International Organizations' Policy Response to COVID-19 in Longer Terms

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Debre and Dijkstra (2021) explore international organizations (IOs') policy response to COVID-19 in the first wave. With a six-point scale to measure the strength of such responses, it is found that IOs with more general policy scope, higher amount of COVID-19 cases in member countries, and larger size of staff employed are likely to have stronger policy responses to COVID-19 in the first wave. This paper acknowledges these findings and contributions, while extends the horizon to explore IOs' policy response to COVID-19 in relatively longer terms. It argues that in longer terms, IOs' policy responses to exogenous shocks such as COVID-19 will be affected by several factors such as the actual size of workforce. This paper suggests to re-examine IOs' policy scope and policy fields with a more sophisticated classification as they may also affect IOs' policy responses to COVID-19 in longer terms.

In the article titled 'COVID-19 and Policy Responses by International Organizations: Crisis of Liberal International Order or Window of Opportunity?', its authors argue that while exogenous crisis including COVID-19 becomes a challenge to liberal international order including the work of international organizations (IOs), such crisis may also become windows of opportunities to expand IOs' work scopes and policy instruments (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021). Based on the analysis of 75 IOs' policy response to COVID-19 in the first wave of the pandemic (March to June 2020), Debre and Dijkstra (2021) find that there are disparities across IOs' policy responses to COVID-19. The strength of IOs' policy response to COVID-19 is measured by a six-point scale developed by the authors, ranging from 0 (no response) to 5 (very high). Empirical results in the article demonstrate that IOs with larger staff size, more general policy scope, and higher number of COVID-19 cases in member states are more likely to have strong policy responses to COVID-19 in the first wave. However, being different from the popular belief, some other factors such as IOs' policy fields (whether an IO deals with health, economics, finance, and border management and migration) do not have statistically significant impact on IOs' policy response to COVID-19 in the first wave. In short, Debre and Dijkstra (2021) have several interesting findings and enrich scientific knowledge of IOs' responses to external shocks including COVID-19. Scientific insights and practical implications are also generated in Debre and Dijkstra's research.

With the wide-spread of the pandemic in the subsequent waves, Debre and Dijkstra (2021) also create space for further studies on IO's responses to COVID-19. In particular, it provokes a further research question: what are IOs' policy responses to COVID-19 in relatively longer terms (e.g., one year after the first outbreak)? With the continuing spread of COVID-19 around the world after the first wave, the pandemic's impact on IOs and IOs' policy responses to COVID-19 may change. For example, the pandemic's impact on IOs specialized in education and environment may become more substantial than in the first wave, when IOs dealing with health, economics, finance, border management and migration are perceived to be most affected (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021). To explore IOs' policy responses to COVID-19 in longer terms, it is suggested to examine the timing of responses. A reconsideration of IOs' policy fields and policy scope is also suggested.

A main objective of this paper is to establish dialogues in the field of IOs' responses to exogenous crisis...
such as COVID-19. It is essential to emphasize that this paper is not contradictory to the findings of Debre and Dijkstra (2021), which focus on IOs’ responses to COVID-19 in the first wave only. Instead, this paper benefits from the foundation that was established by Debre and Dijkstra (2021), and aims to extend the analysis of IOs’ responses to COVID-19 in relatively longer terms.

1 | TIMING OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS’ RESPONSES

As introduced by Debre and Dijkstra (2021), exogenous shocks including COVID-19 require quick responses from many IOs and have the potential to shape IOs’ future developments. The ‘0–5’ six-point scale developed by Debre and Dijkstra (2021), although not perfect, is a useful tool to quantify the strength of IOs’ policy responses to exogenous shocks such as COVID-19. However, Debre and Dijkstra (2021) leave spaces for further exploration on the possible ‘first-mover advantages’ and whether and how IOs respond to COVID-19 in the first wave can affect its responses in medium and long terms.

In a relatively longer term, the timing of IOs’ response could be affected by several factors. One of the most important factors is that the pandemic’s impact on the IOs’ work and active regions have been properly perceived by the IOs (including the secretariats and member states). This is somewhat supported by Debre and Dijkstra’s empirical results that IOs which are active in regions with higher initial number COVID-19 cases tend to take stronger policy responses in the first wave of the pandemic. However, with the expansion of the pandemic in longer terms, some IOs which do not take immediate response to CODIV-19 in the first wave may also respond strongly, as they experienced an increased impact of the pandemic on their work, including the increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in their active regions. To give an example, Debre and Dijkstra (2021) find that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s (SCO) response to COVID-19 in the first wave is only ‘low’. But in early September 2021 the SCO summoned a group of experts and organized a webinar to explore the issue of medical aid during emergencies (SCO Secretariat, 2021), after the soaring of COVID-19 cases in Russian Federation (a major member state of the SCO) in the second half of 2020 and first half of 2021. This means an increase of the level of policy response (from ‘low’ to ‘high’ because new tasks were initiated) as defined by Debre and Dijkstra (2021). This example demonstrates that the timing of some IOs’ responses to COVID-19 is affected by the perceived impact of the pandemic on their work and active regions.

