UN-UN Inter-Organisational Relations: the governance of the Decent Work Agenda

Zena Mouawad

Abstract (working):

Research on inter-organisational relations (IOR) addressing world politics phenomena is only a minor, but growing, program within the discipline of International Relations (IR). The dominance of state-centric approaches in IR looking at international organisations (IOs) as mere instruments of states to pursue their objectives for power has for too long underestimated the role of IOs in pursuing their mandates and interests. This notion has been challenged by constructivist perspectives influenced by sociological strands. They perceive IOs as authorities in the international arena, with a degree of ‘actorness’ to pursue their missions and influence the development and effectiveness of others in the ways they pursue them. When looking at IOs interactions and behaviour, IOR scholars observe that not only IOs have preferences when interacting with states, but also with other IOs. How these preferences diverge from those of states and how they are attained in interactions with other IOs are only possible when understanding IOs as bureaucracies. Once IOs are designed to promote socially valued goals such as human rights and development goals, they work as brokers of cooperation. In this light, the United Nations (UN) is commonly treated as one actor in the IOR literature, but authors generally sublime an important aspect of its operations: the UN is consisted of many bureaucratic structures with highly specialized mandates that converge and compete in a wide range of policy issues. This has certainly an impact on the way UN inter-organisational relationships are observed. In addition, the UN development branch of this highly complex system of IOs is still understudied by IOR scholars, which perpetuates a high preference for security and peacebuilding studies. Nevertheless, IOR research is expanding and the creation of thematic studies enriches its theoretical building blocks. Therefore, this PhD thesis will provide inputs on the interdependence of UN entities across policy fields not yet explored, contributing to IOR studies with a case that moves beyond the single policy-oriented research, currently dominating the discourse on IOR. The International Labour Organization (ILO) will serve as an example of UN specialised agency interacting with dozens of other UN entities to implement its mandate towards decent work for all. The organisation estimates 24 thematic issues intersecting the Decent Work Agenda with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thus the way interactions are designed may weaken or strengthen cooperation between policy fields and partners within the UN development system (UNDS). Through document analysis and field work I will combine rationalist and constructivist approaches to explore and explain UN-UN relations and contribute to the growing debates on IOR and UN policy coherence.