



Original Article

International organisations and crisis management: Do crises enable or constrain IO autonomy?

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Abstract This article seeks to bridge the gap between the literature on international organisations (IO) and the field of crisis management (CM) by focusing on two themes: how crisis conditions lead organisations to centralise decision-making and how this subsequently affects an international organisation's autonomy. We do this based on two dimensions inspired by the CM literature, that is, the degree of the perceived time pressure and the precrisis legal institutional framework. The plausibility of the analytical framework is assessed on the basis of three cases: the WHO's dealing with the SARS crisis; the European Commission's dealing with the Mad Cow Disease crisis; and the UN's handling of the humanitarian crisis in the Great Lakes region. The results show that the perceived time pressure affected IO autonomy in so far as higher time pressure that rendered IO autonomy stronger, whereas with regard to the institutional framework no stringent pattern could be seen. Moreover, based on our findings, we propose that IO autonomy in crisis situations also depends on the framing of an issue in terms on impartiality, on the extent to which the IO in question is subject to politicisation, as well as on the degree to which it possesses specific technical expertise.

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Introduction

In today's interconnected world, both state and nonstate actors increasingly look to international organisations (IOs) to address transborder problems: the World Health Organization (WHO) was expected to handle the Ebola outbreak, the International

Monetary Fund (IMF) the financial crisis and the United Nations (UN) the violent conflict in Syria. Nevertheless, IO scholars have paid little attention to the implications that a crisis may have for the specific roles of IOs in such circumstances, and even less so from the organisation's point of view. This gap can be partly explained by a lack of interaction between the IO and crisis management (CM) literature.

In this article, we argue that the CM literature, particularly through its focus on the importance of centralisation of decision-making during crises, suggests a neglected factor that may account for an IO's relative autonomy. At the same time, we surmise that the centralisation notion developed in the CM literature cannot be readily applied to an IO situation because of differences between the domestic and international spheres. Domestically, an implementing agency is separate from and, ultimately, accountable to the government, whereas internationally, an IO and its executive agency (the secretariat) are partly constituted by and accountable to many different member states.

Member states can exert their power in various ways: they may start monitoring IO actions more closely; they may attempt to influence decision-making directly; and ultimately, they may seek to redefine, or even revoke, the mandate that they have given the agency. We thus start from the premise that all IOs, irrespective of their relative policy autonomy, are kept on a short leash by their owners (member states), which makes member states likely to centralise decision-making within an IO when events on the ground seem to threaten the basic arrangement between member states and the IO. However, we learn from the CM literature that there are good reasons to expect crisis management to deviate from everyday organisational life because of uncertainty, urgency and threats to core values, which require the ability to engage in swift – but decentralised – decision-making. Moreover, crises are valuable objects of study from an organisational and institutional perspective due to their ability to alter organisational processes and power structures (Boin *et al.* 2005).

In this article, we propose that CM theories can help us understand the relational dynamics between IO secretariats and their member states (Olsson and Verbeek 2013), in particular, how crises affect IO autonomy. Inspired by both the CM and IO literatures, this article presents a comparative case analysis based on actors' time perceptions and their precrisis institutional legal frameworks. These issues are explored by focusing on three crisis incidents, which all displayed significant transborder characteristics and, to varying degrees, international crisis management roles were played by IOs: the European Union (EU) during the 1990s BSE scandal, the WHO during the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemics, and the UN during the protracted crisis between 1993 and 1996 in Africa's Great Lakes region. This article is structured as follows: after examining key conceptual issues, we discuss the lack of mutual interest in the IO and CM literatures by defining and comparing key concepts in each area. Subsequently, we theorise about the conditions under which centralisation of decision-making occurs in the context



of an IO's involvement in a transborder crisis and how this centralisation affects the IO's position. This section is followed by an analysis of the three cases. The article concludes by presenting a research agenda for the field of IO crisis management.

International organisations and crisis management

The IO and CM literatures pay little attention to one another. There is a long-standing tradition among IO scholars of assessing the role that IOs play in managing conflicts between states. However, IO scholars remain largely ignorant of the growing body of expertise in crisis management, although they often employ the term international crisis (without always addressing the concept of a crisis). Similarly, IOs have been of limited interest to CM researchers, who have so far focused on managing single crises within one nation, policy sector or organisation (Weick and Sutcliffe 2007). A discrete interest in the transboundary nature of crises and crisis management has been developed recently (Rhinard *et al.* 2006; Boin 2009; Boin *et al.* 2013; Galaz *et al.* 2011) without the influence of the IO literature. This interest may be explained by CM's dominant managerial perspective, which directs researchers towards management issues within a specific, confined organisation or nation-state.

Although frequently used, the term international crisis is difficult to define. First, its conceptualisation differs in the IO and CM literatures: whereas the CM literature adopts predominantly a subjectivist notion of crisis, the IO literature uses mostly objectivist definitions. In the latter, the researcher seeks to determine the extent to which a social system is on the verge of collapse (cf. Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000: 4–5). In contrast, when applying a subjectivist notion, the researcher uses actors' crisis perceptions as the point of departure (Hermann 1969). Classical CM definitions describe crises as events that are perceived to threaten actors' high-priority goals, to restrict the amount of time available, and to surprise members of the decision unit (*ibid.*: 413). Similar criteria tend to characterise later definitions in which surprise is often exchanged for substantial uncertainty (Rosenthal *et al.* 1989). In contrast, it seems that IO scholars use mostly an objectivist notion of crisis linking important international events with potential threats that they pose to local, regional or global stability. Both conceptualisations contribute to crisis studies in different ways; the subjectivist notion of crisis, however, is better suited to studying bureaucratic dynamics within IOs. It allows for the possibility that an IO perceives a situation not only as a threat to its global stakeholders but also as a potential threat to, or opportunity for, the IO itself.

Second, what constitutes a crisis varies by actor: the financial crisis posed different problems for the EU as a whole than it did for the daily lives of Greek citizens or the Greek political system. What constitutes a crisis may also vary over time: high interest rates on Italian government bonds posed a problem for the

Berlusconi government in November 2011 but not for the succeeding government 1 month later. Moreover, some actors perceive a crisis as an opportunity to further their interests rather than as a threat. It is thus essential to understand how crises are framed and to be alert to who benefits from these various frames.

