

Are international organisations in decline? An absolute and relative perspective on institutional change

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Are international organisations in decline? An absolute and relative perspective on institutional change

Maria J. Debre¹  | Hylke Dijkstra² 

¹Wirtschafts und Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany

²Department of Political Science, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Hylke Dijkstra, Department of Political Science, Maastricht University, PO Box 616, Maastricht 6200 MD, The Netherlands.
Email: h.dijkstra@maastrichtuniversity.nl

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Abstract

Many international organisations (IOs) are currently challenged, yet are they also in decline? Despite much debate on the crisis of liberal international order, contestation, loss of legitimacy, gridlock, pathologies and exiting member states, there is little research on IO decline. This article seeks to clarify this concept and argues that decline can be considered in absolute and relative terms. Absolute decline involves a decrease in the number of IOs and their authority, membership and output, whereas relative decline concerns a decrease in the centrality of IOs in international relations. Reviewing a wide range of indicators, this article argues that, whereas there is limited decline in absolute terms since 1945, there may well be important decline in relative terms. Relative decline is more difficult to measure, but to probe its significance this article presents data from speeches during the United Nations General Assembly General Debate. It shows that IOs were most often mentioned in 1996 and that there has been a decline since. These findings indicate that, whereas IOs might survive as institutions, they are decreasingly central to international relations.

1 | THE RISE AND DECLINE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

International organisations (IOs) carry out core governance functions. Many international and cross-border problems—from trade, climate change and migration, to pandemics and collective security—require states to act through IOs (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). IOs, such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), have become household names as they regulate international behaviour and implement ambitious policy programmes. They are global governors (Avant et al., 2010). In the past couple of years, however, IOs and the broader liberal and international order have faced substantial challenges. The UK has left the EU, Burundi has left the International Criminal Court, and the USA has left UNESCO (von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019). IOs must deal with unreliable budgeting (Patz & Goetz, 2019). The number of staff available to IO bureaucracies has not always increased with their expanded mandates (Ege & Bauer, 2017; Heldt & Schmidtke, 2017). And although

many organisations regularly meet and decide on policies, others vegetate into ‘zombies’ without any impact (Gray, 2018).

These challenges are captured in concepts of legitimacy, politicisation, contestation, gridlock, pathologies, exiting states and the overall crisis of the liberal international order (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, 2004; Hale et al., 2013; Lake et al., 2021; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019; von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019; Zürn, 2018). Yet impressive as this scholarship is, scholars have thus far not systematically informed us of the consequences of these challenges: Whether IOs are in fact in decline—defined as a ‘gradual and continuous loss of strength, numbers, quality, or value’ (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). We know about the *establishment* and design of IOs (Hooghe et al., 2019; Johnson, 2013; Koremenos et al., 2001), their *development* (Barnett & Coleman, 2005; Colgan et al., 2012; Hanrieder, 2015; Lipsky, 2017) and increasingly also their *death and replacement* (Cottrell, 2016; Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Dijkstra & Debre, 2022; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, 2021; Gray, 2018; Shanks et al., 1996). But the

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phase of *decline*—which normally precedes death or replacement—remains understudied.

This article makes a case for a more thorough research agenda on IO decline. As a starting point, it takes a step back from ongoing debates about the current crisis of liberal international order to conceptualise and measure IO decline. The focus is on formal intergovernmental organisations, which provide the cornerstones of global governance and the liberal international order. It argues that IO decline can be considered in *absolute* and *relative* terms and can take place at the level of the *population of IOs* as well as *individual IOs*. These are important distinctions which provide us different perspectives on IO decline. For instance, WTO membership has increased in absolute terms over the past decade, but its relative position in international relations has clearly declined since the breakdown of the Doha Development Round.

Reviewing a wide range of indicators (mostly since 1945), this article finds that on many absolute IO indicators—such as the number of IOs and their authority, membership, secretariat staff or policy output—we see consistent growth or at most stasis. Cases of absolute decline are historically rare and few and far between. This is a surprising finding given all the current pessimism of IOs and international cooperation. Nevertheless, we argue that there may well be important decline in relative terms, by which we mean a decrease in the centrality of IOs in international relations. To get an idea of relative decline, for which IO indicators are less readily available in the major datasets, the article analyses the political attention that state leaders pay to IOs over time using data from their annual high-level United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) speeches. We demonstrate that attention to IOs fluctuates and has declined since 1996. Although UNGA data present one relative IO indicator, they reveal the promise of further research on the relative decline. Overall, these findings indicate that, although IOs might survive as institutions (in absolute terms), they are potentially decreasingly central to international relations (in relative terms).

This article makes three contributions. First, by studying decline, it focuses on the *consequences* of phenomena such as gridlock, legitimacy loss or contestation, rather than explaining their causes (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Second, it balances IO scholarship that is normatively *biased on survival* inquiring how IOs can overcome these challenges rather than studying IO decline (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, 2004; Hale & Held, 2017). Third, it points to the *complexity of IO decline*, noting that it is not necessarily the mirror image of IO growth. We know from the literature on other forms of governance (Boin et al., 2010; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Kennedy, 1987; Panke & Petersohn, 2012; Young, 1982) that this assumption is too simplistic.

By better understanding IO decline, we can better judge the significance of current challenges to IOs. The

Policy Implications

- There is a lot of talk of international organisations and multilateralism being in crisis, but we do not know whether international organisations are actually in decline. Policymakers should be more careful in expressing pessimism about the prospect of international cooperation.
- The absolute decline of international organisations involves a decrease in their number, authority, membership and output. The relative decline, on the other hand, concerns a decrease in the centrality of international organisations in international relations. This article demonstrates that international organisations can survive while becoming simultaneously less important.
- Reviewing a wide range of indicators, this article demonstrates that, for all the crises that have occurred over the decades, few international organisations lose authority or member states or produce fewer policies. International organisations are well established and policymakers should therefore continue to consider international organisations as vital forums for international cooperation.
- This article also provides some evidence that international organisations have become less central to international relations since 1996. This implies that, in addition to continuing to invest in international organisations, policymakers should be aware of the wider web of global governance institutions.

article begins by discussing related concepts and how they differ from IO decline. It then considers IO decline at the population level and the level of individual IOs. Subsequently, it reviews evidence of absolute and relative IO indicators using existing data. The purpose is to validate indicators with historical data to help us capture instances of IO decline (cf. Adcock & Collier, 2001; Gerring, 2012; King et al., 1994). Because many of the existing datasets do not yet cover the most recent years, this article does not make definite statements on whether IOs are currently in decline.

