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Governance Reforms in United Nations Specialized Agencies: A Case Study of the World Meteorological Organization

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ABSTRACT

For international organisations aiming to enhance their institutional effectiveness in the face of changing global dynamics, the reform of governance processes has become an increasingly salient issue. This study investigated the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the evolution of its governance through the lenses of executive governance, comparative governance, and institutional adaptability. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study employed a document-based case study supplemented by comparative institutional analysis. The WMO's governance documents, strategic reports, and publications were analysed alongside governance documents from select UN specialised agencies to offer diversified contexts. The results demonstrated that WMO governance reform has occurred through the gradual adaptation of its institutions rather than major shifts in its constitution. The evolution of governance enhanced the executive level, altered the Organisation's responsiveness, and improved strategic oversight, all whilst maintaining the constitutional framework of the Organisation. Comparative analysis indicated that the specialised agencies of the UN possess differentiated governance structures, and that the effectiveness of governance relies on a balance between continuity and adaptability, rather than homogenous governance frameworks. This study is the first of its kind to provide a holistic analysis of governance reform in a specialised agency of the UN, and offers ample opportunities for other international organisations that wish to enhance governance efficacy through incremental adaptation of their institutions. Future studies should extend the comparative analysis of governance and include longitudinal studies of governance reforms in international organisations.

KEYWORDS

Governance reform; World Meteorological Organization; international organisations; United Nations specialised agencies; institutional governance; comparative governance; organisational adaptability; documentary analysis

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1. Introduction

International organisations have taken on a greater responsibility for addressing challenges that cross national borders, such as those presented by the changing climate, the need to reduce disaster risk, and the push for more sustainable development. However, the effectiveness of these organisations goes beyond the scope of their mandates and hinges on the quality of their governance systems.

Governance involves more than just formal systems of administration (Barnett & Finnemore, 2012). It includes decision-making and accountability systems, and the administrative systems that influence the legitimacy and effectiveness of an organization. Many United Nations (UN) organizations continue to function within the post-war governance systems, even though the geopolitical and environmental conditions have changed significantly (Weiss & Thakur, 2010). Therefore, governance reform has become the primary means by which most international organizations try to enhance the systems and ensure their legitimacy and effectiveness in the complex and shifting geopolitical conditions of the world.

Within the UN system, specialized agencies have unique governance issues. These agencies often have expanding technical mandates, outpacing governance reform. Having responsive governance systems is particularly imperative within multilateral institutions (Zürn, 2018), whereas climate governance systems will need to be increasingly flexible to deal with the global challenges of the future (Linnerooth-Bayer & Hochrainer-Stigler, 2015). Among these organisations, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) is unique because of its mandate to undertake international cooperation in meteorology, climatology, and hydrology.

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Given the expansion of the WMO's mandate, its distinctive institutional position highlights the need for responsive governance, administrative representation, and adaptability to changing international conditions.

There has been much interest in governance reform by the international organisations community, but the governance of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) continues to be poorly understood. Existing literature has largely focused on the historical development, the constitutional basis and the scientific contributions of the Organisation. Research on the development of governance, executive governance, comparative institutional positioning, and governance reform has all received considerably less focus. Due to these gaps, the ways in which the WMO has enhanced governance efficacy, while preserving constitutional consistency, remain largely unexplored.

This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the governance of the WMO through qualitative documentary analysis, augmented by comparative institutional analysis. It adds to the body of knowledge available by offering a comprehensive analysis of governance evolution, executive governance, comparative governance and institutional adaptability in a UN specialised agency, and thus contributes to the understanding of governance reform in international organisations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Governance of International Organisations

At the core of understanding how international organisations win and sustain institutional legitimacy and how they effectively engage in the management of the increasingly convoluted and diverse problems challenging the global community is the concept of 'governance.' The mandate of international organisations is complemented and, in fact, extended by their governance processes, which, coupled with their bureaucratic and institutional structures and rules, determine the organisations' actions and the decisions they make (Barnett & Finnemore, 2012). Similarly, governance systems are structures through which international organisations articulate their legal mandate and accountability, as well as their representation of Member States (Klabbers, 2015). The effectiveness of governance is considered within the context of institutional design and an organization's ability to foster transparency, responsiveness, and strategic coordination.

