

The Local Lives of International Organizations – Researching IOs “in the Field”

Conveners:

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International organizations (IOs), their design, culture and legitimacy have received much scholarly attention. An aspect that remains under researched and poorly conceptualized, however, is how IOs operate in the field. This knowledge gap is surprising, given the fact that most IO policies are indeed realized locally. IOs are not only intergovernmental bodies or headquarter bureaucracies, they are also enacted in concrete local settings across the globe. To address this lacuna, this workshop invites scholars from International Relations and related disciplines such as organizations studies, anthropology and history. More concretely, we invite contributions that explore the practices of field staff, the dynamics between local offices and headquarters, the meaning-making processes at play during policy implementation as well as local effects and perceptions of IOs.

In this workshop, we intend to move beyond the current state of the art by exploring the value-added of a field-level perspective and what this means for the theorization of IOs and global governance more generally. In doing so, the workshop relies on two established research strands. Both have drawn attention to transnational practitioners in the field and the localized consequences of global governance – yet so far, such works have often remained disconnected from the wider IO literature. First, studies on street-level decision-making explain how the practices of immigration officials, international lawyers and diplomats shape the way international politics come to bear during policy implementation. Second, research on the anthropology of humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding provides important insights on the multiple experiences with and the effects of IO policies on the ground. We invite researchers working in both traditions yet seeking to connect their insights to the more established literature on IOs.

The aim of this workshop is threefold: (1) to encourage new empirical knowledge on the localized traces of IOs in areas such as migration, peacebuilding, financial assistance, health, humanitarianism or development; (2) to develop a conceptual vocabulary to describe IOs in the field such as distance/disconnect, brokerage, friction, competition, estrangement etc.; (3) to facilitate a methodological exchange on how to research IOs in the field.

Paper proposals can include but are not limited to the following topics and questions:

- How does street-level decision-making by IO staff work in different policy fields? How do power and hierarchies play out? How do the formal and informal interact?
- How do competition and cooperation shape the relationship between local/regional offices and headquarters? What role do diverging working routines and priorities play? How and by whom are conflicts mediated?
- How do IO staff interact with other actors in localized contexts?
- How do IOs create knowledge about “the field”? Can local experiences affect organizational learning?
- How are IO policies perceived, assessed and responded to by those identified as their ‘beneficiaries’? How do they shape the local IO?
- What intended and unintended effects do IO policies have on the social and political order on the ground? Do such effects differ from member states’ interests or mission statements?