

International Organisations as Learning Agents in the Emerging System of Global Governance.

A Conceptual Framework.

Bernd Siebenhüner

The Global Governance Project is a joint research programme of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, the Environmental Policy Research Centre of Freie Universität Berlin, Oldenburg University, and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam



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Foreword

This working paper was written as part of the Global Governance Project, a joint research programme of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, the Free University of Berlin (Environmental Policy Research Centre), Oldenburg University and the Free University Amsterdam. Within the larger context of earth system analysis, the Project investigates international institutions, political processes, organisations and other actors that influence the emerging system of global environmental governance. The current focus is on questions of institutional and organisational effectiveness, learning processes in environmental policy, institutional inter-linkages, the role of private actors in governance systems, and models of global democracy. Major analytical tools are qualitative social science methods, including structured case studies, as well as legal analysis and integrated modelling. Project members represent political science, economics, international law and integrated modelling.

Within the Global Governance Project, this working paper contributes to the efforts of the research group 'MANUS – Managers of Global Change' analysing the effectiveness and learning of international organisations. The MANUS group addresses four main questions: How effective are international environmental organisations? How do different institutional designs influence effectiveness? How can these organisations learn to improve their effectiveness? How can new approaches such as qualitative modelling help in understanding these processes?

Other research groups of the Global Governance Project include MOSAIC—'Multiple Options, Solutions and Approaches in Climate Governance', and MECGLO—'New Mechanisms of Global Governance'.

More information on these groups is available at the Project's website at www.glogov.org. The Global Governance Project also hosts the Indo-German Forum on International Environmental Governance (www.indo-german-forum.net), and it has organised, together with its partners, the 2001 and 2002 Berlin Conferences on the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change (www.environmental-policy.de).

Comments on this working paper, as well as on the other activities of the Global Governance Project, are highly welcome. We believe that understanding global governance is only feasible as joint effort of colleagues from various backgrounds and from all regions of the world. We look forward to your response.

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Abstract

International organisations such as those of the UN system have emerged as crucial actors in the system of global governance. This conceptual paper views them in a management perspective with a particular focus on organisational learning processes. In a first part, the paper examines whether and under which circumstances the perspective of organisational learning could be applied to international organisations. Therefore, the specific characteristics of intergovernmental organisations are identified as opposed to private sector organisations. In a second part, the attempt is being made to define learning within international organisations and to categorise the types of knowledge that are relevant for the learning processes. By this token, existing concepts of organisational learning and the learning organisation will be explored with respect to the specific conditions of international organisations. The final part of this paper delineates a conceptual framework for the empirical study of learning processes in international organisations on the basis of formulated hypotheses.

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1 Introduction

International organisations increasingly attract scholarly interest within a new debate that focuses on their role in international politics and on their internal functioning. The growing importance of international organisations in the system of global governance mirrors the general awareness of global problems in several policy areas such as economic, environmental, social policy as well as internal and external security. Many international organisations have been established to encounter these problems on a global scale. Over time, international organisations have acquired a key role in many of these policy areas and have significant direct and indirect influence on policy making at various levels of governance. In particular, international governmental organisation as those of the UN system emerged as actors in the global governance system who have some degree of independence of national state policies (Biermann and Bauer 2003). A number of those organisations existed and evolved over the period of several decades. Being challenged by highly dynamic environments and changing internal conditions, these organisations need capabilities to learn and to adapt to ensure their persistence. So far, very little is known about the particular ability to learn and whether these international governmental organisations could be labelled learning agents.¹

While most research on international governmental organisations has been conducted in the field of international relations theory within political science, it is only recently that sociological insights are being applied to the study of the behaviour of these organisations (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Ness and Brechin 1988). Contributions from management studies, however, are scant although their repertoire of expertise in organisational studies can provide a number of useful insights into the functioning and the processes of change in international organisations.²

In this paper a particular perspective from management studies will be brought forward as an approach to analyse international organisations. Given the broad body of expertise management studies have developed over the years in the field of organisational learning, it seems more than timely to apply some of the concepts and key findings to international organisations. This perspective might offer novel insights into processes of change and reflexive improvements in these kinds of organisations which should lead to a promising research agenda and consequently also to practical recommendations for the design of international organisations. As part of the MANUS re-

¹ This paper focuses on international governmental organisation as existent in the UN system while international non-governmental organisations will remain outside the scope of this study given the broad existing literature on them (Clark 1995; Edwards and Hulme 1992; Ghils 1992; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

² For the few exceptions see Böhling (2002); LaPalombara (2001a; b).

search project on effectiveness and learning of international organisations, this paper focuses on developing a conceptual framework for future empirical research.

This paper will discuss five questions in three sections. In section 2, it will be explored whether and under which circumstances the perspective of organisational learning could be applied to international organisations. Therefore, in passim I will (i) study the specific characteristics of intergovernmental organisations as opposed to private sector organisations. Subsequently, we will ask (ii) how learning within international organisations can be defined and (iii) what they are able to learn. In section 3, we will ask (iv) how they learn and which factors influence the learning. By this token, we will analyse existing concepts of organisational learning and the learning organisation with respect to the specific conditions of international organisations. Fourthly, it will develop a conceptual framework for learning processes in international organisations that will allow for further empirical research and for some conclusions to answer the question (v) how international organisations could improve their learning capacities.

2 International organisations in management studies

Originally having been focused on commercial corporations, management science has recently opened up to more general problems of organisations be they commercial or non-profit, private or public, small scale or large scale. Starting out from the concentration on industrial processes of physical transformations through capital and labour in the late 19th century, management science developed into a more general approach to study the physical as well as the informational aspects of formal and informal organisations. The growth of service industries and the emergence of the knowledge society was mirrored by the growing scientific emphasis on a different set of problems. However, there is still a dominating bias on private for-profit organisations (Pawłowsky 1998; 2001; Schreyögg 1996).

