

Introduction to the two *IO BIO* Databases

This introduction discusses the background and purposes of the *IO BIO* project, the *Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations*, set up in 2010 and available at www.ru.nl/fm/iobio, and its two Databases of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and their Executive Heads. One database lists all included international organizations with their successive Executive Heads per organization, the other database provides an alphabetical list of all Executive Heads of all organizations. This introduction to the *IO BIO* project discusses, respectively, the relative obscurity of the executive leaders of these international organizations; the short biography as a genre that sheds light on the careers of these professionals; other available databases of IGOs and their Executive Heads; and the setup of the two *IO BIO* Databases.

Why a Biographical Dictionary of Executive Heads of Intergovernmental Organizations?

In International Relations theory individuals are not considered when variation is explained. In its analysis of policymaking processes the field is strongly inclined to minimize the role of individuals and leave personal factors aside. (Neo)realism holds a negative opinion about both intergovernmental organizations (at best a platform for major powers) and their Executive Heads (only interested in egoistically securing the continuity and health of their own organization) (Waltz 1979: 111). American scholar and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger shared this opinion as a professor, but acknowledged that in practice personalities do make a difference (Byman and Pollack 2001: 108). Although IGOs are restrained by major states, they are increasingly seen as actors that matter in international relations, with their Executive Heads (named Secretary-General, Director, Administrator or similar title) playing prominent roles, just like top politicians do in national political systems and CEOs do in businesses. To play a role that matters Executive Heads may deploy their institutional assets, such as mobilizing organizational expertise, researching alternative policies and strategies, identifying external enemies and supporters and using the organization as a medium to communicate perspectives.

The biographical literature on Executive Heads of IGOs is limited. This leaves us with an incomplete understanding of the variety of people who have held these positions and of the interactions between them. One way to improve this understanding is setting up a Biographical Dictionary with life and career descriptions, as these allow not only to discuss individual careers but also to analyse them as a group.

The Short Biography as a Genre

Biographical Dictionaries with short biographies of deceased people whose professional life contributed to the public sphere (e.g., through literature, art or politics) date back to the nineteenth century. The 'short biography' is a genre by itself. A Biographical Dictionary differs from a 'Who Is Who', that offers useful lists of functions and responsibilities living people have in a certain field. An alphabetical dictionary with short biographies or mini-sized written portraits (roughly up to 3,600 words), however, aims to present a coherent and accurate description of the lives and careers of those included: in this case the Executive Heads of IGOs. Descriptions come from experts or practitioners and are based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, including interviews, autobiographies and other private information that is available. The focus is on the personality of these institutional leaders, their perception of world affairs and their capacity to act and lead the institution with both *internal leadership* (of the bureaucracy) and *external leadership* (among other international actors). Factors that require discussion are self-image (personal values, social and political preferences), personal characteristics (e.g., charisma), available knowledge and expertise, experience, legitimacy and

authority as well as performance, both successful and unproductive. *IO BIO* entries provide, respectively, personal details (birth, parents, marriage, death and portrait), an account of life and work (the entire life and all career positions, including elements such as youth, family, education, first jobs, becoming engaged in international relations, international activities, being Executive Head and life after their international career, with their time in office as Executive Head as central to the entry), and, finally, the so-called APL (Archives, Publications and Literature) (Reinalda 2020).

IO BIO focuses on those Executive Heads of IGOs who have left any mark, be it good, bad, or unusual. In 2025 it published on its website over one hundred open-access entries, covering more than sixty IGOs. To create these life and career descriptions *IO BIO* uses a strict format, explained in its *Author Instructions*, which provide detailed instructions about what should be included in each entry (also with a view to potential comparison). Most information is available through literature, original documents, archives, interviews, internet searches and expert knowledge. Entries should provide more than superficial information, so it helps to understand the influence of the people described. Unlike most Biographical Dictionaries, *IO BIO* is not restricted to deceased persons (an editorial decision made due to greater availability of authors). However, the threshold to include still living former heads is that they should have been out of office for five years or longer and should be unlikely to return to office as Executive Head.

