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Panel A11: Inter-Organizational Relations: Theory and Practice I

*Inter-Organizational Research Meets Global Governance.*

_Framing the UN Global Compact as a Relational Configuration_

*Very first draft – Please do not cite without author’s permission – Comments are most welcome!*

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**Abstract:** Despite emerging in separate contexts and with different intentions, the study of inter-organizational relations and the paradigm of global governance hold the potential to mutually supplement each other. Unfortunately, though, it seems that this conceptual marriage does not live up to its full potential if it exclusively considers inter-governmental organizations whose independent existence is derived from their status as formal-legal entities. Rather, the paper contents that relationalism as an ontological perspective holds the potential to provide a solid foundation to connect global governance and research on inter-organizational relations. Such an ontology does not presuppose the independent existence of particular global governors but considers their agency and interests to emerge out of relations. With this commitment in mind, the paper (a) provides brief intellectual histories of both agendas to show their ongoing commitments to substantialism and provide an ideal-type systematization to map out different approaches, (b) develops its own concept of relational configurations, and (c) briefly applies this to the United Nations Global Compact. As a heuristic tool, I argue that framing such a governance initiative provides insight into its longer history and relations to other configurations. In particular, it reveals how new global governors within the configuration became recognized ‘to sit at the table’. Understanding these processes of agency diffusion in order to engage with the complexities of world politics, I argue, becomes the crucial task for a new research agenda that draws equally from global governance and inter-organizational studies by framing both in relational terms.

**Keywords:** Global Compact, global governance, inter-organizational relations
Introduction

While not synonymous, the ambivalent and notoriously vague notion of global governance provides a strong intellectual rationale to study international organizations (IOs). More specifically, it argues to consider IOs, among other entities, as *global governors* in their complex and overlapping mandates (Karns et al. 2015; Weiss/Kamran 2009). As such, the intellectual engagement with IOs in the 1990s received renewed attention within broader debates on the provision of order and governance beyond the state as global governance began its slow but steady rise among IR paradigms to the ‘celebrity concept’ that it represents today (Hofferberth 2016; Weiss/Wilkinson 2014b; Barnett/Sikkink 2008).

Following this renewed interest and injecting in particular ideas of regime complexity to emphasize overlaps between organizations, a related yet independent research agenda explicitly “[c]oncerned with understanding the character and pattern, origins, rationale, and consequences of [inter-organizational] relationships” recently emerged (Cropper et al. 2008: 4). While such an interest may not be completely new to the study of IOs (just as global governance has a longer intellectual history) (Joensson 1986), the recent proliferation of contributions focused directly on inter-organizational relations suggests an ongoing intellectual need, at least perceived as such, to understand complex political realities of organizational overlap in a world of advanced globalization and interconnectedness.1

Whether an authentic description of world politics or not, the notion of increased complexity expressed in both approaches has clearly caught the discipline’s imagery and language as well as the practitioner’s world. Scholars, knowing little about the implications that stem from complex overlaps and governance density feel compelled to engage with this and spell out the consequences for the provision of governance. At the same time, practitioners do not hesitate to emphasize the challenges they face as they continue to navigate this complex web of governance in their policy-making. Global governance and the study of inter-organizational relations, arguably, both relate to these scholarly and practical discourses. Sharing in particular the mutual emphasis on complex and dense networks of international organizations and the dependencies between these that exist in world politics today as well as a commitment (or at least proximity to) policy-making, one would expect these two approaches to mutually inform each other. However, it seems that

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1 Among others, consider Welz (2016); Conceicao-Heldt et al. (2015); Franke/Koch (2013); Koops (2012); Brosig (2011); Biermann (2011); Gehring/Oberth/ür (2009) as examples of recent interest in inter-organizational relations. One cannot help but notice the heavy involvement of German scholars in particular in this research agenda which might be a testimonial to the influence of regime theory in the landscape of German IR (Rittberger 1993).
inter-organizational relations focuses mostly on the interaction between intergovernmental organizations defined in legal-formal terms (Koops 2012: 72-3), while global governance takes all sorts of different and predominantly non-state entities, from NGOs to enterprises to epistemic communities, into consideration (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 8-20). As such, there seems to be little dialogue between inter-organizational research and global governance, maybe so because the former appears to be still in its infant stages Biermann (2011: 174) while the latter seems to be preoccupied with itself and the conceptual imprecision it developed over time Weiss/Wilkinson (2014c).

Ironically, I argue, the lack of dialogue also stems mostly from the fact that both approaches are committed to the same ontological foundation. In a nutshell and to be elaborated throughout the paper, both rely on and reproduce substantial understandings of agency. Conceptualizing their actors as unified, bounded, and self-directed entities, both approaches frame their subjects, be they intergovernmental organizations or global governors, in interaction and operating under overlapping mandates but otherwise independent of each other (Porter 2009: 89ff). In other words, while actors cooperate or compete with each other, their agency is stated in absolute terms, prior and past to the interaction. As such, whether advanced within a global governance framework or as inter-organizational relations, current studies of world politics appear somewhat static and still run the danger to be ‘embarrassed by change’ (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 296-9). In other words, neither global governance nor the study of inter-organizational relations consider the origins of institutional density and the conditions under which new entities emerge as ‘global governors’ in the first place (Qin 2016). As Finnemore (2014: 223, original emph.) rightfully argues, both only notice and report the diffusion of agency and the consecutive emergence of inter-organizational relations but do not probe into “the causes and character of proliferating new actors” and thus fail to consider the dynamics which “create these new actors that are now populating the global governance scene”.

