RESEARCH ARTICLE

Making global public policy work: A survey of international organization effectiveness

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Abstract

Do international organizations (IOs) actually help address global problems? This question is of major concern for global governance scholars and policy makers, yet few existing studies review issues of effectiveness across a range of different issue areas. This paper generates comparative insights on IO performance across seven policy domains, namely climate change, development, finance, investment, migration, security, and trade. Based on a detailed expert survey, we consider how key IOs in these issue areas perform across three different measures of effectiveness: constitutive effectiveness, compliance, and goal achievement. We also investigate causal claims on effectiveness, exploring how IO institutional design – and in particular measures of authority – influence their ability to shape policy outcomes. Taking stock of the distribution of authority across issue areas and policy functions, we ask whether highly formalized, deeply constraining institutional arrangements have a consistently stronger impact on state behaviour or whether less formalized institutions with fewer discretionary powers can also contribute to the effective implementation of internationally coordinated policies. Finally, we identify key cross-cutting challenges for global governance effectiveness, including political conflict and politicization, concerns related to legitimacy and representation, and growing problem complexity.

1 | INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVENESS ACROSS ISSUE AREAS

Do international organizations (IOs) deliver on their stated goals? Why are some IOs more effective than others at changing state behaviour? What are the greatest challenges to IO effectiveness? And how might we enhance the ability of IOs to address pressing global problems? While these questions have informed global governance scholarship from the very start, they may be more relevant today than ever before. There is a growing sense that '[g]lobal governance is not working' (Coen & Pegram, 2015, p. 417); that international cooperation through legacy institutions is faltering 'when we need it most' (Hale et al., 2013).

Yet, despite the pressing need to better understand these challenges, few existing studies review IO effectiveness across a wide range of different issue areas.

This paper responds to this research gap by providing a comparative overview of IO performance across seven issue areas, namely climate change, development, finance, investment, migration, security, and trade. Building on an expert survey, we explore how IOs perform along different conceptualization of effectiveness (constitutive capacity, compliance, and goal attainment). We also investigate causal claims on effectiveness, exploring how institutional design influences IOs' ability to shape policy outcomes, with a particular focus on the level of authority they exercise across different policy functions. Finally, we look at the

most important barriers to IO effectiveness, with a view to identifying cross-cutting trends.

We find that IOs have been most effective in their role as facilitators, enabling states to find agreement on shared norms, goals, policies, and rules. However, when it comes to turning such output into concrete outcomes – that is, changing state behaviour in a way that is conducive to solving global problems – they face significant obstacles. These obstacles include a lack of authority across policy functions geared towards implementation, notably compliance monitoring and enforcement. Even where IOs are able to leverage conditionality or (threat of) sanctions, these instruments rely on support by powerful states and do not consistently deliver outcomes in line with global goals. Survey results also reflect widely shared concerns that IO effectiveness has decreased, at least in some issue areas, as broad-based consensus has become more elusive.

We also consider the implications of changing governance realities for IO effectiveness. In some issue areas, the lack of a highly authoritative 'core' institution has resulted in highly fragmented regimes or 'regime complexes' (Keohane & Victor, 2011), encompassing a diverse array of governance arrangements that are often informal and do not display clear hierarchies. While such fragmentation poses serious challenges to the effectiveness of some IOs, others have been able to reaffirm their focality as central 'nodes' within a messy governance landscape and experimented with new pathways of influence. Notably, facilitative orchestration has allowed some IOs to enlist intermediaries – including non-governmental organizations or private sector actors – that are better placed to fulfil specific policy functions and/or induce behavioural change in line with global goals.

Despite the diversity of issues and institutions under investigation, survey results point to several key cross-cutting challenges for IO effectiveness. These include growing levels of politicization and political conflict, issues of legitimacy and representation, and problem complexity. In combination, these challenges appear to undermine the performance even of relatively authoritative IOs that have historically seen high levels of effectiveness, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Thus, while authority – whether *de jure* or de facto – is an important element of effectiveness, it must be placed in context, and alongside other factors, including problem structure, power distribution and legitimacy.

Policy Implications

- Improving our understanding of what conditions the effectiveness of international organizations (IO) is key to enhancing our collective ability to address pressing global problems. More comparative analysis is needed to clarify the effect of institutional design on IO effectiveness across different issue areas, with a particular focus on how the level and distribution of formal authority influences the ability of IOs to shape policy outcomes.

- States have been reluctant to relinquish formal competencies to IOs, especially across policy functions such as compliance monitoring and enforcement. However, IO performance often depends on de facto and not *de jure* authority, which provides possibilities for IOs to explore alternative pathways towards effectiveness that do not depend on formal, prescriptive regulation and direct enforcement.

- In some issue areas, a shift towards more facilitative implementation approaches promises to open up such indirect pathways of influence, for example, through greater reliance on transparency mechanisms or efforts to catalyse broad-based action by non- or sub-state actors ('orchestration'). Moreover, IOs can use their comparatively strong agenda-setting powers to establish themselves as a focal node within a given issue area. However, this will require consistent high-level leadership within the organization as well as support from sympathetic states, including the provision of reliable funding.

- There is no 'one size fits all' blueprint for institutional design. Those seeking to reform international institutions need to pay careful attention to context, such as problem structure, the risk of politicization, or the degree of regime fragmentation. Often a careful balancing act will be required to ensure IOs continue to enjoy legitimacy and broad-based support while also being able to deliver ambitious global public policies.

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2 | CONCEPTUALIZING INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH AUTHORITY

Our goal is to explore IO effectiveness across different issue areas, with a particular focus on how levels of formal authority may influence their ability to shape policy outcomes. In this section we briefly introduce relevant concepts that inform our expert survey.