Third, several terms are often used interchangeably, particularly crisis, emergency and disaster. Disaster often refers to crises whose origins are natural causes, such as earthquakes and typhoons. Emergency in the CM literature most often refers to routine incidents predominantly taking place in the blue light emergency sector. For the purposes of this article, all situations are relevant to the extent that various actors define them as crises. At the same time, emergencies and disasters pose different challenges to IOs than do, for example, inter- and intrastate violent conflicts, and may thus have a different effect on an IO's autonomy.

Fourth, the conceptualisation of time differs in the CM and IO literatures. Within the CM literature, time perspectives are usually determined by (perceptions of) the crisis event and, thus, they relate to well-defined and narrow points in time. Crisis managers are portrayed as following clearly structured sequential processes based on problem detection, management and aftermath reform (Boin *et al.* 2005). This CM focus on the management of acute situations is mirrored by the neglect of long-term and structural effects. As a result, there is little interest in complex and long-term crisis events that involve many actors and move through different phases. This sequential time perspective is poorly suited to long-term issues such as the involvement of the UN in various conflicts, which have been the focus of IO research. Given the increased involvement of IOs in crisis management today, it is vital that both intellectual traditions open up to one another. In this article, we take up one potential bridge between these literatures: the centralisation of decision-making and its effect on IO autonomy. In exploring the notion of centralisation from the CM literature, which largely builds on public administration and organisational theories, this paper is part of the so-called 'administrative turn' in IO studies in which IOs are understood as compounded organisations in which both formal and informal processes and practices impact the actions undertaken (Ness and Brechin 1988; Trondal *et al.* 2010).

The centralisation thesis

The CM literature has a rich tradition of addressing a multitude of organisational and societal crisis-related issues, such as sense making, decision-making, leadership and coordination. A classic debate amongst CM scholars concerns the trade-offs between centralised and decentralised responses to crises (cf. Pollitt 2009). At heart, crises are political events dominated by power struggles and politicisation (Boin *et al.* 2005). How these battles play out depends on organisational and leadership dynamics. The commonly held position, especially



in the field of security studies, has been that crises tend to centralise leadership at the highest organisational level (Hermann 1963). Centralisation is most often explained by the logic that the greater the threat, in terms of uncertainty and perceived political prizes, the stronger the incentives for political control (Rosenthal *et al.* 1991). From an accountability perspective, citizens tend to demand that their leaders step up in critical situations (Boin and 't Hart 2003). Centralisation usually takes place through the establishment of small groups, consisting of top-level politicians, advisers or managers, which shortens the lines of authority and information to ensure a swift response (Holsti 1972; Paige 1968; Lagadec 1990; Hermann 1963).

Other scholars argue that a centralised response is not always the best option. This is so because centralisation risks creating information and decision-making bottlenecks based on cognitive and time limitations within the top managerial groups ('t Hart *et al.* 1993). According to Weick (1988), a centralised crisis management system runs the risk of neglecting individuals and agencies with relevant expertise and of diminishing problem-solving capacities. To overcome the structural weaknesses inherent in centralised responses and to ensure speed and flexibility, decentralisation tends to take place at the operational level (Dinan *et al.* 2006). Decentralised responses also provide decision-makers with advantages from a political strategic perspective because they provide governments with the best of both worlds: if the response is successful, the government can claim credit, but if not, it can distance itself from the response (*ibid.*). As previously noted, there is a lack of research exploring the notion of centralisation in an IO context. Based on a theoretical analysis of the European Union, Boin *et al.* (2014) argue that there is no best model for handling transboundary crises; rather, a certain degree of decentralisation ought to be combined with elements of centralisation to lead agencies.

How can we explain the conditions under which centralisation of decision-making occurs? According to 't Hart *et al.* (1993), crisis decision-making patterns can be understood through the effects of three variables: the degree of the perceived time pressure, the operational *versus* strategic levels of decision-making, and the precrisis organisational structure. Time pressure is expected to have an impact: when decision-makers perceive high time pressure, this leads to the adaption of organisational structures into *ad hoc* centralised responses. However, low time pressure allows for more formal and pre-planned responses. Time pressure is also felt differently at the operational and strategic levels. At the operational level, time pressure is felt more directly, requiring instant responses, whereas at the strategic level, decision-makers tend to be more concerned with the long-term effects of events. Finally, the precrisis structure impacts centralisation and decentralisation: mechanistic pre-existing structures characterised by routine-oriented bureaucratic hierarchy and formal chains of command and communication tend to centralise responses, whereas pragmatic pre-existing structures, such as matrix or project

organisations, tend to be characterised by informal decentralisation or strategic evasion.

From our perspective, the mechanisms fostering centralisation or decentralisation are among the most relevant contributions that CM can make to IO because these can help us understand IO autonomy in various situations. Examining centralisation and decentralisation in an IO context, we base our analysis on the notions of time pressure and the pre-existing organisational structures, as described above. It should thus be noted that a crisis in an IO context differs from a national crisis. Translating discussions from the CM literature into an IO context is thus not unproblematic. First, in an IO context, it is not immediately clear what centralisation entails: as observed above, CM scholars study crises within the context of a sovereign state. One important difference is that, in a national context, the central government presumably has the authority and capacity to overrule operational units during a crisis. Centralisation thus usually indicates the concentration of authority in the hands of the political and administrative elite. In an IO context, no clear authority exists. Thus, in an IO context, centralisation may involve the concentration of authority in the hands of the highest administrative level (usually the secretary general) of the organisation or in member states. In this article, we conceptualise decentralisation as providing IOs with more autonomy, while centralisation involves member states dominating decision-making. We will explain IO autonomy in detail below.

