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# Historical Social Research

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# International Organizations as Group Actors. How Institutional Procedures Create Organizational Independence without Delegation to Institutional Agents

Thomas Gehring \*

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**Abstract:** »Internationale Organisationen als kollektive Akteure. Wie Organisationen durch institutionalisierte Entscheidungsverfahren auch ohne Delegation Unabhängigkeit gegenüber ihren Mitgliedern gewinnen«. Can international organizations (IOs) gain independence from their member states, even if their decisions arise from member state bodies? While organizational independence is a precondition for the autonomy and agency of IOs, International Relations theory cannot yet grasp IO independence in the absence of institutional agents like secretariats. Drawing on collective actor theories with a strong micro-foundation from philosophy and sociology, this article demonstrates how organizational rules and procedures gradually shape organizational processes and produce collective effects that do not arise from the aggregation of member state activities. Member-dominated IOs can produce collective beliefs about relevant parts of the outside world that differ from the aggregated beliefs of member states. They can comprise institutionalized organizational goals and criteria that indicate collective intentions of organizational action and differ from the aggregate preferences of member states. They can comprise decision-making procedures that foster organizational decisions according to collective beliefs and intentions and reduce or abolish the relevance of bargaining and preference aggregation. Finally, they can act in ways that do not immediately rely on implementation action by the member states or by other lower-level actors. I conclude that analyzing the sources of independence of member-dominated IOs from their members sheds light on the nature and effects of IOs as group actors.

**Keywords:** Collective actor, international organization, independence, autonomy, corporate agency, authority, pooling.

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## 1. Introduction

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While organizational independence is a precondition for the autonomy and agency of international organizations (IOs), international relations theory does not yet grasp IO independence in the absence of delegation to institutional agents like secretariats. Traditional IOs like the International Monetary Fund or the World Health Organization gain gradual independence from their members not least through activities of their institutional agents, especially their secretariats. International relations theory has virtually completely attributed IO agency to activities of institutional agents. From a sociological-institutionalist perspective, Barnett and Finnemore (2004, 16) establish “international organizations as bureaucracies.” From a principal-agent perspective, Hawkins et al. (2006, 12-20) attribute IO agency to institutional agents that partially escape control of their principals. However, many other IOs are strongly dominated by their member states. They comprise only small secretariats or none at all, and organizational decisions are made in member state bodies through “pooling” (Lake 2007, 232; Hooghe and Marks 2015). These IOs can also become international actors, but collective agency arises from interaction among member states (Gehring and Urbanski 2023). Member-dominated IOs include informal institutions (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Roger 2020) like the Global Summits (G7, G20) and the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, treaty management organization established under many multilateral treaties (Churchill and Ulfstein 2000; Gehring and Giesen 2022), and joint bodies of bilateral treaties (Dür and Gastinger 2022). Some organizational components of larger IOs, such as the UN Security Council, have similar characteristics. Member-dominated IOs provide the empirical point of reference for this article. In contrast to traditional IOs, they are characterized by the absence of significant delegation to intra-organizational agents and may be conceived of as “group actors” (List and Pettit 2011).

Member-dominated IOs raise the question of whether, and how, they may gain independence from their members, although their decisions arise predominantly or entirely from member state bodies. Organizational independence is a key concern of IO theory. Abbott and Snidal (1998, 9) define independence as “the ability to act with a degree of autonomy,” while Haftel and Thompson (2006, 257) propose a concept for measuring IO independence. Organizational independence should not be conflated with organizational autonomy. It points at organizational operations that are group specific and distinct from the parallel operations of the member states. In contrast, organizational autonomy denotes the influence that an IO exerts on organizational decisions (Reinalda and Verbeek 1998, 3; Gehring and Urbanski 2023, 144-5), i.e., a matter of effect. The more autonomy an IO has,

the more organizational decisions are influenced by organizational factors, as opposed to member state preferences. In contrast, the more independence the IO has, the more organizational operations are distinct from parallel operations of their members. Strict intergovernmentalists and methodological individualists argue that group actors cannot gain any independence from their group members because all operations at the group level arise from activities at the level of group members (Lomas 2005). In contrast, collective actor theories with strong micro-foundations emphasize that group actors may develop group intentions that are not mere aggregates of the intentions of group members (Tuomela, Hakli, and Mäkelä 2020). Group actors may even acquire the capability to act in ways that do not mirror coordinated action of the member states (Coleman 1974; Gehring and Urbanski 2023). Hence, group actors may be conceived of as “relatively autonomous entities [...] with minds of their own” (List and Pettit 2011, 77-8).

This article examines how member-dominated IOs may gain independence from their member states even if organizational operations arise from member state bodies. It adopts a bottom-up approach that elucidates *how* institutionally driven IO independence emerges gradually from activities of IO members. It argues that organizational independence originates from institutional rules and procedures that shape and design their internal operations. Thus, it resonates with Haftel and Thompson’s (2006, 297) observation that “variation in IO independence is largely a reflection of institutional design.” It follows those collective actor theories that focus on institutionalized group actors and locate the emergence of group agency in the structure of group operations (see Gehring and Marx 2023, in this special issue). In particular, List and Pettit (2011) examine the emergence of collective intentions of established groups from repeated interaction of group members. According to Coleman’s theory of corporate actors (Coleman 1974; Vanberg 1978), organizations can control governance resources and comprise a “constitution” made up of those rules and procedures according to which organizational decisions are made. These highly abstract collective actor approaches indicate that organizational independence does not necessarily depend on community-oriented attitudes and behaviour of their individual members in the particular situation, because formal and informal organizational rules and procedures shape and constrain the opportunities for intra-organizational action of member states. This contrasts with those approaches to group agency, which focus on non-institutionalized groups such as “walking together” (Paternotte 2020). Authors arguing that group agency relies on commitment among group members (Gilbert 2006), on “team reasoning” in game-theoretic decision situations (Bacharach 2006), or on “we-mode interaction” (Tuomela 2013; Hakli, Miller, and Tuomela 2010) tend to sidestep the question of why group members might adopt group-oriented attitudes.

To examine how organizational rules and procedures produce organizational independence, this article focuses on four core operations, which any entity must perform to become an actor capable of intentional (purposive) action. Three core operations address the formation of organizational intentions; they are widely discussed in analytical philosophy (List and Pettit 2011, 20-4) and relate to what political science scholars address as “intentionality” (Hofferberth 2019), “autonomy of will” (Bauer and Ege 2017), or “organizational autonomy” (Gehring and Urbanski 2023). *First*, collective actors must be able to generate *beliefs* that depict how things are in their environment. Beliefs are internal representations of, or knowledge about, important aspects of reality in which organizational action is embedded. *Second*, collective actors must have *intentions*, i.e., ideas about how to change the environment through their actions. Intentions represent motivations for purposive intervention into an existing state of affairs. *Third*, collective actors must be able to make decisions about their action that bring in line their beliefs about the environment with their intentions about desired changes of the environment. Surprisingly, philosophical collective actor theory does not address the action component, which is important from a political science perspective. Hence, political science scholars add a *fourth function*, namely an actor’s ability to act, i.e., to influence the world outside its confines (Bauer and Ege 2017; Hofferberth 2019; Gehring and Urbanski 2023). These four areas of organizational agency broadly fit the scattered conceptions of corporate agency in political science. For instance, Scharpf (1997, 51) argues that actors are generally “characterized by their orientations (perceptions and preferences) and by their capabilities.”