We focus on three prominent conceptualizations of IO effectiveness. The first is *constitutive effectiveness*. At the most basic level, constitutive effectiveness refers to IOs' ability to 'identify the players, assign roles

to them, and lay down the general rules of the game' (Young, 2021, p. 57). We expand on this definition, considering also the extent to which IOs actually facilitate agreement between member states and other stakeholders, producing policy output and promoting general rules, shared norms, goals, or knowledge frames (Gutner & Thompson, 2010; Tallberg et al., 2016, p. 581). We consider constitutive effectiveness to be high when IOs are able to raise collective ambition, moving norms and policy goals beyond the lowest common denominator.

Second, effectiveness can also be understood in terms of state *compliance* with international rules (Simmons, 1998). International institutions can elicit compliance through material inducements, including coercive sanctions (Martin, 1992), but also through 'softer' mechanisms, such as reputation or socialization effects (Guzman, 2008). Compliance is not an uncontroversial metric for effectiveness. After all, where IOs institutionalize unambitious norms and rules, formal compliance may be largely inconsequential.

Finally, *goal attainment* captures whether IOs achieve their actual policy goals. Assessing IOs' goal attainment necessarily involves some counterfactual reasoning, asking whether a particular outcome would have occurred without an international institution (Underdal, 1992). This is methodologically challenging. While some studies leverage natural experiments to explore the impact of IOs (Hyde, 2007), most assessments rely on observational data and statistical modelling that can minimize but not eliminate speculative judgement.

Constitutive effectiveness, compliance, and goal attainment are complementary rather than conflicting. For example, while compliance is not a sufficient explanation for goal attainment, it is often a necessary condition. Similarly, constitutive effectiveness alone does not guarantee a change in state behaviour, yet, if IO norms, goals, policies, and rules reflect nothing but the lowest possible ambition, formal compliance and goal attainment are largely meaningless. We therefore explore the distribution of all three elements of IO effectiveness, both across IOs and issue areas.

What drives IOs' ability to produce ambitious output, induce compliance, and attain their goals? While the literature discusses several potential drivers of effectiveness, a particularly important debate centres on formal authority, that is, IOs' ability to autonomously adopt and implement binding decisions and policies. Early contributions have suggested that unless institutions deeply constrain state discretion, they are of little effect (Downs et al., 1996). From this perspective, IOs' effectiveness, particularly goal attainment, is a function of their formal authority. Authority is formalized in IOs' institutional design (Koremenos et al., 2001; Zürn et al., 2012) and exercised through a set of policy functions (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). Zürn et al. (2021) suggest seven key functions that IOs are tasked to perform across their

policy cycle: agenda setting, rule-making, compliance monitoring, norm interpretation and dispute settlement, enforcement and sanctions, evaluation of internal operations, and generation of substantive knowledge on governance problems the IO is meant to address.[1] Higher levels of formal authority across these functions provide IOs with more leeway and are expected to boost their ability to influence state behaviour.

In contrast to most existing studies, which have typically compared IO effectiveness within the same issue area (for human rights, see Hafner-Burton et al., 2015), this paper examines the link between IO authority and effectiveness across diverse issue areas. While the findings of any such comparison must be treated with caution – given radically different problem structures and actor constellations – it can produce valuable, if tentative, cross-cutting insights into IO effectiveness and its institutional drivers, notably the degree of authority afforded to IOs across different policy functions.

Moreover, this perspective allows us to explore whether the growth of less formalized and less authoritative institutions will undermine international efforts to coordinate state behaviour. While some highly authoritative IOs occupy a focal position in their issue area, others have low levels of discretionary authority and often form part of highly fragmented regime complexes. For example, in both global finance and climate governance a plethora of formal and informal institutions differ widely in terms of mandate, membership, and scope (Coen et al., 2019; Levi-Faur & Blumsack, 2019). Such arrangements are not necessarily without effect (Voeten, 2019) as IO performance often depends on the de facto and not *de jure* autonomy of IOs (Lall, 2017). Moreover, multiple alternative pathways of influence might be at play, such as when IOs 'orchestrate' intermediaries to induce change (Abbott et al., 2015) without engaging in formal, prescriptive regulation and direct enforcement.

To explore the relationship between IO effectiveness and authority in more detail, we designed a small expert survey, which we discuss in the next section.

3 | CROSS-DOMAIN EXPERT SURVEY ON IO EFFECTIVENESS

This article builds on a growing body of scholarship that uses survey data in IO research (Dellmuth et al., 2019, 2022). However, while existing studies have mostly aimed at gathering the opinions of policy makers, elites or ordinary citizens, our survey sought to elicit in-depth assessments by academic experts. It was conducted electronically between July and September 2021, in connection with a collaborative Horizon 2020 project entitled 'Global Governance and the European Union: Future Trends and Scenarios' (GLOBE). It was completed by seven GLOBE project

teams, each comprised of one to four researchers with issue-specific expertise. While not a large-N study, the survey captures the view of a highly committed pool of experts, who – unlike citizens or practitioners – have closely studied IOs in their field for many years and are familiar with the often-intricate theoretical concepts that inform studies of IO effectiveness, institutional design, and authority.

The survey covers seven distinct issue areas that are highly salient in global governance and inform the foreign policy priorities of key actors, such as the EU (EEAS, 2016), namely: climate change (Survey I), development (Survey II), finance (Survey III), investment (Survey IV), migration (Survey V), security (Survey VI), and trade (Survey VII). For each issue area, we asked the respective expert team to self-select, where appropriate, two key formal or informal IOs with a global policy mandate and/or reach. The resulting sample of 13 organizations allows us to explore common trends and differences both within and across issue areas.[2] However, given the small size of the survey and the non-random sample of IOs, we interpret these findings with care and avoid generalizations.

