

Institutional leadership during tough times

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Impact paragraph

My dissertation advances our understanding of the resilience of economic IOs facing challenges. International trade, finance, and development together represent a broad yet key policy arena within that order. Its institutional pillars are embodied by the likes of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and their peers. While some of these economic IOs have been operating for decades under the umbrella of the Washington consensus, others are newer and reflect changing global power distributions. Both collectively and individually, they help the governance of the world economy run smoothly and promote cooperation over rivalry, protectionism, unilateralism, and ultimately, conflict. Yet, the last two decades have been tough enough for these IOs. Some have faced significant challenges from powerful states, others from competing institutional frameworks. They all have had to deal with a global pandemic. Recent studies in the IR literature have raised the alarm regarding their resilience, showing how often they perish and lose functionality.

To improve our understanding of IO resilience, my dissertation focuses on explaining the role of institutional leaders and their bureaucracies in shaping IO response strategies. For that, my dissertation examines a set of cases of economic IOs that have recently faced significant challenges. These are the WTO, the World Bank, and the AIIB. The conceptual framework and empirical findings expand our understanding of the challenges that IOs have experienced in recent years, and how they have dealt with them. They reveal the process that goes from challenge to IO response in each case and highlight the commonalities across them. Importantly, they explain the variation in how IOs tackle challenges by highlighting the role of IO institutional leaders. The findings not only demonstrate that IO responses are strategically shaped, but also highlight the importance of institutional authority, bureaucratic capacity, and leadership competence in explaining the ability of IO leaders to play a role in shaping them. They also point to the congruence between IO responses to challenges and their consequent outcomes. This suggests that IO responses are causally prior to institutional outcomes.

The findings of my dissertation are of both scientific and societal relevance. From a scientific viewpoint, my findings highlight the need for accounting not only for external factors, but also the response strategy that an IO itself produces to stave off a challenge. They furthermore put the

spotlight on the often-neglected role of institutional leaders in the response process. The findings therefore strongly support the view on IOs as agents in and of themselves, and not just vehicles for the pursuit of state interests. Importantly, the dissertation's framework helps researchers delineate the position and scope of institutional leaders within IO bureaucracies and explore the various roles they can play within the response process. They demonstrate the need for accounting not only for the formal powers and bureaucratic resources of institutional actors, but also for the individual leadership competences of their executive heads. They suggest that failing to do so implies relying on an incomplete picture in the study of IO resilience. The dissertation therefore shines light on avenues for future research. Notably, through its general framework on IO responses and the role of their institutional leaders, it sets the groundwork for future research on their causal influence on the institutional outcome of challenges.

From a societal viewpoint, the dissertation reminds us that IOs are vulnerable and not eternal institutions, and that their ability to withstand challenges must not be taken for granted. Given the critical role IOs play in supporting humanity's ability to tackle global problems through international multilateral cooperation, states and societal actors need to ensure that they are given the necessary levers for effectively responding to their challenges. My dissertation can guide experts and politicians on the ingredients necessary for that. IOs' ability to respond matters, and under the right conditions their institutional leaders can tip the balance during tough times. Policymakers need to pay particular attention to the design of new IOs, ensuring that they provide their executive heads with enough voice and influence over the decision-making table. Moreover, IO design should provide executive heads with enough bureaucratic capacity through extensive budget, staff, expertise, and a clear organizational structure over the helms of which they can play a leading role.

Where existing IOs lack such attributes in their design, substantial institutional reforms would be a good investment by policymakers. Such structured solutions are critical in the long run for ensuring the resilience of IOs. However, even where such changes may be complicated by power politics and concerns over control and legitimacy, to the very least we should expect policymakers to appoint capable executive heads based on merit and leadership skills, as the dissertation shows how the qualities of individual leaders are a critical factor in explaining IO resilience. This must be done with an eye on inclusivity and transparency to uphold the legitimacy of IOs.

My dissertation is therefore relevant for three audiences. First, it speaks to the IR scholarship on IOs and the wider debate surrounding the crisis of multilateralism. The IR literature has focused mainly on the sources of challenge and the causal influence of actors and factors external to IOs themselves. Much less attention has been paid to how IOs tackle challenges, the strategies they employ, and the logic behind their actions. Little attention has also been paid to what role their internal factors and actors play behind their responses. The dissertation advances the research agenda on IO resilience and bureaucracies by expanding our understanding of the process behind IO responses to challenges and the role of institutional leaders in shaping them.

The dissertation also speaks to IO experts, practitioners, and national policymakers. The findings provide a nuanced view on the internal processes, relevant institutional actors, and specific institutional features that interplay with the responses of the WTO, the World Bank, and the AIIB during tough times. The findings can be of relevance to officials working in those IOs, but also those interested in all IOs broadly. They can guide them on the concrete steps for ensuring that their institutions tackle challenges. Importantly, the findings show how the onus for securing resilience is ultimately not only on IOs themselves but also their membership. In that regard, the findings offer important insights to national policymakers on the necessary conditions that need to be put in place for IOs to effectively respond to challenges, such as supporting IOs by providing them with the resources they need and pursuing cooperative endeavors rather than rivalry and zero-sum policies during tough times.

The dissertation is also relevant to the general public. Its findings address citizens concerned with contemporary issues relating to the multilateral order and global institutions. Extending our knowledge of the challenges they face and the conditions that promote their resilience is important, as these institutions are critical to societies' ability to address crises and global phenomena. For example, the fate of the WTO and the wider multilateral trading system can have very real economic consequences for citizens across the globe. Similarly, as the findings from chapter 5 show, the fate of multilateral development banks is very consequential on the ability of societies and their economies to tackle future global disasters. These key pillars of the global multilateral order directly impact the way we all live our lives. Finally, the dissertation sheds light on the autonomy of officials working at IOs, as well as the influence that members and civil society can exert on them. These insights are relevant to citizens concerned

with issues relating to the legitimacy and transparency of global institutions.

To disseminate my research and engage with the scholarly community, as of writing I have published one single-authored article (chapter 2 of this dissertation, case study on the Trump administration's contestation of the WTO) and one co-authored comparative article (with a case study on the WTO's response to the Trump challenge) in peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, an additional single-authored article (chapter 5 of this dissertation, case study on the AIIB's response to the pandemic) been accepted for publication at a peer-reviewed journal. I have also single-authored a chapter (on the WTO's response) for the ERC-funded NestIO project's monograph on IO responses to challenges in addition to a chapter (on the inter-institutional relations of the World Bank and the AIIB) for an edited volume on the World Bank.

Throughout the three years of my dissertation research, and despite the challenges and limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I have also presented my theoretical and empirical work and engaged with researchers from various (sub)disciplines by attending, contributing, and/or presenting at 11 national and international conferences and workshops. Finally, I have actively employed social media platforms (such as Twitter and LinkedIn) to disseminate my research and findings on IO resilience, reaching out not only to academic but also broader public audiences across the globe.