While their independence varies starkly according to the design of their institutional rules and procedures, member-dominated IOs *can* gain far-reaching independence regarding all four core organizational operations. Organizational beliefs may result from expert deliberation institutionalized in specialized organizational processes, such as scientific or technology committees, and reflect group-specific expertise that does not mirror the aggregate of member state beliefs. Organizational goals may provide detailed and institutionalized criteria for organizational decision-making that constitute conditional programmes and clearly indicate organizationally desired action far beyond aggregate member state preferences in a given decision situation. Likewise, IO decisions may originate from specialized processes related to particular policies based on organizational expertise and organizational criteria that are designed to exclude member state power and situational preferences, as is often reflected in executive committee decision-making of international funds. Finally, organizational action may be distinct from coordinated action of the member states and create external affects without state implementation, for instance UN Security Council decisions legitimizing the use of force in international crises.

The article contributes to several scholarly debates in international relations and beyond. *First*, it contributes to conceptualizing the origins and nature of IO agency. Whereas international relations theory attributes IO agency predominantly to activities of non-state institutional agents, in particular secretariats (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Hawkins et al. 2006), the article builds on the emergent scholarship on other sources of IO agency (Hofferberth 2019; Gehring and Urbanski 2023). Conceptualizing and identifying sources of IO independence arising from interaction among member states allows for understanding member-dominated IOs as international actors as well. *Second*, this article demonstrates that numerous existing IOs without extensive secretariats may gain a considerable degree of independence from their members and provides an approach to analysing the sources (and limits) of their independence. Hence, informal IOs (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Roger 2020), international treaty management IOs (Gehring and Giesen 2022), joint bodies of bilateral treaties (Dür and Gastinger 2022), and member-dominated components of larger IOs like the UN Security Council may produce organizational effects that make them international actors in their own right, while their degree of independence varies across several dimensions. *Third*, the article provides a foundation for grasping the normative implications of IOs beyond activities of institutional agents (Erskine 2004). In the absence of institutional agents, responsibility for failed organizational action of member-dominated IOs might not always be fully attributable to their members. If IOs gain a considerable extent of independence from their members, they might create demand for “organizational learning” (Erskine 2020) and re-design of institutionalized processes upon failure.

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## 2. Theoretical Foundation: Can Member-Dominated IOs Gain Independence from their Members?

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Identifying the sources of IO independence contributes to grasping the nature and organizational effects of IOs. Without a minimum of independence, IOs cannot become autonomous actors. Occasionally, the two notions of independence and autonomy are used synonymously. In the present paper, IO independence denotes the presence of IO operational processes that allow an IO to develop its own intentions and act accordingly. It is distinct from IO autonomy, defined as the influence that an IO exerts on organizational decisions (Reinalda and Verbeek 1998, 3; Gehring and Urbanski 2023, 144-5). This resonates with Haftel and Thompson’s (2006) attempt to measure IO independence as a prerequisite for IO autonomy based on institutional design features. IO independence is always a matter of degree

because all IOs are under more or less tight control of the member states (Abbott and Snidal 1998, 5). Therefore, IO independence does not (necessarily) contradict broader member state interests: “IOs might act independently from, but consistently with, state interests, interpreting mandates and implementing policy in ways that are perhaps unanticipated but are agreeable to states” (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 11).

Despite its predominant focus on secretariats and other institutional agents, IO theory has identified some sources of IO independence that are relevant for member-dominated IOs. The activities of non-state institutional agents, especially IO secretariats, constitute a major source of IO independence and resulting autonomy. IOs with significant secretariats gain independence because they comprise at least one actor capable of autonomous action in addition to the member states (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Hawkins et al. 2006). Member-dominated IOs cannot gain independence from this source because they lack significant institutional agents by definition. However, only four of Haftel and Thompson’s (2006, 257-9) six indicators measuring IO independence address activities of institutional agents, while two other ones relate to decision-making in member-state bodies, namely voting (instead of unanimity) and decision-making in subsidiary bodies (instead of supreme bodies gathering the highest level of state representatives). Likewise, Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 707), seeking to establish “IOs as bureaucracies,” identify two general sources of IO independence that are not necessarily limited to IO secretariats:

IOs can become autonomous sites of authority, independent from the state “principals” who may have created them, because of power flowing from at least two sources: (1) the legitimacy of the rational-legal authority they embody, and (2) control over technical expertise and information.

Member-dominated IOs raise the general problem of how they are related to activities of their members and whether, and how, they can gain autonomy from their members through independent organizational processes. Collective actor theories hold that activities of group members at the micro level can produce new qualities at the macro level of the group or organization beyond the aggregated activities of group members (Coleman 1987). Of interest are macro effects like organizational independence that cannot immediately be reduced to micro-level activities, which are constitutive for them. Generally, new qualities of higher-level actors are emergent if they are not merely the result of aggregation but of social organization (Coleman 1990, 22). Emergence of macro effects is widespread not only in the social world but also in the physical world. Think of water that emerges from interaction of oxygen and hydrogen but has profoundly different qualities. To investigate how member-dominated IOs gain autonomy from member states through independent organizational processes, I adopt a bottom-up approach that allows analysing the micro-

macro link between activities located at the micro level of member states and effects located at the macro level of IOs.

The highly abstract concept of supervenience helps to identify group effects, such as group agency and organizational independence, which emerge from interaction among micro-level actors (e.g., member states). It reflects an individualistic concept of the emergence of organizational agency and comprises a “no mystery” constraint on social facts (List and Spiekermann 2013, 633). Supervenience implies that macro phenomena (of organizational agency and independence) arise from (“are supervenient on”) events at the micro level. Accordingly, any change at the macro level necessitates a change at the micro level. Yet, not all social phenomena are clearly related (i.e., fully reducible) to *one particular* configuration of individual actions (Sawyer 2001, 572). List and Spiekermann identify two conditions under which a social phenomenon does not clearly reflect a particular configuration of individual actions (List and Spiekermann 2013, 639). *First*, a particular higher-level property may be caused in different ways (multiple realizability). For instance, a Security Council resolution that is duly adopted by a majority of member states certainly arises from actions of lower-level actors. However, it may be adopted by differently-composed groups of member states. *Second*, organizational decisions may be robust against changes at the micro level (microrealization-robust causal relations). For example, the entry of a new member state or representative does not affect the validity and implications of existing Council resolutions.