Three sets of questions structured our survey (Appendix S2). First, we asked respondents to evaluate the performance of each IO in terms of generating normative and regulatory consensus (constitutive effectiveness); ensuring member states stick to their international obligations (compliance); and actually achieving stated policy goals (goal attainment). Open-ended questions were used to provide respondents with the opportunity to provide a full account of IO effectiveness and reflect on domain-specific trends and challenges. These qualitative assessments were later coded, allowing us to ascertain whether IOs are highly, moderately, or barely effective across the three dimensions of effectiveness.[3]

The second set of questions assessed the relationship between IO authority and effectiveness. More specifically, we asked experts to rate IO policy functions in order of their relative importance for overall effectiveness. We also asked which existing institutional features are particularly conducive to goal attainment. To allow for an in-depth evaluation, this part of the survey asked respondents to focus only on the IO that they consider to be most authoritative in their respective issue area.

Finally, the third part of the survey focused on the main underlying challenges that threaten to undermine IO effectiveness, including those stemming from organizations' institutional set-up as well as those reflecting larger political trends. This part of the survey was also deliberately framed in an open-ended manner to avoid predisposed interpretations. By comparing responses to these open-ended questions and identifying overlaps in key concepts and notions, we inductively derived a set of seven key challenges across issue areas (Appendix S4).

Taken together, survey responses provide us with several exploratory findings on the state of and conditions for IO effectiveness across key policy domains, which we present in the next section.

4 | OVERVIEW OF SURVEY FINDINGS

4.1 | Constitutive effectiveness, compliance and goal attainment

Building on survey responses, this section explores IO performance across the three dimensions of effectiveness introduced above, with a view to also identifying broad issue area specific trends.

4.1.1 | Constitutive effectiveness

Survey results indicate that about half of all surveyed IOs (six out of 13) are highly effective at generating normative consensus and influencing global policy agendas, albeit with notable differences across issue areas.[4] Trade and development organizations in particular achieve high scores, whereas IOs in other issues areas display moderate or mixed levels of constitutive effectiveness.

Survey responses point to two major trends. First, differing interpretations can undermine normative consensus. For example, in international security, the 'Responsibility to Protect' represents an important principle, yet, because many states disagree on its precise content, it has had 'limited practical success in altering state behavior' (Survey VI). Second, increasing political polarization, often linked to questions of legitimacy and representation and amplified by global power shifts, challenges constitutive effectiveness. The World Bank, for example, has been criticized for promoting Western-centric development models that reflect the values of high-income countries, thus largely ignoring the needs and priorities of borrowers (Survey II). Of note, polarization does not play out exclusively along familiar 'North–South' divides. In the WTO, for example, 'major world trade powers have also backpedaled on key principles of trade liberalization' (Survey VII), often in response to domestic politicization.

4.1.2 | Compliance

Of those IOs in our sample that have formal compliance requirements, only a third perform well on this dimension of effectiveness. There are noticeable differences across issue areas, with trade and development IOs most likely to induce effective compliance. While survey

results lend support to the expectation that authoritative organizations are more likely to influence state behaviour, due to their ability to monitor state behaviour and use conditionality or (threat of) sanctions, they also raise important caveats regarding the effective use of such tools. For example, the application of sanctions to protect international peace and security hinges on agreement by the UNSC's five permanent members. Even in the trade and development space, historically high compliance records belie a more complicated reality. In the case of the WTO, the gradual breakdown of the Appellate Body has significantly reduced its ability to effectively induce compliance (Survey VII). In turn, the World Bank's strict conditionality criteria contrast with its limited sway over non-borrowing countries (Survey II).

Importantly, compliance as a measure of effectiveness is not relevant for about one third of all surveyed IOs, including those that focus primarily on agenda-setting and project implementation (e.g., the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]), informal collaboration and knowledge-sharing (e.g., Bank for International Settlements [BIS]) or coordinating scientific assessments (e.g., the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]). Overall, the findings suggest that compliance alone is often not relevant and insufficient for understanding the effects of IOs on state behaviour.

4.1.3 | Goal attainment

Only 30% of surveyed IOs are highly effective at realizing their goals. At the same time, and significantly, none of the organizations in our sample are seen as having no impact at all. Indeed, across most issue areas, IOs have been successful at pursuing some of their stated priorities but not others. For example, the WTO has successfully contributed to the liberalization of international trade, at least until recently, however, it 'has been less effective at reducing non-tariff barriers to trade, such as technical standards' (Survey VII). In finance and investment, IOs have effectively coordinated financial policies and resolved investment disputes. However, other policy priorities, such as increasing investment in developing countries, remain unfulfilled (Survey III).

Survey responses reveal three important dynamics. First, expert-based IOs that develop dedicated knowledge and policy solutions to transboundary problems often achieve their goals even when they do not have high formal authority. Examples include the IPCC or the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). Second, in some cases, notably NATO, a small and relatively homogeneous membership has facilitated goal attainment. That said, most of the IOs under investigation require broad-based global collaboration to effectively solve problems. Finally, some formerly effective IOs struggle to muster support from (powerful) states and implement their ambitious goals. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for example, often cannot effectively protect refugees due to dwindling state support (Survey V). Similarly, in the WTO, the United States 'found itself forced to comply with adverse ruling' (Survey VII) and incrementally withdrew its support for the organization, suggesting that powerful states may lose interest in creating effective institutions if this means curtailing their own autonomy too much (Guzman, 2013).

To summarize this discussion, IOs are far better at building normative consensus than promoting compliance and achieving their goals. States are often willing to agree on shared rules, norms, and goals but are wary of the costs of actually implementing them. Still, high levels of constitutive effectiveness are noteworthy, given that shared ambition provides the necessary foundation for other measures of effectiveness. In terms of issue area specific trends, trade and development IOs are overall most effective, which is likely due to their comparatively high authority levels. While this suggests that authority is indeed linked to effectiveness, its influence is neither deterministic nor uniform across all IOs and issue areas. IOs may produce change through multiple interacting pathways, not all of which are (directly) aimed at changing state behaviour through formal and stringent organizational competences (Bernstein & Cashore, 2012). The relationship between formal authority and IO effectiveness is explored further in the next section.