Against this backdrop, the motivation of the paper is as follows: Appreciate the main impetus of inter-organizational relations to consider interaction, merge this with global governance’s mantra of pluralized agency in world politics, and reground both in an alternative ontology above and beyond substantialism which limits the conceptual tools available for us to deal with complexity in the first place. With different labels floating around in the discourse, as well as different traditions and intellectual sources referenced to support its claims, relationalism recently gained recognition and momentum in IR and beyond and in particular holds promises to engage with complex and dense arrangements of world politics. Described as an “ontology of entanglement” (Zanotti
Matthias Hofferberth – *Inter-Organizational Relations meets Global Governance*

2017), hailed as the “new [and improved] constructivism” (McCourt 2016), and even proposed to serve as the new core for Political Science in general (McClurg/Young 2011), it seems that more and more scholars in IR either explicitly draw on relationalism (Qin 2016; DeMars/Dijkzeul 2015; Sending et al. 2015) or at least connect to it through its roots in American Pragmatism as they engage in substantial debate on either global governance or inter-organizational relations (Hofferberth 2017; Avant 2016; Franke 2015). Spelling out the assumptions of this new perspective in greater detail, I argue holds the potential to bring these previously unrelated approaches into contact and thereby generate new insights.2

Having laid out its main claims and intentions, the paper proceeds as follows. In a first step, the paper sketches out how global governance relates to international organizations to then provide an ideal-type overview of the new research agenda of inter-organizational relations. After having outlined their shared interest as well as their differences, I introduce relationalism in a second step and discuss its implications for studying global governance and inter-organizational relations. In particular, I proposes to embrace a relational ontology to study the emergence of global governors and frame their interaction in relational configurations. In a third and final step, the potential of such a framing is outlined by capturing some of the dynamics surrounding the UN Global Compact (UNGC). Within this arrangement, interaction and inter-organizational dynamics matter yet are not restricted to formal-legal entities. Rather, all sorts of different entities interact and, in terms of their agency, enter the stage of governance in one instance to fall back in line in others. To capture such dynamics of episodic agency emerging from the relations between all sorts of entities, the concluding section argues that bringing global governance and inter-organizational relations together and situating both within a relational ontology provides important insights otherwise ignored as to when, how, and why new actors emerge. Being able to capture the complexities, ambiguities, and conflicts of global governance and inter-organizational relations, when based in relationalist ontologies, clearly have the potential to stimulate new discussion and further assess their commonalities and differences.

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2 Anecdotal evidence for this momentum is that other references than those below could have been used to advance the argument that relationalism has been recognized, discussed, and applied more frequently in IR in recent years. I am hesitant to call this new focus on relations a turn, though, because, (a) its contours are not quite delineated and spelled out just yet, and (b) one could argue that IR already experienced too many turns recently.
Global Governance and Inter-Organizational Research – *Same, Same, But Different*

Traditionally, IR approached international organizations in terms of their relations to nation states (Franke/Koch 2013: 87-90). Within the paradigmatic debates of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, we saw realists and institutionalists debating why states decided to act through IOs and whether those mattered in world politics (Abbott/Snidal 1998; Cortell/Davis 1996). While disagreeing in terms of how much influence was exercised by and through IOs (Archer 1992), the concurrent frame of this debate implied that IOs were (a) thought of as singular entities and best studied as such, (b) defined through reference to international law and hence cast in formal-legal terms, as well as (c) not considered as independent and purposive political actors (Barnett/Finnemore 1999: 702-3). This limited focus came under attack first in global governance research which, albeit with varying degree, generally emphasizes IO authority and influence, and then, more recently, through the emergence of inter-organizational research (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 12-5). However, as will be shown below, while trying to emancipate itself from established IR theories, research on IOs drawing from either global governance or the inter-organizational approach continues to discuss its subjects as singular entities. Focused on establishing the importance of one’s research and thus of individual organizations in interaction, large parts of current IO research is either still advanced through single or comparative case studies which analyze IOs “in isolation from each other” with little regard for the constitutive effects of inter-organizational relations (Gehring/Oberth/’ur 2009: 125). Telling examples of this practice can be seen in Weiss/Kamran (2009: 72-76) and their discussion on IOs in global governance, as well as in the textbook chapters of Davies/Woodward (2014) dedicated to individual IOs respectively.\(^3\)

Such a take on IOs seems somewhat strange, to say the least, if one considers the shared notion of global governance and inter-organizational research to consider the inherent complexity of world politics that stems from overlapping mandates, converging missions, and overall institutional density that both approaches take for granted. In this sense, global governance and inter-organizational research share an immediate connection

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\(^3\) It is safe to assume in this context that, just as realism was allowed “to set the research agenda” for IO studies in the 1980s and early 1990s (Martin/Simmons 1998: 742), the inter-paradigm debates of the 1990s, their focus on state actors, as well as their substantial ontologies influenced and continue to influence global governance and inter-organizational research on IOs today. The inclination to organize our classes and syllabi around individual IOs and introduce them separately in our World Politics and Global Governance classes might be considered as another case in point.
since both draw from the same logic: world politics are best defined by interdependent and thus complex issues which demand cooperation and for which we see governance occurring on and between different levels. Crime and terrorism, trafficking of people, weapons, and drugs, global warming, health, and migration, as well as global trade and finance, just to mention the broad issue areas, all demarcate complex and challenging ‘problems without borders’ and hence do not sit well with neatly defined and bounded actors, be they states, IOs, non-state, or collective governance arrangements. Rather, they create mutual dependencies for problem-solving and hence demand close cooperation between different levels of governance. In these assemblages, no single entity maintains full problem-solving capacities but rather depends on others and thus engages in inter-organizational relations (Weiss et al. 2005: 286). As a consequence, institutional density and organizational overlap have become political reality which is why it is instrumental for IR scholars to understand “how IOs and other sorts of organizations interact, cooperate, use one another for their own purposes, and how they sometimes compete with each other” (Franke/Koch 2013: 86). Finnemore provides an even more direct link between the study of inter-organizational relations and global governance by arguing that global governors and their governance activities are constituted through competition or cooperation originating in organizational overlap and institutional density:

“Global governors compete, conflict, cooperate, delegate, and divide labor in a host of ways we have not always examined systematically, but should. Those trying to influence global policy may be in direct and obvious conflict as when advocacy groups clash with states or with each other. Outcomes then may range from victory for one side, to compromise of many types, to more dysfunctional eviscerations of the formally victorious policy by the losers [. . . ]” (Finnemore 2014: 223)

To better understand their relationship as well as to gauge the potential and parameters for bringing both together, the following two sections provide separate, brief accounts for global governance and the study of inter-organizational relations. While the section on global governance in particular discusses some of its intellectual history, the section on inter-organizational research will provide a structure to relate different approaches clustered together under the label. At the same time, both sections outline how the respective approach relates to IOs in particular and why these actors are discussed as separate, independent entities in the first place.