To explore the nature and implications of IO independence beyond activities of institutional agents systematically, it is useful to focus on the four core operations mentioned in the introduction. Each of these core operations realizes a function indispensable for intentional action, which collective actors, like any other actor, must be able to perform. *First*, like any other actor, IOs must have the ability to form *beliefs* about the state of the outside world, which allows them to adjust their action to the realities of their environment. *Second*, they must have *intentions* that indicate how the existing state of the outside world should be modified through organizational action. Intentions indicate what organizational action is to achieve. *Third*, IOs as collective actors must comprise decision-making arrangements that enable them to make organizational decisions based on organizational beliefs and intentions. These three core operations denote intentional states. They allow collective actors to choose purposive actions, which are “rational” if using the optimal means to realize a desired end (Marx and Tiefensee 2015, 20-2). *Fourth*, IOs, like any other actor, must be able to “act” in ways that make a difference in their environment. IOs will gain independence from their members to the degree that their core operations produce beliefs and intentions distinct from the beliefs and preferences of IO members, that IOs make decisions that do not merely reflect the aggregation of member state

preferences, and that IO action is distinct from the aggregated action of IO members. This raises the question of how organizational operations on each of the four functions might look like, which generate a significant degree of organizational independence in the absence of delegation of activities to institutional agents like secretariats.

Collective actor approaches emphasizing group-oriented attitudes of group members provide limited room for organizational independence (overview in Tuomela, Hakli, and Mäkelä 2020). They tend to address “minimalist” basic social situations (Paternotte 2020) like “walking together” (Tollefsen 2015) and focus on groups composed of specific members. Bacharach (2006), an economist, suggests that actors cannot only seek to maximize their own (individual) utility but might also act as team players. “Team reasoning” implies that group members behave as if an imagined team organizer had ordered them to act for the sake of team success. It can explain why groups realize cooperation in interdependent situations more often than classical game theory expects (Noichl and Marx 2023, in this special issue). However, whether actors operate as team players or seek to maximize their individual utility is subject to psychological processes of group members that are externalized from the analysis. Tuomela, a philosopher, argues that joint action, such as carrying a piano upstairs, requires collective intentions defining the group goal that are not reducible to individual intentions and may differ from individual motivations (Tuomela, Hakli, and Mäkelä 2020). As a corollary, group members need to adopt corresponding individual “we-intentions.” Their “we-mode” action implies an individual commitment to contribute to the joint action, a belief that the other group members will participate in the joint action, and a belief that everyone else believes that everyone participates (Tuomela and Miller 2020, 73). Moving a step further, Gilbert (1989, 2006) argues that the commitment of group members to a joint action is not merely a matter of belief in the preparedness of other group members to contribute but creates normative effects. It obliges a group member to participate in the joint action, and other group members can normatively expect that she participates (Gilbert 2023, in this special issue). What these collective actor concepts have in common is their focus on collective (or group) intentions, which will be non-reducible to individual intentions or goals if they do not mirror the individual intentions of group members. They may address collective goals that cannot be achieved individually (like winning in a football match). They may also arise as non-aggregative effects from group interaction such as deliberation among group members (Hakli et al. 2010, 294-6) or learning from repeated interaction (Noichl and Marx 2023, in this special issue).

In contrast, List and Pettit (2011) identify the organizational structure of collective actors as a source of collective agency and IO independence. Their theoretical interest focuses on non-hierarchical groups in which decisions

are made by the group members collectively, not on “degenerative” (i.e., hierarchical) groups that assign decision-making to an agent (List and Pettit 2011, 8). Collective actors develop their distinct systems of collective beliefs and intentions, i.e., a distinct identity, and must have the ability to survive changes in membership. Hence, not every group with collective intentions is a collective actor. List and Pettit (2011, 37) emphasize that consistency of group action over time arising from a distinct system of group beliefs and intentions is a necessary condition of group agency, because it renders distinct group attitudes partially inconsistent with otherwise plausible attitudes of group members. The distinctiveness of the group agent’s system of beliefs and intentions and its partial inconsistency with group members’ individual beliefs and intentions is illustrated by the “doctrinal paradox” (List and Pettit 2011, 44-6), which forces group members to ignore their individual preferences when following group specific decision criteria (see section 3.3). Similar difficulties arise from group decisions over time: “Sooner or later such a group is bound to face an issue such that how it should judge on that issue is determined by the judgments it previously endorsed on other issues” (Petit 2003, 173). List and Pettit (2011, 59) claim that group agents may gain “a surprising degree of autonomy” through their internal structures. Hence, the members of two group agents may individually have exactly the same intentional attitudes on some propositions, while the two group agents hold different attitudes and act differently due to their different organizational structures (List and Pettit 2011, 66). Beyond individual commitment, team reasoning, and we-mode attitudes, the specific organization of group decision processes creates organizational effects and becomes a possible source of organizational autonomy.

Sociologist James Coleman offers a conception of corporate actors that provides a general idea of how organizations and other forms of collective actors may gain the ability to act in their own right. While organizations cannot exercise physical action like individuals, Coleman’s “combining resources model of corporate actors” emphasizes the effects of the pooling of resources (Coleman 1974, 38-44; also Vanberg 1978, 271-85). Whenever a group of actors pools some resources and submits them to centralized collective management, it founds an organization in the sociological sense. Pooling resources, such as money, knowledge, or regulatory competencies, means that the group members assign the authority to employ these resources to the organization and sacrifice their previous right to employ them unilaterally (Coleman 1990, 45-53). By combining resources, the group members empower the organizational actor “per se” to use the transferred resources, even if all decisions are made unanimously in an organizational body comprising all members. Henceforth, the organization can act by employing these resources according to organizational rules and procedures. Accordingly, organizational action can be distinguished from action of the

group members. For example, development aid released by an IO upon previous pooling of money by the member states can be distinguished from bilateral development aid granted separately by these states. Collective intentions do not play a major role in Coleman's conception but can be identified. On the one hand, the members combine resources for joint use "with the hope of receiving a return on that investment" (Coleman 1974, 36), thus defining organizational purpose more or less clearly. On the other hand, the use of centralized resources creates demand for group decisions. Therefore, organizations comprise formal or informal rules and procedures according to which group decisions are made that form the "constitution" of the emerging corporate actor (Coleman 1974, 43-4) and establish a collective decision-making system.

The following analysis of the sources of organizational independence occurs against the backdrop of a stylized conception of member-dominated IOs. *First*, like any other organization, a member-dominated IO reflects a two-step cooperation process. At step 1, a group of actors (the member states) establishes the IO for some purpose and defines formally or informally some basic tasks and decision-making procedures, including one or more organizational bodies. At step 2, the organization operates according to these rules and procedures. Even if organizational decisions are adopted by a member state body unanimously, all member states, including the most powerful ones, operate in a highly institutionalized social environment (Johnston 2001) that shapes and constrains their opportunities for action. The present paper focuses exclusively on the sources and nature of organizational independence at step 2, because at step 1, the organization as a collective actor does not yet exist. *Second*, in the absence of institutional agents, such as secretariats, from ideal-typical member-dominated IOs, organizational decisions are exclusively made by member-state bodies. This is referred to as "pooling" in the theoretical IO literature (Hooghe and Marks 2015; Lake 2007, 231-2). It includes committees composed of member state representatives (Bradley and Kelly 2008) and staged decision-making, in which decisions are prepared by one (often specialized) IO body and adopted by another (often high-level) IO body (Conrad and Monroe 2021). I illustrate the argument with examples from IOs with small or no institutional agents and abstract from the possibly complementary role of these agents.