4.2 | Implications of institutional design for IO effectiveness

This section focuses on the drivers of IO effectiveness, drawing on the second part of the expert survey. We identify which policy functions are particularly conducive to the overall effectiveness of IOs, before exploring which institutional design features enhance IOs' ability to achieve stated goals, especially when authority is low.

4.2.1 | Relative importance of policy functions for IO effectiveness

Figure 1 compares the relative importance of existing policy functions for the effectiveness of the most authoritative IO in each issue area, based on rating scores assigned by survey respondents. It reveals important variation between surveyed IOs. Authoritative production and dissemination of knowledge, for example, is very important only for two surveyed IOs: the UNHCR (migration) and the World Bank (development),
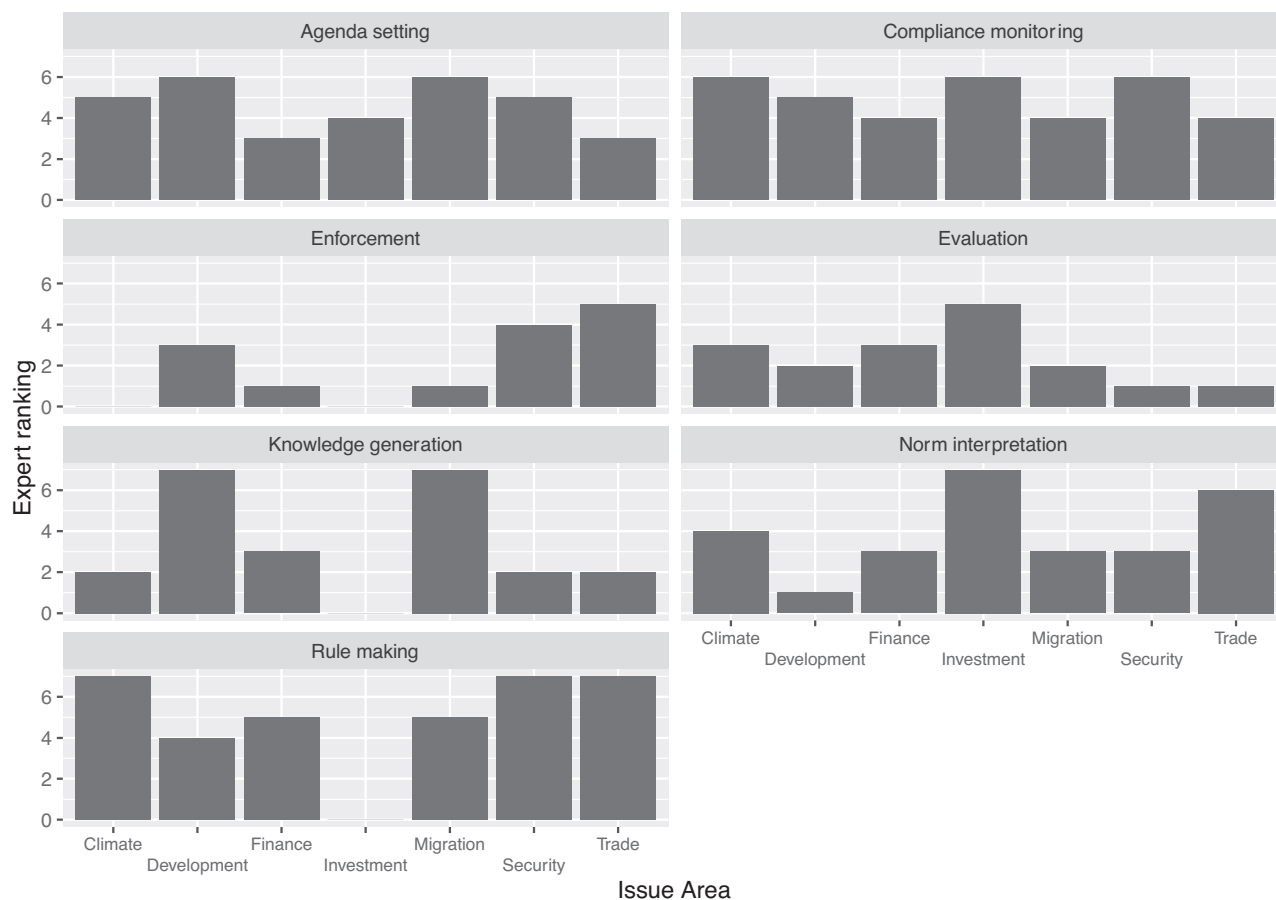
FIGURE 1 Relative importance of policy functions for overall IO effectiveness across issue areas. The value zero indicates not applicable, the value 1 least important, and the value 7 most important for effectiveness. The surveyed IOs are: UNFCCC (climate), World Bank (development), BIS (finance), ICSID (investment), UNHCR (migration), UN (security), WTO (trade).

both of which rely on specialist expertise to implement on-the-ground projects. Figure 1 also shows that not all surveyed IOs are tasked with the full range of policy functions. The ICSID (investment), for example, has no rule-making authority, while the UNFCCC (climate) has no enforcement competences. Finally, only few IOs are endowed with enforcement powers to sanction states. Interestingly, even for IOs that do enjoy sizable coercive powers, enforcement is not considered the policy function most conducive to effectiveness (see development (World Bank) in Figure 1).