All the different forms of organisations share similar problems concerning the internal structuring, principal-agent problems, the interaction between different individuals working together for a common goal, the exchanges between the inside and the outside of the organisation, and last but not least problems of changing processes of the whole organisation. Therefore, it will be argued in the following to apply some significant insights and some tools for examination from the study of commercial organisations to the analysis of intergovernmental organisations.

2.1 Characteristics of non-profit public-sector organisations in a management perspective

Whereas early studies in management science conceived of commercial organisations as machine-like beings which have be optimised through efficient division of labour (Taylor 1911), over the years the insight grew that organisations are much more

complex entities (March and Simon 1958; Morgan 1986). In this perspective, more attention was given to the internal dynamics and the social interactions between the individuals on the basis of sociological and psychological bodies of knowledge. Organisations appeared as multi-dimensional structures that have the ability to organise themselves and to behave as a collective actor.

One key structural element of organisations is the common objective of the individuals involved, as stated by Katz and Kahn (1966, p. 16) who understand organisations as “a social device for efficiently accomplishing through group means some stated purpose”. Other definitions focus on the forms of internal coordination to achieve this common purpose such as Meyer and Rowan (1991, p. 41) when formulating that “formal organizations are generally understood to be systems of coordinated and controlled activities that arise when work is embedded in complex networks of technical relations and boundary-spanning exchanges.” These systems of coordination and control have also been phrased as permanent rules which help to perpetuate collective forms of behaviour on the side of the members of the organisation (Bea and Göbel 1999). It is commonly assumed in most definitions that organisations exist on the basis of collective action as maintained through coordination and self-organisation (Duncan and Weiss 1979). According to Argyris and Schön (1996, p. 8), it is the precondition of collective action that the individual member “must (1) devise agreed-upon procedures for making decisions in the name of the collectivity, (2) delegate to individuals the authority to act for the collectivity, and (3) set boundaries between the collectivity and the rest of the world.” Building on these considerations, we could infer five key definitional requirements for the existence of an organisation which are fulfilled in international organisations:

1. *Membership patterns:* Any organisation needs to have a specific set of members who have a particular relationship with the organisation as such. Normally this relationships grounds on a written or an oral contract, usually a working contract. Organisation theorists emphasise that membership has to be voluntary for the members (Schimank 2001). Neither in private companies nor in international organisations membership patterns are clear cut given the various forms of relationships between an organisation, its members and its stakeholders with whom the organisation sometimes might not have a contract although they are mutually dependent and stakeholders might have a say in the organisational decision making processes. The case is particularly tricky with regard to shareholders who do not directly work for the organisation. In intergovernmental organisations, we have to face similar definitional problems given the multi-level structure of relationships between the organisation, its employees, delegates from member states and the member states themselves who influence decisions of the organisation even though they are not directly working for the organisation.

2. *Systems of rules and procedures*: Concerning agreed-upon procedures, all intergovernmental organisations are founded on a mandate outlining the scope of its activities and the general framework of the internal procedures it has to follow. Individual members have to obey to these rules if they want to stay part of the organisation. There are formal and informal procedures in place in all of these organisations such as rules of decision-making, communication procedures, mechanisms for conflict resolution, and internal control and review processes.
3. *Common objectives*: When we acknowledge that organisations are bound together by common objectives of the members, international organisations need to find a basic consensus for their work and a common set of targets. This might be more difficult than in the case of private businesses but in most cases, the externally given mandate prescribes a set of objectives for the international organisation.
4. *Authority to act for the organisation*: The requirement to have somebody to act and to speak on behalf of the collectivity, leaves room for interpretation since it does not clarify to which extent the authority has to be handed over to certain individuals. International organisations generally have chief executive functions in their hierarchy who delegate tasks to act on behalf of the whole organisation.
5. *Boundaries between the organisation and the environment*: The boundaries of international organisations are normally determined by membership patterns and by the scope of the activity as indicated by the mandate. However, given their public nature and the complex interdependency with nation states, the boundaries of international organisations are somehow less clear-cut than in the case of private businesses. Governing councils in many intergovernmental organisations include representatives from national governments which are not bound by a working contract to the organisation. The scope of the organisations' activity and the influences on their decision making are more diverse than in the case of private corporations. Nevertheless, organisations are dependent on their environment and have to adapt to the specific and often changing condition of their environment in order to function properly. Therefore, the analysis of the respective environments should be integral part of any study of an organisation (Ness and Brechin 1988; Böhling 2002).

Building on these criteria international governmental organisations such as those of the UN system certainly qualify for the status of organisations and could be analysed as such. It is the key characteristic of international organisations that they emerged as collective actors in the international governance system. Therefore, they

have to be distinguished from regimes in the sense of rule systems in which actors operate.³

There are, however, significant differences between private sector for-profit organisations and public sector, non-profit organisations in particular when we focus on an international level. These differences have to be taken into account when the attempt is being made to apply concepts from the study of commercial corporations. Table 1 summarises the key differences between private sector organisations and public sector organisations. It draws on some of the criteria developed by LaPalombara (2001a) who focuses on public and private sector organisations on a national level and draws most of his attention to power issues. In international public organisations, somewhat different conditions have to be recognised since they are usually established on the basis of international treaties and with a clear mandate. Therefore, they are not subject to constant changes in political priorities of national governments or individual ministers as national bureaucracies might be.

The most striking difference between the two types of organisations can be found in the target structure and in the related evaluation criteria. Whereas private sector organisations have to focus on profit and economic survival of the organisation in the market, public sector organisations have to pursue a multitude of qualitative targets such as environmental protection, poverty reduction or capacity building given through their political constituencies. Therefore, they will be measured in the first place in terms of their effectiveness in solving these tasks. In the private sector efficiency is one of the key criteria to measure organisation while in public organisations it is their effectiveness in achieving the given objectives. This is not to say that private sector companies do not also pursue other objectives than profit maximisation.⁴ Nevertheless, profit and efficiency are key for private companies if they want to stay in the respective markets. Public organisations also have to strive for efficiency but in most cases they will be measured in terms of their goal achievement, i.e. their effectiveness.

