

When Do International Organizations Engage in Agency Slack? A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of United Nations Institutions

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The extensive delegation of power to international organizations (IOs) has been accompanied by occasional agency slack. While prior studies suggest that IOs' propensity for agency slack may be rooted in their organizational characteristics, this has rarely been explored empirically. To address this lacuna, in this article we propose a conceptualization and measurement of agency slack and develop a framework of organizational characteristics. Our empirical analysis applies qualitative comparative analysis to assess the conditions under which agency slack occurs across sixteen United Nations institutions. We complement the cross-case analysis with two case illustrations. Our results document the empirical existence of two paths to agency slack, providing confirmatory evidence for our theoretical expectations. Path 1 combines staffing rules that are favorable for the agent with wide access to third parties. Path 2 entails the combination of favorable staffing rules with extensive delegation of authority and a vague organizational mandate.

L'importante délégation de pouvoir aux organisations internationales (OI) a occasionnellement été accompagnée d'une marge d'agentivité. Bien que des études précédentes suggèrent que la propension des OI à obtenir une marge d'agentivité puisse être ancrée dans les caractéristiques de ces organisations, cela a rarement été étudié d'un point de vue empirique. Dans cet article, nous proposons une conceptualisation et une mesure de cette marge d'agentivité et nous développons un cadre de caractéristiques organisationnelles pour combler cette lacune. Pour notre étude empirique, nous appliquons une Analyse comparative qualitative (ACQ) afin d'évaluer les conditions dans lesquelles la marge d'agentivité intervient dans 16 institutions de l'ONU. Nous complétons l'analyse de cas croisés par deux illustrations de cas. Nos résultats documentent l'existence empirique de deux voies vers la marge d'agentivité tout en fournissant des preuves confirmant nos hypothèses théoriques. La première allie des règles de dotation en personnel qui sont favorables à l'agent puisqu'elles lui offrent un large accès aux tierces parties. Et la deuxième consiste à combiner des règles de dotation en personnel favorables avec une vaste délégation de pouvoir et un mandat organisationnel vague.

La amplia delegación de poderes en las organizaciones internacionales (OI) ha ido acompañada de una ocasional inactividad de los organismos. Si bien estudios anteriores sugieren que la tendencia de las OI a la inactividad está basada en sus características organizativas, esto no se ha estudiado empíricamente. Para abordar esta situación, proponemos en este documento una conceptualización y una valoración de la inactividad de las instituciones y desarrollamos un marco de características organizativas. Nuestro análisis empírico aplica el análisis comparativo cualitativo (Qualitative Comparative Analysis, QCA) para evaluar las condiciones en las que ocurre dicha inactividad en 16 instituciones de la ONU. Además, complementamos el análisis cruzado de casos con dos ejemplos ilustrativos. Nuestros resultados documentan la existencia empírica de dos caminos hacia la inactividad de las instituciones, lo que brinda evidencia confirmatoria de nuestras expectativas teóricas. El camino 1 combina normas para el personal que son favorables para el agente con amplio acceso a terceros. El camino 2 supone la combinación de normas favorables para el personal con la amplia delegación de la autoridad y un mandato organizativo impreciso.

Introduction

The empowerment of administrative bodies in international organizations (henceforth international bureaucracies) in terms of transfer of decision-making authority and resources (Heldt and Schmidtke 2017) has been accompanied by strengthened oversight mechanisms (Graham 2017). This occurred, in part, because member states considered that some international bureaucracies had acted contrary to their intentions and overstepped their mandates, commonly defined in the principal–agent (PA) literature as “agency slack.” Hence, international bureaucracies are occasionally portrayed as rogue actors that escaped the control of member states and intentionally go beyond their mandates

(Hawkins et al. 2006; Conceição-Heldt 2013; Heldt 2017). But under what conditions does agency slack occur? How prevalent is the phenomenon among international bureaucracies? And what is the relationship between organizational structure and agency slack?

There is an extensive literature on the delegation of power to international organizations (IOs) (Hawkins et al. 2006; Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019) and international public administrations (Bauer and Ege 2016; Knill et al. 2019). While the PA literature started off by investigating the causes and consequences of delegating power to IOs (Pollack 1997), subsequent studies have turned to complex delegation chains (Nielson and Tierney 2003; Delreux and Adriaensen 2018; Heldt 2021), the influence of IOs on

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institutional design decisions (Johnson 2014; Heldt et al. 2022), questions of indirect governance through intermediaries (Abbott et al. 2020), and autonomous behavior by IO bureaucrats (Cortell and Peterson 2021).

With regard to organizational structure, extensive work has been done on control mechanisms, such as staffing contracts (Dijkstra 2015), capabilities (Goetz and Patz 2017; Heldt and Schmidtke 2017), earmark rules (Graham and Serdaru 2020), or geographical spread (Parížek 2017). Recent work also highlights “contested multilateralism” as member states’ strategic use of institutions vis-à-vis other institutions (Faude and Parížek 2021). Others have suggested that there is a trade-off between transferring competences to IOs and controlling agents’ actions in the post-delegation stage (Abbott et al. 2020). For instance, Johnson (2014) shows how governments are losing control due to the growing number and staffing of IOs and also because of the tendency of international bureaucrats to insulate new organizations from government interference.

While previous studies suggest that IOs’ propensity for agency slack may be rooted in organizational characteristics (e.g., Cortell and Peterson 2006), institutional design (Koremenos, Lipson, and Snidal 2001; Johnson 2014), or in combinations of these factors that create “windows of opportunity” for autonomous action (Cortell and Peterson 2021), these conjectures have not been studied comparatively involving more than a handful of cases.¹ Given the concern with runaway agents, it is surprising how little attention scholars have given to the impact of organizational structure on agency slack. Our article thus makes a three-fold contribution to the study of IOs. First, we conceptualize and measure agency slack by focusing on the observable behavior of the collective principal who can either expend additional resources to control the agent or sanction undesired behavior. We examine four different indicators for agency slack: hiring a new agent to evaluate the performance of an international bureaucracy; establishing a new committee to monitor agent activity; reducing the budget of an international bureaucracy; and staff reduction. Second, we develop a framework for the study of organizational structure, defined as the formal rules and procedures that govern interaction among actors within international bureaucracies, recurring to four indicators: delegation of authority; staffing rules; permeability; and mandate precision. Third, we conduct a cross-case comparison to assess which organizational configurations are associated with agency slack. Our empirical analysis draws on original data gathered on sixteen United Nations (UN) institutions on the basis of primary sources from the UN Joint Inspection Unit (henceforth JIU or the Unit).

To account for complex configurations of organizational characteristics, our article applies the set-theoretic method of qualitative comparative analysis (QCA; Ragin 2008; Schneider and Wagemann 2012). This emerging methodological approach has seen increasing usage in the social sciences (Rihoux et al. 2013; Mello 2021), including applications in international relations (Ide and Mello 2022), but to date there has not been a QCA study on organizational characteristics and agency slack.² QCA allows for the identification of *equifinal* and *conjunctural* set-theoretic relationships

between causal factors, which means that alternate paths and combinations of conditions can be taken into account. This emphasis on causal complexity resonates with theoretical expectations found in studies on IO delegation and preconditions of agency slack, which describe an assumed interaction between various organizational features (Cortell and Peterson 2006; Hawkins et al. 2006). Moreover, the ability to work with a medium number of cases makes QCA an appropriate methodological choice for our research aims.

Our empirical analysis shows the existence of two distinct “paths” (combinations of conditions) toward agency slack among the selected JIU organizations. Path 1 entails the combination of favorable staffing rules with wide access to third parties, which favors the agent. Path 2 combines staffing rules in favor of the agent with extensive delegation of authority and a vague mandate, all of which enhance the agent’s position vis-à-vis the principal. In sum, while the results document the existence of two paths with complex configurations of conditions, they underline the importance of favorable staffing rules as a precondition for agency slack. This condition also comes close to being a necessary condition for the outcome.

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we present our conceptualization and operationalization of agency slack. Next, we develop our explanatory framework based on four organizational characteristics of international bureaucracies. We then introduce our research design and method and apply it to JIU member organizations. While the QCA analysis identifies two paths toward agency slack, we complement the set-theoretic analysis with discussions of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as cases that are important both for theoretical and for methodological reasons. The article closes with a summary of its main findings and their implications for research on delegation to IOs.

