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## Using the Information Resources of the Global Village: The Information Systems of International Inter-Governmental Organizations

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# Using the Information Resources of the Global Village: The Information Systems of International Inter-Governmental Organizations

*Robert V. Williams*

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■ The information systems of international inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) contain significant information resources of interest to special librarians. Use of these resources, however, is limited by lack of knowledge of the existence and nature of IGOs. This paper discusses the nature of the information systems (publications, internal documents/data files, archival records, library/information center, and bibliographic networks) of IGOs in general, with particular attention to problems in acquiring information from them.

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## Introduction

EVEN though the "global village" may now be said to be wired and interconnected, the information resources of some of its narrower and more hidden streets are not well used by many special librarians and information managers. Foremost among these resources are the publications, documents, and data files of international inter-governmental organizations (IGOs). This paper (part of a larger study of the information systems of IGOs) examines the characteristics of these information resources, problems in locating and using them, and presents recommendations for expanding their use within the context of special libraries. Specifically, the paper will: define IGOs,

examine their characteristics and subject areas of interest, discuss the nature of their information systems in general (with specific attention to some of the more important ones), describe the procedures and problems involved in accessing and obtaining information from them, and conclude with some recommendations for increasing their use within special libraries.

## Defining IGOs

The definition of an IGO is not a simple matter. The varieties of complications arising from the lack of a clear and simple definition are extensively reviewed in the *Yearbook of International Organizations*. The *Yearbook* is generally considered the most authoritative

source of information on international organizations of all types. It is compiled by the Union of International Associations (Brussels, Belgium), which has agreements with the UN for establishing definitions of IGOs and of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) insofar as is possible. Their three-part definition is:

1. An organization based on a formal instrument of agreement between the governments of nation states;
2. The agreement must include three or more nations as parties;
3. The organization must possess a permanent secretariat (or executive organ) performing ongoing tasks. (1)

From a legal standpoint, IGOs are the products of treaties or similar international agreements between nation states. These agreements are based on voluntary participation by the governments of the nations and are binding on the nations involved until the point at which they sever the agreement. These agreements may be of limited duration or indefinite; they may be for a narrowly defined set of purposes or for broad ranging ones; they may involve only three countries (bi-lateral agreements being excluded here) or a wide variety of nations; and they may confer a broad array of powers or a limited set of functions. Generally speaking, these agreements, and the resulting associated organizations, may be said to be of two types: supranational and non-supranational. The former generally has the ability to make decisions that are binding on member states (and the citizens of those states), while the latter type must work by, or through, the member states to accomplish actions or goals. For example, the European Economic Community (EEC) is a supranational body in certain areas of authority, but the UN has no supranational authority.

The constitutions (or charters, covenants, articles of agreement, etc.) spell out the nature of the organization, its powers, authority, membership, and methods of operation. In

general, the structure of the IGO will include at least the following: a) a policy-making body that includes all members, b) an executive body charged with the responsibility of carrying out the policies agreed on by members, and c) administrative or technical staff that performs the day-to-day work of the organization. Depending on the size of the organization and the complexity of the agreements creating the IGO, the administrative and technical staff may be very large or quite small. Responsibilities for certain policies or enforcement of the constitution may be assigned to different segments of the IGO, such as in the UN between such organs as the General Assembly, Security Council, and the Economic and Social Council. The split in responsibility or authority may have great effect on researchers attempting to use the publications or documents of the IGO, particularly when bibliographic control or indexing of the documents is poor, and users must be aware of these problems and familiar with the organization.

## Characteristics of IGOs

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Just as the accurate definition of an IGO escapes careful delimitations, so also does the problem of how many IGOs there are. The *Intergovernmental Organization Directory, 1984/85* lists approximately 1,500 organizations. Robert W. Schaff estimates there are over 300 currently operating. (2) My analysis of the *Intergovernmental Organization Directory* and a number of other sources shows approximately 250 in existence as of 1980.

Today, IGOs are a significant factor in all areas of international relations. They are important in economic, social, educational, scientific, and cultural affairs. Practically every area of human endeavor is treated in some manner by an IGO. Every nation belongs to at least one IGO, and the United States has membership in at least 70 different IGOs. (3) They provide a wide variety of services and information and are critical not only to our safety and security but also to our standard of living and health. All IGOs generate substan-

tive information as a result of studies, meetings, conferences, sponsored research, field studies, and other endeavors.

