10.4. Editorial problems and policies

Coverage

The Yearbook attempts to cover all “international organizations”, according to a broad range of criteria. It therefore includes many bodies that may be perceived, according to narrower definitions, as not being fully international 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. For some users, these bodies may even be of greater interest.

The editors are sensitive to the existence of forms of social organization that may substitute for the creation of a more formal conventional organization. A conference series with no continuing committee is one example. Such "organizations" are generally included in one of the Special Types (see the Appendix "Types of Organization).

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 has been treated in a variety of ways with the sensitivity it merits. The editors are attentive to the non-profit objectives of an organization registered under for-profit legal status. Especially problematic are the professional and trade organizations whose existence is in part justified, in their members’ eyes, by the extent to which they defend or improve the members' income.

The editors acknowledge that some types of organization may be totally absent or under-reported within the database, for example virtual organizations associated with the internet (including those of otherwise conventional structure, but also “usenets”, web discussion groups, “listserv” communities etc), criminal networks, cartels and price-fixing rings, mercenary-groups, spy and undercover organizations, terrorist organizations, secret societies, religious sects, family and fraternity groups, bodies with no formal structure or fixed address or associations essentially constituted by a journal subscribership.

The editors have always given priority to bodies that are not focused on, or deriving from, a particular country. This may be construed as under-reporting of certain forms of aid, missionary activity, language and cultural activities, etc.

The editors have traditionally stressed the importance of involvement of three countries on a more-or-less equal footing, to the exclusion of bilateral international bodies and those in which a particular country is dominant. Indications of “internationality” are distribution of board members, location of meetings, rotation of secretariat, source of finance in addition to membership and other such relevant information.

Although in many ways under-reported, and not included in the categories of conventional international bodies, some level of recognition is given to these organization forms in the types clustered under “Other International Bodies” and “Special Types”.

The central concern of the Yearbook has always been that of maintaining comprehensive coverage of international bodies that correspond to its criteria of Types A to D (see the Appendix: Types of organization). The coverage of types E to G is not comprehensive for the following reasons:

- Type E: commissions of international bodies. Only those cited by other bodies, or which appear to have some degree of independent “outer-directed” action are included. A deliberate search for them is not usually made. Less independent bodies are classified as Type K; the least independent are cited only in the “mother” organization’s entry.

- Type F: new forms of organization, organizational experiments and organizational substitutes. Forms most frequently arising in recent years have been networks and, currently, bodies existing only on internet. The emergence of such “bodies” is a constant and useful challenge to any selection criteria. Type F has also been used as a transitional category: it previously contained religious orders (now Type R), and meeting series (now Type S). It currently holds many financing and funding organizations and others with a self-styled structure.

- Type G: national bodies perceived as “internationally active” by international organizations. Clearly it is difficult to define the limits in such a case. In practice, only those which appear international (due to their name or preoccupations), or which are cited with other international bodies, are included. A deliberate search for them is not made.

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Change in editorial policy and practice

While every effort is made to maintain continuity of types of organization, over the period of production of the Yearbook series some new types have been added to the classification system in order to complete the coverage and evolution of the range of organizational forms. This is relevant to understanding the international community of organizations. The editors usually prefer to add a new type to the classification system, rather than modify the definitions of pre-existing types, in order to minimize disruption to the core statistical series.

New types of international organization are usually one of two forms: new kinds of organization (networks, virtual organizations, etc) which have no implications for historical statistics; or an acknowledgement of previously neglected types with a long historical record (e.g. religious orders).

Sources

The descriptions of organizations in this Yearbook are based on information received from a variety of sources. Priority is normally given to information received from the organizations themselves. Questionnaires are sent out between May of any given year and February of the following year (the reporting year). The replies received may neglect to mention significant events (e.g. relocation of the secretariat) that will take place later in the reporting year. Such gaps in information will be corrected only in the following reporting year.

Every effort is made by the editors to check this primary source information against other sources (periodicals, official documents, media, etc.). Equally, and especially when no primary source information is received, the profile of the organization may be updated by consulting secondary sources (print media, websites, documents of collaborating organizations, etc). This information is submitted to the organizations concerned for verification in the following reporting year.

