UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

UNU-WIDER

Research Paper No. 2006/109

International Organizations as a Profession

Professional Mobility and Power Distribution

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September 2006

Abstract

The role of international organizations grows with the acceleration of globalization and the increasing importance of global governance. However, thus far, only limited and rather narrow research has been generated on the subject. It is a state of affairs that reflects on international studies, as well as on the power realities of the world. By assessing international organizations through the career prospects that they offer to skilled professionals, this paper is an attempt to remedy this situation. As such it unveils some of the internal dynamics of international organizations and explores their external consequences in terms of the relations between international organizations, the people employed by these, and the power play (economic, social, political and even cultural) at the national and international level.

Minimization of human resources; or the downsides of international organizations – Poor human resources management tends to be one of the disadvantages of international organizations. According to various studies and surveys, the UN is in many respects a rather unhappy place with dysfunctional characteristics, if not pathologies, which significantly impede its attractiveness to skilled professionals. Among the shortcomings related to the minimal use of already weak human resources, four important factors stand out: i) ambiguous security and career development tracks; ii) process rather than result-oriented work; iii) *ad hoc* and unsystematic implementation of mandates; and iv) self-centered exercise of leadership.

Both in the public and private sectors, there is a general trend to hire staff on short-term contracts.[44] In the UN in particular, this has become the rule rather than the exception. In 2005, the number of regular budget posts in the United Nations system was far lower than the extra-budgetary funds and short-term contracts for support and professional staff (see table in Annex 1). But before turning to the negative consequences of this trend, there are a few advantages that are worth mentioning. Short-term contracts provide flexibility and access to additional human resources that are all the more important in light of the reluctance of member states to increase the UN regular budget. In addition, short-term contracts are not necessarily followed by unemployment and they can go on for several years. Yet, the human and institutional costs of this trend make these positions less attractive, especially from the point of view of developed countries, in which the national civil service offers a long and well-delineated career.

At a human level, short-term contracts bring a sense of insecurity and the constant possibility of the termination of the contract renders staff vulnerable vis-à-vis management. Also, short-term contracts encourage what one could call 'institutional cowardness', where staff is reluctant to challenge and report wrongdoings that they may witness in fear of jeopardizing their job. This has negative effects on the functioning of the UN. In the worst case scenario, the external as much as the internal status of short-term staff without reasonable prospects of amelioration in the years ahead, results in them being treated as second-class citizens, which in turn leads them to be motivated primarily by 'a-social self-interest'. Surviving in the current position or securing the next job is where most of the energy is spent. The quasi lack of institutionalized and predictable career development at the United Nations, the ambiguous long-term policy of the short-term contracts, encourages staff to have 'one foot in and one foot out' of the job. Moreover, the grade structure falls short of a formalized career track with clear guidelines of the requirements and selection process for the advancement in the profession, which well-functioning national administrations, or other international organizations, have. Rather, with the open-ended time spent in each grade,[45] and with staff left under the impression that promotion depends more on connection than on competence (*UNSpecial* 2005), the lack of proper career development constitutes a major disincentive.

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[44] In a 2004 survey on human resources management practices commissioned by 30 international organizations (including the UN, World Bank and IMF), AHRMIO, reported a significant increase, from 6 percent in 1999, to 32 percent in 2003, in the number of international organizations which employ over 10 percent of their staff on a temporary basis (AHRMIO 2004).

[45] Short of progression mechanisms based on performance, time spent in each grade is likely to be lengthy. See Brewster and the ICC (2003).

Another unattractive aspect of the professional culture of the United Nations (although not specific to the UN) is its tendency to be more process, than result, oriented. Although certain UN bodies have more practical mandates that make them more action-oriented, such as the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), overall, the environment is prone to make process more than result a defining character of its professional culture. The same goes for other organizations with similar mandates that have reached a routine level, be it national administrations or even well established private companies. Four main factors shape the work ethics in this direction. First, there is the hierarchical structure of most UN institutions, in which decision-making is highly concentrated and, as actors are squeezed in between layers of authority, no real sense of initiative is encouraged. This is especially the case in the UN Secretariat. Second, there is a tendency of the United Nations to adopt conservative courses of action trying to avoid the responsibility and the risks associated with trying to make a difference. This trait is linked to the political and financial dependency of the UN vis-à-vis member states, and its remoteness from direct constituencies. Third, there is the servicing function that a number of UN departments and institutions have vis-à-vis member states in the establishment and follow-up of multilateral commissions, conferences and negotiations. Combined with the cumbersome and slow rhythms of the politics of UN diplomacy, this can turn activities into a ritualistic production of documents with little short-term result. This only worsens when the entity has weak political clout, such as the at times frustrating predicament of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). Fourth, the use of resources with unfocused and non-strategic spending of already limited resources renders progress, and progress assessment, difficult. As a result, an environment risks being created where activities are undertaken just for the sake of it.