**Global Governance and IOs**

The study of governance and order on a global scale obviously has always been discussed in IR in one way or another. However, in order to develop and advance a more specific
and analytically sharper term, various authors during the early 1990s ‘bundled’ certain assumptions of studying world order anew and thereby created what later came to be known as global governance. Four assumptions in particular stood out which, taken together, distinguished this new narrative from other approaches to world politics: (1) the perception of governance problems to be potentially global in nature and hence the need to find new, potentially global solutions, (2) the analytical consideration of other actors beyond the state to provide such solutions, (3) the notion that ‘order’ as a precept for governance is more than formal-legal authority and is constantly undergoing change, and (4) the articulation of an explicitly normative interest to direct this change (Rosenau 1992; Finkelstein 1995; Hewson/Sinclair 1999). None of these assumptions in and of themselves were unique to global governance. Taken together, however, they created a certain intellectual momentum in the early 1990s as different authors weaved them together in a fashion that led to the emergence of a new approach distinct enough to separate it from other and poised to liberate IR from its self-made straightjackets of state-centrism, paradigm wars, and rationalism.4

In terms of its intellectual history, global governance, among other traditions, heavily drew from the English School and the study of transnational relations (Dunne 2005: 72). As such, Rosenau (1992) and others did not limit themselves to the study of IOs. Rather, for them, global governance was precisely defined by its multidimensional, polyarchic nature resulting from an interplay of a range of different entities involved. Both the governance provided as well as the authority exercised, it was argued, cannot be limited to legal-formal terms but also involves other modes of involvement and recognition (Lake 2010). In other words, nation states and IOs are still prominently featured among the range of actors to be considered. However, neither fully exceed the list of global governors by themselves as other non-state and transnational entities provide governance as well (Weiss/Kamran 2009). This comprehensive focus, arguably, benefited and hamstrung global governance at the same time. Compared to its theoretical predecessors as well as other contemporary research agendas discussing similar themes, global governance as a paradigm arguably has always been less precise and analytically sharp. At the same time, its interest in ‘larger questions’ and its ability to connect (and ultimately annex) different discussions, theories, and topics makes global governance attractive to many IR scholars (Barnett/Sikkink 2008).

4 This section draws heavily from Hofferberth (2015) but leaves out the real-world developments which further facilitated the rise of global governance.
Thus, while global governance by its very definition cannot be reduced to particular actors, the paradigm itself remains suspiciously silent on the notion of agency, at least in theoretical terms. For the most part, agency simply diffuses and these processes are taken for granted and used as starting points for further research. More explicitly, we see detailed case studies advanced in which either specific international organizations, NGOs, multinational corporations, think tanks, or epistemic communities assumingly made a difference and hence were framed as ‘global governors’ (Avant et al. 2010a). Thus, while greatly expanding our empirical understanding of world politics, global governance did not provide a discussion of agency in theoretical terms as it merely advanced anecdotes of diffused agency of entities previously not considered.

As such, while without doubt making important contributions to the study of IOs, global governance ultimately “remains conceptually unclear how various kinds of organizations and other constituents of world politics can be involved in examinations of inter-organizational relations” (Franke/Koch 2013: 92). Put differently, while global governance encourages us to think governance in terms other than government, we have yet failed to come up with alternatives to think agency within global governance in terms other than resting in the substance of individual, autonomous entities which, for reasons seldom considered, have become global governors and thus can be studied (Jackson/Nexon 1999).

In fact, one can argue that by including all sorts of global governors and by emphasizing their particular relevance and autonomy vis-á-vis nation-states, global governance has only further established the practice of separating actors from their environment and assuming them to act self-directed and independent. In other words, by emphasizing that more actors are now involved in global governance and that we need to conceptualize them in a broader, polyarchic fashion, we have only reinforced the notion of individualistic agency by considering, albeit now multiple, still discrete and singular entities in their solo acts (Finnemore 2014: 223). Instead of discussing agency in theoretical terms, global governance’s empirical emphasis on non-state actors in particular only aggravated the issue of reducing complexity and ignoring overlaps. In other words, in its attempt to broaden the notion of agency beyond the nation state, by emphasizing the importance of other entities, global governance has only reinforced the ontology of substantialism and did not follow the arguments inter-organizational research advanced (see below). Ultimately, while plethora of different case studies on particular actors have been justified and published under the framework of global governance, it failed to provide elaborated

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5 Note already the black and white approach of substantialism to be further discussed below – an entity is either a global governor or not, as if this transition is simple and once and for all.
answers in terms of “which actors truly have agency – which actors are agents of global governance”, at least in theoretical terms (Hoffmann/Ba 2005: 255). Put differently, while opening the discipline in substantial terms, global governance did not – or at least not equally well – embraced the emphasis on interaction to provide a theoretical framework relating different global governors engaged in the provision of public goods (and bads) (Avant et al. 2010b).

**Inter-Organizational Relations and IOs**

Against this background, the recent proliferation of research on inter-organizational relations, arguably, can be considered as a response to some of the shortcomings of global governance research. In particular, it seems to me that there is a strong preference driving this new agenda to be more focused and more precise, in particular in methodological but also in empirical and theoretical terms. However, despite this preference, different contributions to this new field, if it can be described as such at all, draw from different theories and frameworks. Simply put, inter-organizational research remains as theoretically diverse and eclectic as the subfield within which it emerged. In addition, as Biermann (2011: 174) argues, this new field is still in its infant stages and “in a period of experimentation”. More specifically, and to some extent more challenging for the consistency of the research program, different understandings of the very term ‘inter-organizational’ seem to exist, and foundational ontological commitments have not been spelled out in their theoretical implications, let alone been related or reconciled. Hence, one task at hand, in addition to further empirical studies and theoretical concept development, is to take stock and relate it to global governance and prior forms IO research.\(^6\)