In terms of accountability, the crucial difference between both types of organisations can be found in the groups and institutions to whom the organisations are accountable. Private corporations are accountable in the first place to their shareholders, but also to the various stakeholders of the organisation who have some interest in the organisation's success or in certain activities of the organisation (Freeman 1984). In the case of public sector organisations in the international arena it is mostly the nation states and the larger UN organisation to whom they are accountable. Moreover, as public authorities they are submitted to the supervision of courts.

³ According to Krasner (1983, p. 1) regimes could be understood as "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue area" International governmental organisations would serve as actors within this system.

⁴ According to empirical studies, most corporations pursue a number of objectives beyond mere profit maximisation (Raffée and Fritz 1990).

Being exposed to multiple political targets and heterogeneous interests by key constituents, international public organisations have less *autonomy* than private organisations even though the latter have to obey national legislation and regulations. Private companies are granted a number of fundamental rights by most national constitutions if they stay within the boundaries of the law and can decide independently about their own goals. Public organisations, by contrast, in most cases have to implement decisions from superior units and are integrated in a system of other agencies leaving them only limited freedom to act (LaPalombara 2001a). In particular, their goals are given from the outside; in the case of intergovernmental organisations it is the mandate which regulates most of the specific tasks of the organisation.

Being directly dependent on their success on markets, private corporations have to adapt to change in the markets if they intend to survive economically. Therefore, private-sector organisations could be assumed to have a somewhat higher ability to change than public sector organisations which are not exposed to this kind of strong pressures. Most students of public bureaucracies found a structural conservatism in these organisations due to their internal processes of bureaucratisation and the external political influence they gain over the time of their existence (Powell and DiMaggio 1991).

	Private-sector organisation	Public-sector organisation
<i>Targets</i>	Profit as key target	Multiple targets
<i>Evaluation criteria</i>	Efficiency	Effectiveness
<i>Accountability</i>	Accountable to shareholders and stakeholders	Accountable to nation states, UN system organisations, courts
<i>Autonomy</i>	Considerable freedom to act	Less autonomy Dependent on other agencies
<i>Goal setting</i>	Sets its own goals	Goals are given (mandate)
<i>Ability to change</i>	Considerable ability to change (forced by markets)	Limited ability to change, bureaucratisation, structural conservatism

Table 1: Difference between private-sector and public organisations

Given the particular characteristics of the different types of organisation, each analysis of those organisations under a management perspective has to acknowledge these differences in their research design. These differences have to be mirrored in the research questions and foci. In particular, the predominant focus on effectiveness

rather than efficiency in international public sector organisations will have to play a key role in any analysis of organisational learning in these organisations.

2.2 Analyses of organisational learning in international organisations

One of the most interesting aspects of organisations seems to be their development over time. Do they grow or do they change qualitatively? Are they capable of adapting to dynamic environmental conditions such as changing market structures and shifting government preferences? Could they reflect about these changes and are they able to learn how to improve their performance in different situations? These questions are being addressed by studies of organisational learning in management science which might also be applied to public sector and intergovernmental organisations.

As yet, there have been only a handful of attempts to examine international organisations under a learning perspective. Nevertheless, there is almost a complete lack of a management-science perspective on learning phenomena in this type of organisation. Researchers on international organisations applied different learning concepts but did not employ concepts from management science as such. For instance, Haas and McCabe (2001) and Haas (2000) have a focus on societal learning processes and the role of international organisations as facilitators in them. In their study, they largely refrain from an internal management perspective although they analyse some internal features of the respective organisations in order to study their impact on the organisation's learning performance. By contrast, Böhling (2002) focuses on the boundaries of international organisations and its relationships with its environment on the basis of the concept of "boundary spanning activities". Thereby, she leaves aside most of the internal processes which are in the core interest of management science. In his handbook article on the use of organisational learning concepts for public sector organisations, LaPalombara (2001a) concentrates on national public sector organisations and does not refer to the specifics of international organisations. Only Koch and Lindenthal (2002) present a framework for the empirical analysis of international organisations such as the European Commission that builds on concepts from organisational learning. Therefore, there are only very few contributions that accomplished to broach the particular strengths of a management science perspective on learning processes in the study of international organisations (Berthoin Antal 1998; Berthoin Antal and Dierkes 2002).

3 A conceptual framework

3.1 *Defining learning in international organisations*

The literature on organisational learning⁵ abounds with definitions on what its core topic is and how it could be distinguished from situations where there is no learning observable (Klimecki and Lassleben 1998). There is, however, not yet a paradigmatic approach in this field and numerous concepts compete in terms of their comprehensiveness, empirical operationalisation and their practical relevance. It is the objective of this chapter to develop a conceptual approach to analyse organisational learning processes in international organisations.

According to Argyris and Schön (1996), organizational learning is a change in the behaviour of the organization or its members that is triggered by a change in the underlying “theory in use”, i.e. the often tacitly used set of values and causal beliefs that the members of an organization share. Consequently, this approach has been labelled an action-oriented perspective. In a similar vein, Dodgson (1993, p. 377) defines organisational learning with a particular focus on the knowledge dimension when stating that it incorporates „the ways firms build, supplement and organize knowledge and routines around their activities and within their cultures, and adapt and develop organisational efficiency by improving the use of the broad skills of their workforces.“ As opposed to the specific perspective on effectiveness applied in this paper, he concentrates on efficiency due to his specific focus on commercial corporations.