IO autonomy

Talking to both the IR and CM communities requires us to clarify the concepts of autonomy and agency. In the CM literature, agency is often used for depicting organisational units in the public sphere that are responsible for specific tasks, like the EU agencies such as Europol (cf. Groenleer 2009). This is how we use the term agent in this contribution. In the IR literature, however, agency refers to the debate whether specific actors in world politics actually matter, in the sense that their behaviour is purposeful and has a causal effect in international relations. In this context, agency presumes that actors are able to formulate preferences and enjoy the capabilities to act freely, although within constraints (Wendt 1987). This notion dovetails with CM's notion of autonomy, which refers to the capacity to manage one's own affairs. An autonomous agent, however, is not fully independent and is still constrained, legally or politically. Autonomy may refer to an agent's decision-making competencies and to the degree to which it is exempt from constraints to use these competencies (Busuioc *et al.* 2011: 850–851; Groenleer 2009: 29–39; Verhoest *et al.* 2004: 107–108). Autonomy is thus always a matter of degree.

To understand IO autonomy, we must first identify the relevant players. In short, an IO consists of member states, which regularly meet in an assembly, and a secretariat (cf. Cox and Jacobson 1973). Two approaches exist to defining an IO. In



the first approach, IOs contain both member states and an international secretariat. The UN Security Council (UNSC) is powerful when at least nine members endorse a resolution and the five permanent member states (China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA) abstain or vote in favour. Although we may investigate the role of the UN Secretary General, nothing is accomplished without the consent of the most powerful member states. From this perspective, a powerful European Union (EU) suggests that strong EU policies require the consent of its most powerful member states, particularly France and Germany. During the early years of the financial crisis, all European eyes were directed at the so-called ‘Merkozy tandem’ of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, without whom progress was not expected. In this conception, member states that found and participate in an IO determine its autonomy.

The second approach focuses on the international secretariat as the major player. It argues that to determine whether an IO matters, one must establish the extent to which international civil servants are essential ingredients of international policymaking and whether they even succeed in convincing powerful member states to accept policies that conflict with their short-term national interests (Cf. Reinalda and Verbeek 1998: 3–4; Suvarierol *et al.* 2013). From this perspective, member states, although legal constituents of any IO, are part of the environment in which the secretariat must operate. This environment also includes the formal and informal norms guiding the policy area of which the IO is part. As we shall see below, these norms may strengthen or hinder an IO’s autonomy. The starting point, however, is that an IO secretariat has at least a minimal degree of independence and is capable of making individual choices and formulating its own policy preferences.

One structural explanation for IO autonomy is the independence from member states that international civil servants traditionally enjoy (Dubin 1983). Although nation-states have always sought to influence IOs through nationals who work for the international secretariat (cf. Weiss 1982), the loyalty of international civil servants to the IO has become an accepted international norm. Similar rules apply to European civil servants, although that picture is effectively more complicated: although they enjoy the same status, some European bureaucrats serve the Council (and thus, member states) whereas others serve supranational institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Court of Justice or the European Central Bank. In principle, IO secretariats possess autonomy. Under certain conditions, IOs may convince member states to accept policies that conflict with their narrow interests. However, IOs may be punished if they are persistently perceived as hindering the major powers. Punishment can come in many forms: member states may block reappointment, seek to redefine a secretariat’s mission, or withhold funding.

In walking this tight rope, the leaders of IOs must also take into account various formal and informal norms. These norms may both hinder and help them. The propensity for autonomy thus varies across IOs, and the autonomy of supranational institutions such as the Commission ‘depends crucially on the efficacy, and [...]’



[this varies] from institution to institution – as well from issue-area to issue-area and over time –, leading to various patterns of supranational autonomy’ (Pollack 1997: 101). From this perspective, IO autonomy refers to the capacity for autonomy from member states and to the formulation of interests that are neutral or impartial as regards member states (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). From a principal agent perspective, IOs have the best opportunities to exhibit autonomy when they possess an information advantage over member states, when they act in an environment wherein member states can be played against one another, and when they are favoured by decision-making procedures (Reinalda and Verbeek 2004: 23). According to Barnett and Finnemore (1999, 2004), IOs can have four types of authority, i.e. delegated, legal, expert and moral. Legal authority underscores the weight of procedures and rules, which helps IOs appear independent, technocratic and value neutral. Taken together, these aspects provide an image of decision-making as impersonal and free of ideological and political considerations. Furthermore, IOs derive authority from the fact that they are established with certain mandates and expectations by their member states. This fact feeds into their moral authority, which is derived from the fact that IOs are typically created to protect and act in the interest of the common good and thus stand above politics. IOs operate in environments of formal and informal norms, which impact their authority (cf. Joachim *et al.* 2007).

These norms include a description of their formal role but also serve as indicators of an IO’s (in)appropriate behaviour. For most IOs, impartiality (or neutrality) and integrity are fundamental norms (cf. Terry 2002). These norms are nested in the general international regime governing the UN, which centred on the sovereignty of states and noninterference in domestic affairs during the Cold War. These norms are a double-edged sword. If handled well, norms can serve as an IO leader’s weapon to find his or her way through the minefield of major member states’ interests. Dag Hammarskjöld initially succeeded in making his mark by framing the UN neutrality as connected to promoting international peace. During the 1956 Suez crisis, this framing enabled him to create the neutral United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), contributing to de-escalation of the conflict (Lyon 2007: 128–130). However, if major proponents of IOs operate in such a way that they can be accused of taking sides or engaging in corruption, they will damage the IOs’ reputations and effectiveness (Kille 2007: 12–13). Changes in the overall regime have granted top UN officials more leeway to navigate the minefield of neutrality and impartiality. The end of the Cold War ended the tendency of the major powers to judge the UN’s behaviour primarily in terms of East–West competition. Additionally, partly in response to the mass killings in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s, it has become acceptable for the international community to interfere in domestic affairs in cases of extreme atrocities (Bellamy 2010). Although state sovereignty remains the cornerstone of the global framework, new



norms have made it easier for top UN officials to take sides and have rendered it more difficult for states to fight them simply by accusing them of partiality.

