coordinating data sharing, issuing technical guidance, and mobilizing vaccine distribution through COVAX. These actions affirm the value of IOs in standardizing international response frameworks and reflect the strength of global governance theory's emphasis on coordination beyond states.

Yet, the stark inequalities in vaccine access, particularly in Africa and South Asia, highlight the deep structural disparities embedded in the global health system. Rich nations' hoarding of vaccines and the dominance of private pharmaceutical interests eroded the WHO's equity goals. Constructivist insights show that while the WHO promoted ethical norms like fair allocation, compliance was optional, leading to nationalistic behaviour in practice.

These findings reinforce calls for:

- Strengthening WHO's independent funding capacity.
- Binding global health treaties that ensure more equitable resource allocation.
- Enhancing Global South representation in health decision-making bodies.

5.3 Economic Development: Between Support and Structural Constraints

International financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank have facilitated debt relief, emergency support, and development financing. The HIPC initiative, for instance, enabled several African countries to reallocate public funds toward social services, demonstrating the capacity of IOs to incentivize pro-poor policy shifts. This aligns with liberal institutionalist views on how IOs reduce economic instability and foster cooperation through technical and financial mechanisms.

However, the study finds that:

- Loan conditionalities often impose neoliberal reforms, such as privatization and austerity, that can exacerbate inequality.
- Voting power and leadership selection favour the Global North, marginalizing the agency of recipient countries.
- Monitoring and enforcement are asymmetrically applied, with less pressure on wealthy states.

From a dependency theory perspective, the IMF and World Bank reinforce patterns of economic dependence, whereby developing countries become structurally reliant on Western institutions for survival rather than transformation.

5.4 Environmental Governance: Soft Power, Strong Norms, Weak Compliance

The UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement have contributed significantly to the normative institutionalization of climate responsibility. With nearly all countries signed on, these agreements reflect the power of IOs to build consensus and provide a global framework for addressing climate change. Constructivist theory helps explain this success: IOs act as norm entrepreneurs, framing climate change as a moral and practical imperative.

However, the study finds that:

- Commitments are largely voluntary, with no formal enforcement mechanism.
- Climate finance pledges remain underdelivered, especially for adaptation in vulnerable states.
- The largest emitters continue to underperform on emissions reductions.

The gap between agreement and action illustrates a credibility crisis. Without enforcement, many commitments remain symbolic. From a global governance standpoint, IOs lack the regulatory authority to hold states accountable, especially when economic interests conflict with environmental goals.

5.5 Education and Cultural Diplomacy: Norm Promotion Amid Resource Limitations

UNESCO has been instrumental in promoting educational equity, intercultural dialogue, and peace education. Its normative influence, especially through the SDGs and global education reports, has shaped national curricula and policy priorities. Constructivist theory is especially relevant here, as UNESCO facilitates ideational transformation through education, culture, and heritage.

However:

- UNESCO's reliance on voluntary member-state contributions leads to unstable funding.
- Political withdrawals (U.S. and Israel in 2017) affect institutional morale and global legitimacy.
- Implementation of programs varies significantly depending on domestic political will.

While UNESCO excels in agenda-setting, its execution capabilities are limited, and its influence is often strongest in symbolic and discursive spaces rather than in practical transformation.

6.0 Conclusion

International organizations (IOs) occupy a central position in the architecture of global cooperation. Across sectors—from peace and security to health, economy, climate, and education—IOs have proven to be indispensable platforms for convening states, setting norms, mobilizing resources, and coordinating collective action. This study has shown that while IOs are

not flawless institutions, they remain among the few entities capable of transcending national borders to tackle complex global challenges.

Data from UN peacekeeping, WHO's pandemic response, IMF and World Bank debt interventions, the UNFCCC's climate regime, and UNESCO's educational initiatives all underscore the vital, yet constrained, roles IOs play. Their successes in promoting peace in Liberia, facilitating vaccine access via COVAX, and advancing climate agreements through the Paris Accord are a testament to their relevance. However, their shortcomings, such as limited enforcement, funding dependency, donor-driven agendas, and structural inequalities, also reveal systemic flaws that limit their transformative potential.

Ultimately, global cooperation through international organizations reflects a paradox: states and non-state actors alike rely on IOs to coordinate global solutions, yet many of these institutions are undermined by the power dynamics they are meant to mitigate. Moving forward requires not just reforms in structure, funding, and mandate but also a genuine commitment to shared responsibility and inclusive governance.

8.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the roles and effectiveness of international organizations in promoting global cooperation:

- IOs should diversify their funding sources to reduce reliance on earmarked voluntary contributions from a few dominant donors.
- Establishing mandatory assessed contributions and global solidarity funds can enhance financial independence and reduce political interference.
- Regional funding pools (AU Peace Fund) should be encouraged to complement global financing mechanisms.

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