

# Invisible Governance

International  
Secretariats  
in  
Global  
Politics

John Mathiason

  
Kumarian  
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# **Invisible Governance**

*International Secretariats  
in Global Politics*

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**JOHN MATHIASON**



*Invisible Governance: International Secretariats in Global Politics*

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# Abbreviations and Acronyms



CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CFCs	chlorofluorocarbons
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
EPTA	Expanded Program of Technical Assistance
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (US)
FCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
ICSAB	International Civil Service Advisory Board
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OEOA	United Nations Office of Emergency Operations in Africa
OIOS	Office of Internal Oversight Services (United Nations)
ONUC	UN Operation in the Congo (Opération des Nations Unies au Congo)

ONUMOZ	United Nations Operation in Mozambique
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV / AIDS
UNAVEM	United Nations Angola Verification Mission
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNMOVIC	United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission
UNRRA	United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNTAG	United Nations Transitional Advisory Group for Namibia
WDR	<i>World Development Report</i>
WFP	World Food Programme
WGIG	Working Group on Internet Governance
WHO	World Health Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society
WTO	World Trade Organization

# Preface



*A moment later Sir Humphrey Appleby arrived. He is the Permanent Secretary of the DAA [Department of Administrative Affairs], the Civil Service Head of Department. He is in his early fifties, I should think, but—somehow—ageless. He is charming and intelligent, a typical mandarin. He welcomed me to the Department.*

—THE COMPLETE YES MINISTER, 14

**I**nternational secretariats need their moment in the sun. When I joined the United Nations Secretariat as an entry-level associate social affairs officer in 1971, it was not considered by anyone to be a major player in international relations. When I left the secretariat in 1996 as deputy director of the Division for the Advancement of Women, the world had changed and the United Nations Secretariat had become a major player. For twenty-five years I was one of the new international civil service mandarins, although I would not claim to be either as ageless or necessarily as charming as Sir Humphrey Appleby from the BBC comedy series *Yes, Minister* (Hacker 1984), who could have been our model. However, in many ways we are like the British civil service—whose rules were largely incorporated into the international civil service—represented by Sir Humphrey.

Like the civil servants lampooned in that series, we tried to be invisible, but unlike them, we were not part of a government. The international public service manages organizations that are not sovereign, have no armies or police, collect no taxes, levy no fines, make few formal decisions on their own, and yet deliver a large and growing number of public services. These are services intended to make the world an orderly place and allow nations and their

citizens alike to live, in the words of the Preamble to the United Nations Charter, with “better standards of life in larger freedom.”

We were invisible because sovereign governments—the member states—are in charge of the organizations, giving them their tasks and their money. Secretariats act through and with those states, almost seamlessly. States are supposed to be seen; their international assistants are not. In fact, the idea that nameless, faceless bureaucrats are running the world would not only be politically incorrect but appalling to most sovereign governments. Invisibility has consequences. First, the international public service cannot defend itself—if it is invisible, what is there to defend? In the wake of the Oil-for-Food scandal (which is discussed in some detail later), the popular press and critics of the United Nations itself use the image of a corrupt, uncontrolled bunch of bureaucrats to discredit the organization. Second, invisibility can reduce accountability. Like government officials, international secretariat managers should have to show that the resources that they have been given have not been wasted. If they are invisible, they can escape this scrutiny.

The idea for the title of this book came from a book published in 1964 by David Wise and Thomas Ross, both White House reporters for major American newspapers. Wise and Ross wrote an exposé of the role played by intelligence agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency in forming national foreign policy. They titled their book *Invisible Government* to reflect the fact that the intelligence agencies maintained a low profile and—the authors claimed—were not accountable to the political process.

The analogy is not completely fair. International organizations are not governments, and they do not govern. Instead, they engage in what has been termed *governance*, a process of steering public policy and services in a non-sovereign world. The secretariats of these organizations make this global governance possible and have been more important than most scholarship would suggest. Their work is a form of invisible governance that needs to be recognized. In recognizing it, their work should be supported but also made more accountable, as the international organizations evolve in the interdependent world of the twenty-first century.