## **Types of Information Systems of IGOs**

Only inadequate guesses can be made about the quantity of materials available from IGOs. In a 1979 study of UN and UN-related agencies (16 independent IGOs), Marulli estimated that 180,000 pieces are issued annually by these organizations. This estimate included documents distributed to the public and multiple language editions of the same item. She also estimated that only about 5% of this total are true publications in the sense that they are available to the general public. (4) In his analysis of a 1980 UN report on internal and external document reproductions in the UN system of organizations, Hajnal shows that almost 1.5 billion page impressions were made in those organizations in one year. He also reports that the European Communities reported 793 million page impressions in 1979. (5) Schaff notes that the Library of Congress (which probably has the best collection worldwide) receives "thousands of international documents yearly...." (6) Cherns, in a review of official publishing, makes no attempt to estimate quantities, but notes that UN documentation between 1964 and 1967 grew at an annual rate somewhere between 400 and 600 million pages (of total output). (7)

Because of their great diversity in size and scope of responsibilities, IGOs are also extremely diverse in the nature and quality of their documentation and information systems. In general, however, almost all IGOs have at least the following types of documentation and information systems:

*Externally distributed publications.* Publications are the materials available from the IGO that are for sale or free distribution to persons or organizations outside the organization itself. These may be in a variety of formats (printed, mimeograph, microform, machine-readable, etc.), and vary in number of copies produced for individual items. These items may be available directly from the IGO itself,

from an approved distributor (such as Kraus/Unipub), or from another IGO, which handles one or more of the publication processes for the IGO. Publications may also be published in cooperation with, and available from, a private commercial publisher.

*Internal documents.* These items are generally available only to staff or member governments of the IGO. They may be listed in the various bibliographies, catalogs, or indexes published by the IGO with such notes as "limited distribution," "restricted," or "internal use only." Some internal documents are eventually revised and issued as publications (particularly in the UN system). Researchers may be able to obtain a copy of these internal documents by writing to the appropriate office of the IGO or by contacting their governmental representative to the IGO.

*Archival records.* These are the publications, internal documents, correspondence, data files, reports, and other materials permanently retained by the IGO for administrative or historical purposes. Access to these materials generally depends on the existence of an archival program and the age of the IGO.

*Library information center.* Almost all IGOs maintain some type of library or information center. The size of the IGO typically determines the range of services provided to the staff of the IGO and to external users. The UN's Dag Hammarschold Library in New York City is an excellent example of the provision of a full range of user services, as well as the preparation of indexes and other bibliographic aids. In addition, an IGO may maintain its own internal information center for control of internal reports, data files, and other information materials.

*Bibliographic information networks.* The worldwide scope of some IGOs and the tremendous volume of materials on subjects of interest to them have led to the development of extensive, sophisticated bibliographic information networks. These systems—sometimes in cooperation with national governments and nongovernmental organizations—collect, abstract, index, and disseminate information about the subjects which interest them.

In some cases, these have resulted in computerized bibliographic databases and networks that are extremely valuable to the worldwide scientific community. A good example of one of these databases and its associated network is the International Nuclear Information System (INIS) of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The above general categories cover the possible varieties of information and documentation systems of IGOs. They are, however, general categories; each IGO may have its own distinctive and unique procedures and titles for these functions. While most IGOs appear to possess all five of these types of information systems, closer study shows that their quality and accessibility vary greatly from one organization to another. The UN-related organizations predominate in the production of information resources. Table 1 shows the major online bibliographic databases identified in my study of IGOs.

The two-volume *Directory of United Nations Information Systems*, (8) published in 1979, lists over 300 additional computerized, but not online, data files available from the UN family of organizations. Currently, no list exists of all the major printed bibliographies and indexes available from IGOs, but I am in the process of compiling such a listing and interested persons may contact me for a copy.

### **Acquiring Publications, Documents, and Data from IGOs**

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Acquiring data from small IGOs is often difficult. Many have only limited sales and distribution systems, and it can be extremely difficult to locate even minimal information about their publications, which seldom appear in the national or trade bibliographies. (9)

The ease of acquiring distributed publications from the larger IGOs (UN, European communities, etc.) can be deceptive. These larger organizations have well-developed cataloging, indexing, marketing, and sales programs but the most difficult acquisitions problem is simply finding out about the exis-

tence of the publications, documents, and data files. Some of the general guides and indexes to IGO documentation are very useful for getting at these items, but generally they are informative only about the UN family of organizations. The best single regularly published bibliography of IGO publications is *International Bibliography*, published by Unipub. This quarterly index lists all publications, periodicals, microforms, and audiovisual materials from about 100 IGOs.