Finally, it is important to note that IOs differ in one central respect from most groups referred to in the theoretical discussion on collective actors: their members are states that are, by definition, themselves organizations, not individuals. This specific characteristic of their members does not diminish the tension between the micro behaviour of IO members and the macro effect of IO agency. However, it increases the ability of IO members to act within an IO. For example, member states as corporate actors may participate in different organizational bodies, say in an expert committee and

a supreme decision-making body, with different representatives while pursuing more or less coherent preferences. To identify IO independence arising from organizational effects, I conceptualize states and their representatives as unitary actors and assume that state representatives in an organizational member-state body act as sincere agents of their state principals. This excludes possible effects of autonomous action of state representatives separate from their state principals and helps focus on organizationally-generated independence of IO core operations.

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### 3. Gradual IO Independence on Four Organizational Core Operations

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This section examines how member-dominated IOs may gain independence from their members through formal and informal organizational procedures. I analyse the four above-mentioned organizational core operations separately, namely belief formation, organizational intentions, organizational-decision-making, and organizational action. For each of them, I identify an institutional arrangement with no IO independence at all (stage 1), which reflects the bottom line of a methodologically individualist (purely intergovernmental) scenario. I also identify an opposite institutional arrangement, which generates extensive IO independence and demonstrates that IOs *can* gain far-reaching independence without delegation of tasks to institutional agents (stage 4). And I sketch two intermediate arrangements between these two extremes, which illustrate that IO independence is gradual, not an all or nothing choice (stages 2 and 3). While these stages do not exhaust all possible institutional arrangements, they provide a stylized metric of IO independence in the absence of delegation.

#### 3.1 The Gradual Independence of Organizational Beliefs

The formation of beliefs is a necessary foundation for any form of purposive action. Beliefs depict cognitive representations of how things are in the world. List and Pettit (2011, 21-2) call them “representational states.” Actors must be aware of important aspects of the world to choose action that promises to realize desired results. Beliefs about the outside world should be true regarding relevant aspects for organizational action. Any distortion will lead to pathologies, i.e., action that is ill-adapted to the realities of the world.

Can IOs develop their own beliefs about the world, even though they do not have physical senses like individuals? Certainly, they cannot develop their beliefs entirely without activities of individuals. Individuals are the ultimate eyes and ears of organizations (List and Pettit 2011, 36). However, even individuals do not grasp all relevant details for their action directly. Much of

what they know about the complex world does not arise from their individual observations or experience but from intermediate sources such as journals, books, or television. While the intake of such information involves physical activity, this activity does not *produce* the information, but merely helps to derive information from intermediate sources. In that sense, IOs might “observe” their environment by relying on information from intermediate sources, especially by gathering expertise from member states and other actors (Boswell 2008, 473-4). In essence, beliefs constitute internal reconstructions, or models, of major aspects of the outside world, *as a given actor perceives them*. Accordingly, actors may develop distinct perspectives on the world. Due to the complexity of the outside world, an actor’s internal model is necessarily highly selective. If an IO develops organizational beliefs, it sees the world from a distinct perspective (Broome and Seabrooke 2012), which provides the foundation for the choice of organizational action.

At the most basic level (stage 1), an IO lacks independent organizational belief formation activities and does not gain any autonomy in the belief dimension. Accordingly, group beliefs reflect exclusively the aggregate beliefs held by IO members and can be easily reduced to the latter. The absence of collective beliefs does not necessarily preclude cooperation. Group members may agree on cooperation based on their shared individual beliefs about a common problem; they might even cooperate based on starkly divergent individual beliefs, say in a compromise accommodating divergent interests.

Organizational belief formation processes reflect a minimum of independence, if collective beliefs are generated through noninstitutionalized deliberation processes among group members (stage 2). Such collective beliefs *are produced* by interaction within the IO and are thus distinct from the aggregation of original individual beliefs of group members; they may differ in substance from any individually held original belief (Hakli, Miller, and Tuomela 2010, 309-14). Deliberation is known to affect the perception of group members in various ways (Schkade, Sunstein, and Hastie 2007). It is a process in which actors put their individual beliefs to a collective truth test and are open to adjust them upon convincing arguments (Risse 2000). The arguments supporting competing validity claims are collectively evaluated and convincing ones are retained, while less convincing ones are gradually sorted out (Paternotte 2020, 51-62). Actors adopt (implicitly) a group perspective, asking what should *we* believe about an underlying problem and the decision situation, which we are jointly facing (Hakli, Miller, and Tuomela 2010, 311-4). Rational actors have an incentive to accept new insights that provide a better foundation for determining their own action, even if this means adjusting their preferences (Grobe 2010). Hence, collective beliefs arising from deliberation among member states (or their representatives) fully depend (“supervene”) on the latter’s input and activity,

even if they starkly diverge from the beliefs originally held by the member states. Collective belief formation is part of most enduring negotiations and organizational decision processes. Some IOs, like the World Summits (G7, G20), are likely to be primarily concerned with collective belief formation on pending international problems.

Organizational belief formation processes are more independent if they are institutionally separated from organizational decision-making (stage 3). Organizational rules and procedures may assign belief formation activities to scientific or technical expert committees. Whereas collective beliefs still arise from deliberative interaction among member states (and their representatives), separate institutionalization of belief formation has two immediate consequences. *First*, it provides incentives for member states to be represented by experts, who can in turn rely on shared professional standards, thus reinforcing the development of an expert-driven rationale of belief formation (Giesen et al. 2022). *Second*, organizationally generated collective beliefs become a separate source of organizational influence on negotiations and allow appraising negotiation outcomes. Hence, IOs confront decision-makers with separately generated collective beliefs on the feasibility, usefulness, or sufficiency of negotiation outcomes, as occurs regularly in climate negotiations. Many member-dominated IOs assign belief formation activities separately institutionalized in expert committees. For example, the Montreal Protocol, the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution (Lidskog and Sundquist 2002), or the International Whaling Commission comprise impressive organizational apparatuses to evaluate information on the respective environmental problems and the implications of available policy measures. Likewise, UN Security Council sanctions committees observe and evaluate the performance of sanctions regimes (Dörfler 2022) as a prerequisite for subsequent adjustment.

Organizational belief formation processes are even more independent if they allow for information input from sources beyond IO members (stage 4). While IO members remain the most important participants in such organizational belief formation processes, they lose collective control of the information fed into, and the truth claims dealt with during, the process. Hence, organizationally structured belief formation processes confront IO members with additional perspectives that they need to address and that might eventually influence the formation of collective beliefs. Many IOs tap sources of information beyond member states. Especially in the areas of human rights, development, and environmental protection, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have access to organizational bodies or may submit information to them (Tallberg et al. 2013). Environmental NGOs participate regularly in preparatory committees of the Basel Convention on the Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes. They can notify non-

compliant behaviour and thus trigger the compliance procedure under the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (Benedick 1998, 269-86); and they can comment on Clean Development projects under the Kyoto Protocol (Gehring and Plocher 2009) and on implementation reports under the verification procedures of the Paris Agreement on climate change (Gehring and Spielmann 2023, forthcoming).