Proper recognition is not easy, since the inner working of the secretariats is not well documented. Few international officials

have seen fit to analyze their work, and much of what happened exists in the form of “war stories” told over dinner by current and former international public servants. Only a few of these have reached publication. Other than the marvelous memoirs of Brian Urquhart, the first member of the United Nations Secretariat, or Margaret Joan Anstee’s recollections, only a few books have been written by insiders. Most academic analysts have focused on the more visible interplay of states rather than deal with the more shadowy secretariats.

In 1980 I took over from Henri Reymond a course entitled “The United Nations System: Structures and Processes” at New York University. Henri was a retired international civil servant who had started his career with the League of Nations. Henri was, for his time, a *wunderkind*. He joined the international civil service at twenty-one, just after graduating from law school. He started in Refugee Affairs, but in 1931 joined the International Labour Organization (ILO), where he served in the cabinets of successive directors-general. After retiring as the director of the ILO’s office at the United Nations and secretary of the International Civil Service Advisory Board, Henri was talked into teaching at the Graduate School of Public Administration at New York University.

Henri expressed the view that, in terms of institutional innovation, the nineteenth century marked the emergence of the nation-state, and historians would mark the twentieth century as the time when international organizations and their secretariats became significant.

In 1971 the only international civil servant who was even noticed in the press was the secretary-general. By 2006 many other international civil servants were considered key public figures. Mohammed ElBaradei of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) could publicly chide the United States for not protecting nuclear sites in Iraq. United Nations Humanitarian Affairs Coordinator Jan Egeland could embarrass rich countries over their initial response to the December 2004 tsunami, and High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour could call individual countries to account over human rights issues. The United States president would mention the director of the UN’s Electoral Assistance Division, Carina Perelli, by name in several news conferences. Later she was front-page news in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* when an evaluation of her office accused her of sexual



discrimination. Clearly, something has changed. But has it been recognized, and what does it mean?

International-relations theory is built around states, and since states create international organizations, the focus of attention has been on how states interact. There is ample literature on the Security Council and the General Assembly. An analogy can be made with national politics, and from this perspective, civil society has become a focus as well. Civil society consists of organizations and entities that appear to be similar to domestic political actors. Civil society is considered a non-state actor and, for most of the theory, the only one.

If states and civil society consist of two classes of actors in international politics, a third would be international secretariats. International public service is different in many ways from national public service. The success of international organizations depends on their secretariats, and the success of their secretariats depends on those civil servants who constitute them.

In recognition of these changes an increasing number of international organizations and a few scholars are beginning to document the history of the secretariats. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the IAEA have commissioned such histories. The City University of New York has begun the United Nations Intellectual History Project. There have been studies of the international civil service, but almost no one has looked at secretariats as institutions in their own right.

Over a sixty-year period the number of issues with which the organizations of the United Nations system have dealt is truly amazing. I have obviously been selective in drawing a picture of the work of the secretariat, using my own experience, but I also analyze situations where precedents have been set that are still relevant to the issues in international relations today. Bureaucracies can be complex, filled with acronyms, technical jargon, and circumlocutions (we tend to write in the passive voice). My wife, Jan Clausen, has a very low tolerance for bureaucratic writing and has tried to keep the text accessible. My research assistant at the Maxwell School, Loveena Dookhony, assisted me in preparing some of the data used. Jim Lance, the editor at Kumarian Press, helped keep the structure of the book consistent and manageable. My thanks to all of them.



