

An Ethnography of a Global Governance Institution: The Case of the United Nations Global Compact

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Building upon my prior work, my research project in this academic year will both elaborate my theoretical frameworks and conduct further empirical research on the UNGC, which will hopefully culminate into a draft book manuscript. Two general questions drive my research. Firstly, why and how is it possible for an idea of “a global compact,” contained in a United Nations Secretary General speech, to grow into the Global Compact with a network of now more than 8,800 organizations in a little more than a decade? Secondly, have the UNGC and its ideas really “changed the world,”¹ and if so, how? These questions can be further broken down into several questions: What exactly is the UNGC? In what ways is it a “new” mode of global governance? How does this “learning network” actually work? What and who have driven its development, and how? Who governs it, by what, and how? How can we conceptualize and analyze the politics within, around, and against the UNGC? What are the promises and limitations of this multi-level, multi-issue, and multi-stakeholder initiative?

Existing literature has described and analyzed the institutional framework of the UNGC by drawing mostly upon the information available either on the official UNGC website or the secondary literature, or both. My research stands out as unique both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, it will delve deeper into the inner world and actual practice² of the UNGC by interviewing with the staff of the Global Compact Office (GCO) and other stakeholders, conducting participant observations of the GCO and GC-related meetings and conferences, and drawing extensively upon documents and data that the UNGC has created and/or gathered. The ethnographic research³ as proposed here will enable me to uncover both

¹ Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (Indiana University Press, 2009).

² For an innovative study on practice in international relations, see Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Iver B. Neumann and Ole Jacob Sending, *Governing the Global Polity: Practice, Mentality, Rationality* (University of Michigan Press, 2010).

³ For reviews of ethnography that are relevant to our discussion here, see Zsuzsa Gille and Seán Ó

the organizational culture⁴ of the GCO and the nature of communities of practice⁵ formed in and around this “learning network.”

Theoretically, my research builds upon and integrates a variety of disciplines—political science, law, sociology, economics, and management theory—and approaches—mainly, but not exclusively, based on constructivism—that have evolved around such concepts as modes of governance, network, effectiveness, legitimacy, authority, accountability, institutional entrepreneur, norms, discourse, and practice. Simply put, my theoretical framework will enable me to inquire into how institutional entrepreneurs such as the GCO have attempted to make the UNGC more effective and legitimate,⁶ with what consequences, limitations, and dilemmas, and whether (and how) the initial idea of the UNSG has “changed the world”? Thus, by showing the nature and dynamics of the UNGC, my research will contribute to scholars as well as practitioners of global governance.

Riain, “Global Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 271-295; Lisa Wedeen “Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 255-272; Sally Engle Merry, “Anthropology and International Law,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 99-116; and David Stark, *The Sense of Dissonance: Accounts of Worth in Economic Life* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴ For studies of organizational culture of global governance institutions, see Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Catherine Weaver, *Hypocrisy Trap: The World Bank and the Poverty of Reform* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵ For studies of communities of practice in international relations, see Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (Routledge, 2005), chap. 1; Emanuel Adler, “The Spread of Security Communities: Communities of Practice, Self-Restraint, and NATO's Post—Cold War Transformation,” *European Journal of International Relations* 14 (2008): 195-230; Pouliot, *op. cit.*; and Marie-Laure Djelic and Sigrid Quack, *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶ For a preliminary attempt to build a framework of legitimation strategies of institutional entrepreneur, see my draft paper, “Who Legitimizes What, When, How: Institutional Entrepreneurs in Transnational Governance,” presented at the annual meetings of the Japan Association of International Relations, Sapporo, November 2010.