Agency Slack

Agency slack is understood as a primary source of agency losses, which constitute a central problem for the delegation relationship. Although the concept of agency slack has long played an important theoretical role in PA relations, to date it has scarcely been applied in empirical research (exceptions include Cortell and Peterson 2006; Gould 2006). In the meantime, various conceptualizations and operationalizations have been proposed. Hawkins et al. (2006, 8) define agency slack as “independent action by an agent that is undesired by the principal.” Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991, 5) note that “there is almost always some conflict between the interests of those who delegate authority (principals) and the agents to whom they delegate it.” Accordingly, agency slack can take two different forms: shirking and slippage. Whereas shirking refers to agents minimizing the effort they exert on their principals’ behalf, slippage refers to situations where agents shift policies away from their principals’ preferred outcomes toward their own preferences (Pollack 1997; Hawkins et al. 2006). In this contribution, we follow the established definition of agency slack as agents acting in a way not intended by their principals and overstepping their mandates.

However, one major challenge in the delegation literature is the identification of comparable indicators for agency slack (see also Pollack 2003; Gould 2006). Weingast and Moran (1983) investigate how often principals correct their

¹ Cortell and Peterson (2021) illustrate their argument on the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Trade Organization (WTO). Johnson (2014) compares the World Food Program (WFP), UN Development Programme (UNDP), and UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Neither study explicitly focuses on agency slack.

² Recent QCA studies in international relations address issue areas such as effective peacebuilding (Mross et al. 2022), unintended consequences of UN sanc-

tions (Meissner and Mello 2022), interstate intervention in Africa (Kisangani and Pickering 2022), and military coalition defection (Mello 2020).

agents and Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991) propose comparing principals' stated preferences with subsequent agent activity. Because agency slack is difficult to observe (see also Lake and McCubbins 2006)—even more so when aiming for a cross-case comparison—we adopt the indirect approach suggested by Weingast and Moran (1983) who propose a measure of agency slack that is based on the observable actions of the principal (see also Chwioroth 2008). Essentially, we consider that there are two ways in which principals can respond to agency slack: (1) by expending additional resources to control the agent or (2) by sanctioning undesired agent behavior. These two types of behavior lead to four observable indicators, namely (1) hiring an agent to evaluate the performance of another agent, (2) establishing a committee to monitor agent activity, (3) cutting an agent's budget, and (4) reducing an agent's staff. Below, we describe how we translate these indicators into numerical scores for our selected IOs.

We are, of course, aware that these observable indicators come with the caveat that staff and budget cuts could also occur for reasons unrelated to agency slack.³ For instance, in certain situations, international bureaucracies may act consistently within their delegation mandate, but principals sanction them nonetheless because of changes in the principals' preferences, due to cases of corruption within the IO, or because of politicization. Moreover, there may also be cases of agency slack that have not been "penalized" yet. To address such difficulties, we take into account four observable indicators and we complement our measure with evidence from primary and secondary sources. Overall, we find that our measure of agency slack overlaps strongly with assessments made in studies on individual IOs, as well as with internal and external reports on the behavior of IOs—including those by the JIU. The advantage of our adopted measure is that it provides us with observable indicators that can be compared systematically across a larger number of cases.

Examples of agency slack can be found, for instance, at the WHO. Already in 1993, the JIU noted in a report that the WHO had deficiencies in fulfilling its mandate in terms of improving local health systems. Member states reacted by freezing the WHO's regular budget and major donors cut their funding (Graham 2013). Hence, this case is consistent with our indirect measurement of agency slack. After the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the WHO was confronted with the ire of one of its pivotal principals, with US President Trump threatening withdrawal from the WHO on the grounds that the organization had failed to fulfil its mandate. This was not the first time that the WHO had been criticized for agency shirking, a case of slack in which agents minimize the efforts they exert on principals' behalf (Hawkins et al. 2006, 8), and for bad performance in the management of other pandemics (Kamradt-Scott 2016). The second example is the WTO Appellate Body. In this case, several US administrations blocked the appointment of judges at the Appellate Body using the narrative that this organization had overstepped its mandate and authority by engaging "in creating its own rules" (WTO 2012) and running "afoul of its obligation to refrain from creating or abolishing rights and obligations for WTO members" (Payosova, Hufbauer, and Schott 2018, 4). Specifically, the Trump Administration accused the Appellate Body judges of engaging in unsolicited judicial overreach, arguing that this kind

of behavior represented a deviation from the agreement to which member states had signed up at the inception of the organization (USTR 2020, 1). This is a typical case of agency slippage, a situation in which the agent goes beyond its mandate.⁴ Denying the reappointment of staff is one of the control instruments used by principals to sanction their agents (Alter 2008; Elsig and Pollack 2014; Voeten 2020). The temporary withdrawal of the United States from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) represents another example of a member state reacting to agency slack. Under the leadership of the UNESCO Secretariat, with the support of Russia, African, and Arab states, the UNESCO executive board had admitted Palestine as a full member of the organization in 2011. The US government considered this action as an act of agency slippage, as the UNESCO secretariat had shifted policies away from the preferences of the main principal toward its own preferences (CRS 2013). The United States reacted by withholding the payment of its membership contribution, leading to a substantial reduction of UNESCO's budget. This agency-slippage situation between UNESCO and its main principal culminated in the formal withdraw of the United States from UNESCO in 2019.

Previous studies aimed to account for agency slack and organizational dysfunction by highlighting the impact of staffing rules and cultural features of a professional bureaucracy inside IOs (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Cortell and Peterson 2006; Heldt et al. 2022). For example, Cortell and Peterson (2006) noted the professionalization of staff in the WHO and WTO as an important factor to explain slack. Our study contributes to this literature with an attempt to indirectly measure agency slack in a systematic way and across a larger number of organizations. To be sure, we are aware that this constitutes but a first step toward the comparative study of agency slack. Future studies with detailed case studies will be able to contextualize the phenomenon of agency slack and the causal mechanisms that lead to its occurrence. A further avenue for future studies is to broaden the measurement of agency slack by adding the agent's actions.⁵ Figure 1 summarizes our conceptualization and operationalization of agency slack focusing on the observable behavior of the collective principal and the four indicators we listed above. We complement this indirect measure with evidence from primary and secondary sources on the sixteen organizations that are part of our sample.

Organizational Structure

The organizational structure of international bureaucracies is expected to affect the extent of agency slack, because it concentrates or disperses power, gives agents more or less authority and autonomy, and can to a greater or lesser degree constrain the principals' ability to monitor and sanction their agents (Galbraith 1995; Hawkins et al. 2006). While tasks and issue scope, centralization, and mandate precision have been identified as core features of IO institutional design (Hooghe et al. 2019), we add to this literature by examining whether organizational structure shapes the extent of agency slack. Organizational structure refers here to the formal rules and procedures that govern interaction between actors within IOs and the division and coordination of work among staff (Biermann et al. 2009; Graham 2013).

⁴Another interpretation is that the US government under Trump had different preferences than previous governments and explicitly sought to gridlock the WTO by not putting forward new nominees for the Appellate Body (see Pollack 2021). We thank one reviewer for drawing our attention to this point.

⁵Thanks to one of the reviewers for this suggestion.

³On the funding of international organizations, see Michaelowa (2017) and other contributions in Goetz and Patz (2017). This literature documents that funding structures of IOs have become increasingly complex and hence budget reductions can also occur for reasons unrelated to agency slack.

