Dijkzeul, Dennis and Dirk Solomons (eds), “International Organizations Revisited: Agency and Pathology in a Multipolar World”

New York, Berghahn, 2021, pp. 410, $145.00/£107.00

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This edited volume offers a critical view of international organizations (IOs)—government, multi-lateral and non-governmental—in addressing some of the world’s most pressing problems. Ultimately, the editors and authors find the ability of IO’s insufficient to meaningfully address and solve global issues. hampered and constrained by what they call “pathologies” within IOs, they are prevented from adapting to a rapidly changing environment and increasingly polarized world. They use “pathology” because, as the editors write, “the organization’s dysfunctional management (causes of the disease) results in negative outcomes (symptoms of the disease)” (p. 2). The diseases in IOs they focus on are inefficiency, patronage, slow and bureaucratic decision-making processes, corruption and fraud.

The book is organized into four sections, each focusing on a distinct area facing international organizations. The first two are primarily focused on the pathologies of the United Nations, from its weaknesses in human development, to organizational culture and north–south relationships. The first section, “Decision-making with National Governments,” specifically focuses on the development of the UN and other IOs over the last century and points out how the historical and archaic structures and processes have led to IOs being underfunded and out of step with today’s needs. In other words, organizations that had been developed in the twentieth century are wholly inadequate, structurally or culturally, to appropriately address the challenges of the 21st. For example, the chapter by Aviles and Lakser discusses the deep structural flaws in the organization and funding of the UN (flowing largely from state partners) that leaves it fragmented and its goals misaligned with its funding streams, resulting in not having the necessary capacity to meet its mandate(s).

The second section, “Decision-Making within International Organizations,” focuses on the pathologizes embedded into and among international organizations, and the challenges faced in reform efforts. Salomons’ chapter argues that organizations, such as the United Nations, that were founded largely with colonial structures and diplomacy in mind, have struggled to meet the growing demands around public health, poverty alleviation and economic development. Biegbder’s chapter, on the other hand, outlines the ongoing issues with corruption and fraud that have left the UN starved for resources and under more intense scrutiny than ever before.

The third section is when the text turns to the role of IOs in “Implementation and Evaluation” of its programs and projects, focusing on narrower aspects of international organizations, including case studies situated in different national contexts. The section provides an insight into the complex and dynamic environments (historical, political, and economic) being experienced on the ground by those tasked with key international priorities, such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other priorities identified by donors. In the fourth and last section of the book, the editors provide some “therapies” for international organizations, including recommendations for reform to make IOs more responsive, transparent and collaborative in their efforts.

Interestingly, the editors outline one key feature in their own limitations in understanding IOs and their pathologies.
The book is organized in such a way that perpetuates the “top down” concerns raised by the authors. For one, in the first two thirds of the text, the role of nongovernmental actors, including NGOs, civil society organizations and communities, barely registers to the reader. The editors illustrate this in the final “therapies” section, which describes the often top-down model of IO action which moves from the “strategic arena,” of international elites, states and donors who make decisions, and the “implementation arena” that is often managed by international or local NGOs and civil society organizations, along with a broad set of local and state actors. This may create new tensions, as particularly seen in the chapters by Krause on international human rights organizations, Evenson’s chapter on civil society organizations in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ohanyan’s and Ter-Gabrielyan’s case study on a cross-border network of organizations in Turkey and Armenia. Building on the contributions of this volume, a question remains: what structural or cultural reform may better knit the strategic and action arenas together? While global issues require discussion at the global level, might “reform” in the context of IOs include deconstructing the hierarchical management of the problems faced by those in communities around the world? Are there new forms of organizations, decision-making and control that may better serve the needs of people facing the impact of climate change, poverty, food insecurity, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic? While the editors pose that it is the international organization that often bridges these two arenas until actors are able to move back and forth across the domains on their own, the disconnect will remain.

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