Drawing on regime theory (Young 1996) and advancing case studies from different issue areas with a particular on environmental governance (Orsini et al. 2013; Falkner/Gupta 2009; Oberthür/Gehring 2006; Rosendal 2001), inter-organizational research is explicitly focused on ‘institutional interlinkages’, interaction, overlaps, and regulatory convergence between different organizations. Its collective rationale thus lies in the empirical observation that multiple organizations are increasingly engaged in co-provisions of governance for the same issues as they overlap both in their missions and responsibilities as well as their mandates and competencies. As Brosig (2011: 147) puts it, “we

\(^6\) Obviously, this is an endeavor that can be challenged on many terms. The two most pressing dangers that I can think of is (a) doing injustice to individual contributions by ‘reading them the wrong way’ and thereby (b) unnecessarily disciplining and constraining research in such an early stage. However, given the importance of explicating different perspectives and ontologies as well as relating them, I think it is worthwhile to take the risk for the time being.
can observe that organisational overlap, dispersed competencies and mutual dependencies between policy fields are increasing and actively fostering organisational interplay”. However, while sharing this commitment in empirical terms, contributions published under the label of and in reference to inter-organizational relations appear to be ambivalent and diverse in terms of their theoretical commitments. As to theoretical orientations, we see a diverse range of different approaches including references to organizational studies and network theories (Knoke/Chen 2008; Biermann 2008), transaction costs and resource dependence approaches (Hennart 2008; Brosig 2011), sociological-institutionalist framework (Holzscheiter 2015), and even a pragmatist-inspired theory of action (Franke/Koch 2013). In addition, contributions differ in regards to (a) what kind of entities should be considered as organizations in the first place and (b) what ontological assumptions should be advanced to make sense of and conceptualize their interaction.

While the first dimension reflects the traditional intergovernmental/transnational distinction present in IR and global governance (i.e. whether one should only consider organization in a narrow sense or all sorts of different entities) (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 25-35), the second dimensions involves decisions whether analytical primacy should be given to entities in interaction or whether the focus should explicitly be on the interaction between said entities. Bringing these two dimensions together, we can roughly organize current inter-organizational research in a 2x2 ideal-type matrix representing the diversity of the agenda while also showing how the majority of contributions are advanced. While surely not the only way to structure the emerging research program, becoming aware of such foundational differences should contribute to an informed and engaged discussion among scholars interested in this field.⁷

Starting with the horizontal axis, Franke/Koch (2013: 93ff) and Biermann (2011: 173) remind us that we can think of inter-organizational relations in a narrow or in a broad sense. Referring it exclusively to formal entities with state members and permanent secretariats (Pevehouse et al. 2004: 103-04), we can conceive inter-organizational relations as the exclusive interplay between legally constituted and formally recognized intergovernmental organizations. Based in such a framework, ironically echoing traditional IO research in IR, inter-organizational relations are defined as the “the links, relationships and modes of interaction between two or more [legally constituted] international

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⁷ As with any such matrix, the ideal types outlined do not take nuances and grey areas into consideration. In addition, the authors featured as well as others discussed below should be understood as illustrative examples only since their full arguments cannot be captured in the matrix which nevertheless provides some orientation and a starting point for further, more detailed systematizations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entities Considered</th>
<th>Formal, intergovernmental organizations only</th>
<th>Both formal and informal, state and non-state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>entities in interaction</td>
<td>overlap between otherwise independent formal IOs (Brosig 2011)</td>
<td>overlap between all kinds of ‘global governors’ (Biermann et al. 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Analytical Focus</td>
<td>interaction and its effects on entities</td>
<td>constitutive effects on formal yet interdependent IOs (Weiss et al. 2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
organisations” which calls for a “research agenda that examines the origins, processes and outcomes of partnerships between [these intergovernmental] organisations” (Koops 2012: 72f). This perspective is often advanced when considering IOs (co-)operating in a specific world region or when interested in determining how different IOs influence each other within a certain policy field (Jørgensen 2009).\(^8\)

Against this focus on formal IOs, different authors, picking up on the axiomatic assumption of global governance of pluralized and dispersed agency, have argued in favor of a more comprehensive approach which includes all kinds of different entities interacting in world politics (Karns et al. 2015 (3); Weiss/Wilkinson 2014a). Arguing that all kind of entities can be framed as global governors (Avant et al. 2010a), there seems to be no reason to limit the list of entities which have to deal with organizational overlaps to intergovernmental organizations. Rather, in a world increasingly characterized by both formal and informal, state and non-state authority, “institutions [and arguably even looser forms of social cooperation and interaction] not based on international conventions and […] not dispose[d] of a permanent secretariat” need to be considered as well when conceptualizing and theorizing inter-organizational relations (Franke/Koch 2013: 93). Adapting the terminology of Organizational Studies rather than traditional IR, organizations in this perspective are broadly defined as either “public, business, or non-profit and the relationships [between them] can range from dyadic, involving just two organizations, to multiplicitous, involving huge networks of many organizations” (Cropper et al. 2008: 4). Above and beyond intergovernmental overlap, there is thus a strong emphasis on private, non-state actors engaged in overlapping public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives to fully capture the complex realities of global governance today (Büthe/Mattli 2011; Hall/Biersteker 2002; Cutler et al. 1999).\(^9\)

In terms of the vertical axis, we can differentiate between approaches focused on entities involved in interaction (i.e. substantialism) and approaches emphasizing the constitutive effects of interaction on said entities (i.e. relationalism) (Cropper et al. 2008: 8). Given the prominence of the EU in different policy fields and the ensuing “organisational overlap, dispersed competencies and mutual dependencies” (Brosig 2011: 147) caused by the parallel emergence and development of regional and global governance, we see this formal view of inter-organizational relations often advanced in European Union studies on interaction with and within the UN system (Laatikainen/Smith 2006) or in relation with other organizations (Orsini 2014; Galbreath/Gebhard 2010; Jørgensen 2009).