**Table 1** IO Independence of Organizational Beliefs

	Source of information	Processing of information	Independence of IO beliefs
Stage 1	IO members	IO members individually	No independence, only aggregation of members' individual beliefs
Stage 2	IO members	IO members collectively	Minimal independence, IO beliefs arise from deliberation among IO members
Stage 3	IO members	Specific organizational process	Considerable independence, IO beliefs arise from a separately institutionalized process (e.g., expert committee)
Stage 4	IO members and external sources	Specific organizational process	Extensive independence, IO beliefs arise from a separately institutionalized process that draws on external sources

In short, IOs can develop organizational beliefs that are distinct from the beliefs of their members. Few IOs are likely to lack any degree of organizational independence on belief formation. Typically, organizational negotiation processes involve some deliberation on the cognitive foundations of pending problems and available solutions. Many IOs comprise separately institutionalized expert committees to generate collective beliefs either exclusively among the member states or with participation of non-state actors. Resulting collective beliefs differ from those originally held by IO members and constitute a source of organizational influence on organizational decision processes. With increasing organizational independence in belief formation, the IO gradually gains control of the cognitive foundations of organizational decision-making.

### 3.2 The Gradual Independence of Organizational Intentions

Organizational intentions are a second necessary component of purposive IO action. They reflect the “motivational state” of IOs (List and Pettit 2011, 20-31) and indicate how organizational action ought to intervene into the organizational environment. Without intentions, actors cannot reasonably choose between available options. However, what an IO action is intended to achieve is a result of both collectively agreed organizational goals and criteria and the aggregated preferences of member states in the specific situation.

IOs typically comprise goals. Their members always establish and maintain them *for some purpose*. As any other organization, IOs can be understood as

“goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, activity systems” (Aldrich 2008, 4). Typically, member states agree on organizational goals when establishing an IO, or on criteria for subsequent implementation decisions when adopting specific policies. Subsequently, organizational goals and criteria guide organizational decision-making. Any agreement on organizational goals and criteria entails a collective commitment of IO members (Gilbert 2006, 2023). Hence, organizational goals provide a distinct normative perspective of an IO on how the world ought to be changed through organizational action and constitute the second dimension of “seeing like an IO” (Broome and Seabrooke 2012). Typically, they are relatively stable over time, i.e., not immediately tailored to a particular decision situation and become part of the institutionalized organizational history (David 1994).

The extent of IO independence results from the selectivity of organizational goals and criteria. Generally, organizational goals and criteria constrain the manoeuvring room of decision-makers in later stages of the decision process. The more selective organizational goals and criteria are, the stronger their implications for organizational decision-making are, because they exclude otherwise available options and drive organizational decision processes toward organizationally desired solutions. Hence, highly selective IO goals and criteria diminish the manoeuvring room for the accommodation of member state preferences and dissociate the motivation for organizational action from the aggregate preferences of member states in the particular decision situation – thus increasing IO independence regarding the intentions of IO action.

At the most basic level, IOs lack any independence because they do not comprise organizational goals at all (stage 1). What may appear as group intentions mirrors exactly what the member states desire in a given decision situation and, therefore, cannot guide organizational decision processes separately. The absence of collective intentions to which group members are mutually committed does not preclude cooperation. States may cooperate based on similar, but individually generated preferences. They may even cooperate in the absence of shared goals by agreeing on mutually acceptable ad hoc package deals that link substantively unrelated issues. Hence, what group action is intended to achieve is exclusively shaped by the aggregate preferences of group members.

General and unspecific organizational goals and unspecific criteria create a low level of organizational independence (stage 2). They provide only a minimum of guidance for organizational action and allow member states to accommodate their preferences extensively. Consider general purpose IOs, which are responsive to a broad range of yet unknown problems, conflicts, or situations (Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019, 45-8). Their broadly defined goals and few additional criteria have a low degree of selectivity and reflect limited normative commitment of IO members to specific collective goals.

According to the UN Charter,<sup>1</sup> the United Nations seeks “to maintain international peace and security, [...] to develop friendly relations among nations, [...] to achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character” (Art 1), while committing member states to few fundamental rules, such as equality and territorial integrity of states (Art 2.4). Likewise, some informal IOs (Vabulas and Snidal 2013) pursue very generally defined organizational goals (Kirton and Larionova 2022). The Group of 20 (G20) defines itself broadly as “the premier forum for international economic cooperation. It plays an important role in shaping and strengthening global architecture and governance on all major international economic issues.”<sup>2</sup> The leaders of the BRICS member states agreed at their summit in 2017 “to develop a closer, broader and more comprehensive strategic partnership, and consolidate the three-wheel-driven cooperation covering economy, political security and people-to-people exchanges.”<sup>3</sup> The selectivity of these organizational goals is rather low. They allow member states to pursue their own preferences within very broad limits on a broad range of international issues. Accordingly, what IO action is intended to achieve is primarily determined by aggregated member state preferences, with some additional influence of rather unspecific organizational goals.

IO goals create more independence if they provide clearer guidance for desirable organizational action (stage 3). Consider specific-purpose IOs that address, by definition, *a particular problem*, which their members conceive of as meriting international attention (Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019, 49-50). Goals and criteria of these IOs are moderately selective because they indicate the broad direction in which a particular international problem should be solved. The member states can pursue their own, possibly divergent preferences only within these limits. The UN Security Council addresses only threats to international peace and security, the International Whaling Commission only activities related to the protection and harvesting of whales, and the climate change regime only measures to combat, and adapt to, climate change. These distinct organizational perspectives may compete with those of other IOs. For example, the treaty management organizations of multilateral environmental agreements tend to welcome trade restrictions as instruments to enforce treaty obligations, whereas the World Trade Organization (WTO), established by a roughly identical group of member states, conceives of them as undesirable obstacles to international trade (Gehring 2011). Accordingly, specific-purpose IOs allow member states to

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<sup>1</sup> Charter of the United Nations. 1945. *United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter> (Accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>2</sup> G20 Secretariat, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 2023. *G20*. [www.G20.org](http://www.G20.org) (Accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>3</sup> *XIV Brics Summit*. 2022. <http://brics2022.mfa.gov.cn/eng/gyjzgj/jzgj/> (Accessed 25 May 2023).

pursue only a subset of their preferences and de-emphasize other, possibly equally relevant problems pending in world politics. What is intended to achieve by IO action is to a considerable extent defined by collectively agreed-upon organizational goals, but within these limits, member state preferences play an important role.