Figure 2 shows the aggregate scores assigned to existing policy functions across all issue areas, allowing us to draw some cross-cutting conclusions. Agenda setting, rule-making, and compliance monitoring score highest overall. Agenda setting is key to the formulation and adoption of ambitious goals, which provide important yardsticks for IO effectiveness. Rule-making turns these goals into binding commitments, without which we would expect IOs to have little, if any, impact on states. Finally, authoritative compliance monitoring helps IOs reliably review states' implementation of binding commitments and policy obligations. Norm interpretation and knowledge generation receive

middling scores, reflecting the cross-domain variations highlighted above. Evaluation is considered less important for IO effectiveness, likely because the review of internal IO operations is largely an *ex post* exercise. Most strikingly, enforcement receives the lowest score, reflecting the fact that most surveyed IOs do not have coercive powers and must use more subtle and facilitative mechanisms to induce behavioural change.

Notably, the ranking presented in Figure 2 corresponds roughly with existing cross-domain assessments of IO authority, suggesting that the policy functions considered particularly important for effectiveness tend to be the ones in which IOs enjoy higher levels of authority. Zürn et al. (2021) find that IOs exercise substantial levels of formal authority in agenda setting, rule-making, and norm interpretation, whereas average authority is moderate with regard to knowledge generation and low with regard to evaluation and enforcement.[5] The only outlier is compliance monitoring, an area in which most IOs enjoy low formal authority but which is considered an important policy function by surveyed experts. A possible explanation for this difference is that even 'soft' monitoring instruments, such as regular self-reporting, can enhance effectiveness if

Relative importance of policy functions
for IO effectiveness
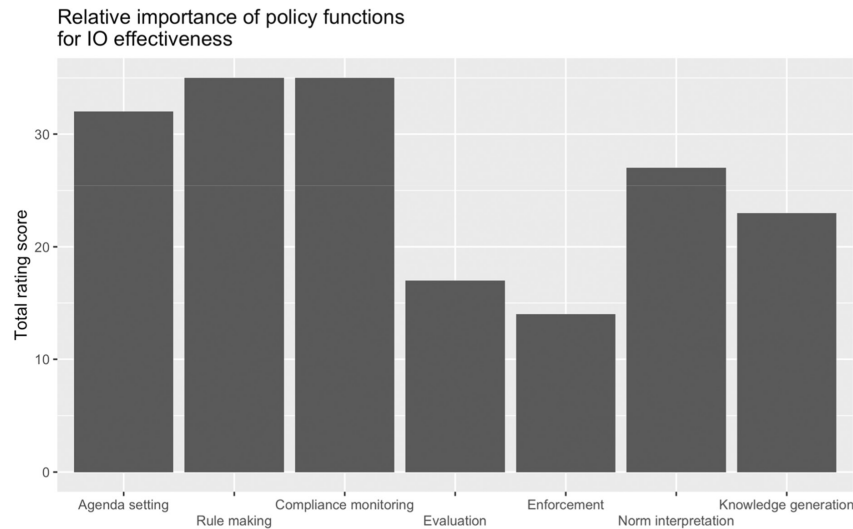
FIGURE 2   Aggregate expert rating scores of IO policy functions across all issue areas.

they encourage socialization and learning processes or mobilize domestic pro-compliance constituencies.

4.2.2 | Institutional design features and IO effectiveness

Next, we explore the institutional design features and processes that are considered to be particularly conducive to IOs' goal attainment. These can be grouped into two groups: (1) those that support several of the policy functions discussed above, making them widely applicable across issue areas; and (2) those that support a specific policy function, which might be essential to strengthening goal attainment in one issue area but not necessarily in others.

For six out of seven surveyed IOs, respondents emphasized the importance of design features that enhance focality. Focality, 'an organization's position as an acknowledged governance leader' (Abbott & Hale, 2014, p. 204) in a particular issue area, is key to its ability to engage in effective agenda setting and rule-making, especially in highly fragmented governance contexts. Focality is supported by formal design features, such as strong mandate prerogatives, focused agenda-setting procedures, and clear decision-making rules, but it may also be enhanced through consistent leadership by high-level individuals or bodies within the organization, even where *de jure* authority is relatively constrained. Specialized expertise and knowledge are another important source of focality for many IOs. For example, the BIS's position as a leading standard-setter in financial governance rests primarily on technical expertise and the World Bank has explicitly positioned itself as a 'Knowledge Bank' since the mid-1990s.

In three out of seven cases, respondents highlighted the need to safeguard funding to achieve stated goals. Without funding, IOs may not be able to perform any

of their policy functions, especially those that require substantial resources. In our sample, mechanisms to secure sufficient funding are of particular importance for IOs that implement projects (World Bank), provide technical services and humanitarian assistance (UNHCR), or send peacekeepers to conflict areas (UNSC). However, many IOs face a chronic funding gap and/or rely on voluntary contributions which might be earmarked for specific purposes, thus reducing institutional independence.

Given the reluctance of states to provide IOs with significant leeway and adequate and stable financial resources, IOs might look for mechanisms to expand their de facto authority. One such mechanism, mentioned in two of the seven surveys, is orchestration – a process whereby IOs catalyse broad-based action by a variety of non- or sub-state actors in line with globally defined governance priorities (Abbott et al., 2015). To be effective orchestrators, IOs must have sufficient focality and a degree of autonomy. However, they do not necessarily need high levels of formal authority (Hale & Roger, 2014). Indeed, orchestration appears to be most relevant for IOs that struggle with a lack of capacity, resources, and formal competences. For example, by engaging in facilitative orchestration the UNFCCC has been able to effectively broaden its narrowly circumscribed mandate (Hickmann et al., 2021). Orchestration could also strengthen global migration governance, with IOs acting as brokers or 'wingmen' of multi-sector alliances (Thouez, 2019).

Other institutional design features directly support specific policy functions. For example, the existence of internal courts or tribunals may greatly enhance an IO's ability to resolve disputes (norm interpretation). Such design features are particularly important in issue areas where inter-state disputes on legal issues frequently arise, such as trade (WTO) and investment (ICSID). However, judicial bodies are not

necessarily appropriate design features in other issue areas where state disagreement centres on normative content rather than legal interpretation (e.g., UNHCR). Similarly, whereas the ability to impose sanctions is considered particularly important for "high politics" IOs, where enforcement is a key policy function (e.g., UNSC), such mechanisms may be less essential for IOs in other issue areas, which can rely on less intrusive self-reporting and transparency mechanisms.

