

For a quantitative geography of international organizations: The Human Rights Council case

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Abstract

Intergovernmental Organizations are privileged areas for the observation of contemporary dynamics related to the globalization process. This paper examines States and non-governmental organizations geopolitical strategies at the Human Rights Council (resolution sponsorship, statements). Results reveal a strong hierarchy for both categories of actors and allow a world political regionalization.

Keywords

Center-periphery, Human Rights Council, NGO, Regionalization, World society.

Introduction

If geographers have been for a long time interested in politics launched by Intergovernmental Organizations (IGO), and are more and more examining the geographical dimensions of their speeches (Van Hamme *et al.*, 2010 ; Beauguitte, Richard, 2012), the study of their actual

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operation remains rare. Yet these organizations appear as privileged areas for the observation of contemporary dynamics related to the globalization process (Beauguitte, 2011). Three approaches seem particularly fruitful: the study of relationships between actors involved in decision-making; regionalization phenomena revealed by the behavior of actors; the dynamics of the topics covered by these organizations. This presentation pleads for a quantitative and geographical study of IGOs partially based on network analysis. Its aim is less to present definitive results than to present several explanatory approaches and to highlight methodological options and their relevance. The first part briefly reviews the functioning of the Human Rights Council (HRC), its objectives, and presents the available data. The second part focuses on sponsorship process. A third part deals with configurations of relations between States and between States and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The conclusion suggests other possible leads and seeks to generalize the approach proposed to other intergovernmental organizations.

A young institution: the Human Rights Council

Procedures

The Human Rights Council (HRC) was founded in 2006 by the General Assembly (resolution 60/251) to replace the Commission on Human Rights, a widely discredited organ from the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC – for the circumstances of the creation, see Cox, 2010; for expectations from NGO sphere, see Terlingen, 2007). In the United Nations (UN) system, where the structures are added to each other at a rapid pace, the removal of an organ and its replacement by a specific institution is a rare event. Based in Geneva, this new

institution is composed of 47 members (UN Member States) elected by the UN General Assembly by an absolute majority for a period of three years¹.

As all UN agencies, the distribution of seats respects an 'equitable geographical distribution': 13 seats for African States, 13 Asian States, 6 Eastern Europe States, 8 Latin American and Caribbean countries and 7 Western European and other States. Three regular sessions are held each year in March, June and September. Special sessions are organized in case of emergency in a given region of the world. A dedicated website provides all information needed regarding the agenda of the institution².

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

One of the main tasks of the HRC is the Universal Periodic Review (UPR): Its objective is to assess the human rights situation in all UN member States. Three documents provide the raw material for the evaluation: a report of twenty pages presented by the country concerned; a ten page report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights summarizing the information gathered by the UN in the country (mostly a summary of treaties and conventions signed); a ten page report of the High Commissioner on NGO positions. When the final report is submitted, NGOs have 20 minutes of speaking time to comment it. This involvement of NGOs at all stages of the process as one of the great original features of the functioning of the HRC: they are very present at the ECOSOC and at the major UN conferences (Riles 2001; Schechter, 2005) but not currently associated with the work of the other institutions.

Data

In 1993, the UN began to scan all documents produced and, the HRC being established in 2006, all the current

information is available on its website (meeting minutes, resolutions texts, States and NGOs statements, etc.). It is also possible to register on its extranet to gather, for example, all texts written by all NGOs on all issues... The problem here does not lie in the lack of information but in its abundance.

Two databases are under construction regarding practices at the HRC:

- a database regarding resolutions and decisions (topic, vote and sponsorship);
- a database regarding the actors (States, regional groups, NGOs, other institutions).

The first base will allow to produce world regionalizations based on sponsorship and vote behaviors (Who joins to propose a text on a particular subject? Which groups of countries always vote in a similar way?). The second will permit to create a typology of actors according to their involvement in the HRC work.

Finally, the database available at <http://www.upr-info.org/en/review> (accessed March 30th 2015) allows to gather all recommendations made by States during the Universal Periodic Review. The treatment of more than 38,000 recommendations (with the following modalities: cycle, date, topic, accepted or rejected etc.) will highlight bilateral relations at the HRC (MacMahon, 2010).