2 | DECLINE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN THE LITERATURE

It is well-known that different forms of governance have a life cycle (Boin et al., 2010; Fazal, 2007; Finnemore

& Sikkink, 1998; Kennedy, 1987; Leeds & Savun, 2007; Young, 1982). They get established, and they may disappear. The Correlates of War Intergovernmental Organizations (COW-IGO) dataset v3.0, for instance, includes 534 IOs of which 200 no longer exist (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020; Pevehouse et al., 2020). Yet whereas scholars have systematically looked at IO development and increasingly consider dissolution, decline as a stage in the life cycle of IOs remains understudied. Various scholars have advanced concepts that seem to be closely linked to decline. Yet their emphasis remains on explaining stasis, ineffectiveness or lack of legitimacy, rather than IO decline (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Hale et al., 2013; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Other concepts such as state withdrawal, decreasing policy output or IO capacity can be seen rather as potential indicators of decline, although they are rarely theorised as such (Goetz & Patz, 2017; Gray, 2018; von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019). The concept of IO decline therefore seems an afterthought rather than the object of study.

It is worth starting with some of the *magna opera* before moving to publications that deal with specific indicators of IO decline. The concept of institutional pathologies (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, 2004) is no doubt one of the most prominent attempts to conceptualise IO dysfunction. Barnett and Finnemore (2004, pp. 34–35) tried to understand why IOs implement policies at odds with their stated mission. Pathologies can potentially lead to IO decline,¹ but Barnett and Finnemore do not consider decline: They discuss the dilemma of IO ‘expansion’ (2004, pp. 158–173). Similarly, the work of Hale et al. (2013) on IO ‘gridlock’ denotes the inability of countries to cooperate via international institutions and address ambitious cross-border policy problems. Although they consider ‘trends that threaten to exacerbate gridlock and further weaken multilateralism’ (Hale et al., 2013, p. 275; see also 279–286), what they really want to do is find pathways out of gridlock (Hale & Held, 2017). Ultimately, they consider gridlock as ‘stagnation’ (Hale & Held, 2017, p. 4).

Zürn (2018) comes closest to dealing with IO decline. He argues that IOs increasingly face growing politicisation owing to the rise of international authority. Although Zürn’s work mostly problematises politicisation, he also discusses the consequences: Depending on the strength of contestation and type of IO legitimation response, the deepening and decline of global governance are potential outcomes (Zürn, 2018, pp. 13–14; 255–257). Zürn defines decline as ‘a decrease in the level of international authority’ (Zürn, 2018, p. 89) and provides a brief causal mechanism (Zürn, 2018, p. 101). In a similar vein, Hooghe et al. (2019) conceptualise politicisation as an inevitable product that ‘can constrain international authority even in the face of functional [cooperation] pressure’ (p. 88). Hooghe et al.

do not elaborate much either. They are concerned with the ‘resistible rise of international authority’ (Hooghe et al., 2019, Chapter 6) and only provide us with descriptive data on the decline in pooling and delegation of authority in table 3.1. They note that ‘[n]o IO has witnessed a decline in both delegation and pooling’ (Hooghe et al., 2019, p. 39).

Our conceptual understanding of IO decline thus remains limited, but scholars are increasingly studying empirical phenomena related to IO decline. Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019) focus on state withdrawal. Sommerer et al. (2022) come close to the concept of IO decline by studying the effects of legitimacy crises on IOs’ capacities to rule including their material capacities, institutional capacities and decision-making capacities. Cottrell (2016) analyses how legitimacy crises lead to the replacement of IOs. And many scholars study informal international governance outside the context of IOs (Westerwinter et al., 2021) as well as how global governance fluctuates from intergovernmental cooperation to nongovernmental cooperation over time (Grigorescu, 2020). These are all impressive publications, and we will build on them in the second half of this article. Yet they do not systematically conceptualise and study IO decline as such.

3 | CONCEPT OF DECLINE: POPULATION DYNAMICS AND IO LIFE CYCLES

The Oxford Dictionary defines decline as a ‘gradual and continuous loss of strength, numbers, quality or value’.² In organisational theory and public administration, organisational decline is equally understood as a deterioration of resources and performance over sustained periods (Trahms et al., 2013, p. 1278). Decline thus has two properties. First, it is a *continuous process*. It does not contain instantaneous moments of change. Second, decline necessitates a clear *downward trend*. When we compare t and $t+1$, we must be able to draw a linear line that clearly points downwards. In other words, at $t+1$, there should be fewer IOs, and they should provide fewer governance functions to fewer members, possess fewer resources, and/or are less central to international relations than at t . Although seemingly straightforward, this section demonstrates that it is not easy to make claims about the decline of IOs as institutions for cooperation. Nor is it straightforward to situate the stage of decline *within* the life cycle of IOs.

3.1 | Decline of IOs at the population level

It is important to first consider the decline of IOs as vehicles for international cooperation at the population

level, as a focus on individual IOs can be reductionist. Unlike international treaties, IOs are relatively recent institutions founded since 1815. This raises the question why do states 'act through IOs' across time and space (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). The utility of formal governmental IOs has, in this respect, also been questioned for contemporary problems, such as climate change (Slaughter, 2004). Empirically, we have witnessed the emergence of a whole range of alternative institutions (Haufler, 2009; Reinsberg & Westerwinter, 2019; Roger, 2020; Vabulas & Snidal, 2013, 2020; Verdier & Voeten, 2015; Westerwinter et al., 2021). Indeed, Grigorescu (2020, fig. 1.3) demonstrates that, over the course of the past century, the ratio between intergovernmental IOs and other institutions has varied substantially.

Drawing on population ecology approaches (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1989), Abbott et al. (2016) have started to study international institutions at the population level. Important is the density of a population and how it develops over time. They note that 'new [organisational] forms initially grow rapidly, with little resource competition and increasing legitimacy; eventually, however, competition causes growth to level off and decline, perhaps even turning negative as organizations exit' (Figure 1a; Abbott et al., 2016, pp. 259–260, see also fig. 1). The variable of carrying capacity is explaining density: The savannah can only host so many animals. For populations of international institutions, the situation is more complicated. First, it is not clear what resource limits constrain the growth of international institutions, as for most states, financial contributions to IOs remain limited. Second, as organisational forms develop, different organisations may adopt consolidation or niche strategies to survive (Abbott et al., 2016, p. 262 ff.).

