

## **'Same Same but Different': International Secretariats in Comparative Perspective**

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Secretariats are the central organs of modern international organizations, so much that they are often mistaken for the organizations themselves. Also known as bureaus or commissions, they are in fact the permanent administrative bodies of such organizations, primarily responsible for coordinating their day-to-day work and executing much of their will. Although the international secretariat is indeed only one component of a broader institutional set-up created by the enabling agreement that is reached among the relevant parties (most often States), it serves to hold the wider treaty system together and, moreover, provides the international organization with continuity and a recognizable profile in the global arena. While the role of secretariats has traditionally been limited to performing tasks of a technical-clerical nature, in the modern era they commonly perform policy-related functions as well, increasingly exerting influence and employing technocratic expertise. Rather than merely execute the agenda of the international regime that they serve, they are now often asked to take a substantive part in shaping it. This has led to greater focus on their work, and to a growing recognition of secretariats as international actors in their own right.

This contribution too sets out to take a close look at international secretariats, with the primary objective of providing distilled hard data on how they are structured and what precisely it is that they do. It constructs comprehensive profiles of six select international secretariats, all serving regional organizations that together encompass the four corners of the earth: the Technical Secretariat of the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR); the Secretariat of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum; the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the Secretariat of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA); the Secretariat of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); and the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (OAS). Each of these is put under the microscope for a close examination of its history and evolution, mandate, organizational structure, financial underpinning, day-to-day functions and human resources. Drawing on official sources and direct inquiries to officials, the paper details both the formal attributes and tasks of each secretariat, as well as its actual practices and the position it has within the international organization in which it operates. The result is a formal inventory of secretariats that illuminates the wide array of possibilities for institutional design, and provides a toolbox for those contemplating the establishment of a new secretariat or reforming an existing one.

From the detailed examination of the six secretariats and the parallels of experience which it erects emerge, moreover, several general observations. These include the finding that while scholars may still disagree on whether or not secretariats are vital to the effectiveness of international regimes, States certainly tend to believe that the answer is in the affirmative. Another such finding is that that Member States (and secretariats themselves) have the option of advancing substantive values and worldviews even within the secretariat's seemingly technical operative framework, if they so choose.

The data collected and the comparative perspective further allow for the identification of several institutional parameters that may distinguish between influential secretariats that take an active part in

executing the regional project, and those whose role is far more limited. These parameters go beyond the formal mandate to include, for example, the length of term of the secretariat's head and the existence or not of a legal department within the secretariat. Such an analytical framework enables not only a characterization of the two general types of secretariats, but also the construction of a possible explanation of why Member States might choose either model for their international organization. In short, it is suggested that States wishing to promote a supranational regime dedicated to a multi-purpose regional project will tend to establish secretariats that enjoy bureaucratic authority and are expected to shape the organization's policy rather than merely execute it. In contrast, when Member States opt for an international regime and seek to accomplish a more limited regional objective against the backdrop of significant power asymmetries between them, they will tend to set up a secretariat whose role will be predominantly administrative.