
9.1.2. What is an “international organization”?

The UIA database, the source of the Yearbook of International Organizations, profiles “non-profit” “international” “organizations” according to broad criteria. It therefore includes many bodies that may be perceived, according to narrower definitions, as not being fully international, or as not being organizations as such, or as not being of sufficient significance to merit inclusion. Such bodies are nevertheless included so as to enable users to make their own evaluation in the light of their own criteria.

“Organization”: There are forms of social organization that may substitute for more formal or conventional forms, such as a conference series with no continuing committee, virtual organizations, networks, cartels, secret societies, religious sects, and bodies with no formal structure or fixed address. Due to the sometimes-vague structure of such bodies, they may be under-reported.

“Non-profit”: The definition of “profit-making”, and the extent to which any “non-profit organization” may incidentally or deliberately make a profit as defined by particular tax regimes, cannot be unambiguously resolved. This grey area is treated with flexibility, though bodies that are unambiguously constituted as “for profit” or with solely commercial aims are excluded.

“International”: The editors look for the involvement of at least three countries on a more or less equal footing, to the possible exclusion of bi-lateral international bodies and those in which a particular country is dominant. Indications of “internationality” include distribution of board members, location of meetings, rotation of secretariat, source of finance, and membership. Bodies that are focused on, or derive from, a single country are likely to be excluded, which may lead to under-reporting of, for example, aid and missionary societies, or language and cultural activities.

The number and variety of organizations in the UIA database are indicators of the problems of information collection. Documenting organizations and their meetings is challenging for reasons such as the following:

- News of the creation, existence or dissolution of an organization may only be received some time after the fact. Information on an organization’s activities may take time to be received and registered by the editors.
- Some organizations are reluctant to publicize their activities. They may not respond to questionnaires or may omit significant information from their replies. Some may not perceive themselves as sufficiently formalized to be mentioned in the same context as those that are legally established.
- Some organizations are ephemeral creations or are only “activated” for infrequent meetings, events or projects.
- Some organizations have frequent changes of secretariat, making continuing contact problematic.

Approximately 60% of UIA’s profiles of currently active organizations include information on meetings activity. These data form the basis of this report. Some tables in this report also draw on the secretariat and membership information contained in the profiles. In these cases, a selection has been made using UIA’s hierarchical typology, counting only those organizations classified under one of 10 selected types:

- A = federations of international organizations
- B = universal membership organizations
- C = intercontinental membership organizations
- D = limited or regionally defined membership organizations
- E = organizations emanating from places, persons or other bodies
- F = organizations having a special form, including foundations, funds
- G = internationally-oriented national organizations
- K = subsidiary and internal bodies
- N = national organizations
- R = religious orders, fraternities and secular institutes

More information on UIA’s hierarchical typology can be found on the UIA website in the article “Types of organization”.