These insights are helpful to think of IO decline at the population level. The total number of IOs or the density of IOs across policy areas can tell us where we are in the life cycle of IOs as an organisational

form (Figure 1b). Hannan and Freeman, for instance, demonstrate that the number of craft unions declined significantly between 1955 and 1985 (Hannan & Freeman, 1989, fig. 3). If we empirically see something similar with IOs, we can speak of *absolute* IO decline as a form of cooperation. Beyond total numbers of IOs, we might consider the cumulative sum of governance functions that IOs execute. Although total numbers of IOs might level off, their mandates and authority can still expand (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Kahler, 2009; Littoz-Monnet, 2017; Reinalda & Verbeek, 1998). At the same time, overlapping mandates and regime complexity impair their ability to effectively fulfil functions and can lead to consolidation (Alter & Meunier, 2006; Gutner, 2005; Raustiala & Victor, 2004). States may reign in their agents and reassert their sovereignty (Heldt, 2017; Hirschmann, 2020) thereby causing absolute decline.

The notion of an absolute decline of IOs as a specific organisational form is easy to grasp, but we should also consider the *relative* decline of IOs compared with other organisational forms of international cooperation, just as we also consider the relative power of states (Baldwin, 2002; Levi, 1988; cf. Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950). It is worth considering, in this respect, the centrality of IOs: If many IOs occupy at t a central position in international relations and at $t+1$ a more marginal position, we can speak of relative decline at the population level. This relative, or even relational, perspective on decline ties into network approaches to global governance (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009; Kinne, 2013a, 2013b) that consider IOs as part of a network structure defined by social and material relationships between participating agents. Relevant, in this respect, is where governance takes place. Scholars have, for instance, pointed at the rapid increase in informal international institutions (Vabulas & Snidal, 2013, 2020; Westerwinter et al., 2021). Although they sometimes remain marginal (Abbott et al., 2016, p. 255f.) or cluster around formal IOs (Westerwinter et al., 2021), they do present

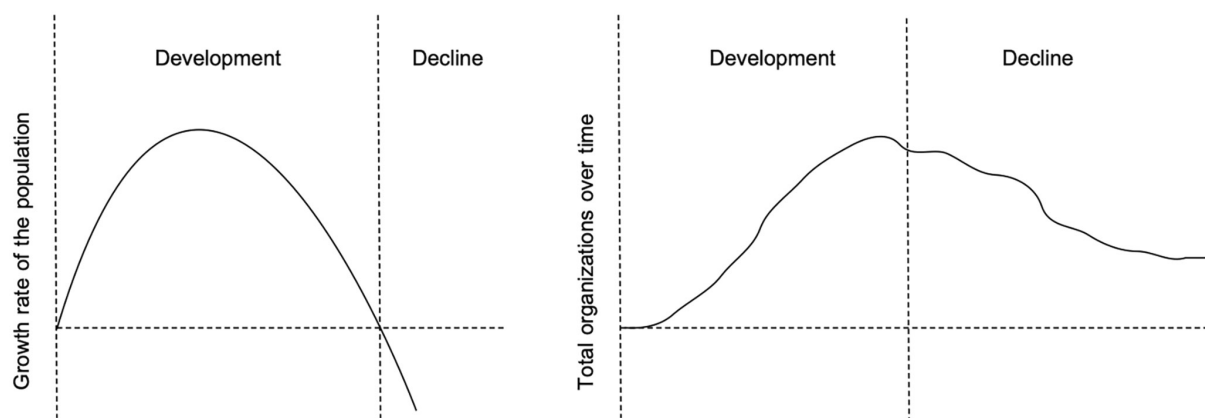


FIGURE 1 Organisational growth rates over time based on Abbott et al. (2016), fig. 1 (left, a). Organisation numbers within a population over time inspired by Hannan and Freeman (1989), fig. 3 (right, b).

potentially competing organisational formats that can lead to a relative decline of IOs at the population level (Roger, 2020). Formal IOs may continue to implement their mandates, but important strategic decisions may be taken in the G7/G20 forums. Grigorescu (2020: title), in this respect, also talks about the ‘ebb and flow of global governance’ where governance fluctuates over the decades from formal intergovernmental IOs to other forms of cooperation and back.

3.2 | Decline of individual IOs

Developments at the population level condition opportunities for individual IOs. If formal IOs are no longer widely perceived as the best vehicles for cooperation—and the pendulum swings towards informal, ad hoc and nongovernmentalism—this potentially leaves less space on the savannah for individual IOs. IOs may no longer be asked to address new cooperation problems as they appear on the international agenda, thereby losing centrality in international relations. At the same time, population-level decline does not automatically imply a decline of individual IOs. Some individual IOs may well adapt to a new environment, for instance by developing partnerships with other non-IO actors or exchanging resources with other IOs, as a result of which they come out stronger. In other words, it is important to complement our understanding of population-level decline with the study of decline at the level of individual IOs.

Conceptualising the decline of individual IOs requires us to consider the idiosyncrasies of their life cycles. Theories of institutional change provide us with ideal types. The archetypical life cycle consists of four stages (Figure 2a). IOs are *born* when they are established by three or more states with regular meetings and a secretariat (Pevehouse et al., 2020). They *develop* in terms of activities, authority, resources and members (Davis & Wilf, 2017; Hooghe et al., 2019; Lundgren et al., 2018; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002). They reach their summit and start to *decline* in a process that mirrors development. They *die* because of formal dissolution or desuetude (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, 2021).

Figure 2a conforms to a gradual transformation logic of institutional change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005), but institutions often evolve differently. Punctuated equilibrium theory notes that institutional change comes in short-term shocks after periods of stability (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Baumgartner et al., 2006; Krasner, 1984; for IOs see: Colgan et al., 2012; Lundgren et al., 2018). In a variation on the theme, scholars argue that choices made at critical junctures are path dependent over time (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Pierson, 2004). Figure 2b presents such a logic and demonstrates that IO decline is perhaps less obvious than assumed. Short-term shocks are not necessarily instances of decline as they are not continuous, and equilibriums between shocks do not point downwards.