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\(^9\) Following this broader understanding of organizations, usage of the term ‘organization’ from hereon implies a range of all sorts of actors engaged in global governance with some of them not meeting the requirements specified under the formal-legal perspective often entertained in IR. References to ‘IOs’ on the other hand should be understood as explicit references to formal and intergovernmental organizations in the narrow sense.
4). In other words, contributions on inter-organizational relations can start with entities and frame them in interaction or argue that it is the very \textit{between} that defines and determines entities and their governance. Focusing on entities in interaction on the one hand, either in formal or informal terms, assumes their existence prior to and independent of the organizational overlap in which they find themselves. Simply put, actors precede the inter-organizational interaction yet at the same time the outcome of the interaction is determined by the fact that multiple actors are involved (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 293-296). As such, inter-organizational relations do not constitute the involved actors, but are rather the result of these actors working together or against each other. In other words, actions are perceived to take place among different entities which remain unchanged throughout the interaction (Emirbayer 1997: 285-286). We can thus conceive inter-organizational relations as a function of the existence of independent organizations which, by choice, chance or accident, overlap in their mandates and responsibilities but which otherwise, in ontological terms, exist outside these relations as well (Brosig 2011).\textsuperscript{10}

Contrary to such a perspective, we find approaches on the right hand side of the table which argue that the relations between entities are more important than the entities themselves. Drawing on the notion of social embeddedness, such approaches do not treat actors “as autonomous from their social, cultural, and material environments” nor do they analytically distinguish them “from the practices and relations that constitute them” (Jackson/Nexon 2013: 553). Rather, since mutual dependencies are thick and fates are shared, it is within inter-organizational relations in which global governors perceive of themselves (and relevant others) as such and determine their interests and actions in relation to each other. In other words, global governance is more than just solo acts responding to each other as the very status of being involved as a global governor is derived from the interaction they are engaged in and the governance activities they exercise. Broadly speaking, the interaction for any given issue itself tells us who is involved since there is no immediate and context-independent definition of agency available to determine who is involved. Relationalism, in other words, offers an ontology to consider inter-organizational relations that allows us to focus on its processes without substantializing either their input or their outcome (Avant et al. 2010b: 8-9).

With the possible ideal-types of interorganizational research now outlined, we can now locate where and how the majority of actual work is conducted. Arguably, this falls into the top-left cell as the dominant take on inter-organizational relations seems to fo-

\footnote{10 Obviously, this perspective ontologically corresponds more to the notion of studying formal IOs in particular which is why we find more research in the top left corner than in the bottom one.}
cus formal relations between legally established, intergovernmental organizations (Brosig 2011). In addition and in line with the discipline’s long-standing focus on single actors, the majority of studies seem to be committed to, or at least start from, individual organizations involved rather than focusing on the relationships themselves (Cropper et al. 2008: 4-5). As such, it is fair to conclude that the reminiscence of traditional IO research and not so much the notion of global governance influences the study on inter-organizational relations, at least when it comes to the selection of actors to be considered in the first place. In addition to this actor bias, it seems that inter-organizational research as well as global governance lean towards substantial ontologies and focus on governance outcomes of organizational overlap rather than on agency dynamics and constitutive impacts on the actors involved. Consider for example the notion of ‘forum-shopping’ for a moment, which seems to suggest that any particular actor can choose between different organizations. While discussions focus on the outcome of such dynamics, assumptions needed to maintain this notion in the first place – the ability anchored in the single actor to rationally choose between different fora and the lack of foundational commitment to any organization – are less often discussed.\footnote{The fact that the majority of contributions appears to follow this line of reasoning as well as the empirical nature of many contributions might explain why the discourse settled on the terminology of ‘inter-organizational relations’ instead of using alternative descriptors in the first place.}

Overall, the main and obviously important yet somewhat limited addition of inter-organizational research seems to rest in the consideration of multiple organizations rather than focusing on one. A more comprehensive engagement with global governance on the one hand to broaden its selection of organizations and the equally important development of ontological alternatives based on relationalism on the other hand, I argue, can help to further establish and elaborate the new field at the same time. More specifically, it might allow us to get a better sense of world politics defined by ever-increasing interconnectedness and the ongoing emergence of different types of authority and agency (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014c; Lake 2010). In this vein, the next section specifies the ontological commitments of relationalism and translates this into the notions of ‘relational configurations’ to study both global governance and its ensuing inter-organizational relations.
Putting Relationalism into Practice: Global Governance and Inter-Organizational Relations as Relational Configurations

Speaking broadly, a relational ontology stresses the social and hence dynamic character of human existence. More specifically, in a terminology first advanced by Dewey/Bentley (1949), relationalism frames agency and actors in trans-actional rather than self-actional or inter-actional terms. Whereas self-action and inter-action reflect ontological stances “where things are viewed as acting under their own powers”, trans-action argues that “our very capacity to act in the first place originates in relations” (Dewey/Bentley 1949: 108). As such, in a trans-actional framing, “[t]here is no pure ‘individual’ action (or agency) outside, beside, or prior to social relations” (Dèpelteau 2008: 63). Relations are more than just mere “link[s] between structure (situation, context, condition) and social actors (with their dispositions, motivations, reasons, intentions)” as they are considered to have ontological primacy and come first to constitute both structure and actor (Donati 2011: 31). In other words, it is “interactions between the social actors and the polity [which] are mutually constitutive all the way through, right down to the actors’ core selves” (Epstein 2013: 289).  

With both approaches laid out in their respective takes on IOs, the following section outlines in more detail how the study of global governance and inter-organizational relations could benefit from adapting such an ontology. The main argument is straightforward: Simply adding to the study of international organizations new actors as global governors or an interactive dimension by considering two or more organizations in their overlaps, seems to not fully capture the transactive dynamics and complexities characterizing world politics today. Rather, bringing both together in a relational framework stresses the processual and complex character of global governance and inter-organizational relations and thereby provides not only insights into which agencies are involved but also how they emerged as such and continue to change within the interaction over time. In other words, if “[t]he starting point is a relational one which gives analytic primacy to the links between organizations”, one cannot start research with a predefined list of organizations and then discuss their interaction (Biermann 2011: 173). Rather, a relational take reconstructs involved actors as well as their changing characteristics and properties as they continue to emerge in the process (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 301-4). In other words, both in global

12 The emphasis on the dynamic nature of human existence should not be confused with the notion of permanent change, though. Stabilized agency can equally well translate into long-term stasis, as Jackson/Nexon (1999: 314) elaborate.
governance and in inter-organizational relations, “the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction” and those studying these things have to approach their phenomena with open tools to capture such foundational dynamics (Emirbayer 1997: 287).