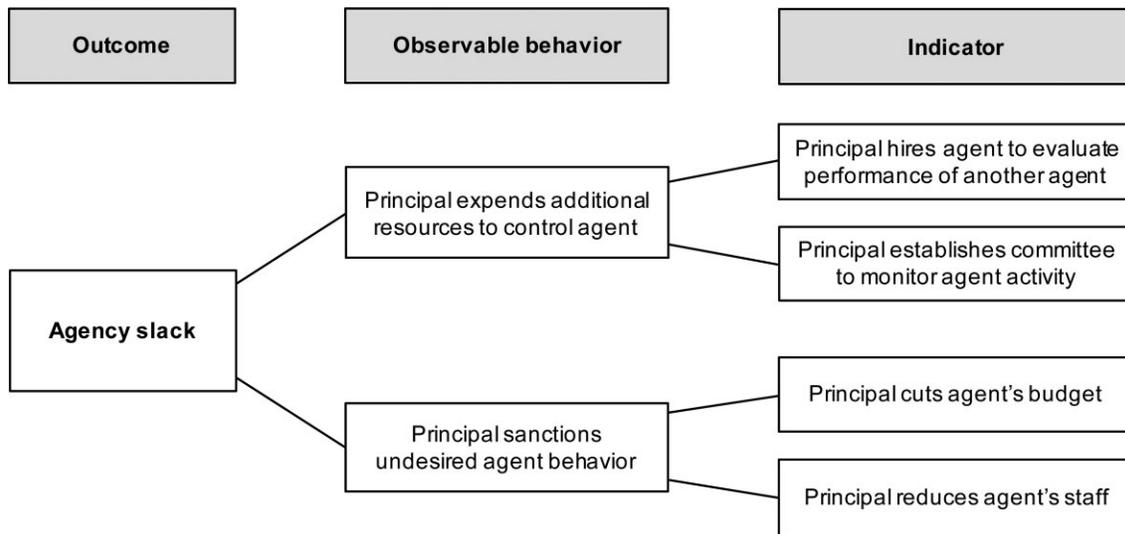


Figure 1. Conceptualization and operationalization of agency slack.

Drawing on arguments from international relations literature, we use the following four conditions to operationalize organizational structure: delegation of authority within an organization, staffing rules, permeability, and mandate precision. We expect these conditions to combine in various ways and that the resulting configurations will be jointly sufficient for agency slack to occur. In methodological terms, we thus conceive of each as an INUS condition, or an “insufficient but necessary part of a condition, which is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the result” (Mackie 1965, 245). This definition implies the existence of *equivinality* (multiple paths) and *conjunctural causation* (combinations of conditions) as methodological assumptions that are essential to QCA (Mello 2021).

Delegation of Authority within International Organizations

A certain measure of authority delegated from IO member states (as collective principal) to international bureaucracies (agents) is necessary to allow the latter to slack. This authority, in turn, can be distributed further within IOs themselves, affecting the occurrence of agency slack. This characteristic of organizational structure focuses on how power is distributed within an organization. Where decision-making powers are decentralized within an IO, accountability for policy decisions is diluted and the propensity for agency slack increases.

Although most IOs are institutionally complex—with different levels below the director-general (DG) and the secretariat—most delegation studies refrain from opening the black box of the agent and from taking into account multiple layers within an organization. Without knowing more about the organizational structure, however, it is difficult to understand and explain the conditions under which agency slack occurs. The typical structure of an organization involves a top level with a secretary or DG above a general secretariat and staff. This is complemented by a range of specialized departments, units, and subunits. The delegation literature shows that principals can use agents for blame-shifting purposes (Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002; Hawkins et al. 2006). We extend this argument by applying it to agents. When interacting with principals, the secretary

or the DG of a decentralized organization can shift blame to its subunits, as it is rather difficult for principals to control multiple layers within an organization. Hence, we expect the way power is shared within an organization to impact upon the occurrence of agency slack, with extensive internal delegation being associated with the presence of slack.

Staffing Rules

Staffing rules are about the balance between collective principals and agents when it comes to human resources. This includes hiring and promotion procedures as well as the type of personnel hired for an organization. One key aspect concerns the origin and professionalization of staff. For example, Parížek (2017) examines the geographical distribution of professional staff as a tool for member states to exercise control. While professional staff refers to international civil servants, usually hired through competitive processes, political staff means employees seconded from states or hired under the influence of member states, for example, as part of earmarked contributions. Seconded staff are expected to put the interests of their governments first (see also Brown 2010). In contrast, professional staff are more likely to be insulated from process feedback from the environment (Barnett and Finnemore 1999) and thus they have more incentives to engage in agency slack. Cortell and Peterson (2006) demonstrate that IOs are more likely to slip from the control of their principals when they have professional staff because this enhances the propensity of the bureaucracy to develop preferences distinct from those of principals. Barnett and Finnemore (1999), in turn, point out that professional staff and the difficulty in measuring “successful performance” are the main causes of bureaucratic insulation. First, international bureaucracies concentrate professionals with similar expertise and training, sharing the same worldview. They share a professional identity and develop a similar “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen 1998), which insulates them from the larger environment. They are more concerned with knowledge- or problem-based aspects of an international bureaucracy than with performance issues. The absence of a competitive environment, in which inefficient practices are selected

out, insulates international bureaucracies from feedback loops and increases the likelihood of pathologies and agency slack (Barnett and Finnemore 1999). In addition, professional staff have bureaucratic incentives to advance their organization's mission. Internally generated evaluation increases the inward focus of staff members leading to independent preferences that may deviate from principals' preferences. In sum, we expect staffing rules that are in favor of the agent to be associated with the occurrence of agency slack.

Permeability

Our third characteristic of organizational structure is the permeability of third-party access to an organization, which refers to the breadth and depth of the inclusion of interested transnational actors (Tallberg et al. 2013). The concept of permeability takes into account the fact that agents do not exist in an institutional and political vacuum but rather coexist with other organizations and third parties in a complex and crowded transnational landscape. While some IOs allow the involvement of all interested third parties, others apply strict limitations or do not allow any third parties at all. Andonova (2017) shows how global public-private partnerships are used to create platforms for direct cooperation with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Michaelowa (2017) illustrates how third parties such as external funders can gain influence on IOs. Third-party access can lead to agency slack because agents can use the information provided by transnational actors to increase their power vis-à-vis principals. Moreover, third parties may seek to influence the agent in a direction not intended by principals or even in direct conflict with principals' stated preferences. Third-party access can also create incentives to develop dualist organizational structures to shield unwanted behavior from principals' monitoring efforts (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006). The permeability of agents to third parties can increase the autonomy of international bureaucracies and induce counterreactions on the part of principals. Agents are likely to be responsive to third parties, when they share basic understandings and norms with the latter (Hawkins and Jacoby 2006). Finally, as Gould (2006) suggests, privileged third-party access can pull agents' actions toward policies preferred by such third parties. Accordingly, international bureaucracies characterized by high permeability are expected to be associated with agency slack. Of course, one could also argue that the more third actors can observe the agent's operations, the more likely it is that principals will be informed about undesired behavior by the agent and the more strictly the agent will be controlled and the less actual slack there will be. This is a plausible hypothesis that can be tested in future case studies examining the agent's actions.

Following Tallberg et al. (2013), we conceptualize depth of access as the involvement of transnational actors in decision-making processes. Transnational actors may include NGOs, philanthropic foundations, labor unions, and multinational corporations. Depth comprises a continuum measured by the "level of active and direct involvement" by these actors. This means one or a combination of the following activities: policy formulation, decision-making, implementation or monitoring and enforcement. In the "deepest" case, the involvement of third parties can be similar to that of member states. On the contrary, at its "shallowest" it is passive and indirect, meaning third parties take part in meetings, but do not play any role(s) in decision-making, implementing or monitoring the activities of IOs.

Mandate Precision

With their formulation of a certain delegation mandate, principals entrust agents with more or less power. The organizational mandate, our final characteristic, demonstrates the scope of the authority entrusted to the agent, the instruments it is allowed to employ, and the rules it should follow while implementing its tasks. Our primary focus is the leeway the agent has in interpreting an organization's mandate as set by principals. Within the delegation literature, this characteristic can be measured along a single dimension from rule-based to discretion-based mandates. A rule-based mandate suggests that the agent is expected to follow a narrow set of instructions on how to implement the tasks assigned by the principal. In contrast, a discretion-based mandate includes only goals the principal wants the agent to achieve, while leaving it up to the agent to decide how these are to be achieved. In a similar line, Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks (2019) explore mandate precision by examining the nature of the contract underpinning IOs. They examine specifically whether the purpose of the IO is contractually open-ended or precisely defined. This is in line with the rule-based versus discretion-oriented distinction made by PA scholars. The main theoretical expectation in this regard is that discretion-based delegation is more likely to allow the agent to slack (Hawkins et al. 2006). In contrast, the more precise a mandate is, the less room there is for agency slack (Bradley and Kelley 2008). At the same time, the more discretion an agent has, the more likely it is that there will be extensive oversight mechanisms to prevent agency losses. These can vary from direct "police patrol" to more indirect "fire alarm" oversight mechanisms, or credible threats to punish or reward agents' behavior (Nielson and Tierney 2003).