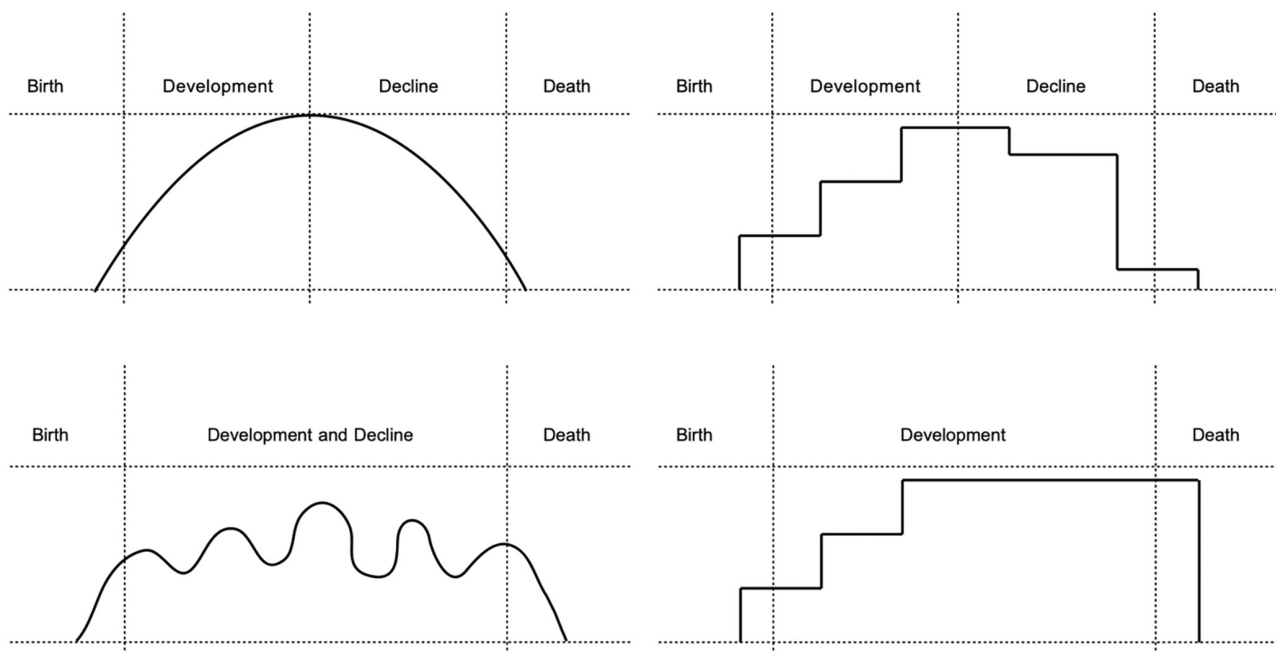


FIGURE 2 Four ideal-type life cycles of IOs: Gradual change (top left, a), punctuated equilibriums (top right, b), alternating periods of development and decline (lower left, c), and sudden death (lower right, d).

Gradual transformation and punctuated equilibriums provide the two standard accounts of institutional change (Gerschewski, 2021). Figure 2a,b can be used to think about, for example, the decline of the League of Nations throughout the 1930s.³ Yet decline is not necessarily the mirror image of development. Periods of development may alternate with periods of decline (Figure 2c). IOs may go through a deep crisis but recover. IOs may be 'on standby' to be used when a global problem hits. Or states might find new purpose in 'zombie' IOs and activate them (Gray, 2018). Other IOs may face 'sudden death' (Figure 2d) in which IOs do not go through a stage of decline first. The Warsaw Treaty Organization is an example which was quickly dissolved after the end of the Cold War. There are thus various ways to think about the life cycle of IOs.⁴ The purpose here is to underline that IO decline is multifaceted and cannot simply be assumed to be the mirror image of IO development.

The decline of individual IOs can also be considered in absolute and relative terms. Absolute decline concerns a loss of authority, resources, members, output and even compliance and impact (cf. the definition of Zürn, 2018 provided above). Yet just as we consider the relative decline of the IO population, we should also consider the relative position of individual IOs in international relations. IOs can lose status relative to other IOs because overall numbers of IOs grow, policy fields get denser, and consequently less attention is paid to individual IOs. Relative decline might also capture stagnation or not keeping pace with developments in a policy field. In the introduction, the example of the WTO was already mentioned, which has increased in absolute terms, but clearly declined relatively.

4 | MEASURING THE DECLINE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The concept of IO decline is abstract and complex, and so is its measurement. Quantification of social constructs necessarily requires reduction, and we must pay particular attention to what extent measurements

are valid representations of the phenomenon under analysis (Adcock & Collier, 2001; Gerring, 2012; King et al., 1994, p. 25). It is thus imperative to develop a systematised concept that clearly defines the phenomenon and its subdimensions and delineates it from background concepts to arrive at suitable operationalisations and measurement (Adcock & Collier, 2001, p. 532; see also: Hooghe et al., 2017, p. 6ff.). We have conceptualised decline, in this respect, as a continuous downward process, which can be observed both at the population level as well as the level of individual IOs. It entails both decline of absolute properties and relative decline of centrality. As such, this article suggests four dimensions for IO decline (Table 1). Concept validity also requires developing clear operational definitions that can be translated into measurable indicators. The central challenge in this endeavour is context specificity: To what extent can indicators meaningfully be applied to different contexts without ridding the concept of its meaning (Adcock & Collier, 2001, p. 534; Gerring, 2012, p. 160ff.; Goertz, 2006)?

In this section, we evaluate measurements and indicators for the four dimensions. To illustrate these dimensions and their measurement, we review existing empirical evidence. The purpose is not to assess whether IOs are currently in decline, but rather to uncover which indicators can help us to systematically identify instances of IO decline in the period since 1945. Only when we are clear about what we talk about, and when we understand how decline looks historically, can we meaningfully judge what is happening to IOs right now and in future. The available empirical evidence indicates growth or stasis across most absolute IO indicators. This is surprising given the pessimism in the literature on international cooperation. Data on the relative position of IOs in international relations are less readily available. To probe the concept of relative decline of IOs, the article analyses the political attention that state leaders pay to different IOs over time using data from their UNGA speeches. This initial probe reveals that, despite the surprisingly limited decline in absolute terms, IOs may well have declined in relative terms.