The supranational players in the European Union – notably the European Commission, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and the European Central Bank (ECB) – operate in a different normative setting than do the UN institutions. That is, they risk provoking the anger of member states and facing ‘corrective measures’ to varying degrees. For example, the formal role of the European Commission is the ‘guardian of the [European] treaties’. This role allows it, in principle, to adopt an activist stance as long as it succeeds in framing its behaviour accordingly. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Commission used its position to initiate legislation in many policy areas, including some that were not exclusively in its formal competencies, such as social policy (the so-called ‘creative legislation’) (Leibfried and Pierson 1995). Commission activism provoked countermoves by member states through the principle of subsidiarity and the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

IO autonomy is thus not a static feature inherent in formal structures and procedures but depends on informal, contextual processes. In studying processes of centralisation, we take a dynamic perspective in which IO autonomy is under constant negotiation. Based on the CM literature, we take into consideration that crises tend to give way to bureaucratic conflicts that will, either temporarily or over the long term, change institutional contexts (Rosenthal *et al.* 1991).

Case selection

We selected three crisis cases with important transborder effects during which IOs were delegated important crisis management tasks: the WHO’s role during the 2003 SARS crisis, the European Commission’s handling of the 1996 Mad Cow Disease crisis, and the UN’s intervention in the 1993–1996 humanitarian crisis in Rwanda and Congo. The case selection was based on differences in two independent variables: the degree of the perceived time pressure and the organisational precrisis structure.

- (1) *Time pressure*: Time pressure is related to the acuteness of a crisis, i.e. the immediacy and severity with which its transborder consequences take effect. The more acute a crisis, the more limited the time available to respond and, thus, the higher the time pressure perceived by IOs. The SARS crisis thus counts as the case with the highest time pressure, as SARS was a lethal, previously unknown virus, which spread from Hong Kong to 37 different countries in a matter of weeks. The Mad Cow Disease crisis is a case with a medium level of the perceived time pressure, as the disease was known and there were few human cases despite its infectiousness. Finally, the Rwandan crisis is a case of low time pressure because the refugee problem increased slowly over years. The CM literature expects centralisation to occur when the

Table 1 Expectations regarding IO autonomy

	<i>WHO</i>	<i>UN Secretariat</i>	<i>European Commission</i>
Time pressure hypothesis	Low autonomy	High autonomy	Medium autonomy
Legal framework hypothesis	Medium autonomy	Low autonomy	High autonomy

perceived time pressure is high (’t Hart *et al.* 1993). We would thus expect the greatest centralisation to occur in the WHO case and the least in the Rwanda case. The IO literature suggests that under high time pressure member states are more restrictive of secretariats and thus reduce their relative autonomy, and *vice versa*. Autonomy displayed by the UN in Rwanda is thus expected to be greater than autonomy displayed by the WHO in the SARS case.

- (2) *Organisational precrisis structure*. The IOs were selected on the basis of differences in the institutional legal framework within which they have to operate. The European Commission operates within the strongest framework because the Commission possesses exclusive competency within the areas of health and food security and is embedded in a strong and codified system of enforcement. At the other extreme, we find the UN Security Council, which formally makes binding decisions but depends on consensus among its permanent members for decisions and on individual UN member states for enforcement. The WHO occupies a middle position: it has certain specific policymaking competencies but no legal system for reinforcement. We expect IOs to demonstrate more autonomy when the legal framework entails more formal competencies. The European Commission is thus expected to display the highest level of autonomy and the UN General Secretariat the lowest (Table 1).

Empirical analysis

Case 1: The European Commission and the Mad Cow Disease (BSE)

Key actors

The EU’s decision-making structure varies across different policy issues. The Treaty of Maastricht (replaced by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009) placed the common market under the so-called ‘first pillar’ (the only pillar with a legal character). First pillar issues are jointly governed by the EU institutions in terms of member states (through the Council), the Commission and the European Parliament. The Commission looks after the common European interest and is the only body allowed to initiate new legislation and ensure its implementation. The Commission is divided into several Directorates General (DG), each responsible for a certain policy area. Moreover, every DG includes a number of committees consisting of national experts who play important roles in decision-making. The committees



serve as a link between the Council and the Commission and provide forums for negotiation. There are three types of executive committees: consultative (which can consult on issues), administrative (which can block decisions) and prescriptive (which have the power to approve decisions). If a crisis occurs in the agricultural sector, the main actors will be member states, representative veterinarians in the Standing Veterinary Committee (SVC), and the Commission (unless stated otherwise, the empirical data are derived from Grönvall 2000).

Crisis for whom?

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) – or, as it is referred to in the media, the Mad Cow Disease – is an epizootic disease in cattle and a suspected zoonotic disease transferrable between animals and humans. BSE is a neurological disturbance that essentially turns the brain into a sponge, which results, without exception, in death. On March 20, 1996, the British government announced that experts had likely discovered a new variant of Creutzfeldt–Jacobs Disease (CJD) in ten people. This announcement caused great turmoil because experts could not rule out that the victims had been infected with human BSE by consuming BSE-infected beef. Panic spread across Europe following the announcement, triggering governments to ban British beef and beef products. From the EU perspective, the BSE crisis challenged economic values and consumer confidence in the common market at a moment when profound uncertainties dominated the situation.

Main actions undertaken

The Commission faced two major issues during the BSE crisis: assessing whether a ban on British beef was necessary or not and determining the risk posed by gelatine. Gelatine is a cattle by-product and is used in the production of, among other things, pharmaceutical products and cosmetics.

The Commission's first decision was to request that independent veterinary experts provide an assessment. The Commission moved slowly otherwise. In the meantime, panic concerning the BSE spread rapidly. States both within and outside of the EU took unilateral action to stop British beef imports. France was the first to act, soon followed by Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland and Singapore, among others. The Commission warned these member states that they were violating the EU's fundamental treaty obligations. However, as member states did not heed these warnings, the Commission felt pressure to jump on the bandwagon and proposed a union-wide ban on British beef exports. This decision was ratified after two voting sessions in the Standing Veterinary Committee (SVC) on March 26, 1996.