One could also argue that agents who operate under a flexible mandate cannot go beyond precise instructions by the principal—and thus that agency slack is unlikely in cases of vague mandates. However, several case studies show that the less precise the mandate of the European Commission on negotiations, the more room for agency slack (see studies assembled in Delreux and Adriaensen 2018). Our study is, to our best knowledge, the first one to examine the impact of mandate precision for a larger number of IOs and using the set-theoretic method of QCA, to which we will now turn.

Methods, Data, and Case Selection

We apply QCA (Ragin 2008) to explore the relationship between agency slack and different configurations of the organizational characteristics of international bureaucracies.⁶ As a set-theoretic method, QCA frames relationships in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. With its inherent emphasis on "causal complexity" (Schneider and Wagemann 2012; Mello 2021), QCA is well suited to account for the existence of combinations of conditions (*conjunctural causation*) and multiple paths toward an outcome (*equifinality*), which resonates with our theoretical framework.⁷

Our QCA includes four explanatory conditions that are directed toward agency slack. In other words, the presence of a condition is expected to be associated with the occurrence of the outcome (agency slack). Hence, the condition

⁶For textbook introductions to QCA and discussions of the method's respective strengths and limitations, see Schneider and Wagemann (2012) and Mello (2021).

⁷We used the R packages "QCA" (Duşa 2019) and "SetMethods" (Oana and Schneider 2018). The R code and replication data will be made available on a public data repository.

Table 1. UN JIU participating organizations and case selection

<i>Code</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Standardized JIU reports</i>
EOSG	Executive Office of the Secretary-General	Principal organ	
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN	Specialized agency	•
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency	Related organization	•
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization	Specialized agency	•
ILO	International Labor Organization	Specialized agency	•
IMO	International Maritime Organization	Specialized agency	•
ITC	International Trade Centre	Other entity	
ITU	International Telecommunication Union	Specialized agency	•
UN-Habitat	UN Human Settlements Programme	Program	
UN-Women	UN Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women	Other entity	
UNAIDS	Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS	Other body	
UNCTAD	UN Conference on Trade and Development	Other entity	•
UNDP	UN Development Programme	Program	
UNEP	UN Environment Programme	Program	
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	Specialized agency	•
UNFPA	UN Population Fund	Fund	
UNHCR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees	Other entity	
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund	Fund	
UNIDO	UN Industrial Development Organization	Specialized agency	•
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime	Office	•
UNOPS	UN Office for Project Services	Other entity	•
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees	Other entity	
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization	Specialized agency	•
UPU	Universal Postal Union	Specialized agency	•
WFP	World Food Program	Program	•
WHO	World Health Organization	Specialized agency	•
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization	Specialized agency	•
WMO	World Meteorological Organization	Specialized agency	•

Note: Case selection included all sixteen organizations on which the JIU has published standardized reports.

names are chosen to reflect their qualitative state: *high delegation* (D), *staffing favors agent* (S), *high permeability* (P), and *vague mandate* (M). The qualitative calibration of these conditions is discussed in the following sections. [Table A1](#) in the appendix displays the results of our qualitative coding.

Our universe of cases comprises all participating organizations of the UN JIU, an independent external oversight institution that evaluates and monitors the operation of twenty-eight UN entities ([JIU 2014](#)). This includes specialized agencies such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), entities such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), UN departments and offices such as the Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG), and funds and programs such as the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). The JIU thus constitutes a classic case of recontracting or hiring a new agent to monitor the activities of other agents ([Heldt et al. 2022](#)).

As the empirical basis for this article, we systematically coded all twenty-three of the standardized management and administration reports issued by the JIU on its member organizations.⁸ Reports are initiated either by the JIU itself, upon request of participating organizations, or by the UN Plenipotentiary Conference and Council. We included all organizations for which the JIU issues at least one standardized report. This yields sixteen organizations and seventeen cases for our comparison because we examine the UNWTO at two different points in time, before and after substantial organizational changes. [Table 1](#) lists all participating

organizations of the unit, their position in the UN system, and whether we included them in the analysis because there was at least one standardized report. The first of these dates back to 1999 (covering the International Labor Union). Before that time, the JIU had also issued occasional reports, but these were neither standardized nor comprehensive and thus of less value for a comparative analysis. The standardized reports enable us to access comparable and independent data on the organizational structure of UN institutions, irrespective of potential agency slack issues. The reports were coded by three individuals from the research team, with two coders independently coding the same report. When disagreements on specific coding decisions occurred, these were discussed and solved among the broader research team consisting of five researchers. This procedure enabled us to systematically and consistently code the reports on the same variables/conditions.

Operationalization of the Outcome and Fuzzy-Set Conditions

Agency Slack (Outcome)

We adopt an indirect measure focused on the observable actions of the principal when coding agency slack. Based on the indicators suggested by [Weingast and Moran \(1983\)](#)—that is, hiring an agent, establishing a committee, cutting budgets, and reducing staff—we have created a general fuzzy-set categorization for the outcome “agency slack.” Cases receive a fuzzy score of 1 if three or more indicators are present and a fuzzy score of 0.7 if two indicators are present. If one indicator is present, we assign a fuzzy score

⁸The reports are available on the JIU website: <https://www.unjiu.org/content/reports>.

of 0.3. Conversely, if no indicator is present, then a case is assigned a fuzzy score of 0 (see [table A3](#) for a summary of our scoring of the indicators). Apart from this straightforward scoring of cases, we also took into account the emphasis certain indicators received in the JIU reports. Hence, if an indicator was mentioned extensively in various sections of the JIU reports, then we assigned additional weight to this (e.g., a score of 2 instead of 1; see [table A3](#)). Conversely, if an indicator was mentioned but there was ambiguity about its scope, then we disregard the respective indicator.

Two examples should help to illustrate the coding procedure. The JIU report on the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) characterizes the institution as suffering from “organizational malaise” and mismanagement, where the disinterest of member states and the disconnect between the secretariat and the members have created considerable leverage for the secretariat. The report further emphasizes a silo structure in the secretariat, leading to an inefficient use of resources and expertise, in addition to increasing bureaucratization. We found other indicators of agency slack, namely a reduction of the budget. For example, extra-budgetary contributions have been cut from US\$36.8 million in 2007 to 30.7 million in 2010 ([JIU 2012](#)). In sum, this resulted in a fuzzy score of 1 (full membership in the fuzzy-set agency slack).

In contrast, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) illustrates the complete absence of agency slack (full set nonmembership).⁹ Although the JIU made recommendations as to the usefulness of bringing in an external auditor to evaluate the human and financial resource needs of the organization ([JIU 2007a](#)), we have not found any evidence of previous external evaluations. There is no other indicator suggesting that agency slack occurred at ICAO, neither in terms of a committee being established for monitoring the organization, budgetary cuts, or staff reductions. However, unlike all the other organizations in our study, member states have tightly controlled the organization through strong involvement in its management. This resulted, among others, in staffing procedures being strongly in favor of the member states and little permeability in terms of access granted to transnational actors. This resonates with [Cortell and Peterson’s \(2006\)](#) findings on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as an organization deliberately designed to give agents scant room for independent action.

High Delegation

In coding this condition, we have looked at indicators for delegation within organizations and the lack of it (centralization). In most cases, these criteria were clear-cut, but at times there were simultaneous indicators of delegation and centralization. In these cases, we have taken all indicators together to establish the extent to which the balance in the organization tilts toward more or less delegation. This resonates with the theoretical logic behind this condition, which emphasizes “blame shifting”—the ability of secretariats/DGs to shift the blame for agency slack onto subunits in cases where a higher degree of delegation was present. When there is less delegation in an organization, it should become harder for the secretariat/DG to deflect blame.