TABLE 1 Four dimensions of IO decline and indicators used in this article

	Absolute decline	Relative decline
Population level	Decreasing number of IOs and their cumulative global governance functions e.g. Total IO numbers (per policy field), cumulative authority and legitimacy of IOs	Increasingly international cooperation takes place elsewhere e.g. Alternative forms of global governance; cumulative mentions in state speeches at UN General Assembly
Individual level	Decreasing functions, resources and activity of individual IOs e.g. Numbers of member states, permanent staff, delegated & pooled authority, policy output and compliance	Individual IOs have decreasing centrality in international relations e.g. Mentions in state speeches at UN General Assembly; number of cooperation agreements/practices between IOs

4.1 | Absolute decline of IOs

IO decline in the literature typically concerns absolute decline, which can be measured by various standard indicators for which data are readily available. We have compiled a range of figures based on such data, which we have included in Figures S1–S3. We restrict ourselves here to a discussion of the data. *Absolute decline at the population level* entails a decline in total numbers of IOs. Here we can rely on the COW-IGO v3.0 dataset by Pevehouse et al. (2020; Figure S1).⁵ Since the mid-1990s, the total number of IOs has stagnated, and particularly economic IOs have experienced a slight decline since the mid-1990s (Pevehouse et al., 2020; Zürn et al., 2021). Overall, the population seems in equilibrium rather than in decline. Beyond the density of IOs, we can also measure the cumulative sum of IO authority and liberal intrusiveness (Zürn et al., 2021; Figure S1), which we can understand as the total reach of IOs. When assessing such data, historically, there are also no signs of absolute decline in other population level indicators.

There are neither many instances of *absolute decline at the level of individual IOs*. IO decline can be measured in terms of a decline in membership, activities and output, resources and authority (Hooghe et al., 2017; Pevehouse et al., 2020; Volgy et al., 2008; Zürn, 2018). Various datasets provide us with appropriate measures to map absolute decline at the individual IO level (Figure S2). Starting with membership, von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019) demonstrate that withdrawal is a relatively rare event: Only 20 out of

534 IOs have experienced more than three withdrawals over the course of their life span, and most exits cluster in a handful of IOs such as the International Whaling Commission and UNESCO (von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019). Additionally, only 23/534 IOs end up with fewer members (by the end of the study period in 2014) than their numbers at foundation (Pevehouse et al., 2020). State withdrawal is therefore rare and not a clear indicator of decline in the period leading up to IO death (Figure S2).

Other indicators demonstrate similar results. Delegated and pooled authority of IOs does vary over time (Figure S2), but mostly grows with few instances of decline (Hooghe et al., 2019; Zürn et al., 2021). Importantly, only a handful of IOs ended with lower levels of authority by 2014 (Hooghe et al., 2019, table 3.1). For bureaucratic capacity (Figure S2), most IO staff numbers have grown steadily and then remain relatively constant once IOs have reached a stable point of maturation (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Heldt & Schmidtke, 2017). Some scholars have argued that IOs are unable to produce relevant output (Hale et al., 2013). However, measures of policy output do not find a significant downward trend. Indeed, Lundgren et al. (2018) demonstrate that policy output conforms to punctuated equilibrium theory (Figure S2), whereby change in attention to certain policy agendas only changes dramatically after exogenous political shocks and output remains stable over most of the IO life span. Gray (2018) considers economic activity among member states as an indicator of the vitality of regional economic organisations, and she too finds stability.

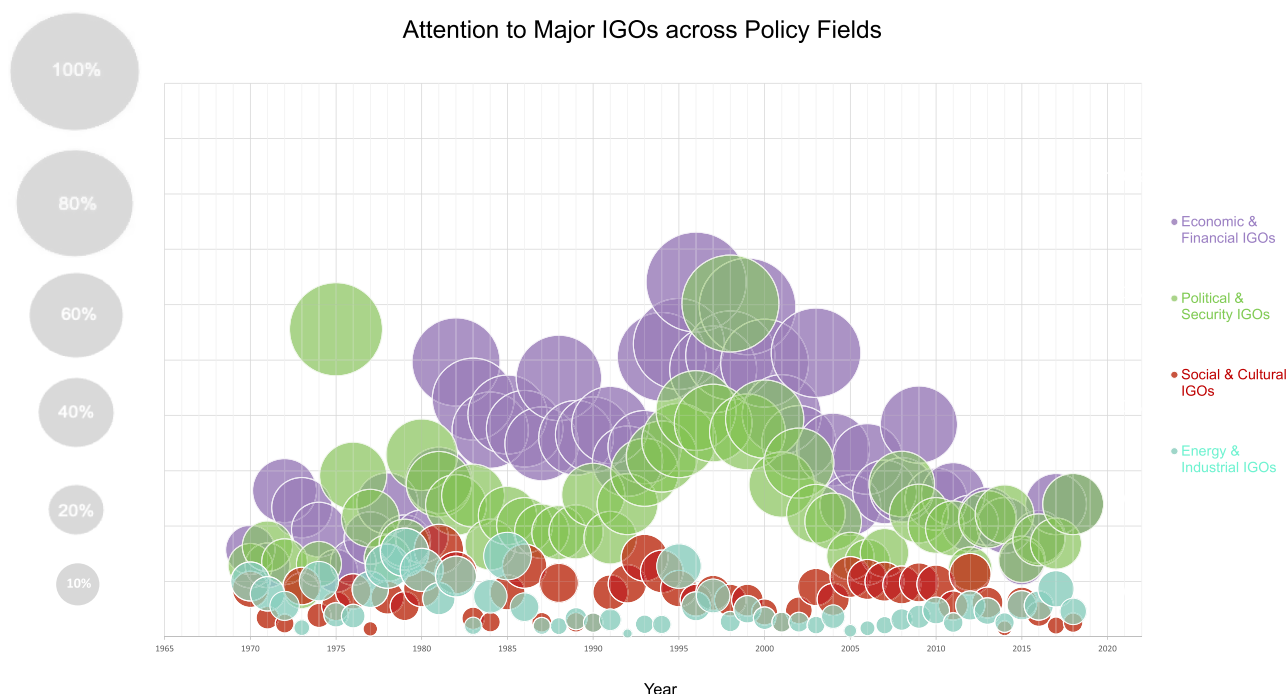


FIGURE 3 Attention in UNGA speeches across policy fields.

Although an elegant indicator, its usefulness is limited to IOs in the economic domain. Lack of compliance is another potential indicator of decline and central in the norms literature as it speaks to internalisation of norms, but we are not aware of cross-sectional data on compliance. Furthermore, compliance rates suffer from observational equivalence, which makes it difficult to simply compare them across IOs.