Organizations may over time change their purpose or characteristics. Some changes will have an effect on classification and on statistical reporting. The editors therefore use information from a variety of sources to present the most appropriate static picture of what is essentially a dynamic situation.

Reliability of sources

Because an organization's view of itself has been given priority, and because secondary sources are not always available or reliable, the editors cannot take responsibility for any resulting inaccuracies in the information presented. The editors apologize for any inconvenience this might cause the user.

The information received, even if from a primary source, does not always originate from the person most competent to provide it. From year to year, different people, of different competence or experience within an organization, may be responsible for replying to Yearbook questionnaires. They may be inadequately informed of the complexities of their organization, or unwilling to take responsibility for more than generalities, or lacking the authority or confidence to give information on an evolving, politically sensitive structure. As a result, the information received may be of inconsistent quality.

Organizations in a process of restructuring may be reluctant to provide information or announce anticipated changes. Organizations that have a radical change of policy may evidence some embarrassment at the reality of their own history and may seek to modify this information. Some organizations, or some people within organizations, will deliberately deliver false information. Some organizations report incompletely and/or infrequently because of lack of administrative resources and/or motivation.

It may take a second reporting year, or more, to remedy misleading reporting. A more detailed update of inadequate information initially obtained may necessitate a reclassification of organizational type, thus affecting statistical reporting.

Information collection

The number and variety of organizations in this Yearbook are sufficient indication of the information collection problem. Documenting many organizations is difficult for reasons such as the following.

- Regional proliferation and functional specialization is such that, frequently, organizational "neighbours" do not know of each other's existence.

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- The “creation” of an organization is often the subject of widely-reported resolutions of an international conference, but such resolutions are not always acted upon very effectively – the intent being of greater significance (or practicability) than later implementation.

- Many organizations are ephemeral creations or are only “activated” for infrequent meetings, events or projects.

- A significant number of bodies have secretariats rotated among annually elected officers, making continuing contact somewhat problematic.

- The differing (mis)translations of the name of a body (further complicated by name changes) make it difficult to determine whether one or more bodies exist.

- Many bodies are reluctant to publicise their activities.

- Many active “international” bodies do not perceive themselves as “international” or as sufficiently formalized to be mentioned in the same context those that are legally established.

- Information on the existence, or change in status, of an organization may take time to filter through communication networks and be registered by the editors.

- Organizations may not respond to questionnaires, or may omit significant information from their replies, in which case outdated information from previous periods will be treated as current.

- Information on the creation, existence or formal dissolution of an organization may only be received after the current reporting year, thus affecting reporting by year.

In such a dynamic environment, the time required for information collection may even be greater than the effective life of organization.

Dating information

Organizations may form gradually. A formal organization that evolves from a network or series of meetings may not have a clear date of foundation. There may be several dates that could be considered as the date of founding (*e.g.* first statutes, first officers, first address, first members). Representatives of the organization may have differing views on when the organization started. Similarly the dissolution of an organization may be progressive, rather than formally indicated at a particular date. It is therefore not always evident, even with hindsight, in which reporting year its dissolution should be correctly indicated.

Description length

How much space can be devoted to a particular organization? As a general guide, more information is desirable for organizations in Type B than in Type C; an absolute minimum is the rule for most of those in Type G. However, large, active or structurally complex organizations of any type generally warrant longer descriptions, while relatively inactive or simple bodies merit less space, especially when the aims are evident from the title. This obviously gives rise to difficulties due to the tendency of organizations to inflate their importance according to normal public relations practice. In the case of exaggerated claims, however, when they are briefly stated they can effectively be used to define the organization. This is not the case when organizations claim large membership in many countries. Some supporting evidence is therefore sought although there is a limit to what can be usefully demanded. Normally, however, exaggerated claims are easy to detect and can be handled by limiting the amount of information given and allocating the organization to the appropriate type.

Since it is difficult to obtain information from organizations that do not wish to supply it, some elements of a description may remain incomplete (e.g. budget and staff). The organization may even request that information, such as the country list of membership, should be suppressed because of its political or other significance.