Particularly valuable is the indexing of all signed articles in the journals of the IGOs. This bibliography is well indexed by subject and other traditional indexing points and includes annotations and prices. The Unipub Bulletin *New Publications* is an excellent means for keeping up in a general way with topical publications from a variety of IGOs. Unipub also backs up this bibliographic system by acting as a dealer for most of the IGOs whose materials are listed in *International Bibliography*. They also issue general and specialized catalogs for items they handle.

While *International Bibliography* is the best single location source, it does not include all the documents that are for sale by the approximately 100 IGOs covered, and, of course, many IGOs are not included at all. Also missing from *International Bibliography* are the internal documents and the data files of all IGOs. This is not a criticism of *International Bibliography*, but simply a recognition of its limitations.

Beyond *International Bibliography*, there are only a few possibilities for coverage of more than one IGO. The best of these are the subject-based computerized networks, such as ARIS, INIS, and INFOTERRA. These systems are usually based on worldwide cooperative information networks for the selection and input of information. Many different IGOs operating in a related field may belong to one or more of these networks and have responsibility for including their publications and documents. The 1979 book *International Cooperative Information Systems* (10) reviews the work of these networks as of a few years ago, and speculates on their progress

**Table 1. Selected List of Online Databases Produced by IGO's**

**CAB International**

CAB Abstracts (agriculture, food nutrition, etc.)  
CAB Economics, Development and Education

**Council of Europe**

EUDISED (education, Europe)

**European Communities**

EABS (nuclear energy, energy, environment)  
ENDOC (dir. of environmental centers in EC member countries)  
ENREP (dir. of research projects in member countries)  
EURODICAUTOM (science, technology, linguistics)  
SDIMI (metallurgy, steel, metals)  
COMEXT (int. trade, commodities)  
CRONOS (economics, statistics, business and industry, etc.)

**European Conference of Ministers of Transport**

TRANSDOC (transportation)

**European Patent Office**

EDOC (patents)  
European Patents Register

**European Space Agency**

LANDSAT EARTHNET DATA AVAILABILITY (remote sensing, earth sciences)  
SATADATA (Satellites, technology)  
SPACECOMPS (aerospace)

**Food and Agriculture Organization**

AGRIS (agriculture, food, fisheries, veterinary science, etc.)

**International Atomic Energy Agency**

INIS (nuclear energy, technology)  
Energy and Economics Data Bank

**International Civil Aviation Organization**

ICAO Statistics

**International Coffee Organization**

Coffeeline (coffee, commodities, economics)

**International Labour Office**

CISDOC (occupational health and safety, technology)  
LABORDOC (employment, occupational health and safety, employment)  
LABORINFO (employment, labor, etc.)

**International Monetary Fund**

Balance of Payments  
IMF Directions of Trade  
IMF Government Finance Statistics  
International Financial Statistics

**Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development**

13 databases (all names begin with OECD) on economics, labor, income, trade, etc. of member countries and some on developing nations

**United Nations**

UN Demographics  
DUNDIS (Database of UN Databases and Info. Systems)  
Register of UN Serial Publications

**World Bank (IBRD, IDA, IFC)**

World Debt Tables

**World Intellectual Property Organization**

INPADOC (6 databases on patents, patent news worldwide)

**World Meteorological Organization**

World Weather Watch (meteorological information)  
CHOMS (Canadian Hydrological Operational Multipurpose Subprogramme)

**Note:** for listings of other databases, most not on-line, in IGO see:

*Directory of United Nations Information Systems*, compiled and edited by the Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems. NY: U.N., 1980.

*Handbook of Information, Computer and Communications Activities of Major International Organizations*. Paris: OECD. 1980. 200 pp.

over the next few years. Similar kinds of networks, oriented specifically towards developing countries' needs, have been developed recently by a variety of different agencies. Development-oriented databases often include information about the publications of IGOs. Canada's International Development Research Centre has been active in promoting these Development Sciences Information Systems (DEVSIIS), and Aiyepoku's recent book (11) reviews the work of the existing ones and makes recommendations for the future. The bibliographic networks of IGOs and development-oriented organizations probably represent the best potential for future control of publications, documents, and data files of IGOs generally. Considerable work remains to be done before they cover more than a small percent of the total information available from IGOs.