Furthermore, in consideration of the administrative procedures in IOs, it may take substantial time for IOs to perceive the impact of COVID-19 and take policy responses. Still using the example in the previous paragraph, summoning a group of experts and organizing a specialized webinar at IOs such as SCO may require considerable time for the preparation. This usually includes drafting a proposal for the webinar and seeking approval, confirming the theme(s) and agenda, as well as arranging the logistics. Therefore, IOs do not take strong policy response to COVID-19 in its first wave may have stronger responses in subsequent waves.

Another substantial factor that could affect the timing of IOs’ responses to COVID-19 is IOs’ actual size of workforce. Debre and Dijkstra (2021) demonstrate that IOs with larger staff size are more possible to reassign staff resources to respond COVID-19 in the first wave. However, this may not be the situation in longer terms. This can be reflected by the case of United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), whose response to COVID-19 in the first wave is classified as ‘medium’ by Debre and Dijkstra. As shown by UNIDO (2021a, 2021b), in 2020, especially late 2020, UNIDO initiated and implemented specific activities in response to COVID-19, in addition to their planned and established projects and programmes. This could be associated with the practice that UNIDO has a much larger non-staff workforce than its staff team (UNIDO, 2021b), as the recruitment of non-staff workforce is usually more flexible and task-specific (Liu, 2020). Therefore, although IOs such as UNIDO did not strongly respond to COVID-19 in its first wave due to its relatively smaller staff size, the responses in longer terms may be stronger because of the large non-staff workforce. This example demonstrates that the timing of some IOs’ policy responses to COVID-19 is possibly affected by the actual size of workforce instead of the staff size of IOs, especially in the United Nations (UN) system where the proportion of non-staff workforce is substantial (Teriz & Fall, 2014).

2 | RECONSIDERATION OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS’ POLICY FIELDS AND POLICY SCOPE

In a relatively longer term (e.g., up to the first half of 2021), the impact of COVID-19 on many policy fields of IOs have been demonstrated by existing evidence (e.g., Barbier & Burgess, 2020). Therefore, IOs are more likely to take stronger policy responses in later waves of the COVID-19 than in the first wave, when the pandemic’s impact on some policy fields were less perceived than those related to economics, finance, health, border management and migration. In other words, although IOs working on economics, health, finance, plus border management and migration were perceived to be most affected in the first wave of COVID-19 (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021), it may no longer
be the situation in a relatively longer term, when many policy fields were also strongly affected by the pandemic. For example, Debre and Dijkstra (2021) find that Global Environment Facility (GEF) was only fulfilling its existing tasks or using established policy instruments in the first wave of COVID-19, and its response was therefore classified as ‘low-medium’ (score 2 in the 0–5 scale). However, in 2021, when the pandemic’s impact on environment was more observed, GEF funded a project ‘Green and Inclusive Recovery in Mexico’ (GEF, 2021). Therefore, GEF’s response to COVID-19 should be classified as ‘high’ in Debre and Dijkstra’s six-point scale (score 4 in the 0–5 scale) because the project is a new task.

A re-consideration of IOs’ policy scope is suggested to explore IOs’ policy responses to COVID-19 in relatively longer terms. Debre and Dijkstra (2021) distinguish IOs into ‘general purpose’ and ‘task-specific’ based on the argument that the scope of general purpose IOs are more likely to expand than task-specific IOs (Hooghe et al., 2019). This dichotomy of IOs is more suitable in short term, as it may take some time for task-specific IOs to change their work portfolios as a result of exogenous shocks such as COVID-19. The simplicity of this dichotomy also brings conveniences for enhancing general public’s knowledge of IOs’ work. But in relatively longer terms, although the work scope of general purpose IOs (such as the European Union) are still more likely to be extended (Hooghe et al., 2019), task-specific IOs may also have sufficient incentives, capacities, and resources (including time) to expand their work scope.