Additionally, decision-makers had to establish the safety of gelatine. Member states could not agree and, as a result, they delegated this issue to the Commission. The Commission concluded that gelatine was safe with certain restrictions; however, the SVC did not reach an agreement. As a result, the matter was sent to the Agricultural Council. Again, no agreement occurred in the Council, which, in

line with the treaties, eventually gave the Commission the authority to decide. The Commission decided to allow the UK exports of gelatine. In sum, the Commission acted as an arena in the decision on beef exports and as an actor in the decision on gelatine.

Explaining (de-)centralisation patterns

Regarding the ban on British beef, the Commission functioned as an arena for member states' interests rather than as an actor in its own right. Which conditions affected the Commission's position? First, perceiving the issue as an exclusively British problem, the Commission missed the opportunity to frame the issue early in the process and thus mould the EU response. Instead, the Commission followed its everyday decision-making procedures, which meant utilising its expert committees to examine new information before proceeding to formulate a proposal to the SVC. According to the treaties, decisions by member states must be approved by the Commission. In this case, the UK did not inform the Commission before its public announcement, bypassing the Commission as did the other member states when they decided unilaterally to ban British beef. The Commission became involved only when other member states implemented unilateral import bans that breached the EU legislation. Member states thus bypassed the very institution created to manage transborder health safety problems within the EU. Member states declared that the concerns about health and safety expressed by their citizens had prompted them to act unilaterally. Regardless of the reasons, national action precluded a common approach. The effects were disturbance of the common market, irritation within the EU because the BSE scare spilled over into other health areas and economic effects, because many other countries halted imports from all EU member states.

During the first phase, which related to the ban on beef, the Commission, under pressure from member states' governments, did not influence the outcome much. Rather, the Commission was forced to follow member states because no policy alternative could have prevailed in the SVC. Deadlock would transfer the issue to the Agricultural Council, where the outcome was preordained because the majority of member states had already implemented bans. During the second phase of the BSE crisis, the Commission played a different role because several member states had not yet formed clear opinions on the gelatine issue.

The BSE crisis then shows that the Commission is constrained when member states are united in a policy preference. To avoid additional political bargaining in the Council, the Commission must propose a policy that it knows will prevail in the SVC. To avoid losing credibility, the Commission tends to avoid proposing measures that are undesirable to member states (Demmke 1998). A crisis reinforces this pattern because the Commission risks losing valuable time if it presents a proposal to the SVC that it knows will be dismissed. Because time is a limited resource during crises, the Commission might be more apt to take on an arena role



during these times. Interestingly, although the BSE issue involved technical expertise, the Commission could not profit from its technical advantage: member states' political considerations dominated the decision-making process. In the more technically oriented SVC, national delegates received political instructions from their respective national governments. Nevertheless, the gelatine issue demonstrates that the Commission has a better chance of influencing member states when their preferences are unclear and the crisis is marked by uncertainty (cf. Pollack 1997).

Case 2: The WHO and the 2003 SARS crisis

Key actors

The WHO was established in 1948 as part of the UN structure, but it enjoys far-reaching autonomy. It is responsible for 'providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends' (the WHO website). Thus, the WHO is not an implementing autonomy but has been accorded directing and coordinating authority. Consequently, during the SARS crisis, the WHO focused on coordinating global efforts aimed at identifying and containing SARS. The organisation is divided into six regional offices coordinated from its Geneva headquarters. The WHO International Health Regulations (IHR) constitute the most important standardised and legally binding measures for disease coordination and identification. Discussions about reforming the IHR had been ongoing since 1996, and a new system was formally launched in 2000. In the revised IHR, the WHO has been given a mandate to collect information proactively, including information from nongovernmental sources, instead of waiting passively for governments to provide it. The Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) is an important mechanism for information exchange within the IHR, spanning 120 public health institutions around the world. Drawing from various online sources, the Global Public Health Intelligence Network (GPHIN), which is maintained by Health Canada, constitutes another important source of information. However, a major limitation of the IHR was that it only required countries to report outbreaks of cholera, yellow fever and the plague.

In what way was it a crisis?

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) caused 8,273 known cases and 775 deaths (a case fatality rate of 9.6 per cent), and it spread to 28 countries and territories within 10 months (WHO 2004). SARS posed a major challenge to the WHO as a nonfocal, multicountry outbreak of a hitherto unknown disease. The outbreak started in China's Guangdong Province in November 2002 and spread to Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Canada. Initially, crisis management was



hampered by China's three-month delay in informing the rest of the world about the outbreak. Despite China's obstruction, the WHO judged the threat to be substantial and issued its first global alert on a new type of severe, atypical pneumonia on 12 March. Three days later, another WHO global alert labelled the disease Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome for the first time. Although the nature of the virus was still unclear, the WHO framed SARS as 'a worldwide threat' (CDSR 2003).

Key actions

During the SARS crisis, the WHO performed its role as an expert organisation foremost by engaging in efforts aimed at coordination and prescription. It adopted a coordinating role in urging the affected countries to cooperate within the GOARN framework of experts. It urged its member states to report cases despite the potential impact on travel and trade of making such information available. Although member states were under no international legal obligation to cooperate, most countries complied nevertheless. Initially, China, the epicentre of the outbreak, was the exception, systematically downplaying the risk and underreporting cases.

Identifying the disease was the first challenge. Through the GOARN, the WHO drew on the public health personnel of over 150 institutions around the world. Moreover, it created a virtual network of 11 infectious disease laboratories in 9 countries, all working together to identify the virus and develop diagnostic tests. Moreover, the WHO Secretariat established three networks that linked clinicians, scientists, and epidemiologists who identified the pathogen, possible treatments, and measures to prevent further outbreaks (Kamradt-Scott 2011: 803). The tasks undertaken by the GOARN during the SARS outbreak included advising the WHO on global alerts and travel recommendations, creating virtual laboratories at the international level, establishing clinical guidelines and providing up-to-date information (Ansell *et al.* 2010; Michelson 2005; WHO 2003). Consequently, SARS provided a timely opportunity to test the IHR system.