The first database can be considered as a bunch of bipartite networks joining resolutions adopted respectively with keywords, vote position and sponsors. The second one consider several levels of relations between actors (States-NGOs, NGOs-NGOs, States-regional groups). And finally, the last database can be considered as a valued matrix between all pairs of UN member States.

States and regional groups: cooperation(s), conflict(s), regionalisation(s)

The behavior of the regional groups in IGOs has produced an extensive literature, especially in the case of the European Union (Mechi *et al.*, 2014). But the simultaneous consideration of stakeholders from different scalar levels (local and global NGOs, States, supranational groups) remains rare (for a programmatic textbook, see Muldoon *et al.*, 2005).

New arena and old behaviors: votes at the HRC

The institution is young, the number of members is reduced, it was then possible to imagine that the voting behavior at the HRC would differ from the behavior observed in other UN bodies. First results show that it is not the case: as in all UN fora where prevails the rule of absolute majority (almost everywhere except in the Security Council), a clear partition appears between the US & Israel, Western European and other States (Japan, South Korea, Australia, New-Zealand and Canada), and the rest of the world. As in the General Assembly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is sufficient to supply more than a third of the votes and to reject the US (and Israel) in a marginal position – it must be remembered that they boycotted the HRC until 2009. One of the few notable differences regards the role of China, which seems more determined at the HRC (high number of negative votes) than in other UN organs – China was and remains a clear opponent to the implication of NGOs in the UN system, especially when dealing with human rights issues....

Writing a resolution together: Between national strategies and regional dynamics

The practice of sponsoring resolutions at the UN is relatively

flexible: there is no limit (minimum or maximum) to the number of States sponsors, and one or more groups can sponsor a same text. Human rights being a particularly sensitive issue at the UN, studying the bipartite graph State – resolution can address several issues in contemporary political geography: Is there a growing involvement of regional groups in resolution process? Is the graph connected or do separate blocks appear? What are the most common associations of States and can they be explained by one or more distances (neighborhood, religious, political or cultural similarity etc.)? Finally, what are consensual themes and the controversial topics at the HRC?

Resolutions and decisions adopted during the first five regular sessions of the HRC (2006-2007) were considered as a bipartite network. The presence of regional or political groups appears strong: 5 different groups for 25 resolutions and decisions. Two main types of resolutions can be highlighted: consensual resolutions sponsored by 40 or more States; resolutions whose sponsors are grouped by policy, regional and/or religious affinity (Organization of Islamic Conference and Arab States, EU, etc.). At least two complementary analysis are required: the evolution of political and spatial configurations; coupling the network analysis with textual analysis of the resolutions. Several network measures could also complete this first approach: especially centrality measures (degree especially), density and centralization index.

The Universal Periodic Review: bilateral relations & NGOs participation

One of the major claim of non-European States during the negotiation was to get an institution that would not adopt a politic of shaming and selectivity (Abebe, 2009). The option used was to create a process involving all UN member States

in a similar way, the UPR. At least two different approaches can be chosen; bilateral relations between States and relations between NGOs and States. But other networks (NGOs collaboration for example) could be considered to get a deeper view of this relational system.

When States send recommendations

The first cycle of the UPR has allowed the evaluation of the human rights situation in the 193 UN Member States between 2008 and 2011³. Studying bilateral recommendations (over 21,000 recommendations of which 15,600 have been accepted) can be carried out by combining flow analysis and network analysis. Does the distribution of flows obey to logical proximity or sharp discontinuities does appear? Is there a logic of retaliation between groups (if A criticizes B then C, B ally, criticized A)? First tests show that there is no relationship between the number of recommendations issued and number of recommendations received. The graph of accepted recommendations is very different from the one of noted ones (greater density, lower diameter, less variance for degree centrality). It also seems to have a great number of convenience recommendations (no impact measures suggested by an ally) for inflating the volume of the accepted recommendations. And there is also an absence of relation between gravity of human rights situation and number of recommendations received. So this data set is more an analysis tool of geopolitical relations than one giving information about respect for human rights...