In their systems theory view, Probst and Büchel (1997, p. 15) define organisational learning as “the process by which the organisation’s knowledge and value base changes, leading to improved problem-solving ability and capacity for action.” Similarly, Marquardt (1996 p. 22) points out that “organisational learning represents the enhanced intellectual and productive capability gained through corporate-wide commitment and opportunity for continuous improvement. [It] occurs through the shared insights, knowledge, and mental models of members of the organization [and it] builds on past knowledge and experience – that is on organizational memory which depends on institutional mechanisms (e.g. policies, strategies, and explicit models) used to retain knowledge.” Both of these definitions integrate the outcome perspective by stating that organisational learning has to serve a specific purpose. Concomitantly, Senge (1990, p. 6) applies an outcome-oriented view on the learning organization, which is characterised by the continuous increase in its “capacity to realize [its] highest aspirations.”

⁵ For related studies see Argote (1999); Argyris (1990); Denton (1998); Fiol and Lyles (1985); Gilley and Maycunich (2000); Probst and Büchel (1997); Schreyögg (2000); Schwandt and Marquardt (2000); Senge (1990); Wilkesmann (1999).

These definitions point to key characteristics of organisational learning which will have to be covered in a working definition for the analysis of organisational learning in international organisations. First, they agree that organisational learning addresses processes of the generation, transformation, transmission and diffusion of knowledge inside of organisations. The changes in knowledge have to transcend individual increases in knowledge in order to qualify for the term organisational learning. Second, organisational learning relates to practical action of the organisation on a systems level as well as on an individual level. Results of reversed actions will lead to changes in structures, cultures, behaviours, and strategies (Fiol and Lyles 1985). Third, any meaningful definition of organisational learning necessitates a goal-perspective. It has to state what the ultimate target of the learning process is, be it the better adaptation to market requirements, higher efficiency or a better consumer orientation. As indicated earlier, in the case of international organisations, this objective is effectiveness.⁶ Building on these elements, the working definition of organisational learning for the present study reads as follows. *Organisational learning is an increase in the organisation's effectiveness caused by a change in the knowledge of an international organisation leading to modified practices of the organisation (changes in the structures, cultures and/or strategies of the organisation and modified patterns of action of the individual members).* In order to qualify for organisational learning not all of the described elements have to change, it is sufficient that one dimension of a practical outcome is observable since it is merely necessary that changes in knowledge have to be accompanied by any form of changes in the practice of an organisation. The crucial indicator for organisational learning according to this definition would be to find reflection processes on an organisational level that could be linked to changes in the organisational practices. On the basis of this definition it is indispensable to explicate the relationship between individual and collective learning as well as the substance of knowledge referred to in the definition and to further qualify the meaning of changes in knowledge.

3.2 Individual versus collective learning

Concepts of organisational learning have been developed in management science to describe processes of organisational change that take place at a collective level. In this body of literature, the distinction between individual and collective action is crucial—in particular for the choice of the appropriate theoretical and analytical approach.

Based on the above mentioned considerations, it seems justified to assume that collective action exists within international organisations and to analyse collective

⁶ A conceptual framework for analyzing the effectiveness of intergovernmental organizations has been developed by Biermann and Bauer (2003).

processes herein. Nevertheless, questions remain concerning the relationship between individuals and the collectivity and the relatedness of their learning processes. Moreover, the distinction between international organisations and nation states or other larger organisational bodies also needs to be addressed.

As regards the latter distinction, international organisations could not only include individual persons but also collective entities that are able to act collectively such as nation states or other organisations. International organisations as actors by themselves could also be members of other collective bodies such as larger UN-organisations. In this perspective, international organisations have to be seen in a multi-layered system of collective action.

The former distinction between individual and collective action is particularly tricky when it comes to learning concepts. Although the notion of collective learning implies that it is more than the mere sum of individual learning by its members, it is dependent on individuals, their learning and their behavioural changes. In this line of thought, collective learning can be seen as the change of procedures, structures, shared beliefs and knowledge that are assembled from individual contributions on the basis of division of labour. For instance, the knowledge how to produce cars, telephones or computers is inherent to the relevant organisation but individuals usually oversee only a small part of the whole production process. Applied to international organisations one could assume similarly that individual members barely know all aspects of the problems at hand when they fulfil their daily work, but they know parts of it very well. In this sense, division of labour in an organisation allows for the possibility of collective learning.

Another argument comes from systems theory, which regards organisations as entities by themselves that are more than the sum of their individuals. In this view, organisational learning is mostly studied on the basis of analogies to individual learning. It conceives organisational learning as an emergent phenomenon building on individual processes that contribute to a larger whole in the knowledge and the practice of the supra-individual entity, titled the organisation (Marquardt 1996; Probst and Büchel 1997).

In sum, it is the general assumption underlying the following research that international organisations could be analysed under a perspective of collective learning that cannot be reduced to the sum of the individual learning processes although it is based on individual contributions and on individuals as changes agents. This assumption does not imply a complete analogy between intergovernmental and commercial organisations. It merely states that learning of and in organisations could be more than mere individual learning because of the existence of division of labour and an existing structural framework of internal relationships between the members of the organisation.

3.3 Learning and Adaptation

In the various models of organisational learning, different types and levels of learning have been distinguished. With regard to the definition of learning employed in this study, further specification seems appropriate to single out an empirically meaningful notion of organisational learning applicable for international organisations.