In addition, such dichotomy may not fully capture the multi-dimensional nature of IOs’ work. This is particularly the situation for organizations within the UN system, which is now working under the guidance of the roadmap of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are highly multi-dimensional and interactive (Liu, 2021), so that UN organizations are more likely to be general purpose IOs even their names or mandates may suggest they only focus on specific tasks or a few SDGs. For example, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) can be classified as a task-specific IO according to its purposes and functions to contribute to peace and development via collaborations in education, science and culture (UNESCO, 2019), which are mainly reflected by SDG 4 and SDG 17. Its official name may also create an impression that UNESCO is a task-specific IO focusing on education, science and culture. However, since UNESCO actively works in other tasks beyond its mandate (although still loosely related to the mandate), such as ocean environmental protection (especially via its Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission), it could also be classified as a general purpose IO. In addition, beyond the common perception of its work scope, UNESCO even positively participates in vaccination initiatives as a response to COVID-19. For example, UNESCO initiated tasks to address ethical issues of COVID-19 vaccinations and monitor the progress of COVID-19 vaccinations among teachers (UNESCO, 2021, 2022). Both of them should be considered as strong policy response to COVID-19 (score 4 in the ‘0–5’ scale) because they are new tasks.

Although the dichotomy of IOs’ policy scope applied by Debre and Dijkstra (2021) has significant advantages such as its simplicity and convenience to use, a more sophisticated classification of IOs' policy scope, which can better reflect the interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional nature of IOs’ work, should be a contribution of future studies in this field. A possible improvement in the classification of IOs' policy scope based on the simple dichotomy is to add a few other categories in addition to ‘task-specific’ and ‘general purpose’. For example, similar to the six-point scale to measure the strength of IO’s policy responses to COVID-19, it would be feasible to add some extra categories such as ‘highly task-specific’ (strictly focusing on the tasks as designated in the mandate or charter without anything beyond), ‘semi task-specific’ (also working on tasks strongly associated with mandated tasks), and ‘high general purpose’ (with very broad mandate and geographical coverage). Such a five-point scale, although still far from perfect, would be more comprehensive to capture the multi-dimensional and inter-connected nature of IOs’ work, especially those strongly related to the UN system and the SDGs.

To support the more sophisticated classification of IOs’ policy scope, it is highly recommended to develop more in-depth knowledge of IOs’ work, although this may not be straightforward in practice even it sounds easy on paper. For example, in addition to the information provided by the Measuring International Authority (MIA) dataset (Hooghe et al., 2017), it would be useful to explore the information of IOs’ work on their websites with special attention to both their mandates and recent work updates. This is because the latter may reflect the possible expansion of IOs’ work portfolio and policy scope as a result of exogenous shocks such as COVID-19. It is also advised to explore the organizational structure of IOs, which may reveal information on IOs’ work portfolio and policy scope. For example, if the existence of Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission in UNESCO is widely noted, then the general public will not be surprised about that ocean environmental protection is also within UNESCO’s work portfolio. Interview and/or informal conversations with workers at IOs may generate knowledge of IOs' work portfolio and policy scope, on top of information that can be obtained from literature and websites. Such efforts, however, are time-consuming and thus may not be suitable for Debre and Dijkstra (2021) which focus on IOs’ policy responses to COVID-19 in short term. These efforts are more suitable for future studies on
IOs’ policy responses to exogenous shocks including COVID-19 in longer terms.

In short, Debre and Dijkstra (2021) use empirical evidence to analyse IOs’ policy responses to COVID-19 in its first wave, which triggers the interest in such responses in longer terms. It calls for future studies on how IOs respond to external shocks such as COVID-19 in medium and long terms and how they may differ from the responses in the short term. Fine-grained qualitative research and small sample case studies would be particularly interesting. In addition, a review of the classification of the level of IOs’ policy responses plus an in-depth exploration of selected IOs’ policy fields and scope may lead to extra findings and extend the contribution of Debre and Dijkstra (2021). It would also be interesting to seek empirical evidence to test whether there are significant ‘first-mover advantages’ of IOs when responding to external shocks, which is an open question that Debre and Dijkstra (2021) leave spaces for further exploration.

This paper shares some initial thoughts of IOs’ policy responses to COVID-19 in a relatively longer term, and also has the objective to initiate further dialogues in this field. In consideration of the substantial amount of non-staff workers in IOs, this paper suggests using the de-facto size of workforce rather than nominal staff size of IOs to proxy IOs’ human resource capacities. In addition, it is advised to reconsider the simple dichotomy of IOs into general IOs and task-specific IOs. More in-depth reviews of IOs’ policy fields and scope and more sophisticated classifications of IOs, such as categorical scales, are recommended. This paper appreciates the contribution of Debre and Dijkstra (2021), and aims to extend it to medium and longer terms by further strengthening the connections between some theoretical hypotheses and the practice of IOs.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ENDNOTE

1 Debre, M.J and Dijkstra, H. (2021) COVID-19 and Policy Responses by International Organizations: Crisis of Liberal International Order or Window of Opportunity? Global Policy 12(4), 443–454. First published online: 23 June 2021 https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12975.

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