Issuing global alerts and travel warnings constituted the WHO's other crucial decision. It published its first global alert on March 12, 2003, notifying public health authorities worldwide of the spread of an atypical pneumonia. On 15 March, the WHO issued a global alert, the first ever to include travel recommendations. On 2 April, the WHO announced the most sensitive, country-specific travel recommendations, namely, for Hong Kong and Guangdong (other travel advisories involved Beijing; Shanxi Province; Toronto; Tinjan; Inner Mongolia; Taipei, Taiwan; and Hebei Province). This announcement forced China into action, beginning national reporting and allowing a WHO team to enter the country. The team expressed grave concerns about the capacity of the Chinese health care system and its ability to engage in contact tracing and reporting. Even more worrying were rumours of systematic underreporting of cases by major hospitals in China. Finally, on 9 April, the bubble burst when a physician reported the true



number of cases at Beijing's No. 309 hospital. This revelation forced China to reverse its course and adopt a policy of transparency. In Canada, the hardest-hit country outside of Asia, the response was hampered by lack of resources and poor leadership, communication and coordination (Markel and Stoney 2011). On 23 April, the WHO added Toronto, Beijing and China's Shanxi Province to its travel advisory. Canada heavily criticised this travel advice, and Canadian politicians and public health officials travelled to Geneva to urge the WHO to lift the travel advisory, arguing that the criteria for issuing travel bans were arbitrary and imposed without proper warnings (Canada Health 2003). On 30 April, the WHO lifted its advisory for Canada.

The WHO not only issued travel advisories but also openly criticised governments' actions. As the WHO Director General, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, stated, 'it would have been much better if the Chinese government had been more open in the early stages' (Parry 2003). The travel advisories were an effective crisis management tool due to the grave economic consequences that these entailed for the affected countries in terms of reduced tourism and trade. Through its independent travel advice, the WHO pressured noncomplying member states. This constituted a departure from previous practices in which measures were taken only with the consent of the affected countries (Fidler 2004: 801–802).

Explaining (de-)centralisation patterns

According to Kamradt-Scott (2011), the WHO performed four roles in connection with SARS: real-time epidemic intelligence coordinator, policy adviser, government assessor and critic. The last three roles represented a clear break from the WHO's traditional role. Neither the IHR (the only rules on infectious disease control that are binding for the WHO member states under international law) nor the WHO founding treaty provided grounds for acting as an advisor, assessor or critic. A crucial cause of the WHO's increased autonomy was the creation of the GOARN system and its reliance on nongovernmental sources (Heymann and Rodier 2004). Thus, the authority of the WHO came mostly from the information dominance it established through the GOARN system. This information advantage gave the WHO the authority to shape the response to the outbreak by defining its severity and identifying the appropriate responses. China's resistance proved timely insofar as it stressed the necessity of basing the WHO opinions on nongovernmental sources, improving not only the WHO's epidemiological position but also its political position.

The GOARN system was devised under the new concept of evidence-based medicine. Thus, the system was 'widely seen as an objective system that would clearly indicate how collaborating actors should react to an epidemic' (Christensen and Painter 2004: 37). The strong technical discourse surrounding SARS provides the other explanation for the WHO's success as an actor. Its ability to act independently must also be understood as based on the high degree of uncertainty that surrounded the outbreak with regard to both the origin of the disease and its



effects. Many considered SARS a wake-up call for the international community that pandemics constitute one of today's most pressing global security threats (Kamradt-Scott and McInnes 2012). With everyone looking to epidemiologists and related experts for direction, the WHO obtained special status in the international debate and was granted ultimate authority to judge the performance of individual member states (Christensen and Painter 2004; Buus and Olsson 2006).

Case 3: The UN and the Great Lakes region

From an IO perspective, the events in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa can be divided into at least two different phases. The first phase concerns the period from August 1993 until April 1994 during which the UN Security Council (UNSC) agreed to a peacekeeping mission (the UNAMIR [United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda]) to observe the Arusha Accords. The Arusha Peace Agreement of August 1993 envisaged a ceasefire between the Uganda-based Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the Hutu-dominated Rwandan government, a transitional government (including the RPF) and the establishment of a UN peacekeeping mission. The agreement was intended to end a conflict that originated in the late 1950s when Hutus had driven Tutsis out of Uganda but became acute when descendants of exiled Tutsis had staged incursions into Rwanda from neighbouring Uganda. This first phase ended with massive killings of Tutsis and moderate Hutus by Hutus in April 1994. Considerable attention has been paid to the role played by the UN during this phase, often to explain the international community's failure to end, or even prevent, the Rwandan genocide (e.g. Barnett 2002: 153–180).

The second phase began in August 1994 when the RPF intervened and Hutus were driven out of Rwanda into neighbouring countries by Tutsis and their allies. This situation posed a major challenge to the UNHCR. The RPF intervention added a refugee emergency to the genocide. Millions of Hutus fled to Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi, already home to many Tutsis who had fled in the previous months. In many instances, the Rwandan conflict between Tutsis and Hutus played out again on different soil. Both phases underline the problems that IOs encounter in terms of centralisation and indicate subsequent constraints on an IO's role in crisis management.

Key actors

During the first phase, the main actors at the international level were the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DKPO), the UN Secretary General (UNSG) and the UN Security Council (UNSC). In the background, the United States and, to a lesser extent, Belgium and France were important stakeholders. On the ground, the UNAMIR was the most important international player. During the second phase, the UNHCR emerged as a key player.



Crisis for whom?

In hindsight, a major issue seems to be why information about escalating conflict did not lead to the conclusion that a major humanitarian crisis was imminent. Part of the answer lies in that the situation in Rwanda posed a major threat to the UN peacekeeping system itself: the United States blamed the UN for its debacle in Somalia, which resulted in the loss of 18 American marines lives. Another mission to address a complex African conflict risked alienating the UN's main creditor. After the events in Somalia, the US had called for a revision of the entire UN peacekeeping system (Bellamy *et al.* 2004: 166). The eventual 1994 Rwandan genocide complicated this sense of crisis for the UN because these events required the UN to demonstrate resolve.