A third downside of the UN professional culture is its *ad hoc* and unsystematic character. This is rather ironic considering the importance that rules and regulations have in the United Nations context. Yet, it is as if there is a significant disconnect between them and their ability to put tracking systems in place in the various domains of action, internally as well as externally. Indeed, one of the areas in which the United Nations is significantly weak is in recording its activities and drawing as well as applying the lessons learnt. It is rare that systematic and well reasoned mechanisms record action.[46] This makes the sharing of data and coordination of action among UN entities very problematic. In the United Nations Secretariat, the creation in the 1990s, along with a Policy and Strategic Planning unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, of a Lesson Learnt Unit (now the Peacekeeping Best Practices Section: PBPS), in the DPKO was designed to improve this shortcoming. Although some progress has been made, UN wide, much remains to be done. Most of the time there is only piecemeal information and coordination available. A tracking system would allow the UN not only to better grasp where it comes from and where it currently stands, but also provide instruments to identify and implement better policies. Instead, the lack of a systematic approach invites the United Nations to act in a state of semi-blindness, to extinguish fires with inadequate tools and only hope for the best; a position in which an

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[46] In addition to registering activities, systematic and well reasoned records also calls for putting the findings in perspective, historically and comparatively, within the UN context and vis-à-vis other relevant actors.

organization dedicated to solving global questions and crisis, and anticipating on future ones, does not wish to find itself.

The unsystematic character of the UN way of doing business is one illustration among many of the under-institutionalization of the United Nations. As it weakens its capacity to be, and project itself as, professional, it also undermines its attractiveness for internationally skilled people. This is only reinforced by certain weaknesses at play in the selection process of senior management position where a lack of transparency and vague terms of references leave room for at times questionable reasons for appointment. This brings us to the fourth shortcoming, namely a self-centered exercised leadership.

According to the *United Nations Organizational Integrity Survey* conducted in 2004 (Deloitte Consulting LLP 2005), three sets of concerns stand out in terms of UN leadership. First, the discrepancies of United Nations leaders' lofty rhetoric, not matching words with acts. Second, the tendency of the UN leadership to be uninterested in management. It is already problematic that frequently those in positions of leadership are not trained to exercise managerial responsibilities. Adding insult to injuries, there is a tendency to concentrate on the more 'noble' aspects of the job (such as political and diplomatic issues) on the expense of investing the required amount of time and work into management. Third, while the custodians of the welfare of the organization, UN leaders should place their own interest if not after, then at least not at odds with that of the organization, it is not uncommon that the contrary happens. The institutional pathologies of the United Nations can become a reason for its leaders not to try to improve it. Assessing that turning the place around would not only be a difficult exercise, but also very unlikely to be successful, management is inclined to opt for individualistic strategies, using the visibility and contacts associated with their position as a springboard. Weak institutional accountability within the UN allows them to get away with it.[47] In the worst case, it amounts to the posturing of leadership. A posturing of leadership that is far from a healthy democratic leadership, that is more aware of its duties than of its rights and entitlements; a posturing of leadership that is far from using personal qualities not to personalize the institutions under its watch, but on the contrary to depersonalize them;[48] a posturing of leadership that, far from thinking strategically for the organization and its mission, fails to realize that unless an institution is strong internally, it cannot be strong externally and everybody, including the people that it is supposed to serve, looses. While this leadership behavior is not specific to the United Nations, the public service and public good ideals and goals of the UN, are prone to make it all the more demoralizing for professionals taking the ethical dimension of the United Nations message seriously.

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[47] It also contributes to deprive the United Nations of the possibility to improve over time as an organization. To institutional growth is substituted a succession of 'fits and starts', a charade of permanent reform.

[48] Using personal leadership qualities to depersonalize institutions is meant to make the functioning of the institutions depend as little as possible upon individuals, allowing procedures and mechanisms to institutionalize in a dynamic way, motivating and committing its employees to the organization. Incidentally, using leadership to institutionalize the delegation of energy and power is one of the elements distinguishing democracy from authoritarian rule.

III – International civil service and distribution of power

Despite the shortcomings, working for an international organization continues to be a popular professional choice. For instance, the average number of eligible people who apply for every vacant UN positions, support or professional, is 114 (UN 2004: 6) and for professional positions alone, the number of applicants per vacancy tends to be even higher, at times even twice as high.[49] This being said, the extent to which international organizations appeal to professionals with skills marketable nationally and internationally is not only explainable by the intrinsic characteristics of their professional culture. It also has to be understood in connection with relations of power at the national and international level. More specifically, in connection with the place that international organizations and their potential staff occupy in the international and national distribution of power. In order to clarify this state of affairs, two aspects of the question will be touched upon. First, how the appeal of international organizations tends to be relative to the power position of the countries of origin of potential staff and, second, how the attractiveness of international organizations can be relative to the power position that staff occupy in their home countries.[50]

The power status of international organizations vis-à-vis countries of origin

For professionals from countries at the top of the hierarchy of international power, joining international organizations is not often a primary choice, whereas for professionals who belong to countries in the middle or low ranks of the international distribution of power, a career in international organizations is an attractive proposition. This suggests that the appeal of international organizations is relative to the power position of the countries of origin of the potential staff.