It may be questioned whether it makes sense to set up Biographical Dictionaries in this time of the internet and social media, where so much information about individuals can be easily found by anyone behind a computer, with Artificial Intelligence even making summaries in seconds (be it sometimes with obvious or strange mistakes). However, we believe that writing an accurate and coherent short biography requires both expertise on the topic (the IGO and its Head) and assessment qualities to judge the reliability of available sources and statements. Furthermore, large bureaucracies are often part of institutions that prefer to be in control of what is made public and in what form. Even if transparency is an official policy of an IGO, its archives may remain inaccessible or certain documents may not be disclosed. This ‘closedness’ requires authors to find ‘hidden’ information through, for instance, access to institutions, archival research, a combination of sources or interviews with engaged individuals.

Collecting sufficient and appropriate information is one thing, having an open mind while discovering various components of an entire life and career is another, given that easily spread *myths* may exist. IGOs have been inclined to define their own histories by writing ‘official’ histories themselves, which may lack a scientific or critical eye, because they are written by insiders. Internal conflicts are barely mentioned in official descriptions, although other sources may indicate them. Similarly, autobiographies and interviews may be inclined towards positive outcomes while disregarding less favourable issues and results. Information from internet sources often is incomplete, particularly about what is happening in the institutions internally, and uncritically copied from, or by, other sources. In particular, the policies of Executive Heads and their impact as well as political dimensions of international relations are missing from websites. Short biographies help to reveal these relevant aspects.

Other Databases of IGOs and their Executive Heads

Setting up a database of IGOs and their Executive Heads requires an overview of the field, although it probably is impossible to have a complete overview of all organizations and their Heads.

The Institut de la paix published the first listing of international organizations in its *Annuaire de la vie internationale* (1905). Later listings were coproduced with the Union of International Associations, publisher of the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Saunier 2019) since 1950, or were published by the League of Nations. The most integrated database is

the *Correlates of War* (COW) IGO data sets, which provide information on IGOs from 1815 to 2014, with data collected at 5-year intervals (1815-1965) and annually thereafter (<https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/igos/>). Version 3 of the COW IGO data sets contains 534 IGOs between 1816 and 2014. The maximum number of IGOs in any given year never reaches 400, due to the number of IGOs in any given year that die off ('IGO death') or are consolidated in some way (Pevehouse *et al.* 2020: 494). For 2021 the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Edition 59, 2022-2023, Appendix 3, Table 1: xlv) counted 290 conventional IGOs, 991 emanations (not founded by states alone) and 750 organizations of special form. Among the conventional IGOs is one federation of IGOs (the United Nations) plus 37 universal membership organizations, 39 intercontinental membership organizations and 213 regionally oriented membership organizations. The *Yearbook* mentions 912 dissolved, or apparently inactive organizations.

When the *IO BIO* Project began to set up its database of IGOs and Executive Heads in 2010, two similar databases that mention the respective Executive Heads and their terms in office were available, one edited by Ben Cahoon (*Worldstatesmen.org*) and another by Benjamin Schemmel (*Rulers.org*). In mid-2024 *Worldstatesmen.org* contained 125 organizations and *Rulers.org* 65 (both including a few organizations that we exclude). The third source of information to be discussed here is Wikipedia.

Ben Cahoon of *Worldstatesmen.org* is a United States senior manager of information technology who, with the help of others, started an online encyclopaedia of leaders of nations and territories, with the goal to provide researchers with 'detailed lists of leaders, chronologies, flags, national anthems and maps to give an in-depth portrait of polities past and present'. The site, available since 2001, is work in progress, as it is updated frequently (<https://www.worldstatesmen.org>). The webpage 'About World Statesmen.org' explains the conventions used (including some abbreviations) and shows a table of 'Abbreviations of International Organizations and Agreements'. The project's website has two sections of 'International Organizations' ('A to L' and 'N to W'). The entry of each organization starts with its emblem or flag and a coloured section that refers to the organization's website and headquarters, followed by the precise dates of relevant treaties (constitutions), including changes of treaty and name. Then there are chronological lists of leaders, such as Presidents, Secretaries-General or other relevant officeholders, whether or not connected to specific organs of the organization. Each entry ends with a table that shows the number and names of member nations and their dates of admission. The list of Secretaries-General (or other officeholders) provides the starting date and end date of their term in office, followed by the full names of the officeholder, his or her nationality, plus their years of birth and death – all information as precise as possible and as far as known. The section 'Materials Needed' shows incomplete data in the lists and the Editor welcomes comments, corrections and additions. There is an 'Explanation of Page Layout', which also gives a list of 'Noble Titles and Styles' (European and Non-Western). Lastly, the website's homepage has an alphabetical index, an overview of selected sources and contributors, lists of updates and additions by year (since 2010), related links (e.g., to leaders, historical pages, politics and international organizations) as well as overviews of religious and terrorist organizations.