Main actions undertaken

When the Arusha Agreement broke down, the UNSC decided to send a peacekeeping mission (UNAMIR). It agreed upon a much smaller mission than originally envisaged (2,548 instead of 8,000 observers) and limited its task to monitoring. In early April 1994 – facing a rapidly deteriorating local situation (Barnett 2002: 99) – the UNSC discussed an extension of the UNAMIR's mandate, but it was unaware of warnings from the UNAMIR Commander Roméo Dallaire regarding impending mass killings and reduced the UNAMIR to a mere 250 observers (although 450 decided to stay). The UNSC did not authorise an enlarged force until May, after most of the killings of Tutsis and moderate Hutus had occurred (for an overview, see Bellamy *et al.* 2004: 137–141).

Meanwhile, the RPF intervened, taking control of Rwanda and driving millions of Hutus out of the country. Some 1.6 million Rwandan refugees fled to neighbouring countries, of which some 1.1 million fled to Eastern Zaire, especially the region of Goma. With the refugees came Rwandan soldiers, having been defeated by the RPF. Often, they brought along their equipment and considerable sums of money. Both the UNSC and the UNHCR defined the situation as a humanitarian disaster rather than as a political problem. This meant that the UN would build refugee camps and ensure supplies of food, shelter and medication. It also meant that they adopted a position of neutrality, treating all refugees, whether Hutu or Tutsi, alike.

Explaining (de-)centralisation patterns

First, one should note the complicated chain of command. Although the UNAMIR had been installed by the UNSC, it reported to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). At the same time, all its cables were copied to the office of the UNSG Boutros Ghali, where they were read by his assistant, Chinmaya Gharekhan. Boutros Ghali had ordered that only Gharekhan, not the DPKO, could inform the UNSC (Traub 2006: 58–59). As expected, centralisation at the UN occurred, effectively reducing the DPKO's relative autonomy while reinforcing the position



of the UNSG's office. Second, the UNSG and the DPKO catered to different stakeholders: Boutros Ghali had to take the interests of the UNSC members into account, particularly those of the USA. It was thus impossible for the UNSC to accept the required number of troops for the UNAMIR. This set the stage for Boutros Ghali's April 1994 decision not to ask the UNSC for reinforcement and suggest the UN withdrawal from Rwanda.

The DPKO was a new department created in 1992 to cope with the increased demand for the UN peacekeeping. However, its institutional capacity was still limited, sharing responsibilities with the UN Department of Political Affairs and the UNSG's office. The DPKO thus had few incentives to defy the UNSG. Indeed, between August 1993 and April 1994, the DPKO sought to avoid 'another Mogadishu' (which would jeopardise the UN as a whole); this effort required maintaining a small peacekeeping force rather than expanding the UNAMIR's mandate. Thus, Dallaire's January warning of impending ethnic cleansing was belittled (Barnett 2002: 84–87). Moreover, the commander on the ground was at a disadvantage in having to address the preferences of different actors, including other UN agencies on the ground (e.g. the UNHCR) and countries contributing soldiers to the UN mission. The decision reflected the centralisation of power to the UNSG rather than delegation to the UNAMIR. Overall, the UN's distribution of responsibilities in Rwanda hampered the UNAMIR's ability to respond effectively to the changing situation.

Second, adding to the DPKO's reluctance to promote the expansion of the UNAMIR's capacity were specific cognitive biases limiting its ability to properly assess developments on the ground. Indeed, the DPKO's outlook reflected an organisational culture that was based on the norm of impartiality and thus geared towards avoiding the use of force and seeking consensus-based solutions. The incoming information was thus interpreted accordingly (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 139–153). The DPKO persisted in its belief that the Arusha Agreement reflected a sincere attempt to create a shared government in Rwanda, whereas both Rwanda's history and events since August 1993 suggested otherwise. Furthermore, the DPKO belittled Dallaire's warnings, judging them as coming from a newcomer to peacekeeping (Barnett 2002: 87). Moreover, focusing on its assignment of peacekeeping (rather than peace enforcement), the DPKO interpreted the violence as representing a civil war rather than genocide. Based on this frame, the violence was defined as ethnic violence mirroring previous situations, and solutions were to be sought based on consensus between the parties involved (Barnett 2002: 112–118).

During the second phase, the UN member states did not object to a massive humanitarian rescue operation but remained unwilling to send troops to the Great Lakes region; the USA even instructed its officials not to use the term 'genocide' because of the legal and moral obligations involved (Terry 2002: 171). The consequence of this frame was that every refugee was considered a victim. This frame also reinforced the norm of impartiality in the IO's behaviour. This served the UNHCR well in paving the way for decentralisation in which its main task was



to provide humanitarian assistance. Adopting a humanitarian frame, however, implied embracing the norm of neutrality and ignoring the political dimensions of the refugee crisis in the Great Lakes region. The UNHCR thus contributed to prolonging rather than resolving the situation. Ultimately, this situation limited the UNHCR's capacity to act: exceeding what was acceptable to its paymasters, especially the USA, would be risky.

The consequences of this dominant humanitarian assistance frame were profound: with their money and weapons, representatives of the exiled Hutu government and Rwandan army were able to control Hutu refugees. Moreover, because they enjoyed legal status as refugees, these actors were protected by the international community. Consequently, they hindered the return of Hutu refugees by frightening them with the prospect of Tutsi revenge after their return, thus worsening the humanitarian crisis and hampering the UNHCR's work.

Results

We expected IOs to demonstrate more autonomy if the legal framework entailed more formal competencies. However, the cases reveal that the WHO performed with the highest level of autonomy despite having a weaker legal institutional framework than the Commission. As expected, the highest levels of member state centralisation and the lowest level of IO autonomy were found in the UN case. Our expectation was met in the first phase of the Rwanda case, with the UNAMIR becoming dependent on the UN member states' interests, particularly those of France and the United States. However, when the definition of the Rwandan situation shifted from civil war to a humanitarian crisis, the UN increased its power through the UNHCR. A similar pattern can be seen in the EU case, when the Commission was outmanoeuvred by member states in the first phase of the crisis. During the second phase of the crisis, in connection with the gelatine issue, the Commission demonstrated a more independent role made possible by its skilful use of, and agenda setting in, the EU expert committees. Hence, our analysis suggests that although the legal institutional framework provides important cues for the decision-making dynamics, additional information is needed to understand IO autonomy during times of crisis.