In concluding our observations on institutional design, the data presented suggests that IOs can make a greater difference at the 'start' of the policy process, when initiating and adopting global goals, norms, rules, and policies, rather than towards the 'end' of the policy process, when the focus shifts towards implementation, enforcement, and review. In the absence of credible 'policing' mechanisms, surveys point to possible alternative pathways towards effectiveness, such as enhancing the transparency of national efforts (facilitative compliance monitoring), boosting focality, or engaging in orchestration. Survey results also suggest that there is no 'one size fits all' blueprint for institutional design. In theoretical terms, survey results lend some support to arguments about effectiveness that emphasize alternative pathways towards compliance, beyond top-down enforcement, including those focused on reputational concerns (Keohane, 1984), knowledge generation and learning (Haas, 1989) or pressure from domestic constituencies (Dai, 2005).

4.3 | Key cross-cutting challenges to IO effectiveness

Although the governance context in which IOs operate varies significantly across issue domains, survey responses enable us to identify a number of key cross-cutting challenges. Below we discuss seven key barriers to greater overall IO effectiveness, which we derived inductively through a systemic review of qualitative responses in the third part of our survey (see Appendix S5 for the coding).

As shown in Figure 3, political conflict, legitimacy concerns and challenging problem structures stand out as the most prevalent sources of ineffectiveness, with some IOs also struggling with institutional capacity, fragmentation, a lack of ambition or the absence of a supportive internal culture.

4.3.1 | Political conflict

As Hurd (2020, p. 12) writes, '[(a)]ll substantive political decisions have their winners and losers, and "governance" exercised through global institutions is no different'. States seek to advance their own interests through IOs. Where these interests broadly align, IOs are more likely to produce shared goals, norms, and rules and drive effective domestic implementation. However, when interests are antagonistic, IOs might find themselves paralysed in disagreement. The UNSC, for example, has repeatedly found itself constrained by the veto powers. More generally, the legal powers of IOs are embedded in political context, which in turn is informed by global power dynamics.

Such tensions between the spirit of international law and the reality of international politics are not new. However, they have arguably grown in some issue areas. Once seen as a relatively depoliticized 'technocrats' domain' (Reich, 2005, p. 800), for instance, trade policy has become 'highly contentious' as 'the global consensus on ever greater trade liberalization has been eroding in recent decades' (Survey VII). Similarly, migration has seen higher levels of politicization as the
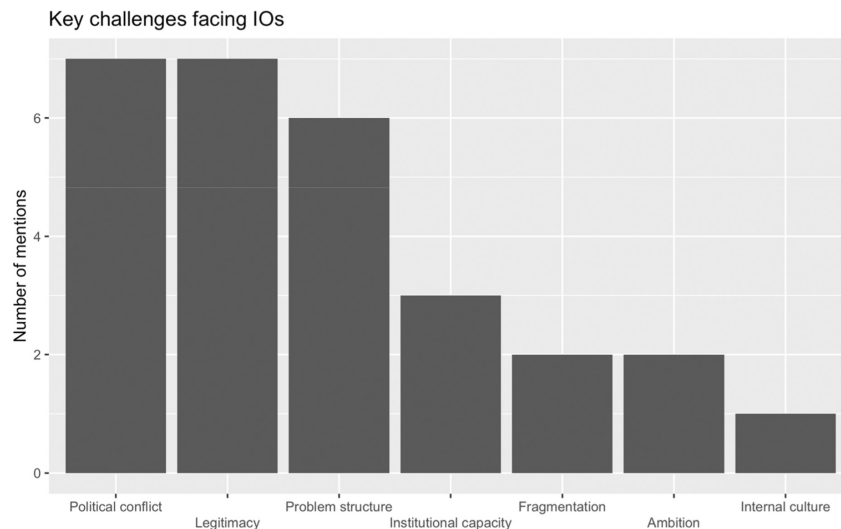
FIGURE 3 Challenges ranked according to number of mentions across survey responses. Respondents were asked to identify the most important overall challenges to IO effectiveness in their issue area.

debate has shifted 'towards the securitization of this topic' (Survey V). Even the IPCC, an IO mainly providing expert assessments, has seen greater levels of politicization, evident, for example, in intense state-led lobbying efforts to weaken recommendations in its Sixth Assessment Report. Beyond such issue area-specific observations, we also witness a broader trend of IO politicization, manifesting itself in contestation of multilateral institutions – especially those that boast relatively high levels of authority – by states and non-state actors (Zürn, 2018).

4.3.2 | Legitimacy

Legitimacy – 'the belief that an IO's authority is appropriately exercised' (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019) – is an important prerequisite for institutional effectiveness. In terms of constitutive effectiveness, legitimacy ensures that states respect the underlying 'rules of the game' and are willing to sign up to new agreements and ambitious goals. Legitimacy is also key to compliance, especially where IOs rely primarily on normative and reputational pressures to ensure that states stick to their international commitments. Even for highly authoritative IOs, legitimacy is essential. If authority is perceived as inappropriately exercised, it is likely to invite contestation and may ultimately prompt states to withdraw from IOs, undermine them from within, and/or seek membership in alternative institutions.