In conclusion, the empirical data do not reveal significant instances of IO decline at either the population or the individual level. The absolute IO indicators—which are considered throughout the literature as the indicators for development, decline and vitality—thus do not seem to suggest that many IOs have experienced marked periods of decline. There are obviously historical examples of absolute decline, such as the League of Nations, but when looking at a cross section of 30 or 75 IOs post-1945, as various datasets do, these absolute IO indicators do not point to many cases of decline (in line with the ideal types presented above), even in the years prior to death.⁶ When institutional change does happen, the trend is upward, not downward. At most, we can speak of stasis, where IOs perhaps have reached an equilibrium or stagnation in that IOs do not develop quickly enough to deal with the many challenges of our times (Hale et al., 2013). The absence of IO decline, in the absolute indicators at the population and individual level, is naturally surprising given the considerable pessimism about IOs and international cooperation, and does not correspond to our general knowledge of IOs. It is therefore important to also consider the alternative, relative, concept of IO decline.

4.2 | Relative decline of IOs

Contrary to absolute decline, indicators of relative decline do not readily appear in the standard IO datasets. We are only aware of a few datasets that include IOs as actual actors, but these are restricted to specific governance fields (Grigorescu, 2010; Holzscheiter et al., 2020; Song et al., 2020).⁷ This makes it difficult to provide definite statements on the validity of the concept of relative decline. To probe the concept, and to point at a fruitful avenue for future research, the article analyses the political attention that state leaders pay to different IOs over time using data from their annual UNGA speeches. This is a proxy for relative decline and ultimately only a single indicator, so it must be considered with some caution. Other forms of probing the centrality of IOs in their organisational field could be to look at cooperative practices between IOs such as formal relationship agreements (Grigorescu, 2010) or regular joint meetings of subdivisions (Sommerer & Tallberg, 2019) but also referencing in annual reports as a proxy for self-positioning within the field (Holscheiter et al., 2020).

To start with *relative IO decline at the population level*, it is worth pointing at recent research on informal and private international institutions as alternative cooperation vehicles to IOs. Abbott et al. (2016: abstract) and a recent special issue by Westerwinter et al. (2021) make the case for studying alternative forms of global governance by pointing to the stasis of IOs (as detailed in Figure S3). They demonstrate that states increasingly turn to less formalised institutions. Although mere numbers indeed suggest that states increasingly choose alternative informal venues to cooperate, and formal IOs might therefore be in decline, it remains of course unclear to what extent essential governance functions are actually performed by informal institutions. Abbott et al. (2016) and Lake (2021) see, in this respect, more of a niche function for some of these institutions, such as transnational public-private governance initiatives (TGIs). There also appears to be variation across policy fields. Because IOs, informal IGOs and TGIs are not necessarily in full competition, collectively they might be reinforcing each other and add to the overall expansion of global governance.

We therefore focus on the centrality of IOs in international relations, as measured by the attention accorded to major IOs over time by states. To this end, we coded the number of mentions of all 34 IOs from the International Authority Database (Zürn et al., 2021) during UNGA General Debates between 1970 to 2018 to ensure that all IOs have a similar likelihood of being mentioned.⁸ To account for large variation in the number of speeches delivered per year (from 70 in 1970 to 196 in 2018), including as a result of the increasing number of member states, we use mentions in percentage of speeches instead of overall frequencies. Mentions are understood as any reference to the IO during a speech irrespective of the context or sentiment expressed by the speaker. We search for IO full names as well as IO short names and abbreviations, also accounting for potential variation in spelling.

Data on the UNGA General Debates are a valuable source (Baturio et al., 2017; see also Kentikelenis & Voeten, 2020 who use these data to study legitimacy challenges over time). The UNGA General Debate has taken place continuously, once a year, in September since 1946. State leaders (heads of state or government or foreign ministers) travel to New York where they get their 15 minutes of fame.⁹ Although some obviously also talk to domestic audiences, speakers need to prioritise their attention. What is in their speeches is a good reflection of their countries' foreign policy priorities. Consequently, if speakers pay attention to an individual IO in their speech, this IO must have some meaning to them, be it positive or negative (Baturio et al., 2017, pp. 2–3; Kentikelenis & Voeten, 2020, pp. 5–7). In other words, all the speeches together at the UNGA include a scarce pool of political attention and