Next, we surmised that the greater the time pressure, the more likely the crisis response was to be centralisation. These expectations were not met because the case with the greatest time pressure – the WHO during the SARS crisis – illustrated the highest levels of IO autonomy. This reverse effect can be explained by the fact that situations characterised by high levels of time pressure and uncertainty create opportunities for IOs to play roles when member states lack adequate knowledge and solutions to the problems at hand, as discussed in more detail below. Moreover, the case with the least time pressure – the first phase of the Rwandan case –

illustrates the highest level of member state influence. That case shows how actors in New York chose not to interpret the UN reports of increased violence on the ground as an impending genocide, which would have prompted an acute response. Rather, member states (joined by the UN Secretariat) actively sought to avoid involvement in Rwanda based on the events in Somalia the year before. The case that came closest to matching our expectations was the BSE crisis when member states sidestepped the Commission due to its slow response to what member states perceived as an acute problem. Interestingly, time pressure seems to impact IO autonomy, although in the opposite direction than expected, that is, higher time pressure increases the room available for IO autonomy. As seen from the discussion above, differences in outcomes could not be fully explained by the extent of time pressure or the institutional legal framework. In the following, based on our empirical findings, we present two additional propositions regarding the relation between IOs and their member states during times of crisis.

Conclusions: Crises and IOs

Based on our finding that the UN possesses the least autonomy and the WHO the greatest, we conclude that IOs that address politically sensitive issues, the so-called political IOs, are more likely to be closely watched and controlled than are the so-called technical, expertise-oriented IOs (such as the World Meteorological Organisation, the World Maritime Organisation, and the World Health Organisation). Although a technical issue may conceal important state and other interests, technical IOs are more likely to avoid open political conflict. This does not mean that these organisations are immune from member state criticism or interference. For example, the WHO was heavily criticised for its management of the 2009 swine flu outbreak. Its description of the influenza as a pandemic despite its relatively mild symptoms led to accusations of hidden political motives. However, their crucial positions within a web of technical expertise most often provide technical IOs with a source of influence *vis-à-vis* their member states (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004; Skjærseth and Wettstad 2010). This, we argue, is especially true during times of crisis when urgent measures are requested in a previously unknown area requiring a specific type of expertise. This *ad hoc* delegation of power to expert-driven IOs is enhanced by the increased levels of uncertainty inherent in a crisis, which relates both to the nature of the problem and to the policy options available. Uncertainty provides technical and expert-oriented IOs with more space to define the problem and identify potential solutions. This occurred when the Commission took the lead on the issue of gelatine due to the lack of consensus amongst member states. Similarly, the WHO's newly developed assessment capacity, built upon its nongovernmental resources and its extensive network of expertise, were effectively applied during the outbreak and further



strengthened the WHO's independence from member states. Interestingly, China's initial noncompliance served to underline the risks inherent in relying upon member states' goodwill. The SARS case suggests that the WHO managed not only to maintain its mandate but also expand it in the midst of the crisis, taking on the role of government critic and assessor. Thus, decentralisation with regard to the WHO can largely be explained by its status as an independent expert autonomy working for the common good in fighting the outbreak (cf. Terry 2002; Kille 2007). At the same time, such a status would most probably not have been granted to the organisation without the time pressure.

Other IOs are of a more political nature, hence, the problems are cast in terms of different state interests, and solutions that satisfy all parties involved are more difficult to adopt. Moreover, political crises tend to require expertise that is within the sphere of member states' competencies. The UNGA and UNSC are prime examples of such political IOs. For example, during the first phase of the Rwandan case, UNAMIR interpreted evolving events as technical and downplayed genocide. Headquarters, however, feared a member state backlash against the UN as a whole and chose not to consider the available local expertise. Based on the discussion above and the results of the empirical study, the assumption here is that IOs' influence increases in times when addressing the crisis situation requires specific technical expertise that is possessed by or can be accessed by the IOs. That IOs with technical expertise can create more autonomy during times of crisis is foremost demonstrated by the SARS case, wherein the WHO not only had a strong influence in managing the crisis but also succeeded in strengthening its mandate.

Finally, the nature of the problem and the tasks required to solve it are important, as are the manner in which the situation is framed. The empirical analysis shows that the better IOs are at framing the situation in accordance with neutrality and impartiality, the more the response is to be decentralised in their favour. For example, in the Rwandan case, the UNPK had internalised a specific definition of violent conflict in Africa based on stereotypical views and a basic notion of peacekeeping (rather than peace enforcement), which ensured that it would act as a neutral party between warring groups rather than as an organisation open to the possibility of mass killings. In the Great Lakes case, the UN framed the situation as a humanitarian crisis, which allowed the UNHCR to classify all Rwandans as refugees and provide them with legal and physical protection, thus allowing the Rwandan army to reorganise within the refugee camps and effectively establish control over the refugees, provoking a Rwandan invasion of Zaire. Interestingly, the dominant UN frame (a product of centralisation and routine) then granted autonomy to the UN organisations on the ground that maintained the routines that effectively helped continue the conflict. Impartiality was also an important ingredient in the WHO's framing of the SARS situation, albeit cast in a technical light, as the IO was perceived as the actor possessing the most cutting-edge knowledge on how to cope with the situation and benefit all member states.



If member states (at least the most powerful ones) perceive an IO's handling of a situation as lacking in neutrality or endangering vital member state interests, then centralisation is more likely to occur. In connection with the ban on British beef, the Commission tried to frame its preferred position, which was to wait for an expert investigation, in accordance with the values and obligations stated in the EU treaty. However, this framing effort failed because the Commission entered the process long after member states had formulated their preferences and because the frame it proposed was perceived as favouring the British. This episode stresses the importance of timing to successful IO framing efforts.

Overall, crises provide opportunities for IO scholars to deepen their understanding of the factors that impact IOs' abilities to act autonomously. In line with the results presented in this study, we believe that IOs scholars would benefit from engaging with the CM literature, particularly with regard to leadership, learning and sense making.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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