Broadly speaking, institutional legitimacy derives from two sources, procedure (input or throughput) and performance (output), that are often mutually reinforcing (Dellmuth et al., 2019). In a context of growing multipolarity, procedural concerns have come to the fore, with important implications for legitimacy, especially for IOs where some states enjoy disproportionate influence (Johnson, 2011). The World Bank's weighted voting system, for example, is seen to favour the US and other advanced economies, who also exercise significant ideational influence over what kind of development models the Bank promotes (Survey II). In the case of the UNSC, '[c]oncerns about procedural deficits of the Security Council clearly dominate and inform the overall negative assessment of that body by UN member states' (Binder & Heupel, 2015, p. 247). Procedural asymmetries may even affect the legitimacy of expert-centric IOs, albeit to a lesser degree. For example, the BIS has been criticized for its club-like governance structures (Levi-Faur & Blumsack, 2019) whereas the IPCC has faced 'criticism regarding its geographical and disciplinary make-up' (Survey I). Beyond procedure, IOs might derive legitimacy as a result of their performance, both in terms of policy objectives achieved and their perceived fairness. For example, in climate governance, negotiation outcomes are judged not only on their overall ambition but also on the 'appropriateness'

of state parties' contributions, an issue that has proven particularly thorny.

4.3.3 | Problem structure

As insights from public policy research suggest, correct problem definition is essential, helping us pose relevant questions to guide the selection of governance instruments (Peters, 2005). Regime scholars, too, have acknowledged that problem structure, which typically varies across issue areas, is key to studying the effectiveness of international institutions, not only because institutional performance might vary depending on the 'difficulty' of the underlying problem but also because problem framing influences how institutions are designed and how we define 'success' (Mitchell, 2006). In other words, understanding the types of problems we are facing helps us assess whether existing institutions are actually geared towards addressing them.

There is a growing sense that global problems have become 'harder', overwhelming the capacity of existing governance mechanisms (Hale et al., 2013), and, in some cases, so complex that they fundamentally undermine the logic of the post-war multilateral order (Kreienkamp & Pegram, 2020). To address climate change, for example, will require not just intergovernmental agreement but systemic change, driven by multiple actors across multiple sectors and levels of government, all within a rapidly shrinking time frame (Survey I). Similarly, 'development governance occurs at a variety of levels from international organizations to small villages and is conducted by a wide range of different actors – from international and regional development banks, to states, non-governmental organizations, and business actors' (Survey II). In this domain, problem complexity, coupled with competing state interests, has also produced normative ambiguity, resulting in competing models of development and a lack of adequate progress indicators. In other issue areas, complexity is rearing its head in the form of 'new' and emergent problems, such as terrorism and other 'networked' security threats (Avant & Westerwinter, 2016), or regulatory overlap and interaction, such as the 'spaghetti bowl' of preferential trade agreements (Kloewer, 2016).

4.3.4 | Institutional capacity and finance

A lack of institutional capacity may reflect both states' reluctance to delegate formal authority to IOs and/or their hesitancy to provide IOs with the resources necessary to effectively execute the policy functions in which they do enjoy a reasonable degree of formal authority. As Heldt and Schmidtke (2017, p. 51) note, 'IOs' power to shape global governance outcomes is

clearly contingent on their financial and staff capabilities' and, where such capabilities are high, they can be strategically employed to further increase IO authority. Of course, IOs' resource needs are dependent on the scope of their work. IOs that directly engage in service provision, project implementation or costly enforcement activities are likely to require substantial resources to be effective. For example, '[t]he UN's operations in the field of security, particularly those related to peacekeeping, require a great deal of funding for their effective continuation' (Survey VI). While some IOs suffer from chronic underfunding, others may experience acute funding impasses, due to unforeseen events or because key states seek major funding cuts. In response, many IOs have adopted increasingly sophisticated strategies to raise budgets, often actively encouraging greater diversification of resources and funding mechanisms (Goetz & Patz, 2017). While this has helped shine a light on existing capacity gaps, it has also raised concerns over the budget transparency of IOs and its implications for institutional effectiveness (Moloney & Stoycheva, 2018).

4.3.5 | Fragmentation and lack of central authority

Growing regime fragmentation is a feature of several of the surveyed issue domains. Yet, it appears to be particularly consequential for effectiveness where there is no authoritative IO to act as a central 'node' (Zürn, 2018). Notably, the international regulation of both finance and investment is highly decentralized and fragmented, and IOs in this space have few formal powers. Global financial governance is highly 'polycentric', relying primarily on voluntary standard-setting and market discipline to induce change (Survey III). In turn, '[t]he international protection of foreign investment is governed by more than 3000 bilateral state-to-state agreements, with only a few plurilateral agreements of limited geographical or substantive scope … and a handful of multilateral fora' (Survey IV). However, fragmentation does not appear to be equally detrimental to effectiveness across issue areas. For example, in the climate space, the 'UNFCCC has struggled but ultimately succeeded to keep its position as the key node in an increasingly polycentric global climate governance system' (Survey I). Indeed, some have argued that the 2015 Paris Agreement is making 'virtues' out of polycentricity and fragmentation (Hale, 2017, p. 190), enabling a variety of 'bottom up' responses by a multitude of actors. This is in line with broader claims about the 'creative' potential of fragmentation in a context of complex interdependence (Acharya, 2016). Thus, the long-term implications of regime fragmentation for IO effectiveness remain contested and may well look very different from issue area to issue area, depending on problem structure and institutional context.

4.3.6 | Tension between ambition and broad-based consensus

As highlighted above, many of the IOs under investigation face a fundamental tension between ensuring broad-based consensus on the one hand and ambitious commitments on the other, that is, commitments that go beyond what governments would have done anyway. For some scholars, this tension is essentially unresolvable. According to Underdal's (1980) 'law of the least ambitious program', international agreements are inevitably constrained by the level of commitment displayed by the least enthusiastic parties. In practice, however, this law does not always hold, for example where other powerful states are willing and able to use carrots (or sticks) to entice reluctant parties (Victor, 2006) or where unanimity is not required for decision-making (Hovi & Sprinz, 2006).