If global governance and inter-organizational relations (or, more precisely, the respective governance issues and the entities involved) are indeed processes, any attempt to study them needs to bracket, both time-wise as well as in a substantial way. To do so, the paper proposes to consider sites of global governance and inter-organizational relations involving multiple entities dealing with a particular issue as relational configurations (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 304-7). Such sites are defined by actors and the processes (by choice or chance) that connect them. Actors and their agency still play a crucial role as they “divide labor, delegate, compete, and cooperate with one another in many ways” and collectively “create issues, set agendas, establish and implement rules or programs, and evaluate and/or adjudicate outcomes” (Avant et al. 2010b: 2). At the same time, they are not able to do so without the processes that link and constitute them. As such, more a heuristic tool than a direct reflection of the real-world, the idea here is to consider how stakeholders of the same problem take ownership in the first place and then relate to each other over time (Freeman 1984; Miles 2012). The actors certainly bring with them certain “agent properties” and engage in the configuration (or consecutively emerge out of them) as “social entity[ies] with the ability to make choices and exercise causal power” based on the recognition of others involved (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 307). Their properties and purposes, however, would not be perceivable nor would they guide action if not for being part of the configuration. Unlike a principal/agent framework (Abbott/Snidal 1998), configurations are not owned nor necessarily consciously designed by the actors involved simply because we cannot even easily determine the actors involved. Furthermore, framing overlapping processes of governance as relational configurations does not imply that involved actors commit to certain values and means of problem-solving or even agree on the specific nature of the problem to solve at all. Rather, we can think of any configuration simply as a consequence of actors, both established and emerging, connected through a ‘shared fate’, so to speak, as they face the same common problem, although they do not have to perceive it as such. In other words, a configuration demarcates those processes and relations of interaction between actors which constitute and determine their ability to affect outcome (Avant et al. 2010b: 22-4).
In a complex world characterized by an abundance of interdependent problems which individual actors cannot solve alone, we see actors more often aggregate otherwise loose processes into more solidified configurations. Not unlike Matryoshka dolls, these configurations relate and contain actors and processes but at the same time can be thought of as yet another process or even an actor on a higher level of aggregation. At the same time, any actor can be disaggregated to a series of processes (Franke/Roos 2010: 1065-66). In addition and aware of the danger of getting lost in overwhelming complexity and infinite regress (Finkelstein 1995; Latham 1999), any particular actor is engaged in an almost endless number of configurations interacting with other actors and even other configurations in different ways and with varying degrees of commitment. Hence, any engagement with a particular configuration (a) always only reflects a particular snapshot or bracket of the actor’s existence in and commitment to world politics, (b) needs to at least be aware of or, even better, relate to other configurations, and (c) consider the ever-changing and shifting nature of configurations as new actors emerge, others opt out, and the overall dynamics change – since any configuration can be thought of as a process itself, it includes occurrences and events that continuously change the dispositions, interpretations, and beliefs of both the actors involved and the overall configuration (Qin 2011: 132-9). The next section frames the UN Global Compact as a relational configuration to illustrate the potential value of such a perspective for both global governance and inter-organizational relations.

The UN Global Compact as a Relational Configuration

If academic and public interest, manifested in research publications and media coverage, could be used as a proxy of institutional relevance and impact, the UN Global Compact would be all but alive and well. After its inauguration 18 years ago and the initial excitement it caused (Judge 2000), it has received significantly less attention over the last few years. At the same time, the initiative itself proves to be quite successful in reinventing itself and including new topics, continues to grow in membership (see below),

13 Hence, what is considered as a configuration, an actor or process depends, for the most part, on the specific point of time for the inquiry as well as the research question(s) one is interested in since the “search for the ultimate microfoundations of analysis” is ultimately fruitless (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 305). To further illustrate this point, we can think of two separate configurations situated on the same level of aggregation (e.g. two regional organizations consisting of different member states) becoming part of a larger configuration on another level (e.g. within the UN). Vice versa, the actors in any particular configuration represent configurations themselves in other settings (e.g. state delegations in the UN and the regional organizations).
and overall appears to be gaining ground within the UN and the governance of and with multinational enterprises (Sagafi-nejad 2008: 201-21). Against this background, the overall assessment of the UNGC appears rather mixed, simply because different criteria and measures (i.e. different conceptualizations of outcome) have been advanced. On the one hand, for those who advocate the UNGC, it remains a strong and important forum for learning, dialogue, and the promotion of CSR. Emphasizing inclusiveness over regulation and enforcement, the UNGC’s open-endedness in this light is framed as its asset (Ruggie 2001; Kell 2005). On the other hand, for those more critical, the UNGC lacks any real biting power and thus represents the shortcomings of global governance. Without increasing its regulatory enforcement capacities, so the argument, the UNGC will remain irrelevant at best and counter-productive for increased corporate accountability at worst (Brühl/Liese 2004; Bruno 2002). With little to no agreement between these diverging accounts, it comes as no surprise that research on the UNGC lost some of its momentum recently (Berliner/Prakash 2015).

For the task at hand, to illustrate potential value of framing global governance arrangements as relational configuration, the UNGC and its institutional set-up features certain characteristics that are worthy of further discussion. Also, given that it directly reflects some of the hopes and commitments of global governance advanced as an “collective effort involving not only the United Nations and corporations, but also international labor and NGOs as core participants” (Ruggie 2000: 291), the UNGC also proves itself to be an interesting arrangement in terms of broadening the research agenda on inter-organizational relations. In the following, by framing the UNGC as a relational configuration, I hope to show some of the dynamics surrounding its origin, membership, and its open-ended mission plus impact as well as how the UNGC relates to other configurations. In light of the preliminary and unfinished nature of this paper and its research (plus the inexcusable polemics that come with it), I want to touch in particular upon (a) discussions to regulate MNEs predating the UNGC with the initiative itself being a major turning points in establishing corporate agency and legitimacy thereof, (b) the many different actors and agencies which interact within and beyond the UNGC, and (c) the open-ended nature of the UNGC leaving us with an undefined arrangement, a shifting and unclear agenda, and overall an organization unsure of its own purpose.
Origin and Impact of the UNGC