The complexity of global governance has changed the focus of research to governance effectiveness and institutional adaptability. International organizations are required to develop new governance systems for new, cutting-edge transboundary issues that cannot be managed by conventional intergovernmental systems (Weiss & Thakur, 2010). To improve the performance of an organization, governance must be reformed in cases where the mandates of organizations grow faster than the governance systems in place to control the organizations (Stone, 2011). Taken together, these ideas illustrate that governance should be conceptualized as a flexible system of thought rather than a fixed set of organizational systems to provide a basis for the evaluation of governance systems within the specialized agencies of the United Nations.

2.2 Reforming Governance in the UN Specialized Agencies

As UN specialized agencies adapt to emerging trends in the political, scientific, and operational fields, reforming governance in these agencies has become a critical element of their institutional strategy. International organizations undertake governance reforms to enhance institutional legitimacy, enhance the efficiency of decisions, and increase accountability, all without infringing on the intergovernmental tenets of such organizations (Pease, 2018). Similarly, within organizations that operate in highly specialized areas of policy, the governance frameworks must evolve and adapt to changing mandates and complex new realities of stakeholders (Armstrong et al., 2004). Governance reform is best understood not as a restructuring of the organization's founding documents, but as an ongoing change in institutional processes that improves the organisation's ability to respond and sharpen its strategic focus.

Specialized agencies merge the challenges of intergovernmental decision-making and governance of complex, evolving scientific issues and technologies. Organisations dealing with global environmental governance are calling for governance systems that facilitate the integration of scientific knowledge and institutional and adaptive decision-making across multiple governance systems (Muiderman et al., 2020). In the same vein, governance systems must enhance their adaptability in order to respond better to growing levels of environmental uncertainty and transnational challenges (Linnerooth-Bayer & Hochrainer-Stigler, 2015). The governance of specialized agencies in general requires the combination of formal institutional structures and the capability of governance systems to foster institutional learning and long-term organizational adaptability and resilience. This forms a critical basis for assessing the governance reform of the World Meteorological Organization.

2.3 Governance of the WMO

Despite the WMO's growing impact on international governance of meteorological, climatological, and hydrological domains, there has been scant focus on the governance of the WMO. The literature has looked at the international history of meteorological collaboration and the WMO's scientific contributions. The WMO has successfully promoted and unified international scientific collaboration (Edwards, 2013; Zillman, 2009). However, their accounts place much more importance on the technical realm than on governance and institutional decision-making. Likewise, recent changes in the WMO have been positive in terms of unifying science and improving the functionality of the WMO, but have received scant assessment with respect to governance, executive power, and institutional accountability (Pease, 2018).

The literature indicates that the evolution of WMO governance has resulted from gradual changes. The governance reforms in international organizations tend to manifest as incremental shifts, due to structural and political challenges, and the WMO is no exception (Pease, 2018). Similarly, governance reforms should be evaluated based on their potential to promote institutional inclusiveness, flexibility, and effectiveness (Klabbers, 2015). However, independent assessments of the WMO's post-2015 reforms are not numerous. Thus, the literature on WMO governance has focused on specific components and has refrained from offering a definitive assessment of governance evolution, executive governance, and comparative institutional positioning and governance reform. This will be done in the following section, where the literature deficiency will be discussed.

2.4 Research Gap

This segment encompasses literature related to the governance of international organizations, particularly regarding governance reforms of UN specialized agencies and the World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) changing governance system. The literature review synthesizes key theoretical and empirical contributions in order to delineate the existing body of knowledge, discern scholarly consensus and contention, and articulate the research gap that this study seeks to address.

3. Research Methodology

Qualitative research is justified when seeking a deep understanding of the complexities of phenomena at the level of natural social and institutional systems (Saunders et al., 2019). In line with this statement, this research opted for a qualitative approach to study governance reforms at the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Within this approach, a single case study was preferred as it focused on the evaluation of governance reforms within an organization and offered the opportunity to analyse the organization's governance, processes, and reforms in depth. There is similar utility of case studies when addressing problems of contemporary organizations and the many types of information that can be brought to bear on the situation (Yin, 2018).

This study focuses on governance reform within the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) using document-based evidence. Document-based analysis is characterized as a thorough qualitative technique that relies on official records and extracts rich pieces of information on existing institutions, policies, and organizational documents (Bowen, 2009). Following this description, the study reviewed the WMO Convention, Resolutions of the World Meteorological Congress, reports of the Executive Council, documents proposing governance reform, as well as the strategic and financial plans. WHO, FAO, and ILO governance documents were reviewed to promote institutional analysis. The documents were selected based on their institutional relevance and their trustworthy contributions toward understanding the changes in governance among the United Nations specialized agencies.