In their seminal study Argyris and Schön (1996) differentiate between three types of learning. The fundamental criteria for this classification is how far the underlying “theory in use”, i.e. the often unconsciously and tacitly used set of values and causal beliefs that the members of an organisation share have changed during the learning process. The basic level of learning has been framed as *single-loop learning*. It is the simplest form of learning addressing the adaptation of new knowledge to existing frameworks of objectives and causal beliefs. Based on a simple feedback loop between given expectations and the real outcomes of a process, this instrumental type of learning allows for error correction and leads to adjust results that defer from the pre-existing expectations. According to Argyris and Schön (1996), the advanced form of learning could be framed as “double-loop learning” which also includes the underlying theory of use into the learning process. Thus, there will be two feedback loops, an instrumental one of error correction and a more fundamental one that connects the former to changes in the general framework of beliefs, norms and objectives. *Deutero-learning*, the third level of learning, takes place on a meta-level of how to learn. This rare form of learning of the ability to learn itself. In their studies of business corporations, Argyris and Schön could hardly find forms of deutero-learning. Most learning processes usually remain in the scope of the first two categories of learning. In general, single-loop learning is largely sufficient when limited errors or deviations from goals have to be corrected, but it is not sufficient any more when the underlying norms and belief systems of an organisation or other agents conflict with new internal or external developments or requirements. It could hardly be expected that organisations do exhibit patterns of deutero learning. Thus, this study will focus on phenomena of single- and double-loop learning.

The adoption of Argyris & Schön’s framework for empirical studies confronts researchers with the task to discern the scope of the involvement of the theory-in-use in the learning process which is particularly difficult given the tacit nature of this form of knowledge and the broad definition of the theory-in-use. Therefore, Fiol and Lyles (1985, p. 811) proposed a more clear-cut theoretical approach that helps to conceptualise learning as opposed to adaptation. In their notion, learning comprises “the development of insights, knowledge, and associations between past actions, the effectiveness of those actions, and future actions” whereas adaptation denominates the “ability to make incremental adjustments as a result of environmental changes, goal structure changes, or other changes.” By abstaining from the distinction between different types

of learning, Fiol and Lyles gain a better focus on the role of cognitive change that results in observable changes in behaviour.⁷ Any form of change that is not an incremental adjustment and that builds on a change in the prevalent knowledge structure qualifies as learning while induced changes through external processes outside the cognitive framework of the organisation and its members remain in the cluster of adaptation phenomena. The latter comprises error correction but not an inclusion of the fundamental knowledge and belief systems behind certain forms of behaviour. Thereby, learning is confined to higher-level processes involving cognitive and behavioural changes.

3.4 *Knowledge to be Learned in International Organisations*

In the current debate, studies on organisational learning are often linked to insights on knowledge management⁸ from which they could profit in terms of clarifying different types of knowledge relevant for organisational learning. The particular conditions of international organisations, however, are hardly reflected in these debates. Therefore, an additional reference to political science bodies of knowledge helps to identify the relevant types of knowledge in international organisations that foster the organisation's effectiveness and its learning.

In commercial corporations, any forms of knowledge relevant for innovation, increased efficiency, and better economic performance seem fruitful. In the scientific debate, authors distinguish between tacit and explicit forms (e.g. Lam 2000; Polanyi 1966), between technical and non-technical knowledge (e.g. Kogut and Zander 1992) or between specific knowledge and broader beliefs (e.g. Marquardt 1999). These forms of knowledge seem relevant for the study of international organisations even though they do not play a similar role as for commercial businesses.

For the purposes of the study of intergovernmental organisations in terms of their effectiveness a particular focus on the distinction between substantial and procedural knowledge might prove fertile since it allows for empirically meaningful operationalisation. Substantial knowledge is concerned with particular problems which are located in the specific focus of the organisation as stated in its mandate, such as environmental protection in the case of UNEP, poverty alleviation in the case of UNDP or education in the case of the UNESCO. In these fields, every organisation is expected to learn continuously and it is almost impossible to discern whether increases in this field of knowledge are significant or trivial. Therefore, inter-organisational comparisons are empirically extremely difficult and will hardly generate far-reaching insights. By contrast, the study of procedural knowledge in an organisation allows for comparisons be-

⁷ A similar distinction between learning and adaptation has been made by Haas (1991).

⁸ For an overview of the discussion on knowledge management see Backler (1995); Glynn (1996); Lam (2000); Nonaka (1994); Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995); Pawlowsky (1998); Spender (1996).

tween different organisations and their learning. Procedural knowledge in this context refers to all procedural matters how substantive knowledge is generated, organised, condensed and processed and how the organisation deals with certain problems on a structural level (Siebenhüner 2002a; b).

This focus proves particularly helpful in the study of organisational learning as processes of increased effectiveness of these organisations. We could regard procedural knowledge as particularly relevant for increases in effectiveness since it enables individuals to purposely address effectiveness issues. Therefore this perspective on procedural knowledge is in line with the particular focus of the definition above.

3.5 Determinants of Organisational Learning

For the purposes of the study of learning processes in international organisations, a conceptual framework is required that helps to generate hypotheses about possible influences on learning in international organisations. This concept should distinguish between external and internal factors, the latter related to the organisational structures, to the organisation's strategy, the organisational culture and to the individuals involved. In the following, these factors will be explained on the basis of the insights from organisational learning. Figure 1 depicts the causal linkages of this conceptual framework visually.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS

In management studies, significant attention has been paid to the formal structures of organisations and the impact they have on the behaviour of the individuals and on processes of change and development. In regard to organisational learning the following factors have been identified in the relevant literature to be influential.

In business contexts, regular *exchange of individuals* among different units or departments has oftentimes triggered changes and the fast distribution of specific and new knowledge throughout the whole organisation (Marquardt 1996). Individuals or teams who possess new kinds of knowledge are supposed to spread out into other organisational units where they could transfer, generally speaking, this knowledge to other employees. Nevertheless, it seems important that there is some kind of commitment to the transfer of knowledge in order to generate the desired snowball effects. If individuals simply exchange their working environment without communicating their knowledge to others, there will hardly be any learning at the collective level. Moreover, these "travellers" have to be accepted in the new divisions to be able to diffuse their knowledge. While exchange can lead to increased capacity at the receiving end, it might create a void causing major problems at the other. Likewise, the complete loss of individuals with specific knowledge that has not been diffused so far could harm the organisation as such and the organisational learning process in particular. As far as international organisations are concerned, it could be assumed that a transfer of (proce-

dural) knowledge from one organisational unit to another or from one organisation to another could best be carried out through real people who carry this knowledge. Therefore, learning in international organisations seems most likely when possessors of crucial (procedural) knowledge move from one part to another or from one organisation to another as long as they, thereby, do not compromise the ability of one organisational unit to generate new knowledge.