When no information is available, the problem is one of how long to allow entries to remain un-updated before considering the organization inactive. Generally, there is a delay of several years before it is assumed that the body is no longer functioning.

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Censorship

Users should be aware that the editors are subject to pressure from some international bodies to suppress certain categories of information. Reasons given include: (a) the body does not belong with “international organizations”, possibly because it is an informal network (personal not public) or because it is in some way transcendental to the mundane organization of the international community (as is the case of certain religious bodies); (b) the body is of “no possible interest” to anyone else (as is the case of some staff associations of major intergovernmental organizations); (c) mention of the body, or of its normal relationships, attracts unwelcome attention (as in the case of some military bodies in countries where terrorism is a problem); (d) mention of membership of the body may subject members to victimization (as is the case of trade unions with members in countries with severe human rights problems); (e) organizations wish to avoid unsolicited mail (especially “junk mail”). In most cases, the editors resist these pressures; in some cases, the entry is reworded to respect the concern of the body in question. No entries have been eliminated as a result of such pressure.

Evaluation

It has never been the intention of the editors to evaluate the significance of the organizations described or to provide interpretation of the information supplied by an organization. The guiding principle has been to portray the organization as it sees itself usually in words from its own documents, as far as this is possible. The editors cannot verify the claims made in documents received.

The final evaluation of the information presented here must be left to the users of this volume. Users may be assisted in this assessment by whether a full description is included, by the amount of information it has been considered useful to include in the description, by the last date on which information has been received, and by the organization type. See the Appendices "Contents of organization descriptions" and "Types of organization" for further information.

Some organizations included are perceived as highly suspect by other bodies, whether because of dubious academic standing, questionable values, or as a threat to public order. The editors do not act on such judgements, which may be contradicted by others. However, in the case of the very small minority of bodies that seek to mislead through false claims, to defraud or to engage in covert operations, the editors endeavour to juxtapose items of information that draw attention to the questionable aspects of these organizations. The final assessment is left to the user.

Error control policy

It would be unrealistic to expect a Yearbook of this size to be error free. There are various kinds of possible error.

- Errors in information supplied: As noted above, the entries attempt to describe the organizations as they wish themselves to be perceived. Whilst it is possible to detect exaggeration in some claims, it is not always possible to detect errors in information such as budgets, date of foundation, etc.

- Errors due to out-of-date information: Portions of organization descriptions can quickly become out-of-date (especially when the secretariat address rotates among members). Every effort is made to include the most recent information and to date entries accordingly.

- Errors in editorial treatment: Since the editorial treatment of an organization may involve weighing alternative possibilities in documents from different sources, this can result in errors of judgement, which can only be corrected when the organization next receives its entry for updating or other information is received from other sources.

- Errors in keyboarding/proof-reading: Whilst every effort is made to reduce the number of such errors, it is not cost-effective to do this beyond a certain point when there is a print deadline to be met.

- Duplicate entries: Tracing organizations whose names may be (mis)reported in a variety of languages can result in duplicates being detected too late to be eliminated.

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Country names

It is not the intention of the editors to take a position with regard to the political or diplomatic implications of geographical names or continental groupings used in this Yearbook.

The names of countries used may not be the complete official names of those countries. The geographical names used are chosen for the sake of brevity and common usage.

Wherever possible, the country (or territory) name preferred by the organization concerned is used, providing this is possible within the limits of standardization required for mailing or statistical purposes.

It is important to note that some organizations insist on the inclusion of territories on the same basis as countries, or on the inclusion of geographical areas that are not recognized – whether under the specified name or indeed as a definable area at all – by other organizations.

Giving precedence as much as possible to the organization's preferences may lead to what appears to be duplication, as one geographical area may, according to some parties, have more than one possible name.

Some geographical names used in this publication may not, strictly speaking, even refer to geographical areas. An example is groups "in exile", namely a group identifying itself by the name of a sovereign State but not actually present in that State.

Political changes over the years may lead to some questions in an organization's description. Briefly: countries referred to in an organization's description retain their old form when referring to a date prior to the change. For example, towns referred to in events prior to 1991 still retain their country as German DR (Democratic Republic) or Germany FR (Federal Republic), while subsequent dates refer simply to Germany.

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