Discussions within the UN on how to regulate MNEs first began during the late 1960s which obviously predates the establishment of the UNGC (Dell 1990: 55-72). As such, its inauguration in July 2000 marks more of a turning than a starting point. Considering the UNGC in this fashion and becoming aware of the longer history of the issue helps us to reconstruct its shifts and twists. In 1972 for example, Philippe de Seynes as United Nations Under-Secretary-General initiated the Group of Eminent Persons “to study the impact of multinational corporations on economic development and international relations”, which, only two years later, led to the formation of the UN Commission on Transnational Corporations (Sagafi-nejad 2008: 52). Without going into this early episode in much more detail, it is fair to say that despite a broad mandate that included advisory services, technical assistance, and capacity-building, the initial impetus of this commission, spurred by the G-77 and their call for a New International Economic Order, was to provide a global code of conduct for multinational enterprises that would regulate their behavior (Moran 2009: 92-7). Soon after, though, and in particular championed by the US, attempts were made to shift the debate away from a regulatory framework towards “the promotion of FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] and the Washington Consensus [with] Jeanne Kirkpatrick and other like-minded conservatives [feeling] exonerated by the shift” (Sagafi-nejad 2008: 124).14 Realizing the lack of consensus and the inability to reach agreement between the different positions, the Commission continued to work but lost its initial momentum and was finally dissolved as a ‘failure’ by then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in 1992 (Moran 2009: 97).

Becoming aware of these dynamics helps to put the reinvigorated debate in 1999 by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the actual framework that emerged in 2000 into perspective. At this point in time, due to the influential Report on Global Governance (Commission on Global Governance 1995), notions to regulate enterprises had been effectively replaced by the idea to partner up and cooperate. Against the perception of significantly increased corporate power and the inability to govern these entities, it was argued that “business, as a key agent driving globalization, can help to ensure that markets advance in ways that benefit society” (Rasche/Kell 2010: 2). As such, driven by a functionalist logic and assuming the necessity for integration, enterprises were no longer framed as the problem (or at least part of the problem). Rather, their

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14 In office between February 1981 and April 1985, Jeane Kirkpatrick served under the administration of Ronald Reagan as the 16th United States Ambassador to the United Nations.
governance agency in the UN and beyond was established and legitimized by framing them as the solution and an unavoidable “consequence of globalization” (Whelan 2012: 713, original emph.). This shift obviously explains the particular form of governance – voluntary, principle-based reporting without enforcement – that the UNGC established. Either hailed as ‘learning network’ (Ruggie 2001) or criticized as yet another opportunity for ‘blue-washing’ (Berliner/Prakash 2015), the UNGC surely did not solve the ideological debates that trace back to the 1970s. However, it did ‘succeed’ in establishing the notion that enterprises should be part of these debates.

Membership and Dynamics of the UNGC

Given its growing numbers on the one hand and the lasting criticism on the other hand, there seems to be a reversed correlation between membership in the UNGC and its assessment. With a minor dip in 2005, the UNGC continued to grow over the last 18 years and nearly doubled its membership in the last three years (see figure 1). More importantly, with Nuremberg being the first city to join the UNGC in May 2003, the first academic institution following in September 2003 together with multiple public sector organizations joining over the next years, the UNGC from its very beginning featured great diversity among its members. As of now, among the 12,717 members of the UNGC, 5,209 companies classified as small and medium enterprises plus another 4,368 larger corporations still constitute the single largest group of actors. However, their geographical spread and the different industries they represent as well as the diversity in size and corporate governance structures indicates that the constituency of the UNGC, if such a thing exists in the first place, remains very heterogeneous.\(^\text{15}\)

In addition to companies, academic institutions, and public sector organizations, we further find local (1,060) and global (454) NGOs among the UNGC members, which arguably interact in other relational configurations as well. The same can be said for the local (422) and global (86) business associations which are likely to hold regular meetings and events which feature a subselection of the companies present in the UNGC. Considering these numbers, the networks and dynamics between all UNGC members remain rather elusive, in particular again when focusing on the initiative in a singular fashion and when assuming similar interests among the different group of stakeholders involved (Sell/Prakash 2004: 167-70). Rather further unpacking seems to be in order by considering aggregated opinions voiced within the UNGC, positions advanced over time,

\(^{15}\) Data and classification of membership are directly taken from the UNGC’s website, retrieved September 27, 2017.
and the dynamics of these positions changing in deliberation. In a nutshell, framing the UNGC as a relational configuration in terms of membership dynamics and becoming aware of its diverse, indeed global (in many senses of the word) approach allows the researcher to raise new questions. More importantly, it suggests immediate need for further research on reconstructing attitudes, beliefs, and arguments advanced within the UNGC instead of just considering its outcome in absolute governance contributions.¹⁶

**Agenda and Open-Endedness of the UNGC**

Following this last thought, it comes as no surprise that the UNGC’s agenda remains elusive and vague. Restating its ten principles almost in a knee-jerk reaction over and over again every time questions about the initiative’s mission are raised, means how to realize these principles and who should be involved in which ways in the first place remain suspiciously absent in public declarations. Due to this, in many ways the UNGC remains programmatic (or even generic) which explains the continuous criticism it receives. However, while rightfully pointing out that there are limitations to the UNGC’s impact on corporate behavior, framing and assessing this vague and open-ended agenda plus the lack of authority to enforce it in absolute outcome terms seems to disregard the potential for change. In other words, maybe talk in any relational configuration is not that cheap,

¹⁶ Arguably, since these attitudes, beliefs, and arguments are foundational to the actions of UNGC members, such a reconstruction might ultimately provide better insights than focusing on outcome in absolute terms only and applying rather arbitrary (or at least diverging) criteria for assessment (Hofferberth et al. 2011).
even for multinational enterprises, if their motives and interests emerge from or at least change in interaction rather than existing prior to it.