Numerous studies on organisational learning stress the role of *organisational slack* in the form of spare resources for learning efforts. Organisations working constantly at the capacity limit have few means at their disposal to instigate learning processes. Employees as well as management levels of an organisation need time and some financial resources to be able to undergo thorough reflection processes. Workshops, creativity seminars, dialogues can hardly generate fruitful results when participants view them solely as additional burdens to their highly demanding work (Cyert and March 1963).

Organisational learning requires the *storage of knowledge* from past learning experiences. In most cases, computer technology provides the necessary support for this task in the field of numerical data, but these information systems have to be organised, maintained and fed by the personnel that is working with them (Marquardt 1996). However, values, norms and beliefs as ingrained in the predominant theory-of-use are stored and transferred by humans who stay in certain positions or communicate them to new members of the organisation. In international organisations, documentation plays an important role in order to save existing knowledge for future times and to allow for transparency to outsiders. Good documentation is a key requirement for lesson-drawing from past experiences. With regard to individuals, the maintenance of certain values and norms requires some continuity of personnel in the organisation from one period to another. A constant exchange of personnel will probably hinder the storage of crucial knowledge that has been accumulated in the past.

Through *reflexive mechanisms* organisations attempt to make use of past experiences by reflecting on them and to turn them into action of any kind. Reflexive mechanisms are the formally or informally installed structural means by which an organisation learns.⁹ They could be either largely informal like focused personal communication among participants or highly formalised in the form of evaluation workshops or institutionalised review committees with a distinct set of rules of procedure (Siebenhüner 2002b). The complete absence of these reflexive mechanisms will most likely coincide with little learning efforts within the respective organisation.

⁹ This resonates partly with the concept of “organization learning mechanisms (OLMs)” as defined by Armstrong and Foley (2003, p. 75) building on Poper and Lipshitz (1995) who distinguish between cultural facets and structural facets of these OLMs. The structural part resembles the notion of reflexive mechanisms as presented here when being defined as “the institutionalized structural and procedural arrangements that allow organizations to systematically collect, analyse, store, disseminate, and use information that is relevant to the effectiveness of the organization.”

The formal structure of an organisation defines the roles the individuals have to play, it clarifies the *hierarchy* and the formal *leadership* structures and it structures working processes. Learning organisations require formal structures that on the one hand are clear in the attribution of responsibilities and in the leadership. On the other hand the structures have to provide enough flexibility and individual freedom for learning on the individual as well as on the collective level. Therefore, a balance between openness and guidance is asked for (Schwandt and Marquard 2000). In empirical studies (e.g. Beer and Eisenstat 2000) it turned out that both the traditional top-down management style and the permissive laissez-faire style hamper effective learning processes. Accordingly, successful organisational learning requires well defined responsibilities, an appropriate number of hierarchical levels and some kind of leadership that leaves enough room for the development of new ideas and for the learning dynamics. Empirically, research could focus on the styles of leadership according to the management literature where authoritarian styles have been distinguished from consultative, cooperative and participatory styles (Staehele 1999).¹⁰ In management practice, a better involvement of employees has proven to increase the commitment on their side to find new solutions and to implement them. The study of international organisations will have to concentrate on how well defined specific responsibilities are and how individuals would describe the style of leadership. It might be assumed that international organisations will be better able to learn when they have clear responsibilities combined with a motivating and encouraging style of leadership that could be expected to be the case in a cooperative, consultative and participatory mode.

Communication structures in any form of organisation seem to be fundamental for collective learning, it “will be possible only to the extent that there is communication” (Duncan and Weiss 1979, p. 96). Since information flow is an important element of every learning process, the intensity, the openness and the transparency of the communication structures in any kind of organisation seem equally pivotal in respect to collective learning as the style of communication is. This pertains to both, internal communication within the organisation external communication with the environment of the organisation (Daft and Huber 1987; Cohen and Levinthal 1990). Both fields of communication channel the flow of knowledge and give meaning to certain forms of information and discharge others. The communication structures are decisive for the acquisition of new knowledge and for the dissemination of it. Therefore, the study of organisational learning processes will have to analyse the communication structures in the respective organisation with respect to the directions of internal and external

¹⁰ In an authoritarian style of leadership, managers or directors usually decide by themselves without involving their employees. A consultative style of leadership is characterized by a consultation process in which directors seek for the opinion of their employees and decide by themselves. In a cooperative mode, directors and employees search for new solutions and decide upon them by themselves. The participatory mode, by contrast, includes the participation of employees in the decision making itself, e.g. by a voting system.

communication as well as with respect to the style of communication which is part of the organisation's culture. Given the broad variety of information to be communicated, a focus on specific forms of knowledge is advisable to examine the communication structures in one specific field which might be the processing of scientific knowledge in the case of intergovernmental organisations.

STRATEGIES

Any organisation has to take strategic choices concerning its long-term perspectives. For their learning ability it seems decisive that these perspectives incorporate a theory of how the organisation learns (Cyert and March 1963). In management science, strategic choices are given high prominence since they should ensure the future survival of the organisation in the future. Strategic choices could include decisive commitments towards organisational learning which could provide the motivation for purposeful learning endeavours and the improvement of the organisation's learning capabilities. By contrast, if organisations prefer to foster stability and continuity they will neither develop good knowledge about how they could learn nor will they be able to deliberately trigger learning processes. In these organisations, learning processes are often triggered by moments of crisis or changes in the top-management when continuity is called into question (Hedberg 1981). It could be hypothesised that organisations without that clear a commitment towards learning or change are less likely to learn effectively. In these cases learning might occur occasionally but there will not be an intentional process behind it which allows for a steady process of improvement of the organisations performance and its learning capabilities.