Considerable discussion has taken place within various international groups for improvement of bibliographic control processes for IGOs, but little progress has been made. A 1977 UNESCO study (12) made a firm recommendation that the publications and documents of IGOs be a part of national bibliographic work. Specifically recommended were processes by the IGOs themselves for undertaking cataloging-in-publication, use of International Standard Bibliographic Number (ISBN), and use of international standards for cataloging description. A few IGOs have implemented some of these recommendations, but the majority have done little or nothing. (13)

Even though there is not one good source for bibliographic coverage of all IGO publications, it is still possible to maintain good or excellent coverage of information from the organizations that interest you. Once you have identified the organizations of interest to you, it will be necessary to determine the kinds of programs each IGO has available for acquiring their materials. For most IGOs (especially the larger ones), the standard processes are sales, deposit, and free subscriptions.

When an IGO has publications, documents, or other information for sale, they will gener-

ally issue some type of catalog, available on request. The catalog may resemble in quality and ease of use a traditional commercial publisher's catalog or it may be in very rough form, such as a typed sheet or mimeographed listing with minimal information on ordering procedures, prices, discounts, and so forth. Unipub/Bernan issues a regularly updated catalog of standing order titles available for order. Most of the individual IGOs have similar standing order procedures. There may be free items which the library can receive on a standing-order basis. The larger IGOs have generally established official sales outlets in most countries for rapid service for popular and in-print items. (UNESCO, for example, had 275 outlets in 1975 and FAO had almost 100.) These sales outlets may be commercial dealers, such as Unipub, or government outlets, such as the National Technical Information Service in the U.S. As noted earlier, some IGOs use commercial co-publishing for more popular items, which can be located through traditional sources. The approaches used by each IGO for sales, free distribution, and co-publishing will be similar among the UN-affiliated IGOs but may vary significantly among the smaller IGOs.

Almost all of the IGOs engage in some type of depository library system. Frequently, the IGO designates only one library in each member country for receipt of free items on deposit. In many cases, the IGO will delegate to that library the answering of all questions about the IGO and the availability of its documents. This places a heavy burden on these libraries and obtaining service from them may be quite difficult. Fortunately, the larger IGOs often establish several depository libraries within a country, usually resulting in improved service. The UN and European Communities, for example, have extensive worldwide systems of depository libraries. In general, these depository libraries do participate in inter-library lending, and some provide reference services to individuals outside their own organizations. Some of the IGOs, such as FAO and the World Bank, have taken great care to establish depository libraries in devel-

oping countries so that researchers in those nations may have unhindered access to their publications and documents.

The problems involved in acquiring the publications and non-internal documents of IGOs are not nearly as severe as those for obtaining the internal documents and data files of these organizations. Only a few of the existing catalogs and guides provide listings for these materials, and depository libraries maintain almost no holdings of them. Eventually, as cataloging and bibliographic control systems for computerized data files are improved, we may see improvement in this area. Currently, however, the special librarian attempting to locate them has his or her work cut out. For the UN family of IGOs, the *Directory of United Information Systems* is the best single source for these organizations. The dated, but still useful, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Handbook of Information, Computer and Communications Activities of Major International Organizations*, (14) contains thorough information on the kinds of information being collected by some of the larger IGOs. For most of the IGOs, however, it is necessary to consult the various catalogs, newsletters, and other publications of the organization for listings of these kinds of materials. In many cases, these documents and data files are available only to member governments or qualified researchers. A great deal more work by the IGOs—and by bibliographic and documentation systems professionals—is necessary before we have even moderately good control over these kinds of materials.

## Conclusions

Special librarians are well known—perhaps infamous—for their ability to find out about, and obtain, elusive information. IGO information daunts the best of us, but is not impossible. It simply takes knowing the potential that awaits us in these information resources, as well as persistence. As should be obvious by now, there is tremendous diversity in the quality and the accessibility of the biblio-

graphic control and information retrieval systems of the IGOs. This diversity causes many problems, as it does in commercial systems, but not insurmountable ones. Even the most serious problem—restrictions on certain types of information—can often be overcome by appeal to member governments for the information.

Given the difficulties—particularly the unevenness of the information systems—it is not surprising that the publications, documents, and data files of IGOs are underutilized. In this they share a fate quite similar to other kinds of government information. It is to our advantage to remember that these organizations have extensive information resources valuable to our users and that we need to work—individually and organizationally—to find out about them and bring them to the attention of our users.

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