Beyond the documentary analysis, the study adopted a comparative institutional analysis approach to shed light on the governance reform of the WMO. Instead of studying the WMO in isolation, the focus was on the analysis of the governance structures, the arrangements for decision-making, and associated reform proposals of selected UN specialized agencies (WHO, FAO, ILO). However, the case study research is improved by the addition of comparative analysis, as this helps disambiguate the identity of an organization in the context of the prevailing institutional setting (Yin, 2018). This analysis helped examine the WMO's governance reforms and arrangements in a broader context, thus enhancing the quality of the analysis.

The analytical framework integrated thematic and comparative institutional analysis to construct a holistic picture of the governance reforms. In relation to the synthesis of the governance-related information, the use of thematic analysis is appropriate in the identification of flexible patterns within the pieces of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with their argument, the documentary analysis was classified into themes on the evolution of governance, executive governance, institutional representation, governance reforms, and organizational flexibility. Comparative institutional analysis then provided the framework within which the themes were juxtaposed with the governance systems configured by other UN agencies, thereby establishing the broader institutional context in which the governance systems of the WMO were evaluated for their effectiveness.

In the interest of enhancing the integrity of the research, a number of measures were implemented throughout the analysis. The credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research are bolstered by triangulation, systematic data analysis, and the unprejudiced interpretation of evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this regard, control was exercised over the number of articles published by a given institution, and multiple institutional publications were used to ensure uniformity throughout the analysis. The interpretation of findings was done on the basis of the documentary analysis, which minimized researcher bias and improved the integrity of research. Throughout the research, ethical issues were taken into consideration. As the research was based solely on publicly accessible documents, there were no research participants, and issues related to informed consent and confidentiality were not applicable. Nevertheless, ethical research practice requires documentary sources to be employed in a legitimate manner, interpreted accurately, and credited appropriately (Bell & Bryman, 2007).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Evolution of WMO Governance

The documentary analysis showed that while keeping the WMO's foundations intact, the evolution of WMO governance had taken place with gradual changes in the institutional structure. As shown in Figure 4.1, the incremental development of governance from 1950 to 2025 mirrored the increasing scope of the WMO's work in the fields of meteorology, climatology, hydrology, and global environmental governance. The evolution of governance was primarily the result of changes to the institutional structure to enhance coordination and decision-making at the organizational level, as opposed to the redesign of the constitutional framework.

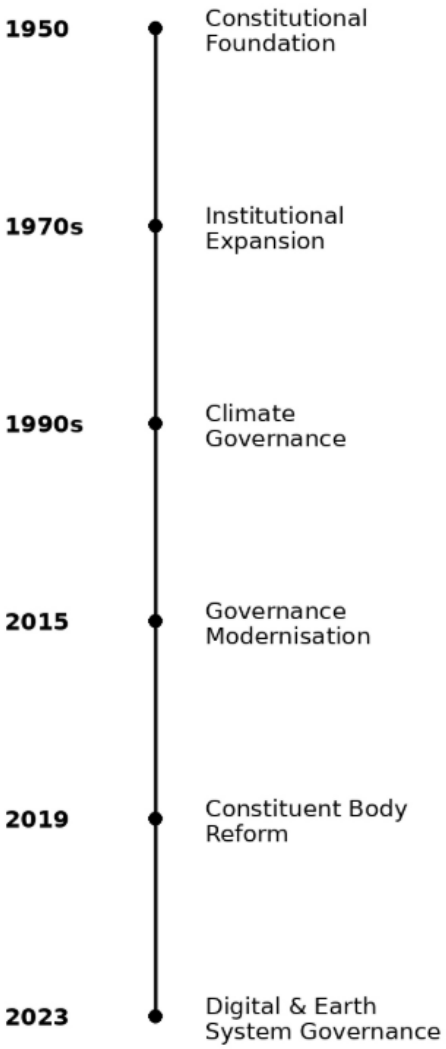

Figure 4.1: Evolution of WMO Governance (1950–2025)

Several key milestones in governance were identified. The creation of Regional Associations and Technical Commissions, alterations in processes of the Executive Council, an increased level of cooperation with international environmental initiatives after the Rio Earth Summit, and the modernization of governance at the 17th, 18th, and 19th World Meteorological Congresses are some major milestones. These changes gradually expanded the scope of governance with no major disruptions in the institutional structure.