CULTURAL FACTORS

Apart from the formal organisational structure, informal aspects of the organisation have gained increasing attention by scholars of management processes in recent years. These so-called "soft factors" refer to the human relations inside the organisation. In relation to learning within assessments, I will concentrate on two essential factors: values and norms and the informal communication networks.

Organisational culture when understood as the set of shared *values and norms* in an organisation is an important denominator for any kind of organisational activities.¹¹ Openness, flexibility, commitment to the solution of actual problems, or creativity are elements of an organisational culture that is most likely to support organisational learning (Senge 1990). By contrast, taboos that may not be discussed or altered, dedication to formal procedures or top-down implementation of strategies will lead in

¹¹ Schein (1984, p. 3) defines organisational culture as "the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." It is therefore the result of organizational learning processes, itself.

most cases to little learning progress in the organisation (Probst and Büchel 1997). Therefore, it is likely that learning in and of international organisations will hardly occur when taboos and a strict dedication to formal procedures are part of the shared norms of the members of the organisation.

Even if international organisations do not meet all these requirements of an organisational culture that is likely to foster learning, it could be assumed that values play an important role for the constitution and the integration of the organisation as such. It is, however, a partly open question to which extent shared values foster or hamper learning in organisations. Based on the insights from organisational learning, it could be argued that a more comprehensive form of learning, e.g. double-loop learning, could be triggered by value conflicts but it could not grant for an organisational learning process itself which requires the formation of shared beliefs and commonalities in knowledge (Hedberg 1981). In less close forms of collective bodies such as networks, on the other hand, fundamental value conflicts might turn destructive for the entire network once the social glue is gone. Therefore, it could be expected that the stronger the controversy over the underlying values the less likely is learning of the organisation.

Without communication no learning could take place at all. Within business organisations, several levels and channels of communication exist in parallel. Apart from the formal channels along hierarchical relationships and formal rules of procedure there are *informal communication networks* to be observed in almost all types of organisation. The experiences with organisational learning demonstrate that top-down communication in the formal channels hardly suffices for the initiation and continuation of learning processes in an organisation. In most cases the informal communication networks that build on face-to-face contacts are crucial for the success of learning initiatives (Daft and Huber 1987). If the dominant opinion among the members of the informal networks of employees is not to subscribe to the learning initiative, it will be very hard to push it on the formal platforms (Crampton, Hodge et al. 1998; Groat 1997; Klimecki and Lassleben 1998; Krackhardt and Hanson 1993).

Accordingly, the style of communication counts as well. One-way communication that is reduced to instructions and commands will hardly facilitate commitment and self-organisation among the employees. Therefore, open multilateral communication and the sincere dedication to mutual understanding and the solution of apparent problems could be seen as supporting factors for organisational learning processes since they allow for the unhampered flow of information and for the spreading of new ideas (Senge 1990). Assuming that informal communication is similarly fundamental to intergovernmental organisations as it is to business companies and networks in general, it could be assumed that the existence of informal communication networks with a style of communication that is supportive for mutual learning could be expected to serve as facilitators for learning processes in international organisations. Empirically, the distinction between informal and formal forms of communication could be drawn between the predominance of written communication on the basis of pre-defined rules

of procedure in the case of formal communication whereas informal communication builds on a large degree of face-to-face contacts where there are no pre-defined rules or routines for the communication itself.

Research on the styles of communication has pioneered with the separation of three distinct types which seem applicable also in the study of international organisations (Benz 1994). These styles of communication pertain to the mostly tacit preoccupations or the communication partners, to their basic assumptions about the others and to their commitment to problem solutions. The first style has been labelled as *bargaining* and it builds on the assumption that interaction partners seek to maintain their own positions and, therefore, attempt to convince the others of their opinions (Bacharach and Lawler 1981). This form of communication is dominated by power and individual interests of the interaction partners. Communication that could be characterised as bargaining is marked by mutual distrust, the dominance of tactical reasoning, defences and attacks combined with little real dialogue. A second form has been categorised as *arguing*. In an arguing style of communication interaction partners seek to find compromises on the basis of the acceptance of the potentially different opinion of the other. Both partners seek to find compromises which minimise conflicts. Therefore, this style is characterised by the mutual attempt to build up confidence and trust and to acknowledge and to satisfy the needs of the others. As a third form, one could find truly *cooperative* styles of communication where the individual interests stay behind and the mutual interest to find new solutions is prevalent. Partners strive for understanding the ideas and opinions of the other and try to comply with them on the basis of mutual benefit (Agranoff 1986; Siebenhüner 2001). Both, the cooperative and the arguing style of communication could be expected to facilitate learning processes. In particular, the cooperative style is connected with a reflexive mode of learning such as double-loop learning since this form includes the finding of new frames of reference and the creation of new solutions and interpretations (Benz 1994, p. 126).

PERSONAL FACTORS

Since human relations are perceived as influential to the outcomes of organisational processes, the individuals themselves have to be taken into consideration as well. It is the individuals that organisations consist of and that have to carry out the learning processes. They serve as change agents, as gatekeepers between the organisation and its environment, as knowledge provider or as transmitters of knowledge inside of the organisation (Daft and Huber 1987; Duncan and Weiss 1979).