Indicators of *lower delegation* included cases in which JIU reports (1) mentioned the need for more delegation, (2) pointed out that the secretary general/DG convened a high number of meetings with different parts of the bureaucracy

indicating tight control, and/or (3) included mentions that the secretary general/DG extensively engages in micromanagement (e.g., on travel authorizations or placements of contracts). Indicators of *higher delegation* included cases in which JIU reports (1) specifically mentioned that high delegation exists, (2) did not mention the need for delegation (we took a lack of information on delegation as an indicator that delegation exists, since it is very common for the JIU to emphasize insufficient delegation in its reports), and/or, finally, (3) showed that individual sectors of the bureaucracy were in charge of some administrative and financial functions within their individual areas of authority.

Based on these indicators, we assigned fuzzy scores ranging from 0 to 1: *no delegation* (fuzzy score 0): when there was a high level of involvement of the secretary general/DG in day-to-day operations of the organization together with high control (budget, recruitment, etc.). *Little delegation* (fuzzy score 0.3): where the report suggested so, or that authority was centralized, or when decentralization existed without any substantial shifting of authority. We furthermore considered cases where delegation was present in only one sphere (e.g., human resources) while lacking in others and also when reports mentioned that most decisions were at the full discretion of the secretary-general/DG of the organization. *Partial delegation* (fuzzy score 0.7): when we found both indicators of little and extensive delegation or in cases where the report noted improvements in delegation, with regard to previous levels. *High delegation* (fuzzy score 1): if a report specifically mentioned high delegation existed, or when reporting lines were not clear and substantial duplication of functions was found. Other cases included those where reports mentioned that silo structures existed and/or that there were loopholes—note that we have only considered these indicators as cases of extensive delegation when it was clear that authority was fragmented.¹⁰

To take an example, the World Food Programme (WFP) displays a high level of delegation (fuzzy score 1). Decision-making is spread among various technical and administrative units—including human resources, procurement, finance, and public information. Additionally, regional bureaus have significant decision-making powers, for example, country offices have become major frontline actors preparing and implementing operations. Moreover, the WFP has a dual system at the legal, oversight, and advisory levels, reporting to both the UN and the FAO ([JIU 2009](#)). Conversely, the IAEA is an example of no delegation (fuzzy score 0). In this specific case, the DG and senior staff of IAEA exert strong control over the internal procedures within IAEA in the shape of weekly formal and informal meetings at various levels ([JIU 2012](#)).

Staffing Favors Agent

For this condition, we have looked at indicators of control over the recruitment of human resources. As with delegation, the criteria were clear-cut in most cases. When conflicting indicators of control over human resources existed, we have taken these indicators together to establish the extent to which the balance in the organization tilts toward the principals (member states) or the agent (secretariat).

¹⁰The sole case that differs from this pattern is ICAO, where the JIU emphasizes that the organization faces an important problem of delegation of authority, which is not only a result of the internal structure of the organization but also results from member states in the Council being involved in its day-to-day management and in the appointment of professional staff ([JIU 2007a](#)). Hence, we have coded ICAO as an organization where there is little to no delegation (fuzzy score 0).

⁹The WFP was the only other case where agency slack was entirely absent.

This reflects the theoretical reasoning behind the condition, which rests on the premise that staff would promote specific interests depending on whether they are seconded from member states or are international bureaucrats. Balance in favor of the organization is expected to be associated with agency slack.

In establishing the balance between control over staff by either member states or bureaucracies, we considered the following cases. Indicators of the overall *staffing rules favoring principals* (the absence of our condition) included cases in which the JIU reports mentioned that (1) a high number of short-term staff and external consultants were linked to earmarked funds from member states and (2) principals oversaw (and even vetted) recruitment processes. Cases where the *staffing rules were in favor of agents* (the presence of our condition) included those in which JIU reports mentioned (1) the existence of competitive recruitment and/or promotion of personnel, (2) extensions in the duration of employments undertaken by the secretariat or DG (e.g., extensions beyond the age of retirement), and/or (3) the recruitment of consultants not linked to earmarked funds (from principals) by the secretariat or DG. This resulted in fuzzy scores that ranged from 0 (staffing rules strongly in favor of the principal) to 1 (staffing rules strongly in favor of the agent), with two intermediate categories, resulting in scores of 0.3 and 0.7 (where staffing rules favor either the principal or the agent, respectively).

An example of rules favoring the agent is the Universal Postal Union (UPU). The JIU reports emphasize strong control by the DG over staff and a substantial lack of transparency and accountability in human resources management. For instance, promotions were made without oversight from principals and were characterized by a lack of transparency, even suggesting that too much power with regard to staff had shifted from member states to executive management. In addition, political appointments by the DG and personnel promotions in positions to which staff were not qualified exemplify the existence of staffing rules favoring the UPU (JIU 2008, 2017). The United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), on the contrary, shows staffing rules favoring principals. UNOPS is dedicated to implementing projects for UN institutions, trust funds, governments, and other third parties. This reliance on project funding gives substantial control to its principals. UNOPS has control over staff involved in projects and has a limited number of permanent staff. Staff is recruited under international or local individual contractor agreements (JIU 2018).

High Permeability

For the condition of high permeability, we looked at two main sets of indicators relating to the range and depth of third-party access, namely whether parties had access to the organization and if they were also granted powers in policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and enforcement. On the basis of JIU reports, we considered the following indicators of the extent of permeability: (1) *cases of access and no involvement* (fuzzy score 0) were those where third parties had neither access to nor powers in policy formulation, decision-making, implementation or monitoring and enforcement; (2) *selective access but no/little involvement* (fuzzy score 0.3) occurred when access was granted to selected third parties but no powers; (3) *wide access was granted without any or little involvement* (fuzzy score 0.7) when an extensive number of parties were engaged in the organization, without being granted any (or very few) powers; and, finally, (4) *wide access and full involvement* (fuzzy

score 1) when an extensive number of parties both had access to the organization and were given substantial powers.

An example of low permeability is the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Given its technical and standard-setting character, IMO acts as an executing agency while implementing various projects funded by other UN institutions. We found no evidence that transnational actors had any access to policy-making. Thus, based on our coding criteria, we consider the degree of permeability to be very low (JIU 2007b). In contrast, the ILO is among the most permeable cases we have found. The main reason for offering transnational actors substantial access to policymaking has to do with the role labor unions and employer organizations play in the organization. Principals include member states, employers, and worker representatives. They all decide on the budget of the organization and on selection of the DG suggesting a high degree of permeability.

Vague Mandate

For this condition we considered how vague or precise a mandate was, and thus the discretion agents have when interpreting the objectives set by the principals. We looked at each mandate for all the organizations included in the study on the basis of its treaty or articles of agreement. The coding criteria were the following: (1) *cases of precise mandate* (fuzzy score 0) were those where the mandate was clear about objectives and what they meant, and the number of objectives was limited/narrow in scope; (2) *somewhat precise mandates* (fuzzy score 0.3) occurred when the number of objectives was limited/narrow in scope, but vague/less clearly defined; (3) *little precise mandates* (fuzzy score 0.7) were, despite the objectives being narrow in scope, those that merely reflected the name of the organization, without defining concrete functions; and finally, (4) *not precise mandates* (fuzzy score 1) included a very large number of objectives that were not clearly defined.