The database *Rulers.org* contains information about political leaders of all countries from about 1700 to the present, including leaders of selected international organizations (also in two groups: A-N and O-W). Benjamin Schemmel from Heidelberg, Germany is the website's Editor (<https://www.rulers.org/index.html>). The website was founded in 1995 and is regularly expanded and updated. In 2001 a helpful Index was added to the website, with a variety of small sections of political leaders, often with only a few data and sometimes a somewhat more elaborate 'Who Is Who' section. The website has a chronicle of relevant events since 1996 (per year and per month). Other overviews discuss countries and territories, their foreign ministers

and religious leaders. The international organization sections A-N and O-W start with the names and changed names of the organization, followed by lists of Secretaries-General (or other officeholders), with details of the respective individuals similar to Worldstatesmen.org. The same goes for the organization's membership (member states and their dates of admission). If a leader is included in the index, the link is marked. Compared to Worldstatesmen.org, Rulers.org is more limited in the number of organizations listed and less detailed in general information, but with great overlap (as well as small differences) with Worldstatesmen.org.

Wikipedia is another important source of information for the *IO BIO* Databases, as it publishes entries of IGOs and biographies of people both living and deceased. Some are extensive, others more limited or very short. Although Wikipedia has explicit policies regarding writing style (tone and balance), reliable sources (verifiability, misuse of primary sources, avoiding self-published sources and gossip) and privacy (using a multitude of reliable published sources when discussing public figures or people who are relatively unknown) (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Biographies_of_living_persons), we have used Wikipedia entries cautiously in terms of the life and career stories presented. Sources can be unreliable, and the text may be written from a biased position or may reproduce 'myths', as mentioned earlier. However, Wikipedia also publishes entries about less known individuals and IGOs, some in more detail than others. Entries about IGOs may mention one or more Executive Heads by name, but this is not always so. Sometimes these entries provide an overview of all Heads, e.g., all Directors of the International Bureau of Weights and Measures, with links to those who have an entry in Wikipedia (only a few in this case). Generally speaking, compared to Worldstatesmen.org and Rulers.org, information on Wikipedia may be less detailed (e.g., mentioning years instead of precise dates) (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Bureau_of_Weights_and_Measures). However, regarding lesser-known IGOs and Executive Heads Wikipedia may mention names or dates that cannot be found elsewhere.

Internet searches in addition to Wikipedia, for instance of newspaper and journal articles, obituaries, archives or related topics, may also yield other references to names, which can help to find or verify a name or date, or (which also happens) leave one with contradictory information. The new Artificial Intelligence technology is helpful, but the information provided must be carefully interpreted.

The *IO BIO* Databases are deeply indebted to these other databases but reveal that they may all mention different exact dates: one source may present a different date from another (with significant differences in some cases). Sometimes a different system is used (for example, in the case of succession: to 13 Nov. & from 14 Nov.; or: to 14 Nov. & from 14 Nov.). Sometimes a precise date is lacking (only the year is mentioned, without further specifications). Even if an attempt was made to use original sources, different dates may be cited. This leaves us with some arbitrariness. Hence, everyone working with names and dates from the *IO BIO* Databases is advised to check other databases themselves.