It is also shown that the evolution of governance affected all the major components of the WMO, including the executive, regional, and technical components of the organization, as well as coordination and cooperation. These findings, taken together, show that the WMO changed its governance mechanisms through gradual and continuous institutional changes while protecting its core constitutional principles.

4.2 Governance Structure and Executive Representation

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) analysis showed that the WMO has a defined governance structure that consists of the World Meteorological Congress, Executive Council, Regional Associations, Technical Commissions, and the Secretariat. As per Figure 4.2, the Congress is the Organization's highest decision-making authority, while the Executive Council, among other governance structures, defines the strategy and Council decisions, and oversees implementation of the decisions of the Congress between Congress sessions. Regional Associations and Technical Commissions support governance through the coordination of regional activities and the provision of technical advice, respectively.

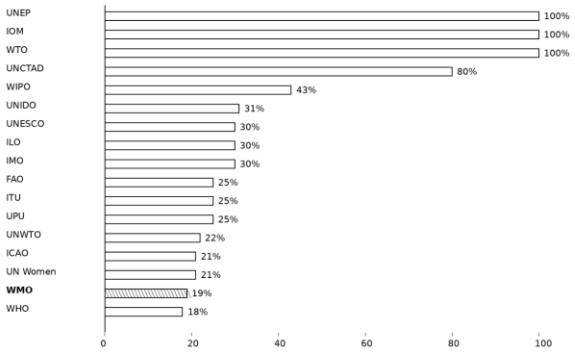

Figure 4.2: Executive Representation Ratios across selected United Nations Organisations

The analysis demonstrated an even more selective approach to executive representation in the WMO. The Executive Council is made up of 37 members across 193 Member States, offering an executive representation ratio of roughly 19%. Comparison with other specialized agencies of the United Nations showed that this is among the lowest executive representation ratios of the organizations reviewed. Though the executive structure is relatively small, the governance model preserved institutional continuity through delegated authority and explicit governance responsibilities.

In the delegated governance model, the Executive Council was shown to direct organizational priorities, oversee constituent bodies, and control the implementation of activities in the period between Congress sessions. Ultimately, documentary analysis suggests that the WMO governance structure integrates centralized strategic oversight and dispersed institutional coordination to foster organizational efficacy.

4.3 Comparative Governance Analysis

The study examined variations in governance structures of selected UN specialized agencies, focusing on executive representation, governance structure, meeting frequency, financial governance, and reform mechanisms. This formed the basis for the comparative analysis of the governance structure of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) against the selected specialized UN agencies as seen in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Comparative Institutional Analysis Framework

Variable	WMO	WHO	FAO	ILO
Membership Structure				
Executive Body Structure				
Representation Ratio				
Decision-Making Frequency				
Financial Governance				
Reform Mechanisms				

The study findings illustrated that all organizations had similar core governance structures; however, important variations were noted in executive representation and governance responsiveness. The WMO Executive Council, having 37 members from 193 Member States, had an executive representation of 19%, thus placing the Organization in the lowest representation category alongside the WHO.

The comparative analysis showed variations in governance meeting cycles. While many organizations convened their supreme governing bodies on an annual or biennial basis, the WMO Congress met every four years, with the Executive Council having the mandate to ensure governance continuity during the intersessional period. The reviewed governance models of the WMO showed an innovative design of institutional governance with an emphasis on the delegation of executive authority and the need for strategic guidance and operational continuity within the framework of the UN specialized agencies.

4.4 Governance Reform and Institutional Adaptability

The documentary analysis showed that the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) pursued incremental institutional adaptation for its internal governance changes, instead of broad system overhauls. As evidenced in Figure 4.4, changes to the WMO's governance structure emerging from the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth World Meteorological Congresses, respectively, demonstrate a gradual advancement to a more cohesive and flexible governance framework.