One example of an organization with a less precise mandate is the UNESCO, whose mandate states that “the purpose of the organization is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms (. . .)” (UNESCO 2018, 7). The mandate is quite extensive, its constituent parts are not well defined, and it is also not specified how the organization shall achieve the different objectives. In contrast, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) is an example of an IO with a precise mandate. The ITU’s aim is to maintain and extend international cooperation among all its principals for the improvement and rational use of all kinds of telecommunications. The mandate is quite specific, stating for example that the ITU shall: “effect the allocation of bands of the radio-frequency spectrum, the allotment of radio frequencies and the registration of radio-frequency assignments and, for space services, of any associated orbital position in the geostationary-satellite orbit or of any associated characteristics of satellites in other orbits (. . .); facilitate the worldwide standardization of telecommunications, with a satisfactory quality of service” (ITU 1992, 5). Table A1 in the appendix shows the results of our qualitative coding.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis

The first step in QCA is testing for conditions that are necessary for the outcome. Table A2 in the appendix displays the results of this test for the presence and absence

Table 2. Truth table for the outcome agency slack

Conditions				Outcome					
D	S	P	M	AS	N	Consistency	PRJ	Organizations	
0	1	1	0	1	3	1.00	1.00	ILO, UNIDO, UPU	
1	1	0	1	1	2	1.00	1.00	UNCTAD, WIPO	
0	1	1	1	1	1	1.00	1.00	UNWTO1	
1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00	1.00	UNESCO	
1	1	1	0	1	2	0.91	0.87	ITU, WHO	
0	1	0	0	0	2	0.83	0.64	FAO, IMO	
1	0	1	1	0	3	0.73	0.62	UNODC, UNOPS, UNWTO2	
0	0	0	1	0	1	0.63	0.46	ICAO	
1	0	1	0	0	1	0.63	0.30	WFP	
0	0	0	0	0	1	0.46	0.00	IAEA	
0	0	1	0	?	—				
0	0	1	1	?	—				
0	1	0	1	?	—				
1	0	0	0	?	—				
1	0	0	1	?	—				
1	1	0	0	?	—				

Note: D = high delegation, S = staffing favors agent, P = high permeability, M = vague mandate, AS = agency slack, ? = logical remainder. Bold cases hold fuzzy-set membership > 0.50 in the outcome.

of the four conditions included in the analysis (high delegation, staffing favors agent, high permeability, and vague mandate). As shown in the table, no condition reaches the conventional threshold of 0.90 consistency (Schneider and Wagemann 2012, 278; Mello 2021, 110), which means that no single condition can be considered necessary for agency slack. We also conducted this test for the non-outcome and none of the conditions passed the necessity threshold. That said, with a consistency of 0.85 and equally high coverage and relevance of necessity (RoN) values, staffing rules that favor the agent come close to being “almost” necessary for the outcome agency slack. This finding resonates with our theoretical expectations and we will return to it when discussing the overall results.

As the next step in the analytical procedure of QCA, we construct a *truth table* for the outcome agency slack, which shows the logically possible combinations of conditions and the distribution of cases across the respective rows (table 2). Since we include four conditions, the total number of possible combinations of these is 2^k , where k denotes the number of included conditions: $2^{(D,S,P,M)} = 16$ rows. Some of these rows are not filled with empirical cases (“logical remainders”), as indicated by question marks in the table. The JIU organizations are listed on the right-hand side in the respective row that fits their organizational configuration. Cases in bold are those that show agency slack, all of which are situated at the top of the table. For the ensuing Boolean minimization of the truth table, we use a threshold of 0.90 consistency, which effectively includes the top five rows. This means that rows 6 and 7, which feature not only the IMO and UNODC but also some cases that do *not* show the outcome (such as the FAO), are not included in the minimization procedure because their consistency is not deemed to be high enough.¹¹ Hence, we complement our set-theoretic analysis with two case illustrations, contrasting the UNODC

(which shows the outcome) with the FAO (which does not show agency slack).

In the final step of a QCA analysis, solution terms are derived on the basis of Boolean minimization. For our substantive interpretation, we draw on the “conservative solution” term (also known as the complex solution). This solution type rests solely on empirical cases and it does not include any logical remainder rows in the analytical procedure, which are rows without empirical information, indicated by a question mark in table 2. We deem the conservative solution the appropriate choice for the substantive interpretation of our data because the state of research does not allow for robust expectations about the specific configurations for which we do not have empirical cases.

Table 3 shows the conservative solution term for the outcome agency slack. This solution entails two paths to the outcome at a consistency of 0.96 and a coverage of 0.73. The solution accounts for nine out of eleven cases of organizational agency slack in our data. As mentioned above, the sole cases that are not covered by this solution are the IMO and the UNODC. Of these two cases, the UNODC received a full score in agency slack; hence, we discuss this case in a separate section below. We complement the discussion of UNODC with the FAO, as a contrasting case that did not show indications of agency slack.

The findings show that there are two paths to agency slack. Noticeably, the four conditions included in our analysis all appear in the solution paths (in their expected qualitative state), as part of two different configurations. Both paths comprise staffing rules that favor the agent, which underlines the prominent role played by this condition, and which resonates with our prior identification of staffing rules in favor of the agent as an “almost” necessary condition for agency slack (see table A2). Path 1 comprises staffing rules in favor of the agent and high permeability, both of which enhance the agent’s position vis-à-vis the principal. Path 2 combines staffing rules favorable to the agent with high delegation of authority and a vague mandate, as another configuration that favors the agent in its interaction with the principal. The bottom of table 3 lists the cases that are accounted

¹¹ The truth table column “outcome” is coded on the basis of the consistency threshold determined by the researcher. Rows with a score of 1 are retained for the ensuing Boolean minimization (Mello 2021, 129). We thank one of the reviewers for highlighting this aspect, which is easy to misinterpret for readers who are not versed in QCA.

Table 3. Paths to agency slack

	Path 1	Path 2
High delegation		●
Staffing favors agent	●	●
High permeability	●	
Vague mandate		●
Consistency	0.96	1.00
PRI	0.94	1.00
Raw coverage	0.65	0.31
Unique coverage	0.42	0.08
Covered cases/unique covered cases (bold)	ILO UNIDO UPU UNWTO1 ITU WHO UNESCO	UNCTAD WIPO UNESCO
Solution consistency		0.96
Solution PRI		0.95
Solution coverage		0.73
Model (total)		M1(1)

Note: Black circles indicate the presence of a condition.

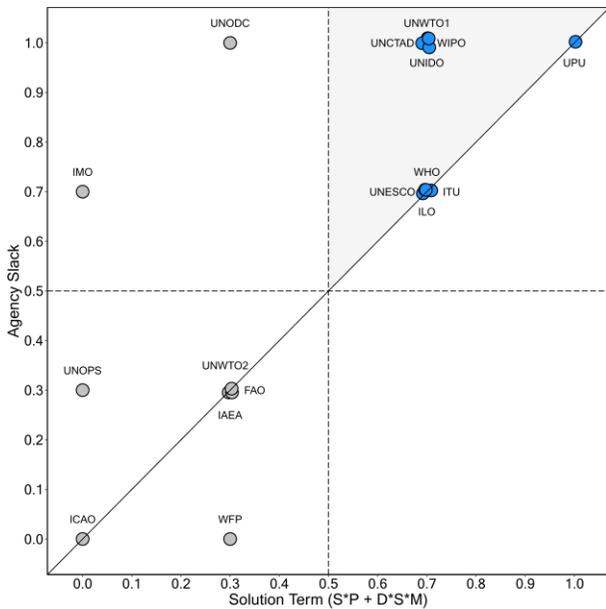


Figure 2. Solution membership and agency slack.

for by each solution path, where bold print indicates cases that are uniquely covered by a specific path. Below, the table lists set-theoretic measures of fit for the overall solution term. In sum, both the identified paths resonate with the expectations we derived in our theory section—placing emphasis on the role of personnel and hiring decisions inside organizations (favorable staffing rules). When these are combined either (Path 1) with wide access to third parties (high permeability) or (Path 2) with extensive delegation and a vague mandate, then this constitutes combinations that are sufficient to bring about the outcome agency slack.

To visualize the results of the set-theoretic analysis and to document the fit of the overall solution term, we construct an XY plot that shows membership in the solution term and membership in the outcome agency slack (figure 2). We divide the plot into areas of different theoretical significance,

as suggested in the QCA literature. The upper right triangle highlights “typical cases” as blue dots—the points are slightly jittered to make overplotted cases with identical values visible. Typical cases are cases whose set membership values for the outcome exceed (or are equal to) those for the solution, while both are above 0.50 (meaning they are “rather inside” both sets). The lower left quadrant shows cases that are less relevant because they hold membership neither in the outcome nor in the solution. Overall, the solution provides a consistent account for the outcome with high coverage, which means that, apart from two exceptions (UNODC and IMO), all of the cases that show agency slack are covered by the solution. We discuss the case of UNODC below.