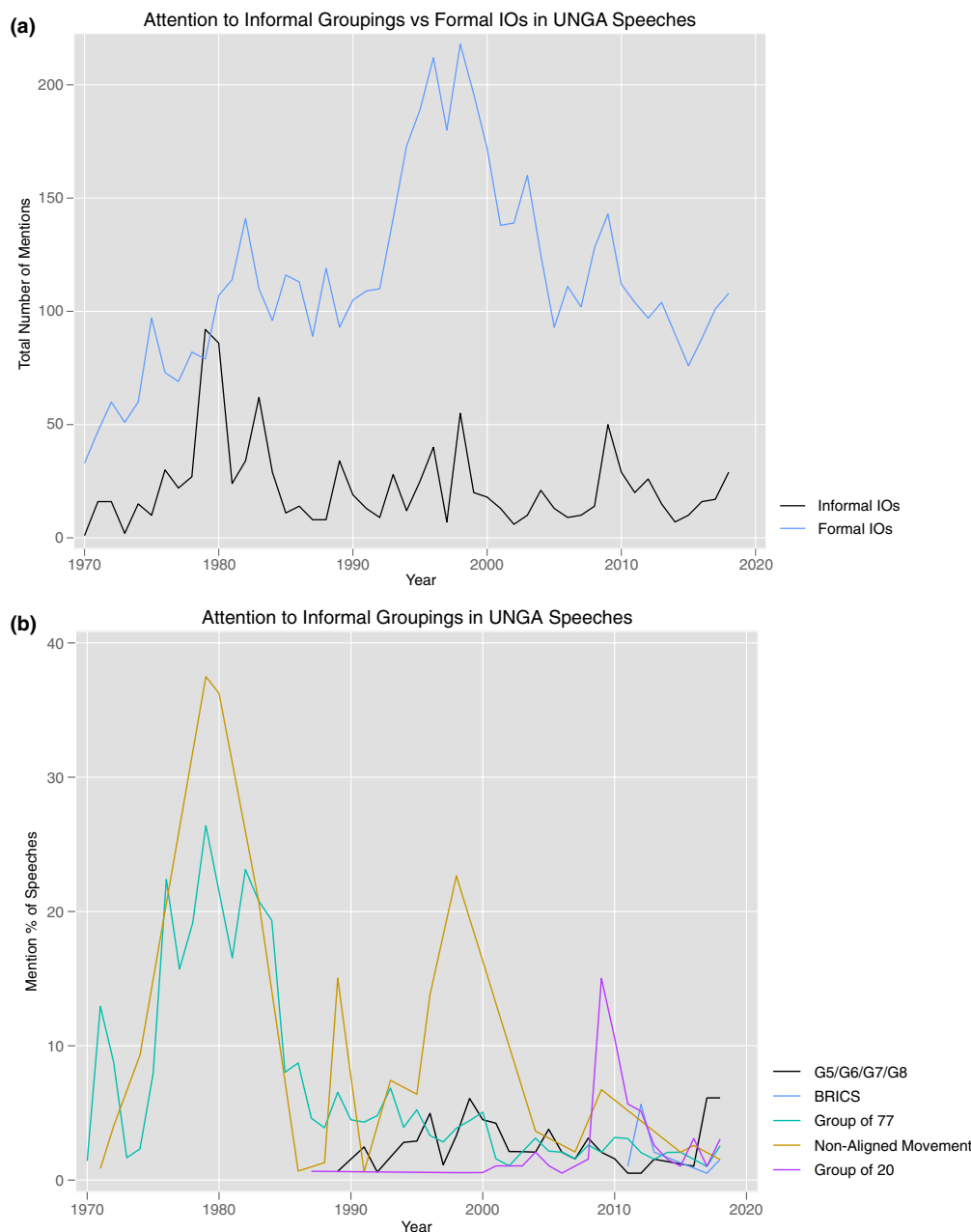


FIGURE 4 Attention in UNGA speeches for informal IOs.

how this is allocated over IOs (and other foreign policy issues) tells us something about the centrality of individual IOs in international relations.

We use political attention in the UNGA as a proxy for the centrality of IOs, but it also resembles the concept of politicisation, which is about public awareness, public debate and the public sphere, and often includes an analysis of the contents of (news) media (Zürn et al., 2012). In this respect, politicisation is often measured as an expression of (negative) sentiment vis-à-vis IOs. The UNGA General Debate, however, remains more of a diplomatic forum of exchange than a public debate. Indeed, throughout its history, mostly foreign ministers and permanent

representatives have been addressing the assembly rather than elected heads of state and government. Political attention as we understand it therefore includes all types of mentions of IOs irrespective of the sentiment expressed by the speaker. Furthermore, as our indicator concerns the percentage of speeches in which IOs get mentioned (and is a scarce pool unlike news media), across 100–200 speeches per year, politicisation moves by a single state leader will not show up in the data.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of speeches in which IOs across policy fields is mentioned. If economic and financial IOs are mentioned in 60% of the speeches, this implies that in 60% of the speeches there is at least

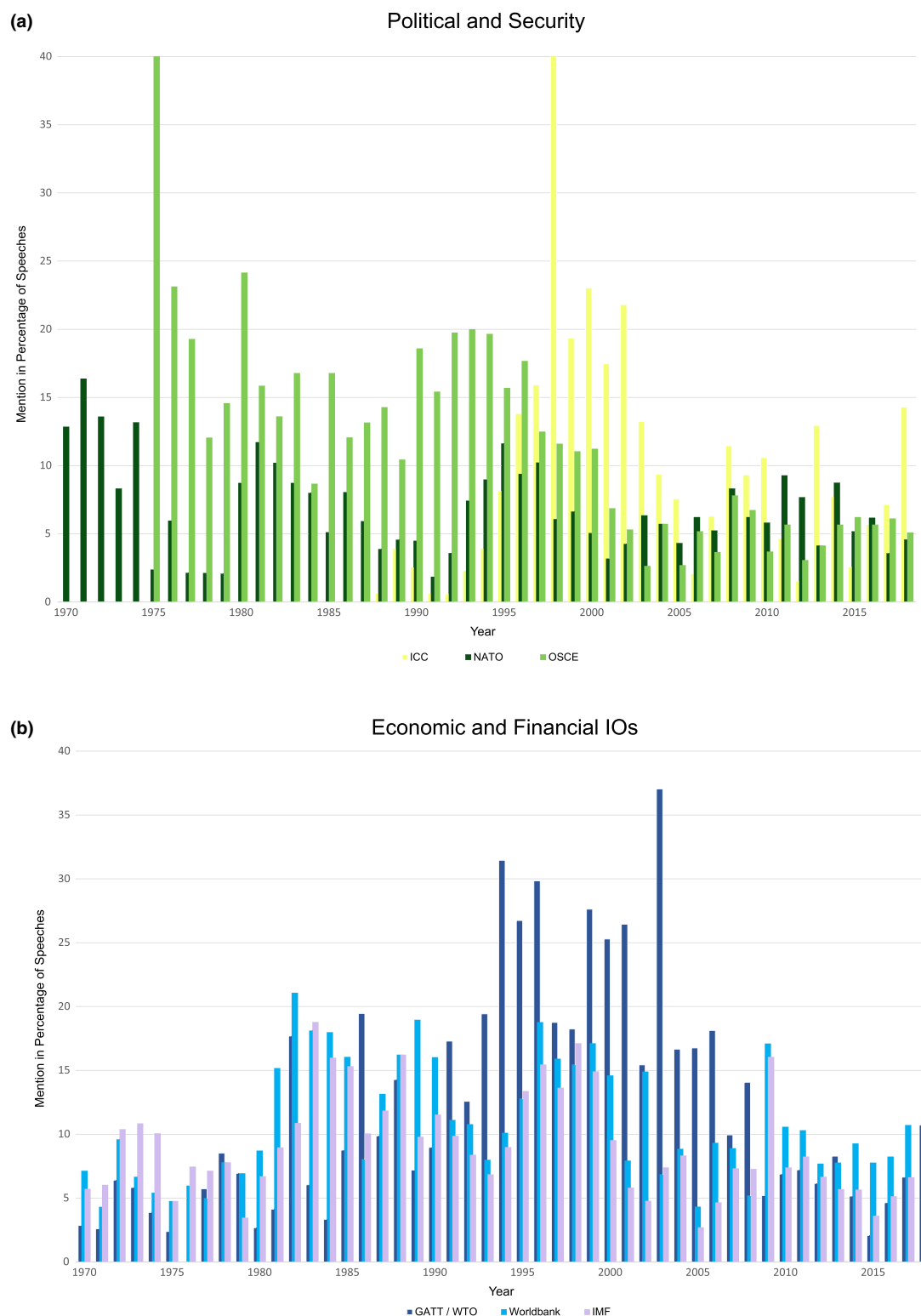


FIGURE 5 (a) Attention in UNGA speeches to political and security IOs; (b) Attention in UNGA speeches to economic and financial IOs.

one mention of one economic or financial IO. What these population-level data make clear is that political attention for IOs increased during the early 1990s, reached their summit in 1996 and started to decline from the early 2000s. Although this corresponds to

what we know about the general enthusiasm for multilateralism in the 1990s, the decline started earlier than what we typically know about the early/mid-2000s (e.g. the entry into force of Kyoto, China's accession to the WTO and the EU Constitutional Treaty). Noteworthy is

also that, currently, political attention has returned to Cold War levels and is actually substantially lower than during the 1980s.