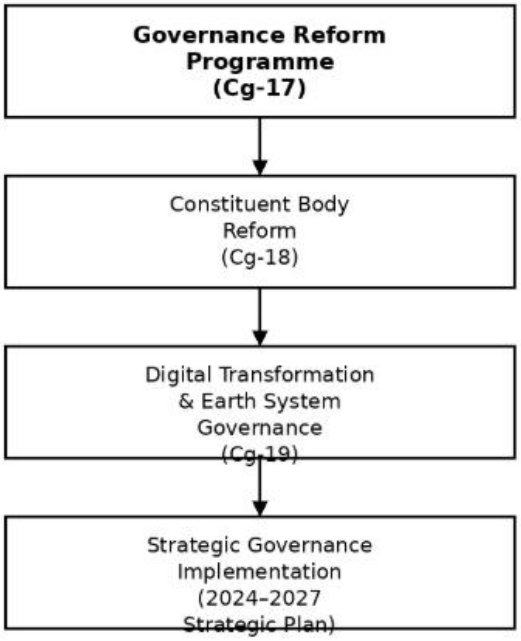

Figure 4.4: Governance Reform Trajectory within WMO (2015–2025)

The analysis also revealed that governance reforms encompassed more than structural change. Improvements to executive oversight, constituent body alignment, digital governance, and organizational planning fell within the purview of governance reform. The reforms captured in the documents showed a commitment to modernizing the governance framework, enhancing Member State collaboration, and boosting the Organization's capacity to respond to emerging global challenges, such as the impacts of climate change and disaster risk reduction. These reforms conveyed a stronger emphasis on the organization's adaptability, while offering continuity in the governance framework.

The analysis also led to the conclusion that the WMO employed a balanced progressive approach to governance reform, which privileged institutional stability, while allowing for ongoing organizational improvement. In the absence of significant constitutional revision, the Organization implemented focused governance changes to enhance the system's operational effectiveness and strategic responsiveness. Based on the documentary analysis, the WMO's governance reform followed an ongoing, incremental, institutional change approach for adapting the organization to a complex global governance context.

5. Discussion

5.1 Governance Evolution and Institutional Flexibility

Research results indicated that the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) relied on incremental changes to its institution for the evolution of its governance structures. The documents indicated that as the Organization expanded its governance functions to meet the needs of the new scientific, technological, and environmental challenges, its core elements remained unchanged. This observation suggested that the ability of international organizations to sustain governance structures that adjust to external pressures strengthens their legitimacy and authority, and that restructuring international organisations does not disrupt institutional equilibrium (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). It is also asserted that the ability of organizations to maintain a balance of change and continuity is essential for the legitimacy of the institution (Scott, 2014).

The research further builds upon current insights regarding the evolution of governance within specialized international organizations. The development of governance is largely dependent on the institutional mandate of the organization (Klabbers, 2015). Nevertheless, the documentary analysis shows that the evolution of governance within the WMO was also a result of growing scientific complexity and the increasing requirements of global environmental governance. The Organization modernized governance processes, built institutional coordination, and established new governance focuses including Earth system governance and digital change. These findings indicate that within technically specialized international organizations, the evolution of governance is most effectively realized through a combination of continuous governance processes designed to ensure institutional legitimacy and an organization's preparedness to address emerging international demands.

5.2 Executive Governance and Representation

The findings revealed that among the United Nations specialized agencies included in the study, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) implemented one of the most selective executive governance structures. Executive governance within international organizations should address a trade-off between representational legitimacy and the efficiency of decision making, a viewpoint that was clearly evident in the WMO governance structure (Bauer et al., 2019). Similarly, the governance frameworks of international organizations are primarily determined by the institutional mandate as opposed to the number of member states

(Klabbers, 2015). The comparative findings support this proposition and show that organizations with a similar number of member states adopted strikingly different executive governance frameworks based on their respective functions.

The study also demonstrated that delegated authority was a necessary governance mechanism to ensure continuity between the sessions of the World Meteorological Congress. Network governance requires a balance between broad participation and centralized control (Provan & Kenis, 2008). In contrast, it is argued that collaborative governance requires a degree of formality within the decision-making framework. In line with these arguments, the WMO Executive Council placed itself beyond an administrative role by co-ordinating constituent bodies, executing the decisions of Congress and providing strategic guidance during the intersessional periods (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Within the context of specialized international organizations, executive selectivity should be assessed in relation to governance effectiveness and institutional continuity rather than the presence of executive representation.

5.3 Comparative Governance across United Nations Specialised Agencies

The analysis revealed that within the context of United Nations specialized agencies, governance effectiveness cannot be encapsulated in a singular institutional framework. While the agencies studied shared similar principles of governance (intergovernmental decision making, executive oversight, and constitutional governance), significant discrepancies existed in executive representation, governance frameworks, and institutional coordination. It is argued that in governance, as in all other types of arrangements, the focus should be on the specific functional mandate of an organisation as opposed to conventional designs (Klabbers, 2015). The comparative results lend support to this argument, as governance frameworks were contingent upon the diverse responsibilities of the organization, the varying nature of scientific activities, and operational demands.