Post-QCA Case Studies: UNODC and FAO

The results of our QCA analysis revealed two paths toward organizational agency slack, covering the broad majority of cases that show the outcome (nine out of eleven cases with a positive outcome). To complement our set-theoretic analysis, we further want to illustrate the dynamics at play in two cases that do not hold high membership scores in our solution but that are important for both theoretical and methodological reasons: UNODC and FAO. The former is an “unaccounted case” that does show agency slack (fuzzy score 1.0) but that is not covered by our solution (on unaccounted cases in QCA, see Mello 2021, 193). Hence, it is important to examine why agency slack occurred at the UNODC. The latter case, the FAO, is a case that shows little evidence of agency slack (fuzzy score 0.3) despite the fact that staffing rules favor the agent (which were present in both of the solution paths we identified previously). Consequently, it is of theoretical interest to understand why staffing rules did not come with agency slack in this particular case.

We find that in the case of UNODC, agency slack largely results from earmarking contributions controlled by member states and the fusion between the drug- and the crime-fighting agencies, which led to a duplication of many organizational functions. In the case of FAO, our findings suggest that despite the agent having strong control over staff, increasingly new hires have been made on a short-term basis and as a result long-term contracts have been substantially reduced. Hence, despite having strong control over staff, high personnel turnover constrains the agent’s ability to engage in slack. This finding contextualizes expectations concerning staffing rules, showing that rules that are favorable to the agent can be offset by short contract durations. Additionally, it must be noted that the FAO has a very narrow mandate, which further constrains its ability to engage in agency slack. We summarize our findings from these two case studies below.

UNODC

The UNODC is a puzzling case given that control over staff by its member states did not prevent the IO from slacking. The reason why principals have control over staff has to do with a strong reliance by UNODC on earmarked funds, even for key corporate positions in the office (JIU 2010, 11). While the overall budget of the organization has increased substantially, non-earmarked contributions have declined. Member states that fund the organization through earmarked contributions have substantial control, including over staffing decisions. In principle, we would expect such a situation to lead to the absence of slack. However, as we show below, all other conditions that we assumed would translate into slack are present. We find high levels of delegation of

authority, high permeability, and a vague mandate. For this reason, the case may be less puzzling as it appears at first sight.

We expected that delegation of authority would be conducive to slack, given that agents may shift blame to other parts of the organization. The fragmentation and dual structure of UNODC make it easy for the agent to engage in this type of blame shifting. This results from the UNODC having been created in 1997 by merging two previous organizations: the United Nations International Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention. The JIU considers that the merger has in fact not been completed and a duplication of a large number of functions exists (JIU 2010). UNODC's governance and financial framework remain split in two main bodies: the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. Each has a separate budget and administration. This means that both governance and financial frameworks are characterized by fragmentation. Additionally, some parts of the bureaucracy, such as the International Narcotics Control Board, have their own secretariat and are highly autonomous. We expect such a high level of delegation to be conducive for agency slack.

Agency slack arising from blame-shifting possibilities is further supported by high levels of permeability. This condition may lead to slack given that allowing third parties access to an organization allows (depending on the depth and range of such access) the agent to use information provided by such parties against the principals, or to be influenced by them against the principals' stated preferences. We find strong evidence of permeability at UNODC. Due to its limited capacity, UNODC relies strongly on support services from other organizations and in particular from UNDP. For example, when it comes to field offices, UNODC relies on personnel from UNDP to support the selection and administration of staff and the management of field offices. In fact, most employees deployed to the field are hired by UNDP and are not even considered to be UNODC staff. This gives UNDP substantial access in terms of both depth and range to UNODC activities, opening the door to further possibilities for the IO to slack.

Additionally, the vague mandate of UNODC is conducive to slack. We have argued that the mandate widens or limits the leeway an agent has in interpreting the organization's mission as set by the principal. In this case the mandate of the organization, while narrow in scope, does not define what the concrete functions of the organization are. In fact, the mandate is split along its narcotic drugs and crime prevention components. The mandate of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs is to "review and analyze the global drug situation, considering the interrelated issues of prevention of drug abuse, rehabilitation of drug users and supply and trafficking in illicit drugs." The mandate of the Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Commission for its part is to "guide the activities of the United Nations in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice" in addition to "review UN standards and norms in this area and their use and application by Member States."¹² Both mandates leave substantial room for interpretation.

To summarize our findings from the study of UNODC, the initially puzzling situation of agency slack at the organization, despite control of (some) member states over staff, can be partially explained by the fact that all other organizational characteristics that we examined enhance the propen-

sity for agency slack. Furthermore, principals control over staff is weakened by the fact that only a limited number of principals exert control.

FAO

Unlike UNODC, the FAO was coded as a case where agency slack was largely absent (fuzzy score of 0.3) despite the fact that we found a strong control of the agent over staff. This is puzzling, since all other cases where the agent had control over hiring and promotion showed a high degree of agency slack. In fact, the only evidence of agency slack in this case had to do with reductions in its budget and delays in establishing new positions.

FAO's control over staff is substantial. The top management is directly involved in the recruitment, promotion, and reclassification of hiring processes (JIU 2002). Hence, following our theoretical expectations, FAO should rather witness agency slack. However, much as in the previous case of UNODC, where all the other conditions were coherent with the expected outcome, in FAO all other organizational characteristics lead us to expect the absence of agency slack.

To start with, FAO shows low levels of delegation of authority within the organization. This is consistent with our expectation of lower levels of agency slack. The JIU repeatedly mentions a need to delegate more authority to department managers and regional representatives. Even its DG described, in 1994, the structure of the organization as being "too centralized" (JIU 2002, 7). Previous efforts to decentralize FAO have remained unfulfilled. In some cases, delegation merely involved shifting tasks from one department to another. Other evaluation reports published by the FAO itself underline the "outgrown and over-managed" (FAO 2007) character of the organization, where senior management is involved in almost all decision-making and lower level managers do not have any authority or resources to make decisions. This lack of delegation makes it difficult for the DG to employ a blame-shifting strategy.

Third-party involvement is also low, which according to our theoretical propositions decreases the likelihood of agency slack occurrence. Although FAO pioneered in cooperating with various third parties already in the 1960s, the level of its cooperation and collaboration with NGOs and private sector has decreased from the 1980s onward (FAO 2007). In the 2000s, FAO launched a self-evaluation regarding its partnerships and alliances and concluded that while there is some cooperation with IOs and research institutes, NGOs and the private sector are not involved. When FAO has had partnerships with private sector, these only covered expert consultation and data exchange, and not more engaging areas such as policy dialogue, regulation, and resource mobilization (FAO 2005). A low level of permeability characterized by selective access and little involvement of third parties limits the opportunities for agency slack to occur.

We also expect organizations with narrow mandates to be less able to slack. Supporting this assumption, FAO presents a case of rule-based delegation. Its precise mandate contains both clearly established goals of the organization and its functions. The mandate further elaborates on various aspects of FAO's working processes, such as the functions of its various governing bodies, reporting by the member states and associate members, and the organization's relations with the UN and third-party organizations (FAO 2017). All of the above decrease the possibility of the agent to slack.

Despite that the other conditions were all in line with the outcome (an absence of slack), we expected that an agent's

¹² See https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/commissions/CND/Mandate_Functions/Mandate-and-Functions_index.html.

strong control over staff would be conducive to slack. In fact, the DG and some senior managers enjoy substantial discretion when it comes to the issues of recruitment, promotions, and reclassifications of posts but the organization shows low levels of slack. Besides the fact that all the other conditions would mitigate the DGs' control over staff to slack, another possible reason for the divergence from our theoretical expectations regarding staffing rules may have to do with the high turnover that exists in FAO. The substantial increase in short-term contracts at the organization may also limit the opportunities for the DG to slack, even if these are controlled by the agent. As an illustration, the number of short-term staff and non-staff human resource contracts grew significantly with 6,477 contracts being issued between July 1, 2000, and June 30, 2001, almost twice as much as the total number of general service and professional staff (JIU 2002).