From international power to international organizations as a second choice – The social prestige of an organization is largely based on its power, and on the extent to which it is, or derives from, a source of power. International organizations are not foreign to this status 'law'. Their attractiveness as a working places is partly measured by their position in the distribution of power vis-à-vis member states. The examples of the United States and France illustrate this state of affair particularly well.

Regarding the United States, its centrality in the international distribution of power shapes the professional trajectories, social attachments and status which seem highly desirable to skilled ambitious American professionals. With the United States being a global power, the role of an American skilled professional often also implies a significant influence on international affairs. Therefore, for these professionals, there is little that is more rewarding than an American career. This situation is especially striking in the context of the public sector. For instance, if the choice is between being a senior official in one of the United State's Executive Branch entities dealing with international issues, or being a senior official in an international organization, the

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[49] In 2005, the average number of applicants for a P-5 position was 125, for a P-4 position it was 199, and for a P-3 position 335. Figures provided by the Department of Human resources of the UN.

[50] The tendencies examined correspond only to statistical trends. They simply provide an outline of the reality without pretending to give a comprehensive explanation of the personal trajectory of each international staff.

former is likely to be more attractive than the latter.[51] The power of the United States reverberates on the Executive Branch, on its posts and its staff, granting them with social prestige as well as with strong personal satisfaction.[52] Ultimately, the disparity of power between international and American organizations, accounts for patterns of professional mobility. For example, it is easier for a US national with a senior career in the American governmental machinery to be offered a senior position in an international organization, than for a US national with a senior career in international organizations to be proposed a senior position in the US government.

The case of France is less straightforward, echoing its increasingly ambiguous status as an international power. The national professional realm tends to be preferred over the international, particularly for senior careers in the public sector. Traditionally there is more social prestige attached to a senior career in the national administration than to a senior career in an international organization, and being a high civil servant often serves as a stepping stone for a political career. In this regard, the Ecole nationale d'administration (ENA), that educates most high civil servants, cabinet members and key politicians, holds a prime of place in the national landscape.[53] This situation is in line with the fact that France continues to see itself as a major power, and its public sector elite, nationally centered. Under these conditions, the declared commitment of France to international organizations, is not powerful enough to change the career of choice of its administrative and political elite. Joining international organizations on a seconded position does not help the career advancement of French high civil servants. In addition, the fact that career prospects in international organizations are less predictable than the ones in the national civil service also has a discouraging effect.[54] Hence, among French elite students and professionals, few see the attraction of joining international organizations. But at the same time France is growing defensive and insecure of its international standing, and the way in which its national administration and high civil servants function is increasingly seen more as part of the problem than of the solution. And the table of professional attractiveness turns. This is not to say that international organizations now constitute a more valued career path than the national high civil service but, compared to fifteen or twenty years ago, more well trained students and young professionals see beyond the national civil service. A career in international organizations is becoming an option that is not necessarily worse than the ones offered by the national administration. The current difficulty for university graduates and young professionals to find employment in France only adds to this evolution.

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[51] On the relationship between the state and civil society in the US and its impact on the respective social value assigned to private and public sector professions, such as lawyers and civil servants, see Cohen-Tanugi (1985).

[52] 'As we left, I reflected that it was hardly my skill that was moving the allies behind us. This was an exercise of American influence; the U.S. officials traveling with me called it the big dog barking as we flew from stop to stop – and it was a great feeling to be speaking for America. The exercise of American power would move others...' (Lake 2000: 275).

[53] For a sociological analysis of the importance of ENA in France, see Bourdieu (1996).

[54] Although mobility traditionally has not been a factor of career advancement for French civil servants, this is changing. In 2004, decree number 2004-708 made mobility and secondment compulsory for civil servants recruited through ENA (article 1 and article 2 paragraph C). The decree is available at http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/WAspad/UnDocument?base=LEX&nod=1DM004708#.

