6. Conclusion

The different chapters of this dissertation have shown the effects of the tension between scale and community on international organization. As I have argued in the introduction, this tension produces two distinct types of IOs: general purpose and task specific. Where organizations are rooted in community, they are likely to be general purpose; where organizations focus on effectively addressing a problem, they are likely to be task specific. The primary distinction between task specific and general purpose organizations is their policy scope, which is extensive in the latter and limited in the former. The various chapters have shown that these type of organizations behave differently across a range of dimensions.

Perhaps most importantly, general purpose and task specific organizations differ in how they make decisions and in how they are set up, i.e. in pooling and delegation. Task specific organizations aim to include all states that are involved in the collective action problem they seek to address. As a result, they tend to have large memberships, which may impede decision making in the context of unanimity voting. Hence, a concern for efficiency makes task specific organizations much more likely to move away from unanimity voting. General purpose organizations, on the other hand, prefer to stick with conservative decision-making. These organizations have large policy scopes and frequently deal with issues that are distributional or carry legitimacy concerns. Their memberships also tend to be smaller, which diminishes the threat of deadlock. Hence, general purpose organizations are much more likely to make decisions by unanimity.
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Task specific and general purpose organizations also differ in the extent to which member states are willing to delegate authority to them: general purpose organizations have are endowed with high levels of delegation over time, whereas task specific organizations remain static at lower levels.

The two types of IOs also display variation in terms of institutional complexity. General purpose organizations tend to not only have higher levels of delegation but also a larger variety of bodies to deal with the complex policy problems they encounter. This type of organization is more likely to have a parliament in which national politicians can influence IO policies. This reflects the greater need of general purpose organizations to legitimize their decisions. Task specific organizations, on the other hand, have a simpler institutional set-up with fewer IO bodies. Parliaments are very rare in this type of organization.

The difference between task specific and general purpose organizations also affects their conditions for admitting new member states. Chapter 3 demonstrates that stricter accession rules are found in organizations where there is more at stake. One of the main predictors of stricter accession rules is the size of an organization’s policy scope: the larger the policy scope, the higher the incidence of restrictive accession rules. Since policy scope is the defining characteristic of general purpose organizations, we can conclude that these organizations tend to be more exclusive. This makes sense: where organizations are rooted in community, it becomes important to ensure only states with whom you want to cooperate are admitted. In task specific organizations, characterized by a small policy scope, it is important to enlarge membership to effectively address the organization’s policy problems.

Task specific and general purpose organizations also differ on dispute settlement. Chapter 4 shows that dispute settlement falls into distinct types: state-controlled and supranational. State-controlled dispute settlement is characterized by automatic access to judicial proceedings, a standing tribunal and sometimes binding decision-making.
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Nevertheless, state-controlled dispute settlement always leaves states the final say and cannot directly influence domestic politics. This is different in supranational dispute settlement, where courts can either impose sanctions or make directly binding rules, allow access to non-state actors or issue preliminary rulings. Hence, these courts carry substantial sovereignty costs and can directly affect domestic politics. Although strong dispute settlement is often predicted to occur in the context of strong trade relations, these courts frequently work in very different issue areas, including human rights. The chapter shows that supranational dispute settlement is most common in organizations that are based on an incomplete contract or organizations that are rooted in community: general purpose organizations. Hence, the rise of supranational courts can be attributed to the empowerment of general purpose government.

Finally, this dissertation has also shown that task specific and general purpose organizations differ in the extent to which they change over time. Chapter 2 described how general purpose organizations are much more dynamic than task specific organizations. Since the former are rooted in community, they confront all problems that occur within their geographical area. The problems that these organizations are required to solve are not known beforehand. Hence, general purpose organizations require a degree of flexibility which can be realized through cooperation based on an incomplete contract. In order to ensure successful cooperation in the context of so much flexibility, general purpose organizations are often increasingly bestowed with strong institutions, including general secretariats and dispute settlement mechanisms. Hence, general purpose organizations display much more change over time. Task specific organizations, on the other hand, are set up to deal with a specific collective action problem. Hence, the institutional requires fewer amendments. The dynamic nature of general purpose organizations was also revealed in chapter 5, which discussed dispute settlement reform in regional organizations. It was found that the nature of the organization’s founding contract was a strong predictor of the likelihood of dispute settlement reform. In organizations with an
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incomplete founding contract, reform was much more likely to occur.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on institutional design by showing how the tension between scale and community produces distinct types of organizations, and by showing how these types vary across different dimensions of institutional set-up and decision-making. The dissertation is part of a larger research project that puts forward a new dataset on the institutional design of 72 organizations over time. This rich data source will be made publicly available and hence will also benefit other researchers.

This research project also opens up several avenues for further research. A promising venue for future research is the interaction between IOs. As chapter 5 has shown, the influence of other organizations active in the same issue area can have an important influence on institutional development. We also know that some organizations can be crowded out by others. Precisely how this happens is poorly understood and therefore studying the interaction between organizations could make a valuable addition to our understanding of institutional design. This research project has primarily focused on the formal rules that govern IO behavior. This focus is justified given that formal rules usually structure informal rules. Nevertheless, we know that informal rules often are influential in international politics as well. Hence, a logical extension of this project would be to consider informal rules and how these relate to formal rules.