Concerns over the tension between ambition and consensus feature particularly prominently in the UNFCCC and WTO, both of which operate on the basis of the consensus principle. While this means that these IOs may face less contestation over procedural legitimacy, finding agreement becomes harder, especially in light of growing complexity and politicization. In the case of the UNFCCC, states have tried to find a way around this dilemma in the Paris Agreement by substituting binding substantive commitments with procedural obligations designed to 'nudge' states towards greater ambition over time. In the case of the WTO, reform suggestions include moving towards some form of majoritarian or weighted voting, or, alternatively, to embrace 'differentiated integration' that would allow states to move ahead at different speeds on specific issues (Survey VII).

4.3.7 | Internal culture

Most of the challenges identified above are rooted in conflicting state interests, power asymmetries and/or the complexity of global problem structures, rather than the internal workings of IOs themselves. In our survey, internal culture is explicitly mentioned as a barrier to IO effectiveness only once, namely in the context of global migration governance; however, it is likely that bureaucratic "pathologies" play at least a secondary role in explaining effectiveness shortcomings in other domains as well (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). In the case of UNHCR, survey respondents (Survey V) note that internal culture 'is characterized by a lack of learning, deference to seniors (telling managers what they want to hear, rather than what is actually happening on

the ground), and deference to states (which impedes holding them to account)'. Others have explored how opaque bureaucratic structures at UNHCR create obstacles for refugees seeking to obtain humanitarian aid and access to resettlement (Ozkul & Jarrous, 2021). Going forward, a burgeoning body of research on international public administrations (Bauer et al., 2017; Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009; Eckhard & Ege, 2016; Trondal et al., 2010) could provide important insights on the implications of administrative styles and leadership cultures for IO effectiveness.

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper has shed light on the constraints and possibilities international institutions face when initiating, designing, and implementing global policies. To date, few existing studies have reviewed issues of effectiveness across a range of diverse issue areas. This paper has sought to respond to this research gap. Specifically, we designed a detailed survey on IO effectiveness, gathering not just information on IO performance across multiple dimensions but also the implications of institutional design as well as the key underlying challenges that threaten to undermine IOs' ability to deliver.

While the findings presented here must be interpreted cautiously, given the small size of the survey, they provide important clues as to the factors that facilitate or impede IO effectiveness, providing the foundation for a larger survey and highlighting future research priorities that may further advance the emerging IO-survey literature (Dellmuth et al., 2022). Overall, we find that IOs tend to be most effective early in the policy cycle, when initiating and facilitating agreement on global goals, norms, and rules. States generally appear willing to delegate substantive levels of authority to IOs during these 'constitutive' stages of the policy processes (agenda setting and rule-making). In contrast, only a few IOs are endowed with meaningful monitoring and enforcement powers. Evidence from the survey also suggests that coercive powers, where they have been granted, are not always applied consistently to hold states to account. Consequently, many IOs have a relatively successful track record with regard to constitutive effectiveness – generating consensus on the normative principles and goals underpinning global collaboration – but struggle to translate this into tangible collective action.

While this observation applies across most issue areas, survey results also remind us to be careful when drawing generalized conclusions on IO institutional design. Some policy functions and design features – for instance those related to knowledge generation and dispute settlement – are far more important for some IOs than for others. Indeed, not all IOs are active across the full policy cycle and not all IO functions are

directly aimed at changing state behaviour. IOs also differ in terms of their capacity to adapt to a changing governance context, marked by power shifts, regime fragmentation, institutional overlap, and the rise of less formalized governance arrangements. Thus, while the proliferation and diversification of actors and mechanisms poses serious threats to the effectiveness of some IOs, it may provide opportunities for others. In the domain of climate change, for example, catalytic experimentation by a plurality of state and non-state actors has gained traction as a promising new form of governance (Bernstein & Hoffmann, 2018), especially where IOs are able to 'orchestrate' such contributions. However, while it provides a promising alternative governance pathway, orchestration is not necessarily more effective than delegation (Abbott et al., 2015), nor is it always normatively desirable (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017), and more research is needed to determine when, where and how it can boost IO performance.

Notwithstanding important differences between the IOs included in the survey, we have been able to identify a few cross-cutting challenges that impede institutional effectiveness across most issue areas. These include political conflict and growing politicization, concerns over IO legitimacy and representation, and the expansion and complexification of global problems. These challenges are interrelated and not easily resolved. For example, because complex problems are evolving and ambiguous, they are likely to increase political conflict. In turn, efforts to reduce political conflict through institutional reform, for example, by introducing majority voting, is likely to heighten concerns over legitimacy and representation. The relationship between legitimacy and effectiveness is particularly interesting, since these two attributes can be mutually reinforcing but also mutually constraining (Sommerer & Agné, 2018). Without sufficient legitimacy, IOs are arguably less able to engage in effective problem solving. In turn, a lack of effective output is likely to further decrease legitimacy.

As this paper has shown, the effectiveness of IOs is constrained by a range of factors, including low levels of authority across policy functions, especially those related to compliance monitoring and enforcement. IOs are more than faithful servants of their masters, yet their ability to induce behavioural change in states is carefully circumscribed. Thus, IOs must engage in the 'art of the possible' (Keohane, 1982), using their comparatively strong agenda-setting powers and multiple pathways of influence to pursue their mission and contribute to the attainment of globally defined goals.

referees and Axel Marx for their helpful comments on the earlt drafts of the paper.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Please see Appendix S2 (p. 5) for a full description of the policy functions.

[2] For the full list of IOs, see Appendix S1.

[3] For the coding of qualitative expert assessments, see Appendix S3.

[4] Table B in Appendix S3 shows the relative frequency of IOs rated as highly, moderately, or barely effective across the three effectiveness dimensions and issue areas.

[5] In Appendix S6 we provide data from Zürn et al. (2021) on the ranking of policy functions in terms of their formal authority.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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

Appendix S1