The decline of formal IOs also does not seem to be explained by arguments that more attention might be paid to other forms of international cooperation, most importantly informal groupings. Figure 4 displays the total number of mentions of all informal organisations from Vabulas and Snidal (2020)¹⁰ plotted against the number of mentions of formal IOs (top) and split by individual groupings (bottom). The patterns reveal that attention has not shifted from formal IOs to informal types of organisations, but rather that general attention paid to multilateral cooperation seems to follow similar patterns. Overall, these data on relative decline of IOs at the population level correspond much better to the general impressions we have about international relations than the data on the absolute indicators above.

The UNGA data also appear to be a useful indicator to consider the centrality of individual IOs in international relations. Figure 5a,b show, respectively, the mentions for three political and security IOs and three economic and financial IOs. The CSCE, for instance, is prominent during the Cold War after its creation in 1975 and gets mentioned substantially in the early 1990s when it is transformed into the OSCE. Since the 2000s, however, mentions are down, which can be explained by the prominence of the EU and its competing external policies. The mentions of NATO likewise are in line with what we generally know about the alliance with its increased prominence during the 'Second Cold War' after a period of *détente*. Its crisis interventions and missions of the 1990s appear in the data, as does its ISAF mission in Afghanistan. For the ICC, we can identify the Rome Statute (1998) and its entry into force in 2002, after which attention for the ICC declines.

Political attention paid to the GATT/WTO neatly mirrors the conclusion of the Uruguay Round and establishment of the WTO until the breakdown of the Doha Development Round in the late 2000s. The high point for the World Bank and IMF, according to the data on political attention, was clearly 1980–2000, pretty much in line with neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus. The IMF and the World Bank again gained some attention because of the financial crisis in 2009. These patterns correspond well with our general understanding of the importance of these IOs to international relations.

In conclusion, it appears that UNGA mentions provide quite a dynamic picture which seems to correspond largely to what we know about IOs and how we actually tend to think about them in terms of decline. An alternative explanation for the decline in attention at the UNGA is that IOs have become accepted mechanisms where states work out their cooperation problems. Along these lines, the period of the 1990s was

one where states debated the establishment of IOs and giving them additional authority, after which political attention returned to normal. Although the UNGA data do not provide us with definite answers, such alternative explanation is at odds with all the literature that states that IOs have become more contested and politicised in the past decade. The overall conclusion is therefore that, whereas the UNGA data have obvious limitations, it has provided us with a first probe and a good reason to further study the relative decline of IOs.

5 | CONCLUSION

Many IOs are currently challenged, yet are they also in decline? This article takes a step back to conceptualise and operationalise IO decline. It brings us closer to understanding the life cycle of IOs, which includes stages of birth, development, decline, and death. Although decline is often simply seen as the mirror image of growth, a closer look at institutional developments reveals that this is not necessarily the case. Without a clear understanding of IO decline, it is difficult to say meaningful things about the consequences of IO contestation. This article has addressed this topic by situating decline in the life cycle of IOs and proposed to understand decline as a continuous downward process both in absolute and relative terms and at the individual IO and the population level. As such, existing concepts such as IO pathologies or politicisation can be viewed as potential drivers of IO decline, with a continuous loss of members, legitimacy, staff or authority as indicators. Although providing empirical data on some of these indicators, the article has not tried to assess the current crisis of multilateralism, explain IO decline, provide causal pathways from contestation to decline or theorise how IO decline can lead to dissolution and IO death.

We have, instead, proposed four dimensions of IO decline, and this concept has been validated by the divergent impressions we get from an absolute and relative perspective on the life of IOs. Although absolute IO indicators indicate considerable stasis over time, the relative IO indicators provide a more dynamic picture. Studying decline from a perspective of the centrality of IOs in international relations is therefore promising. In the absence of good data on the relative position of IOs, we have used UNGA General Debate speeches to probe the concept of relative decline. At the population level, we have seen a decline in mentions of IOs since the early 2000s, whereas at the individual level, UNGA mentions also seem largely to correspond to what we know about the vitality of individual IOs. UNGA speeches are, in this respect, a valuable source of data, but more importantly this empirical probe demonstrates the potential of a relative perspective on the life cycle of IOs. This also provides a rationale for further

investment in data that captures the centrality of IOs in international relations. Future scholarship should find ways, in this respect, to also include IOs themselves as nodes of interest to map variation in centrality over time on a large-N scale.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data used in this article can be founded online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

ORCID

Maria J. Debre  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2151-0080>

Hylke Dijkstra  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3637-5296>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ UN peacekeeping deployments dropped significantly after blue helmets were unable to prevent genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda.
- ² Oxford Dictionary (n.d.).
- ³ Walters (1952) and Scott (1973) distinguish between the rise and fall of the League.
- ⁴ This also includes whether IOs eventually die, are replaced or develop some other form of afterlife (Cottrell, 2009; Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Wessel, 2011).
- ⁵ To ensure readability only figures based on newly gathered data are presented in-text (Figures 3–5). Figures based on existing data have been included in Figures S1–S3.
- ⁶ The COW-IGO data (Pevehouse et al., 2020) shows that only 8 out of 241 dead IOs experienced a decline of IO membership in the years before death.
- ⁷ Most network datasets focus on states, not IOs, as central nodes (Kinne, 2013b; Maoz, 2010; Song et al., 2020).
- ⁸ We only include IOs that have received more than one mention by at least three or more member states in Figures 4a,b.
- ⁹ This time restriction is a 'voluntary' limit, but generally the speakers stick more or less to their limit.
- ¹⁰ We only included informal IOs from the dataset that received more than one mention by three or more member states.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Maria J. Debre is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at Potsdam University and an associate researcher in the ERC project 'Who gets to live forever?' at Maastricht University. Her research focuses on regional and international organisations and their institutional design and on the international dimension of democratisation and autocratic survival.

Hylke Dijkstra is an associate professor at the Department of Political Science, Maastricht University, The Netherlands. He is the principal investigator of the project 'Who gets to live forever?' on the decline and death of international organisations which is funded by the European Research Council. He focuses on international organisations.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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