Organizational goals create a high degree of IO independence if detailed criteria guide specific policies (stage 4). Specific policies, often established by IO bodies as parts of organizational activities, have, by definition, a narrower focus than the entire IO. Moreover, they institutionalize detailed agreement or a mutually accepted compromise and reflect a collective interest in their sincere implementation through subsequent organizational decisions – despite conflicting preferences on specific issues. Accordingly, specific policies are typically guided by tight directives that reflect clear organizational intentions and strictly limit the manoeuvring room for decision-makers. For instance, UN Security Council sanctions regimes focusing on particular countries (like North Korea) or issues (like international terrorism) institutionalize fine-grained criteria that reflect specific organizational intentions and guide decision-making of sanctions committees (Dörfler 2019). Likewise, specific policies and institutional schemes established by the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including international climate funds, the Clean Development Mechanism (Gehring and Plocher 2009), and the transparency mechanism reviewing implementation activities of IO members (Rajamani and Bodansky 2019), comprise clear and highly selective decision criteria. These criteria are intended to realize the organizational goals instead of accommodating case-specific member state preferences. Hence, what organizational action is intended to achieve is primarily determined by organizational goals and criteria, whereas situation-specific member state preferences play only an inferior role.

**Table 2** IO Independence of Organizational Intentions

	Role of IO goals and criteria	Role of aggregate member state preferences	IO independence and typical situation
Stage 1	Absent	Exclusive	No independence: ad hoc cooperation
Stage 2	Additional	Predominant	Low independence: general purpose IO
Stage 3	Important	Important	Considerable independence: specific purpose IO
Stage 4	Predominant	Additional	Extensive independence: implementation of specific policies

In short, organizational intentions indicating the purpose of organizational action *can* be determined largely or fully by institutionalized goals and criteria, thus reflecting a high degree of organizational independence. If group intentions mirror the aggregate of member state preferences, they do not reflect any degree of IO intentional independence. However, most IOs comprise organizational goals and criteria with varying degrees of selectivity. Some of them are highly specific and guide organizational action in detail. With growing specificity of organizational goals and criteria, IOs can increasingly influence organizational intentions independently from member state preferences in the particular decision situation.

### 3.3 The Gradual Independence of Organizational Decision-Making

Organizational decision-making is another indispensable component of organizational agency. Purposive action implies that actors choose their action deliberately. As the main function of public organizations is the making of collective decisions, any IO can make decisions. Member-dominated IOs adopt decisions by “pooling” (Hooghe and Marks 2015), i.e., through member state bodies; they lack delegation to some institutional agent, e.g., an IO secretariat or court.

IOs decision-making is independent to the degree that it is based on organizational goals and criteria and on organizational beliefs, instead of the aggregation of member state preferences. The more organizational goals and criteria specify the organizationally-desired direction of action and the more organizationally-produced collective beliefs provide an organizationally-developed representation of relevant facts (Hakli, Miller, and Tuomela 2010, 311-4), the more the organizational decision process is dissociated, or independent, from member state preferences in a particular situation. In highly-independent organizational decision processes, a member state body may adopt organizational decisions, but the member states do not determine their content. Member states are necessary to operate the process, but they are “marginalized” as stakeholders (Coleman 1974, 35).

A stylized example demonstrates that organizations may require decisions that differ starkly from the aggregated preferences of group members, thus pointing at IO decision-making independence (List and Pettit 2011, 42-58). Suppose that an IO body with three members deciding on a new policy measure, say on climate change, shall adopt the measure if it finds, first, that the measure is technically feasible and, second, that it is suitable to realize an established organizational goal. Now imagine that the three members conceive of these issues as follows:

	Technically feasible	Suitable?	Preference for action?
Member A	Yes	No	No
Member B	No	Yes	No
Member C	Yes	Yes	Yes
Collective appraisal of premises	Yes	Yes	

Two of the three members reject either technical feasibility or suitability and therefore prefer not to adopt the proposed measure. Accordingly, the group would not adopt the measure if the organizational decision were based on preference aggregation (right column). List and Pettit call this outcome “conclusion-based.” However, two of the three members appraise the measure as technically feasible and two of them consider it suitable. Consequently, the group would adopt the measure if the decision were based on a collective evaluation of the two premises (bottom row). List and Pettit call this outcome “premise-based.” Accordingly, criteria-based decisions may be fully dissociated (independent) from members’ individual preferences, although they originate entirely from their input. So, “knowing what the group members individually think about some proposition does not generally tell us how the group as a whole adjudicates that proposition” (List and Pettit 2006, 86).

IOs will lack any decision-making independence if collective decisions arise entirely from the preference-based choice of IO members (stage 1). In the absence of organizationally-produced collective beliefs informing decision-makers about the cognitive foundations of the decision situation and of organizational goals and criteria indicating institutionalized collective intentions, there are no organizational constraints that limit the freedom of IO members to reach agreement. Member states can adopt any collective decision, on which they can agree, and compromise among them fully determines outcomes. Accordingly, collective decisions mirror the aggregated preferences of IO members, for instance in cases of ad hoc agreement on mutually acceptable package deals that link otherwise unrelated issues. This constellation reflects a purely intergovernmental perspective on IO decision-making and List and Pettit’s (2011, 44-5) “conclusion-based” scenario.

Loose institutional frameworks generate limited decision-making independence of IOs (stage 2). If deliberations among member states about the cognitive foundations of a pending problem produce some collective beliefs (stage-2 belief formation) and if broad goals and few additional criteria provide a general direction for choosing organizationally appropriate action (stage 2-intentions), IO decision-making is subject to limited organizational constraints. Member state preferences are predominant, but IO decisions are also influenced by organizational beliefs and goals. This constellation is typical for decision-making in general-purpose IOs like the United Nations or

the Global Summits (G7, G20) on new policies. These IOs often lack specific belief formation procedures on new policies, while their broad and fuzzy goals impose very limited constraints on the ability of member states to reach agreement reflecting their specific preferences.

Tighter institutional frameworks generate considerable organizational decision-making independence (stage 3). They are typical for specific-purpose IOs, which embody clearly defined general collective intentions and allow distinguishing between organizationally desirable and undesirable collective action (stage-3 intentions). With more clearly defined objectives, organizational belief formation processes can be institutionalized in expert bodies (stage-3 belief formation) and confront decision-makers with separately generated collective beliefs. Such comparatively tight institutional frameworks limit the manoeuvring room for member states to pursue their individual preferences considerably. Member states can pursue their specific preferences only within these limits. Hence, organizational decision-making is to a considerable extent influenced by organizational factors that complement the accommodation of member state preferences. For instance, decision-making of the treaty management organization established under the Montreal Protocol has been heavily influenced by the organizational goal to protect the stratospheric ozone layer and detailed findings of its various scientific expert committees (Benedick 1998).