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# 1



## Why Are Secretariats Invisible?

*And their greatest skill of all is the low profile. . . .*

*So what have I learned after nearly six months in office? Merely, it seems, that I am almost impotent in the face of the mighty faceless bureaucracy. However, it is excellent that I realize this because it means that they have failed to house-train me. If I were house-trained I would now believe a) that I am immensely powerful, and b) that my officials merely do my bidding.*

—THE COMPLETE YES MINISTER, 162

**T**he twenty-first century will have a large and vibrant international public sector. A quick perusal of the news shows the breadth, variety, and importance of activities of international organizations, both public and nongovernmental. These range from inspectors determining whether uranium enrichment in Iran is for peaceful purposes; the World Health Organization (WHO) maintaining surveillance on a possible bird flu epidemic; the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) finding ways to protect refugees in Sudan; the World Food Programme (WFP) raising alarms about starvation in Zimbabwe; UN war-crimes tribunals passing

## 2 *Why Are Secretariats Invisible?*

judgment on former heads of state and military officers in the Balkans; and in the Balkans, West Africa, and Southeast Asia, a dispute resolution panel of the World Trade Organization (WTO) deciding whether billions of dollars in aircraft sales violate trade agreements.

In monetary terms the international public sector is also growing. The UN's biennial assessed budget for 2006–7 is US\$3.6 billion,<sup>1</sup> to which another US\$3.6 billion can be added for the specialized agencies of the UN system, not including the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank, IMF, and the WTO).<sup>2</sup> This is larger than the national budgets of most countries in the world and can be expected to grow as new tasks are given to international organizations.

International relations scholars have kept an eye on the international public sector over the past sixty years, although their attention has waxed and waned according to changes in world politics. As the international public sector's importance has grown since the end of the Cold War, scholars have focused on how governments interact in multilateral negotiations, peacekeeping, human rights, and development assistance. They have analyzed the growing role of civil society in international politics.

Despite the renewed interest in international organizations, few scholars have looked at international organizations as public administrations, created and maintained to deliver global services. An exception is Barnett and Finnemore who, in *Rules for the World*, examine some of the workings of secretariats like the IMF, the UNHCR, and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). But their focus is still mostly on the governments involved in international organizations rather than on the international public servants who work in the buildings and who are still, in a real sense, invisible.

The question can fairly be asked, if the governance provided by international secretariats is invisible, how can we be sure that it exists? In one sense there is no difficulty in proving that the secretariats exist. They can be seen in office towers all over the world, from New York, Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, Bangkok, Addis Ababa, Beirut, and Santiago de Chile for the United Nations; and Paris, London, Madrid, Rome, and Montreal for the specialized agencies. Almost every country on the planet has an office of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The secretariats are



reflected on the vehicles supplied by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) everywhere in the developing world or on sacks of grain marked WFP. They are probably more ubiquitous than any public sector in history.

The secretary-general of the United Nations appears in the news almost every day. Refugees, HIV/AIDS, disaster relief, and peace-keeping are normal stories. Nuclear power, the environment, human rights, and trade are all areas where the international public sector is visible.

The breadth and depth of that growth are not so visible nor are their implications for ordinary people. Calculating the extent of the expansion is not easy. For many reasons, including the fact that organizational structures are complicated and reporting on them is uneven, there is no clear indicator of the size of the international public sector or its growth. In the past, when it was politically useful to show how small the United Nations was, supporters would point out that the core budget of the United Nations was smaller than that of the Tokyo fire department and "together with supporting (general service) staff, the core UN Secretariat has a smaller civil service for all these worldwide responsibilities than the City of Winnipeg (9,917 staff) in Canada, or than the staff of the international advertising firm, Saatchi & Saatchi" (Urquhart and Childers 1994, 26).

In reality the international public sector, in budgetary and staff terms, is the size of the public sector of a medium-sized country, and this represents a significant growth over time. Unfortunately, no one has tried to maintain a comparable record of the expenditure of the United Nations system.

However, by looking at expenditure and human resources reports, it is possible to estimate both the present size of the international public sector and its growth over time. This can be seen in three ways: (1) the amount of funds spent, in terms of (2) the tasks the international public sector undertakes, and, linked to this, (3) the number of persons who work for international organizations.

## **FINANCES**

The expenditures of the universal international organizations that belong to the United Nations system have increased dramatically