Global NGOs, local NGOs and GONGOs

Upon submission of the report to the State under review, accredited NGOs⁴ can make comments on this report. The content of these remarks is very variable: it can be

congratulations for adopting a given measure, a defense of the regime or, conversely, strong criticism against the State under review. If some States were prompt to associate civil society to the elaboration of the report, others choose to promote State-driven NGOs to saturate the debate with support demonstration (Sweeney & Saito, 2009).

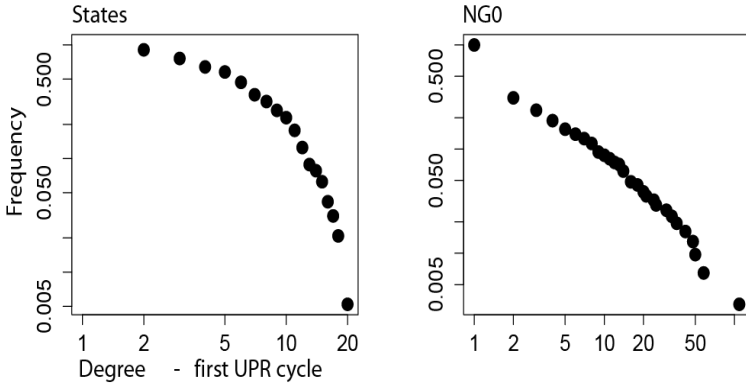


Figure 1 - Degree distribution of States and NGOs during the UPR (First cycle)



Figure 2 - A worldwide expertise, Amnesty International statements of the UPR (2008-2011). A red dot indicates that AI made a statement during the presentation of the country final report during the first cycle of UPR.

A first exploratory treatment examining all the NGO interventions during the presentation of the final report allowed creating a bipartite graph State – NGOs. Figure 1 shows the degree distribution for these two sets of actors.

The difference of comments received by States varies from 1 to 10 while the number of comments made by NGOs varies from 1 to 100, the organization taking the floor the more often being *Amnesty International* (Figure 2).

These first results allowed to construct a typology into 3 main classes:

- global NGOs present continuously and able to provide an expertise regardless of the country in question, these NGOs being generalist (*Amnesty International*, *Human Rights Watch*) or thematic ones (*COC Netherlands* and *ILGA-Europe* working on homophobic discrimination for example);
- local and regional NGOs whose expertise is limited to a State or a sub-continent. Less active, they constitute the majority of NGOs present in HRC;
- the GONGOs (governmental non-governmental organizations...), that is to say, NGO-led government that appear only once to warmly congratulate the country under review – China, Cuba, and Venezuela appear as specialists in this particular type of NGOs.

A still unexplored option regards to the statements made by NGOs on behalf of other NGOs as well as the statements made jointly. If time constraints (20 minutes of talk time for all NGOs) and cost (sending a delegation to Geneva is expensive) can explain these joint statements, it would be interesting to map these collaborations accurately in order to know better relations between NGOs. A first exploratory analysis seems to show the strength of the religious nature of links between NGOs in the writing of joint statements (notably for Christian and Muslim NGOs). If the construction of the world society is a long-standing hypothesis (Burton, 1972), a spatial quantitative study of the

behavior of non-State actors in IGO could provide a useful mean of validation.

Perspectives

Two main approaches were presented here: the study of interactions between players of different nature (States, groups, NGOs) and regionalizations which could be deduced from the behavior of actors (vote and sponsorship). Many other options could be explored to move from the description of a comprehensive relational system to elements of explanation regarding global policies and spatial dynamics of the system. The study of themes and texts of the resolutions, of the speeches of the actors, the use of quantitative and qualitative methods (interviews, observations) would undoubtedly enrich this approach. Projects under development with historians and political scientists aim to provide common analysis grid for IGO, grids finally taking into account the spatial dimension of diplomatic relations between actors.

¹ After two consecutive mandates, a State has to wait at least one year before a new election.

² <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/HRCIndex.aspx>, accessed March 30th 2015

³ The 194th UN member state, South Sudan, entered in July 2011 (resolution A/RES/65/308) and was not involved in the first cycle

⁴ The process of accreditation is highly flexible at the HRC as virtually all NGOs willing to make a statement can do it – if time constraint allows it.

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