Organizational decision-making within the strict institutional frameworks of well-established policies reflect far-reaching independence of IOs (stage 4). Such policies allow establishing strong organizational belief formation procedures in the form of separately institutionalized expert committees that are open to external information and focus on clearly identified tasks, such as evaluating the emission reduction effects of a given project for which funding is applied (stage-4 belief formation). Moreover, organizational decisions are typically guided by detailed and precise criteria that provide standards for the appraisal of decision problems and for the ex-post evaluation of adopted decisions (stage-4 intentions). This institutional design largely abolishes the room for the pursuit of member state preferences and drives decision-makers toward we-mode reasoning (Tuomela 2013, 21-6): How should we as a group decide in light of clear criteria and established cognitive evaluation of a decision problem? Member states are still important because organizational decisions rely (supervene) on their activities within the decision process. Yet, their importance as stake-holders diminishes because collective decisions are predominantly determined by organizational factors, not by member states' individual beliefs and preferences. This effect will be reinforced if such decisions are assigned to specialized bodies, which are typically less well suited to strike new grand bargains among the member states. For example, decisions of the Multilateral Fund established under the Montreal Protocol to support

activities of developing countries are assigned to the Fund Executive Committee. An “indicative list of incremental costs” adopted by the Meeting of the Parties binds the Committee. A balanced composition of the Committee thwarts attempts by any of the two groups of contributing and recipient countries to pursue their specific preferences (Biermann and Simonis 1999). Hence, this constellation closely mirrors List and Pettit’s (2011, 44-5) “premise-based” scenario.

**Table 3** IO Independence of Organizational Decision-Making

	IO belief formation	IO goals and criteria	Decision-making independence and typical situation
Stage 1:	No	no	Independence absent: unstructured bargaining
Stage 2:	Non-institutionalized deliberation	Very general IO goals	Independence limited: new policies in general purpose IOs
Stage 3:	Belief formation in expert bodies	Specific IO goals	Independence considerable: new policies in specific purpose IOs
Stage 4:	Expert bodies with external participation	Highly specific and selective IO criteria	Independence far-reaching: implementation of specific policies

To conclude, IO decision processes *can* reflect far-reaching decision-making independence, even if all organizational decisions are adopted by membership bodies. Only rarely are organizational decision processes exclusively based on the aggregation of member state preferences. Most organizational decision processes constrain the ability of member states to pursue their preferences in specific decision situations, but the extent varies starkly. In some cases, organizationally generated collective beliefs and institutionalized criteria dominate IO decision-making so extensively that the IO members are effectively hindered from pursuing their preferences successfully. To be sure, decision-making according to organizationally generated collective beliefs and institutionalized goals and criteria is not self-enforcing. It is typically enforced by those IO members that do not benefit from deviating decisions. Generally, aggrieved IO members can accept undesired, but criteria-based IO decisions as long as they support the overall objectives of the IO.

### 3.4 The Gradual Independence of Organizational Action

Action is a final necessary function, which actors must be able to perform. Entities do not qualify as actors if they are incapable of performing activities that “make a difference” beyond their confines (Giddens 1984, 14). Accordingly, IOs must acquire action capability to become actors in their own right. IOs have action capability to the degree that they can influence world politics through their own purposive actions (Gehring and Urbanski 2023,

141-4). This does not imply that action is successful. What matters is the ability or potential to influence world politics.

Action capability is a particularly intriguing aspect of collective agency. Like any other collective actor, IOs are non-physical entities that cannot act physically. Their action seems to rely *always* on the action of lower-level actors. For simple groups composed of individuals that constitute standard points of reference in philosophical reasoning, this conclusion seems to be straightforward. Gilbert (2006, 12) argues that “collective agents, as I understand them, act through their members.” Likewise, Tuomela (2020, 90) holds that “actions by collectives are closely connected to relevant jointly performed individual actions.” However, IOs are institutionalized group actors with important implications for organizational independence (List and Pettit 2011). Fleming suggests that even states as highly complex organizations can merely be the “owners” of organizational action, while lower-level actors (eventually individuals) are their indispensable agents that execute their action “on their behalf” (Fleming 2017, 932). In contrast, I argue that even member-dominated IOs *can* gain a considerable degree of independence regarding their action.

Independence of IO action depends on two interrelated features, namely the control of governance resources and the ability to create effects in the environment by using these governance resources. Control of governance resources enables an IO to act. Coleman’s (1974, 1990) sociological theory of corporate actors demonstrates that IOs can indeed gain control of governance resources that are distinct from the governance resources controlled by the member states (section 2). It is fully compatible with the ongoing IR discussion on the exercise of political authority by IOs (Lake 2010; Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012). IOs are equipped with action capability whenever their members authorize them to make decisions intended to be binding on addressees (Cooper et al. 2008, 505) or to create effects beyond their confines. Governance resources may include the right to create and amend rules, to regulate specific policy areas, to implement joint policies by deploying pooled financial assets, to monitor and enforce compliance with international commitments, to adjudicate disputes, or to issue recommendations, opinions, and interpretations intended to create external effects (Bradley and Kelley 2008; Zürn, Tokhi, and Binder 2021). Independence of IO action is also related to the ability to create effects in the environment by using these governance resources. While scholars of group agency point to the fact that organizations cannot physically implement their decisions, organizational decisions might not need significant physical implementation to influence the IO environment and enable an IO to act independently from joint action of its member states.

If the member states have not transferred any decision-making authority to the organizational level, an IO will not gain any ability to act independently

from its members (stage 1). Without this transfer, the IO does not control significant governance resources, which it might employ to influence its environment. IOs of this type may still serve as arenas for coordination of member state action. However, what may appear as organizational action is entirely the aggregate effect of the actions of group members (Tuomela 2020, 90-5). This is true for many “informal” or “low-cost” IOs (Vabulas and Snidal 2013; Abbott and Faude 2021). For instance, the Global Summits (G7, G20) and the BRICS Forum allow their member states to coordinate their action (Kirton and Larionova 2022). Coordinated action may significantly influence world politics, but this effect is virtually entirely the result of adjusted member state behaviour, not of separate IO action.

If their member states empower them temporarily to act for well-specified purposes, IOs enjoy very limited independence regarding their action (stage 2). They become capable of acting in their own right, but their action is immediately related to the empowering action of the member states. For instance, the EU member states have repeatedly authorized the EU to conduct specifically defined military missions in crisis regions. However, they do not transfer the necessary troops, equipment, and funding to the EU unless they have agreed on the precise nature of the particular mission. EU military action does not mirror the aggregate of member state action. It matters whether a group of states transfers military means to the EU and thereby empowers this IO to conduct the mission; or whether the same states conduct the mission jointly as a “coalition of the willing.” Likewise, it matters whether the member states of the G7 or G20 World Summits use these IOs to orchestrate action of other IOs, such as the International Monetary Fund or the OECD (Downie 2022); or whether they merely form a negotiation coalition within these other IOs. While the respective IOs are empowered to act in a particular situation, their independence remains rather limited because organizational action is immediately related to the empowering action of the member states.