What remains to be considered than is how the UNGC can impact enterprises in terms of their roles and responsibilities through deliberation and discussion. Conceptually, the effectiveness of any relational configuration must be assessed in terms of its own standards and approaches. Having said this, research should remain critical of any turning points and closings in discourse in which either the need for this closing or the agency of the entities involved are framed in a way that suggests there are no alternatives. Rather than assuming the lack of alternatives, “the range of strategic choices open to us in the present and future” to regulate as well as integrate enterprises in global governance should remain subject to political debate (Zeitlin 2007: 135). The UNGC as the largest initiative in this context constitutes an important forum to discuss these fundamental questions but research on it should be careful to either accept as truth or outright reject its rhetoric. Rather, we might want to reconstruct its justifications and underlying assumptions to capture change (or stasis). As will be further outlined in the following conclusion, being aware of the dynamics involved in this and framing them as the outcome of relational interaction, I believe, helps us to maintain that critical yet engaged distance.

Conclusion & Outlook

By framing the United Nations Global Compact as a relational configuration, I intended to show the potential of bringing together research on global governance and inter-organizational relations. As to the first, the notion to consider governance beyond the nation state clearly brought renewed and welcomed attention to the study of IOs and opened up the field. However, it did so in a peculiar way and, in response to how IR was framed in the 1990s, remained limited to substantial accounts framed in self-actional or inter-actional terms at best instead of considering the constitutive effects of interaction. As such, global governance ironically reproduces the very ontologies which guided the research it considered to be limited and thereby confined itself to a “add new actors and issues and stir” approach as well (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014c: 210). For similar reasons, I argue that the study of inter-organizational relations is often framed as the interaction between legal-formal entities and thus remains limited as well. Granted that this new field is still in its early stages and “a variety of diverging approaches are [still being] tested” (Biermann 2011: 174), the practice-oriented and problem-driven research it advances seem to favor the same ontology that confines global governance (Koops 2012: 75-76).
Such an ontology and its focus on single intergovernmental organizations in interaction no doubt produces important insights. However, I argue, that we can raise different questions (and eventually answers...) by bringing both research agendas together. In other words, given the complexities and ambiguities of multi-dimensional, polyarchic, and overlapping governance, simply adding an *interactive* dimension to the study of international organizations by considering two or more organizations in their inter-organizational overlap while assuming their individual agencies as given, does not capture the *transactive* dynamics inherent in inter-organizational relations. On the contrary, “governance involves the creation of new issues, new interests, new communities, and new modes of action by creative agents”, as well as the establishment of the very agency of said agents in the first place (Avant et al. 2010b: 9). Consequentially, the constitution of new global governors has to be endogenized into our research and its dynamics can best be captured if one considers the different relational configurations involved on different levels and approach their interaction in *trans*-actional rather than *self*-actional terms:

“[I]nteraction is not merely the actors’ way of reproducing themselves. This is the seductive assumption that fools both functionalism and rational choice theory into accepting a social ontology that by making stasis primary loses its ability to explain change. If we would explain change at all, we must begin with it and hope to explain stasis – even the stable entity that is the human personality – as a byproduct. Previously-constituted actors enter interaction but have no ability to traverse the interaction inviolable. They ford it with difficulty and in it many disappear. What comes out are new actors, new entities, new relations among old parts.” (Abbott 1996: 863)

The main motivation to bring global governance and inter-organizational research together then is to be able to consider the very emergence of “stable lineages”, establishing what “we call ‘actors’” in any given situation at any point in time which itself “is something to be explained, not something to be assumed” (Abbott 1996: 863). The obvious challenge in this line of thinking is that world politics reflects the most aggregated and hence complex “social interaction [in its temporal flow] with what is in part a soup of preexisting actors and actions” (Abbott 1996: 863). Obviously, given the complex histories and antecedents of any topic in world politics, by the time we consider a particular instance of it, we immediately find a set of actors (quite often states but also others) operating as global governors. However, their existence in these instances of world politics are still informed by certain assumptions and determined through prior discussion. In other words, just because we find evidence of their ability to influence outcome at the specific time of inquiry, we should not take that entity’s agency for granted. More specifically, since interaction is never just between two actors but takes place in and between larger configurations, bracketing and the respective justifications for particular ways of doing so becomes a
major methodological issue. The notion of relational configurations was introduced to equally examine (a) emerging and established actors within – whether it is states, IOs, non-state actors, or even other configurations – and (b) the processes in which these actors relate to each other as well as other configurations (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 304f).

Being limited by definition to represent only snapshots and brackets of longer processes, studying governance activities in such configurations promises to provide new insights. Applied to the UNGC in a very preliminary and unfinished fashion, I hope to have shown that any configuration has a longer history yet also features critical junctures. Instead of focusing only on the Compact itself, assessments should place this initiative into the larger context of debating and regulating enterprises. This might involve corporate actors but one should not take their agency in these configurations for granted. While remaining somewhat limited to the internal dynamics, the next step in this research would be to consider how the UNGC relates to other instances of global governance in which enterprises become global governors. Assumingly, many other such initiatives find themselves vindicated by the UNGC and thereby further establish the role of multinational enterprises in global governance (Hofferberth 2017). Unpacking some of these dynamics in their relational unfolding helps us to remain critical about any recognition of entities as global governors and in particular of corporate agency. Put differently, the invitation ‘to sit at the table’ and participate in global governance is or at least should be subject to contentious debate.

Relationalism and its emphasis on process, conflict, and contestation in this context reminds us that global governance and the emergence of inter-organizational relations are political projects. Framed in functionalist terms (i.e. justifying the diffusion of agency as a consequence of untapped resources, capacities and expertise), it is these very frames which carry deeply-held cosmologies about the political which constitute their normative if not ideological foundations (Avant et al. 2010b: 6-9). Against this background, as argued by Jackson/Nexon (1999: 296ff), relational ontologies can help overcome the dilemma of substantial ontologies being interested in change they cannot explain. It is this “embarrassment of change” that haunted IR theories for the longest time and now seems to confine both global governance and the new field of inter-organizational relations as well. Focusing on questions of how agency is constituted and emerges within and between relational configurations and how their particular characteristics influence governance in a trans-actional framework, at least allows us to become aware of and maybe eventually understand the dynamics of change inherent in a system as complex as global governance as the search for “what makes the world hang together” continues (Ruggie 1998).
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