The pursuit of status through international organizations – The situation is quite different for skilled professionals from countries standing in the middle or at the low end of the international distribution of power. To them, working for international organizations is an attractive option. In addition to granting financial benefits that are substantially higher than their national salaries, the workforce of an international organization gives a professional and social status that the national job market of these countries has a difficulty matching. This has to do with the greater range of action and opportunities that can come with international organizations. Consider for instance diplomacy. Generally speaking, it is much more difficult for a diplomat of a developing country to have an impact internationally, than it is for a diplomat of a leading developed country. Short of the backing of a powerful state, a diplomat stands more or less on his or her own, at times being no more than a background actor. In a high-level position within an international organization, a developing country diplomat has more of a chance to overcome this predicament, especially if he or she joins an international organization with a political clout. Moreover, it is certainly more comfortable to be a staff member of an international organization that seeks to get countries out of trouble, than to be on the other side of the fence. Thus it is not uncommon that developing countries diplomats are attracted to senior UN positions while this is relatively rare for countries dominating the international hierarchy of power, except for the very top positions.[55]

International organizations and the power position of its potential staff within their respective home countries

The correlation between the attractiveness of international organizations to skilled professionals, and the distribution of power, extends to the position of the individual professionals in the distribution of power in their respective home countries. This correlation is rather straightforward. Skilled professionals with an 'elite' social and educational background from leading developed countries tend not to see international organizations as one of their first career choices, whereas skilled professionals from developing countries are prone to.

Power distribution within leading countries and international organizations – It is not surprising that the disparity of power between international organizations and powerful countries, which brings about the dependency of the former vis-à-vis the latter, translates into certain patterns of behavior of skilled professionals in leading countries. These patterns amount to professionals from countries at the top of the international distribution of power being more attracted to careers inside than outside the national framework. This state of affairs is first and foremost the case in the United States. Data shows that in general, those highly skilled US nationals who are not entrepreneur minded and who are trained in areas relative to international organizations, do not consider these organizations the most appealing professional option. Their educational background, often also a benefit of their privileged social background,[56] puts them in a

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[55] The World Bank has always been headed by an American, and the IMF by a European.

[56] 'Three-quarters of the students at the country's top 146 colleges come from the richest socio-economic fourth, compared with just 3 percent who come from the poorest fourth (the median family income at Harvard, for example, is USD 150,000). This means that, at an elite university, you are 25 times as likely to run into a rich student as a poor one', *The Economist* (2004).

position where they are able to get the best possible professional, financial and social rewards and recognition. The fact that the prestige of powerful professional US settings exceeds that of international organizations encourages American graduates on topics related to international organizations, to set their eyes on US government, universities, think tanks, Wall Street and other prestigious professional venues.[57] However, later in their career, some chose to join international organizations for a period, preferably in a high position, as a finishing touch.[58] Against this background, when it comes to the United Nations, those US nationals who consider international organizations as a long-term career tend to come from the second tiers of US universities.[59]

To a certain extent, this also applies to other developed countries. For instance few of the French professionals working for the United Nations come from elite schools, or have elite social backgrounds. Few graduated from elite schools, and the majority only holds Masters degrees. Moreover, those who are sons and daughters (actually more daughters than sons) of French diplomats tend to have a 'moyenne bourgeoisie' or 'petite bourgeoisie' socio-economic background. And for those who come from a higher social background, chances are that working for the United Nations was not their first choice but, a career on which they settled 'faute de mieux'. An analysis of nationals of the United Kingdom is likely to show similar results. Another interesting example is Japan. Again, few graduates from elite schools such as the University of Tokyo, and the Faculty of Law in particular, consider international organizations for a full time career. They prefer to be where power is, namely at home. Moreover, with the time-limited contracts becoming the norm, a career at the UN becomes all the less attractive for Japanese males, who are still the main bread-winners. This being said, for Japanese women with an elite socio-economic and educational background, international organizations remain a quite prestigious career.

Power distribution within developing countries and international organizations – The picture tends to be reversed for developing countries.[60] This can largely be explained by the access to education. In most developing countries access to education face even more severe inequalities. Although, in the past fifty years enrollment in primary education and the demand for access to secondary education has risen,[61] this has not

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[57] For an American graduate, not all these options are of equal value. Elite graduates, especially those who have a background in law, prefer to make their first mark in the private sector (law firms and others), to then join the public sector in positions of responsibility, via political appointments.

[58] In certain American elite circles, especially on the East Coast, it may look good and quite 'progressive', to have an international organization, including a UN, connection of some sort. For example, in a phone interview, Yves Dezalay stated that spending a few years with an international NGO can allow graduates from prestigious universities to acquire a 'savoir-faire' and contacts useful for a corporate career. For more, see for example Dezalay and Garth (2005).

[59] Incidentally, among American nationals working for the UN, the percentage of women tends to be higher than men (2005a: 50).

[60] A more detailed analysis would have to introduce some nuance to this statement, taking into account the various layers of elites in developing countries and their access to power (economic, social and political).

[61] The overall result has been that, by 1995, 70 percent of adults living in developing countries were literate, compared to less than half of the adult population in 1965. The number of adults in developing countries with at least some higher education has also increased from 28 million students in higher education in 1980, to 47 million in 1995 (World Bank 2000: 26-7).