The Two IO BIO Databases

The *IO BIO* Project has produced two corresponding Databases, each with two columns: 1. *Secretaries-General and their IGOs*, an alphabetical list of individual Executive Heads, with their names in the first column and the related IGO in the second; and 2. *IGOs Included and their Secretaries-General*, with the names of IGOs in the first column and all respective Executive Heads in chronological order in the second. The latest version available on the Nijmegen website dates to March 2017 (previous versions were published in 2010, 2012 and 2015). These Databases are work in progress, being corrected and added to. They also include Acting Executive Heads, who may be less known but do have executive responsibilities in case the Executive Head is indisposed or otherwise absent. *IO BIO* does not include international

non-governmental organizations (INGOs) nor non-IGO networks (such as international parliamentary organizations). The 2017 *IO BIO* Databases included 174 IGOs with a total of 1,079 head positions over time, occupied by 1,036 individuals: 68 of which were female and 968 male. 56 women had taken office since 2000; so, leadership by female executives is a recent phenomenon. 99 individuals were 'Acting' (or Interim) Executive Heads. The average age on entering office was 53. The following office titles were found: Secretary-General (470), Director-General (140), President (135), Executive Secretary (94), Director (89), Executive Director (64), High Commissioner (25) and Administrator (11).

The first inventory for *IO BIO* was based on physical files containing information on IGOs constructed for Reinalda's *Routledge History of International Organizations* (2009). At the time the amount of information available on the internet was still limited. Among Reinalda's institutional information were lists of Executive Heads as far as, and as detailed as, provided by the organizations, as well as sub files with researched and collected information on specific officials. Unfortunately, many organizations do not directly provide extensive details about their Executive Heads. The general impression is that most IGOs simply mention when a term in office starts and when it ends, while some organizations only mention years in office, while others provide more specific dates (referring to appointment dates or to actual start dates, when the term in office started). Many IGOs provide a list of former Executive Heads. Few institutions mention Acting Executive Heads, although they matter for reasons of continuity and they occasionally function for a longer period. Many IGOs provide pictures. But almost all IGOs are reticent in providing information about the actual performance of their Executive Heads while in office. IGOs giving information about Executive Head's policies and achievements is an unusual occurrence. Not all IGOs provide personal information on their Executive Heads, but several do by mentioning their nationality, education, previous positions and sometimes their family situation, as well as prestigious prize awards. However, the information about activities, policies and results is rather limited and insufficient for writing a short biography.

Researchers of IGOs, therefore, learn about Executive Heads by investigating the policies and related aspects of the organizations, but they also need other sources of information about individual leaders. The 'Who Is Whos' mentioned before, are helpful in this respect, especially if they provide a chronological overview of roles performed by individuals, such as Christian Burckel's *Who is Who in the United Nations* (1951). However, this is often done rather rigorously and mostly restricted to simple enumerations, thus clouding the relationships between the roles. Biographical Dictionaries and oral histories of public figures are more helpful here, because they provide a more consistent overview of (parts of) a life or career. Unfortunately, the number of biographical entries of Executive Heads of IGOs in general dictionaries is small, but several relevant oral history projects and digital collections are available at university and other institutional libraries. The number of careers of Executive Heads discussed on the internet is limited as well, as is the provided information about these people. To our disappointment, it is even less than hoped for. However, more libraries have been digitizing their documents. Some specific sources worth mentioning include Nobel Prize laureates (www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes/), the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the *American National Biography* and Warren Kuehl's *Biographical Dictionary of Internationalists* (1983). Specific databases are also useful, for instance the LONSEA database (<http://www.lonsea.de>), which is based on material collected on the League of Nations, the by now digitized League of Nations archives, known as LONTAD (<https://archives.ungeneva.org/lontad>), and BAFUNCS, the United Nations Career Records Project in Oxford (<https://archives.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/repositories/2/resources/3250>). All these tools can be found in the *IO BIO Author Instructions*. Some of the research work could be

characterized as ‘detective work’, because it too is about combining bits and pieces of information and attempting to find more sources.

The *IO BIO* Databases have benefited from reviewing the impressive work done by Cahoon and Schemmel. However, their websites do not specify their sources and reviewing various sources can provide different answers to simple questions about exact names and dates. Not providing sources is understandable. *IO BIO* also does not publicly provide source support for each dimension of the databases, although each part of the data is carefully cross-checked and verified to the best of our ability, because a lot of space is needed to mention all sources as well as the substantiation why certain dates were selected and others were not. Hence, scholars employing data provided by *IO BIO* may come across conflicts with other sources (as noted before).

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