Considering the abovementioned factors, the absence of agency slack in the FAO is not too surprising. The divergence in the outcome of staffing rules with regard to our theoretical expectations can be explained by the other conditions being closely in line with regard to their anticipated effects on agency slack. The reliance on short-term staff and non-staff human resources undermines continuity and prevents a large share of the workforce from internalizing the social structure and norms of the secretariat. Additionally, we find that a high turnover rate in FAO may limit the capacity of the agent to slack, despite having substantial strong control over staff.

Conclusion

The extensive delegation of power to IOs has been accompanied by occasional agency slack. While prior studies noted that the propensity for agency slack may be rooted in the organizational characteristics of IOs, this has rarely been studied empirically. To address this lacuna, our article proposes a conceptualization and operationalization of agency slack. We measure agency slack based on the observable actions of the principal, who can either expend additional resources to control agents or sanction undesired behavior through the reduction of financial or human resources. In a second step, we develop a framework of organizational characteristics to account for patterns of agency slack. Drawing on original data gathered on sixteen member organizations of the UN JIU, we conduct a QCA to assess the empirical resonance of organizational configurations. Finally, we complement our set-theoretic analysis with two illustrative case studies on the UNODC and FAO to contextualize our findings and explore the dynamics within IOs.

Our results show that the observed cases can be placed on two paths toward agency slack. Both paths contain staffing rules in favor of the agent: once these combine with wide access to third parties or permeability (Path 1) and once they appear together with extensive delegation of authority and a vague mandate (Path 2). Both paths show that the presence (rather than the absence) of certain organizational configurations is associated with the occurrence of agency slack, which confirms our theoretical expectations. The findings also resonate with prior studies that examined agency losses at individual IOs. One of the striking findings of our study concerns staffing rules or the control over staff by either agents or principals. Staffing rules in favor of the agent appear to be an (almost) necessary condition for agency slack. Indeed, with one exception (FAO), we find that, in all cases where staffing rules favor the agent, we also observe agency slack (in combination with other conditions). Furthermore, we find that, with the exception of UNODC,

all cases where we identified signs of agency slack involved the agent having control over staff. We cannot draw similarly clear conclusions for the other conditions, as we find both cases of agency slack and its absence in different combinations involving varying degrees of delegation of authority or permeability.

Overall, however, the evidence broadly supports our original expectations, in the sense that agency slack is associated with staffing rules that favor the agent, either in combination with extensive access to third parties (high permeability) or when combined with wide-ranging delegation of authority, and a vague organizational mandate that the agent has to adhere to. Prospective studies could use these findings to explore other groups of IOs (beyond the UN system) comparatively or to examine the causal mechanisms of agency slack in individual cases via process tracing or similar methods. One particularly fruitful avenue for further inquiry would be a closer examination of personnel decisions and contracting at IOs and how these impact upon the organization's mandate execution.

Our empirical analysis is not without limitations. To construct a reliable and transparent measure of agency slack that is amenable to comparative analysis, we used an indirect measure of agency slack that draws on indicators of observable behavior of the principal (summarized in figure 1). This operationalization allowed us to systematically code twenty-three of the standardized management and administration reports issued by the JIU on its member organizations. This approach is limited in the sense that it only detects agency slack once the principal has punished the agent's behavior. Additionally, there may also be situations where sanctioning behavior occurs for reasons unrelated to slack. To accommodate for the latter, our measure draws on four different indicators, three of which have to be present for a case to be assigned a full score on agency slack. As suggested above, future studies could build on our cross-case comparison to assess individual IOs, which should allow for more fine-grained measures of agency slack, including direct measures of agent behavior.

What are the payoffs from the considerable work that has gone into measuring agency slack? The findings of our set-theoretic analysis add to prior studies on measuring delegation to IOs (Brown 2010; Heldt and Schmidtke 2017) and on questions of professional staffing and how this increases the likelihood that principals lose influence and control over time (Parizek 2017). The choice for a delegation design with staffing rules giving agents extensive leverage can have the unintended consequence of agency slack, which exacerbates over time. In the context of strong resistance to the liberal international order (Fioretos 2019b; Fioretos and Heldt 2019), gridlock in international institutions (Hale and Held 2017), and the current wave of disengagement from international organizations, the mere suspicion of agency slack might also lead to moves toward unilateralism and informal settings (Fioretos 2019a), away from multilateral governance.

Our study is a first step toward a better understanding of agency slack in multilateral institutions. If future studies can begin from the premise that a consideration of agency slack is necessary to enable more nuanced comparisons, this will enhance our understanding of why the performance of IOs varies, why reform is more or less substantive, or why politicization happens. This has become even more important in a context in which multilateral institutions are under increased pressure to legitimize their actions—with some labeling them as “errant agents” (Heldt 2017) and as “institutional Franksteins” (Hawkins et al. 2006), who have emancipated themselves from their principals.

Research on IOs has largely overlooked the fact that agency slack does not automatically constitute an abuse of power. For instance, in certain cases, an agent's use of a flexible mandate and going beyond precise instructions by the principal can be crucial to achieve policy outcomes—as the proactive role of the European Central Bank during the Euro crisis illustrates (see [Heldt and Mueller 2021](#)). Hence, the “suspicion” of agency slack is not per se negative. In some cases, it can be a positive side effect of the delegation of power. And it may be necessary for an organization to successfully adapt to adverse circumstances. A fruitful avenue for future studies could be the conceptualization of positive and negative effects of agency slack and their impact on the PA relationship and on the implementation of policies.

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Appendix

Table A1. Fuzzy-set conditions and outcome agency slack

<i>Case</i>	<i>High delegation (D)</i>	<i>Staffing favors agent (S)</i>	<i>High permeability (P)</i>	<i>Vague mandate (M)</i>	<i>Agency slack (AS)</i>
FAO	0.3	1.0	0.3	0.0	0.3
IAEA	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.3
ICAO	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.0
ILO	0.3	0.7	1.0	0.0	0.7
IMO	0.3	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.7
ITU	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.0	0.7
UNCTAD	0.7	0.7	0.3	1.0	1.0
UNESCO	0.7	0.7	0.7	1.0	0.7
UNIDO	0.3	1.0	0.7	0.3	1.0
UNODC	1.0	0.3	1.0	0.7	1.0
UNOPS	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.7	0.3
UNWTO I	0.3	0.7	0.7	1.0	1.0
UNWTO II	0.7	0.3	0.7	1.0	0.3
UPU	0.3	1.0	1.0	0.0	1.0
WFP	1.0	0.3	1.0	0.0	0.0
WHO	0.7	1.0	0.7	0.0	0.7
WIPO	1.0	1.0	0.3	0.7	1.0

Table A2. Analysis of necessary conditions for agency slack

<i>Condition</i>	<i>Presence</i>			<i>Absence</i>		
	<i>Consistency</i>	<i>Coverage</i>	<i>Relevance</i>	<i>Consistency</i>	<i>Coverage</i>	<i>Relevance</i>
High delegation	0.673	0.750	0.755	0.495	0.716	0.821
Staffing favors agent	0.850	0.875	0.835	0.318	0.515	0.765
High permeability	0.748	0.769	0.733	0.421	0.682	0.832
Vague mandate	0.467	0.704	0.825	0.561	0.606	0.645

Table A3. Indicators of agency slack and fuzzy scores for agency slack

Case	Hiring agent	Monitoring committee	Budget cuts	Staff reduction	Agency slack (index score)	Agency slack (fuzzy score)
FAO	0	0	1	0	1	0.3
IAEA	0	0	1	0	1	0.3
ICAO	0	0	0	0	0	0.0
ILO	0	2	0	0	2	0.7
IMO	1	0	1	0	2	0.7
ITU	0	1	1	0	2	0.7
UNCTAD	2	0	1	0	3	1.0
UNESCO	1	0	1	0	2	0.7
UNIDO	0	1	1	1	3	1.0
UNODC	0	1	1	1	3	1.0
UNOPS	0	1	0	0	1	0.3
UNWTO I	1	0	2	0	3	1.0
UNWTO II	1	0	0	0	1	0.3
UPU	1	1	1	1	4	1.0
WFP	0	0	0	0	0	0.0
WHO	1	1	0	0	2	0.7
WIPO	1	1	1	0	3	1.0

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