The individual employees are the core elements of business organisations as social systems. Their *personal capabilities* determine to a large extent how far an organisation is able to learn on an organisational level. In other words, although organisational learning has to be more than individual learning, it cannot occur without individual learning. It is the people's ability to learn and to reflect on their individual and

collective learning that is clearly the foundation for the organisational learning (Senge 1990; Senge 1996; Simon 1991).

Nevertheless, as Levitt and March (1988) convey, the accumulation of individual skills could also lead to so called “competency traps”, where people stick to one area of competence. Once a certain competence has proven to be successful people will stick to it even if it is not the appropriate answer to current problems any more. In dynamic environments it seems problematic to stick to one way of dealing with problems and to develop one type of competency. In order to overcome this competency trap a reflection process on the actual developments and the successes of learning efforts in relation to the broader environment is required. Here, the organisation has to rely on individuals with the capability of reflection upon the prevailing “theories-in-use” according to Argyris and Schön (1996) and to question existing values and belief systems. This type of learning does not only relate certain outcomes of organisational processes to a given set of targets or strategies but it also includes a feedback to the underlying set of targets and values whether they are still appropriate given the current overall situation. Organisations could institutionalise this type of learning but they have to rely on individuals, who have the ability to fulfil the task. In sum, demands concerning the individual capabilities are numerous when it comes to effective organisational learning. Apart from showing proficiency in reflecting on past learning experiences, individuals in an organisation are required to be able to generate, collect, accumulate and disseminate new knowledge. Therefore, they have to be flexible and open-minded with a view for the overall processes in order to make individual learning a fruitful contribution to learning on the organisational level. When we apply this to international organisations, we could suspect that successful learning in or of assessments in total requires individuals with those personal capabilities that enable them and the collective process to learn.

As obvious as this hypothesis sounds, it proves difficult to be tested empirically. Learning capabilities seem the best to be analysed by their results where individuals have demonstrated their abilities in successful learning processes. Therefore, a case-based study of crucial learning incidents in an organisation could give insights into the personal factors involved and the role individuals played in these processes. It could be analysed whether individuals played a rather passive or active role, whether they could be characterised as change agents or as continuity oriented, or whether they mostly generated, communicated and/or received new knowledge.

On the side of individuals not only cognitive capabilities are of importance for the general ability of an organisation to learn. It is also the attitudes of the people involved that could either foster or hamper organisational learning. In many cases, dissatisfaction of employees has triggered learning that was directed at solving the problems that presumably caused the dissatisfaction. Often *dissatisfaction* goes along with *conflicts* among the individuals in an organisation, in particular across hierarchical levels. These conflicts could result in further learning and in the sense that they could

be seen as productive in the long run (Probst and Büchel 1997). Since conflicts could also be highly destructive and energy consuming, the number of conflicts inside an organisation could hardly constitute an indicator for proneness to organisational learning in general. In particular, when dissatisfaction is directed against colleagues and not against institutional arrangements in the organisation. However, since both causes of discomfort often are closely connected, an empirical study has to analyse them as such. For the purposes of this study, dissatisfaction and conflict are taken as indicators for internal pressures based on people's discomfort with the current situation that could be seen as triggers for learning processes in general. Hence, it is plausible that people's discomfort or dissatisfaction trigger learning processes in international organisations.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Many of the observable learning processes in organisations are triggered by external factors rather than by internal ones. Changing consumer preferences, intensified competition on markets, the introduction of new technologies, accidents or catastrophes in certain production fields, or alterations in political regulation are external factors that could initiate learning on the side of the organisation. Companies could prepare themselves to encounter several of these risks. The creation of a learning-stimulating organisational structure and culture is an important element of this kind of preparation (Argyris and Schön 1996). For the study of learning processes in private as well as public organisations, these external influences could be highly significant. Changes in the external framework conditions could trigger significant changes in the size, structure and procedures of the intergovernmental bodies. These factors include political pressures, changes in the mandate, new scientific findings, criticisms from governments, NGOs, industry or from the media, and experiences with other intergovernmental organisations. Given the breadth of possible external factors, no clear hypotheses could be formulated for the case of intergovernmental organisations. Empirical research will have to be rather exploratory in nature than testing hypotheses generated on the basis of existing experiences in organisational learning.

4 Conclusions

As yet comparatively little is known about intergovernmental organisations as such and about organisational learning in them in particular. Most political science scholars concentrated on international regimes, international relations and institutions and thereby neglected intergovernmental organisation as actors in their own right (Biermann and Bauer 2003). On the other side, most management scholars devoted their work to commercial organisations but less so to public organisations and even less to international intergovernmental organisations.

It was the aim of this paper to sketch out this research gap and to provide some conceptual tools that might be helpful in the attempt to fill it. Albeit the obvious struc-

tural differences between commercial organisations and international public ones, concepts of organisational learning could prove a fruitful basis for the analysis of these organisations and their internal learning processes. Nevertheless, intergovernmental organisations distinguish themselves in several respects from business organisations, the traditional field of study of organisational learning processes. They have externally formulated mandates which limit their range of action, they are part of the public sector with a less strong dedication to market processes but rather to overall effectiveness as far as the given mandate is concerned. Moreover, according to most comparative studies of private and public sector organisation, they tend to be less flexible and more continuity oriented than most private corporations.

Given the dearth in actual empirical studies on intergovernmental organisations in general and with a management studies focus in particular, it seems highly desirable to undertake an in-depth analysis of these forms of organisations and of their organisational learning capabilities. This paper formulated a number of hypotheses for this kind of study on the basis of common insights from the organisational learning literature. The different nature of these hypotheses necessitates a mixed empirical design of such a study with a number of open questions to give interviewees room for their interpretations and views that can be interpreted and compared to the formulated hypotheses. Some hypotheses, by contrast, would also allow for closed questionnaires where facts and preconditions are to be examined. In any case, the empirical study would require a case study oriented procedure with a number of in-depth interviews in these intergovernmental organisations as it is intended in the MANUS project.

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