The findings suggest that adaptive governance incorporates institutional diversity, as opposed to the inconsistency of the WMO's own organizational structure. Within this context, it is argued that within the world of international organizations, governance reforms are influenced by the institutional context, political bargaining, and the organizational mandate (Pease, 2018). It is also argued that the effectiveness of governance is contingent on the organization's ability to modify its institutional framework in response to new global challenges (Stone, 2011). The WMO preserved a relatively lean executive structure while reinforcing governance through delegation, regional grouping, and technical cooperation. The evidence from the comparative studies suggests the size or makeup of executive bodies is not a major influence on the effectiveness of governance. Instead, the flexibility of governance frameworks to accommodate strategic coordination, institutional preparedness, and organizational continuity is most influential.

5.4 Governance Reform and Institutional Adaptability

The research demonstrated that within the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), governance reform happened as a result of continual institutional adaptation, rather than major changes to the constitution. Documentary analysis showed that as each reform was implemented, executive coordination, collaboration of constituent bodies, and strategic governance were enhanced, while the constitutional foundations of the Organization remained intact. It is asserted that within the context of international organizations, governance reform is most successful when institutional change promotes organizational adaptability and responsiveness while preserving intergovernmental legitimacy (Pease, 2018). The findings endorse this viewpoint, in that the WMO committed itself to a pathway of reform that was more effective in governance, through continual incremental institutional change, rather than major structural transformations.

The study showed that governance reform includes not only the restructuring of an administration, but also the inclusion of organizational learning, the integration of different sciences, and the flexibility of governance systems. It is proposed that organisations tasked with solving the global environmental problems need governance systems that fuse science and coproduction (Muiderman et al., 2020), and it is argued that organizations dealing with the uncertain and dynamic problems of climate change must continuously build their governance capacity (Linnerooth-Bayer & Hochrainer-Stigler, 2015). In line with the argument, the WMO, as the leading global agency dealing with climate and weather, continuously modernized its governance systems in relation to climate service, disaster risk management, and Earth systems governance.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed at studying the extent of the changes in the governance of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and how these changes reflected the new demands placed on the organization from the institutional, scientific and operational perspectives. The main methodology was an in-depth qualitative analysis of the available documents and was complemented by cross-institutional analysis. The research focused on the evolution of governance, the executive component of governance, and the comparative frameworks of governance, as well as the institutional adaptability of selected agencies of the United Nations. The research aimed to bring together the existing documentation of the official agencies of the United Nations and conduct a comparative analysis of the existing studies on the United Nations.

The research indicated that reform of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) was a result of gradual adaptation of the institution rather than radical shifts in the organization's constitution. Evolution of governance enhanced organizational coherence, oversight of the executive, and responsiveness of the institution while retaining the constitutional tenets on which the Organization was founded. The comparative analysis also indicated that specialized agencies' governance frameworks differed according to

their institutional mandates and their operational tasks. This suggests that the effectiveness of governance should not be assessed solely on the basis of the structure of the organization or executive representation. Rather, effective governance was evidenced by an organization's ability to strike a balance between institutional constancy and responsiveness to new challenges of the world.

The undertaking adds to the existing body of knowledge by presenting a comprehensive assessment of the changes in governance of a specialized United Nations Agency and complements existing studies that have primarily focused on the WMO's functional aspects or historical evolution in a disjointed manner. By integrating governance evolution, executive governance, comparative institutional analysis, and governance reform in a cohesive framework, the study presents a novel perspective on the effectiveness of governance in specialized international organizations.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, the results indicate that international agencies pursue the refinement of governance through incremental changes to the institutional structure rather than major changes to the constitutional framework. Maintaining flexibility in governance, strengthening coordination at the executive level, and fostering inter-body collaboration may enhance the organization's agility and responsiveness to stakeholders while retaining institutional legitimacy. As the study employed qualitative research relying exclusively on documents, the results likely cannot be directly generalized to international agencies. Future studies may broaden the scope to other UN agencies, include primary data from the agency stakeholders, and analyse the longitudinal governance changes to explain institutional adaptation in global governance.

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