If their member states empower them permanently, or for longer periods, to act, IOs will gain considerable independence, even if IO action requires implementation activities by member states or other lower-level actors to become effective (stage 3). The enduring transfer of governance resources occurs in a separate stage, which precedes a collective decision on a particular IO action according to valid organizational rules and procedures. This entails a more extensive sovereignty loss for member states because the transfer of resources is not immediately linked to *a specific use* of these resources. The IO gains independence because it can act by using resources that are already under its control, and it can influence the shape and nature of its action. For example, member states having transferred money to an international fund sacrifice unilateral control of how this money is used; simultaneously, they empower the IO to employ this money according to

organizational decisions. Hence, IO funding action differs from the aggregate effects of preceding member state action. However, independence of IO action is constrained because it creates effects in world politics only upon implementation by addressees. Money does not flow, unless some lower-level actors invest it and accept related conditions. Similarly, voluntary regulatory activities of IOs, which are not binding on member states, do not create effects unless addressees are responsive. For example, the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision has been established as the global forum for banking regulation and is authorized to elaborate banking standards (Young 2011). Hence, it controls action resources with potentially tremendous implications for world politics. However, its standards constitute recommendations that become effective only upon implementation by the member states.

IOs are highly independent regarding their action if they are authorized permanently, or for longer periods, to exercise specific activities, *and* if IO action can affect world politics without immediate implementation by member states or other lower-level actors IOs (stage 4). This is especially true for IOs with regulatory tasks and the authority to make binding decisions. At least two types of IO action matter for world politics even if they are not immediately implemented. *First*, IO decisions may change the normative status of specific forms of behaviour. For instance, the decision of the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) to impose binding restrictions on trade in endangered species renders certain activities unlawful, even if they are not immediately terminated. The normative consequences of IO decisions are even more obvious in case of enabling (as opposed to prescriptive or proscriptive) decisions. A UN Security Council decision to authorize the legitimate use of force in a given international crisis (Voeten 2005) permits states to act accordingly, whether or not this permission is used. Likewise, the decision of the COP of CITES to lift the trade ban on a given species renders certain trade activities legal, whether or not any actor immediately engages in such trade. *Second*, IOs may be authorized to establish institutional schemes that provide addressees with new opportunities for action, even if these opportunities are not immediately used. For instance, the COP of the UNFCCC established a number of climate funds, sophisticated cooperation mechanisms like the Clean Development Mechanism, which member states *can* use, as well as a compliance arrangement (Gehring and Spielmann 2023, forthcoming), which might exert influence (as a threat) even if it were never used.

**Table 4** IO Independence of Organizational Action

	Does IO control governance resources?	Is IO able to create effects without implementation activities of lower-level actors?	Independence of IO action and typical situation
Stage 1:	No	No	No independence: coordinated member state action
Stage 2:	Yes, but only upon situation-specific transfer	--	Very limited independence: military mission, G7/20 orchestration of other IOs
Stage 3:	Yes, permanently	No, effect depends on immediate implementation by lower-level actors	Considerable independence: international funding, voluntary regulation
Stage 4:	Yes, permanently	Yes, effective even without immediate implementation	Far-reaching independence: change of normative status; institutional scheme

In short, member-dominated IOs *may* gain far-reaching independence on their action. Some presumably mostly informal IOs lack action independence entirely because IO members have not transferred any governance resources. Talking about action of these IOs is merely a shortcut for the aggregate effects of coordinated member state action. IO independence is rather limited if the member states empower the IO to act only upon agreement on a specific IO action, because the latter is immediately related to the enabling actions of the member states. IOs can act with considerable independence if they gain permanent control of governance resources, because IO action using these resources is clearly separated in time and nature from the empowering action of the member states. In turn, IO action independence will be constrained if effects depend on the responsiveness of implementing actors. Therefore, IO action independence is highest if an IO is in permanent control of governance resources *and* can act in ways that matter for world politics even without implementation by addressees.

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#### 4. Conclusion

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Without a minimum of independence, IOs cannot become autonomous actors of world politics. The independence of IOs from their member states originates from institutional rules and procedures. Variation in IO independence is largely a reflection of institutional design. While this has been well-established for IOs involving delegation of organizational tasks to institutional agents like secretariats, it is also true for IOs in which decisions are made by member state bodies through pooling. The influence of organizational rules and procedures is the consequence of the two-step process of governance through IOs. In the first step, a group of states establishes an IO, authorizes it to make subsequent decisions, and agrees on

a “constitution” with some basic rules and procedures that spell out how these decisions are to be made. Subsequently, organizational decisions are made according to these rules and procedures. The member states replace their standing as sovereign actors of world politics with their role as members of an IO as defined by the rules and procedures of this IO. Henceforth, they can pursue their preferences with the IO only according to these rules and procedures. It is generally difficult to pursue one’s interests beyond these institutional constraints because this move is likely to stir resistance by negatively affected IO members. After all, the IO has been established to organize mutually beneficial cooperation, and violation of its rules is likely to jeopardize this endeavour. Accordingly, it matters how an IO operates and what this means for organizational independence.

IOs can acquire far-reaching independence from their members in each of the four organizational core operations of corporate agency even if all IO operations are conducted by member state bodies. Member-dominated IOs can generate specific organizational beliefs about relevant aspects of their environment that arise from specialized procedures, such as scientific committees that infuse organizational knowledge into the decision process. They can embody organizational goals in the form of detailed and highly selective criteria for the making of organizational decisions, in particular in respect of specific policies such as funding schemes. Their decision processes can be designed to appreciate organizationally-generated beliefs and institutionalized decision criteria, thus reducing the ability of IO members to pursue their preferences beyond established criteria. Finally, IOs can be authorized to exercise actions that gain relevance in world politics even without immediate implementation action by member states (or other lower-level actors), for instance by changing the normative status of certain behaviour. All these forms of IO independence are a consequence of specifically designed organizational rules and procedures and reflect genuine organizational characteristics. Although they arise from (are supervenient on) activities of IO members, none of them can be reduced to the related activities of IO members. Few real-world IOs without delegation reach the highest level of independence on all four dimensions of IO agency. However, few real-world IOs are likely to lack a minimum of independence on any of the four organizational core operations. Higher levels of independence on any of them reinforce the autonomy of the respective IO because they increase the extent to which organizational effects, as opposed to characteristics of members, influence organizational action. The approach developed in this paper helps assess the degree of independence of a given IO on each of the four organizational core operations of corporate agency.

These findings have implications for our understanding of member-dominated IOs without delegation to institutional agents and of traditional IOs with extensive secretariats and other institutional agents alike. They

demonstrate that the former can acquire a considerable degree of independence from their member states, even if member state bodies adopt all organizational decisions. Treating them as inert forums for interaction among their member states threatens to underestimate their autonomous influence on world politics grossly. Likewise, traditional IOs do not only gain independence from the activities of their secretariats and other institutional agents, but also from the design of decision-making procedures, which virtually always include member state bodies and committees. These findings may also have normative implications. The more independence from its members an IO has acquired, whether or not based on activities of institutional agents, the more the IO may be responsible for organizational action. The more organizational rules and procedures influence, or even determine, such action, the more the institutional design needs adjustment upon failure or unsuccessful organizational action.

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