

**Researching the United Nations and Other International Organizations  
(RUN 2018)**

*Rethinking Methods of Investigation*

University of Geneva  
18-19-20 June 2018

## Rationale

The United Nations organization has been a subject of study in many disciplines such as political science, history, economics, law and others since its creation in 1945 and earlier if we take into account previous settings of multinational discussions such as the League of Nations. Various theoretical approaches — at times even competing with one another — have been used to examine the United Nations. For instance, in the 1960-70s, an extensive literature raised the issues of politics and power games in particular with respect to the voting patterns at the General Assembly as well as the Security Council (Alker and Russett 1967). An intergovernmental perspective dominated the literature and realist theories were mainly applied to study international organizations. However the 1970s witnessed a turning point in the way scholars examined these institutions. This period was marked by the rise of the regime literature, which goes beyond formal organizations. The study of international governance was understood as a set of rules, norms and principles. Scholars also started to consider other actors involved in this international governance such as NGOs and civil society. The late 1990s-early 21st century constituted a second crucial milestone in the study of the UN. In line with the critical perspective developed by Cox and Jacobson in 1973 and followed by Reinalda and Verbeek in 1998 and 2004, the academic community began to open the “black box” and look at the internal processes at play. In 1999 and 2004, Barnett and Finnemore laid the cornerstones for the study of the UN bureaucratic structure. They were followed by a growing field of research analyzing the UN as an international bureaucracy (Biermann and Siedenhüner 2009, Bauer, Knill, and Eckhard 2017). Despite this important theoretical development in the study of the United Nations, it has not been followed by a complete assessment of the methods used to research these organizations. Which methods are used and how? What would be a specific methodology applied to the case of international organizations (IOs)?

On the one hand, IO researchers have recently called for a renewal in the way international organizations are approached stressing the need for innovative tools to capture the intergovernmental world. Scholars also consider the relevance of a research “toolkit” which includes quantitative methods or mixed-method perspectives, that are used for instance in the context of European organizations (Van Ingelgom 2007). In addition, the digitalization of IO documents has allowed researchers to study them in new ways, providing an easier and global access to grey literature. Network analysis together with quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis is among methodological tools recently applied to enhance research on IOs.

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On the other hand, many scholars have raised the difficulty to conduct research on IOs, due to the need for “discretion” and neutrality when addressing international civil servants (Dematteo 2011, Badaro 2011) or due to invisible entry barriers that make research impossible to outsiders, favoring research (almost) exclusively to former international staff (David-Ismayil 2010). The place of the researcher within these configurations with specific codes requires a permanent reflexivity (Laurens 2007). The entry into the field, the modalities of research and the exploitation of results are complex issues to negotiate in any context, and even more in a multilateral and bureaucratic one. Ethnographic approaches, applied both collectively and individually (Lewis and Mosse 2006, Abélès 2011, Müller 2012, Foyer 2015), are increasingly used to overcome these hurdles. Furthermore the work of historians is also considerably valuable to put multilateral practices into perspective (Kott 2011).

## Objectives of the Workshop

This workshop aims to foster discussion revolving around methods and approaches relevant to study the United Nations and other IOs. Participants will discuss both the empirical and analytical benefits of different methods and the practicality of their application. The purpose of the workshop is two-fold. First, it intends to identify and question the specificities of the United Nations and other IOs: do IOs require a radical change in the application of a classical method in social sciences? How should researchers adapt their methods to the case of IOs? Secondly, it serves as a venue for researchers from various disciplines to be reflexive on their methodology and their use of different methods to conduct research on IOs.

While addressing these two dimensions, each presentation should consider the following questions: why is this method relevant to study IOs? How do you concretely apply this method to the case of IOs? What are the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach?

The workshop will welcome different types of interventions to answer these questions. Interested scholars can present a paper in which they discuss the relevance and the concrete implementation of a specific method or approach. Others can provide case studies to illustrate the productive use of different methods. Finally, we will welcome methodological appendixes, which provide very practical examples of methods applied to IOs (questionnaire, field notes, visual methods, etc.). We will discuss possible outcomes in terms of publication during the workshop.

By tackling the issues of methodology, the workshop aims to lay the groundwork for innovative, multi-disciplinary future research on the United Nations and other IOs. It intends to be interactive and horizontal to facilitate discussions among participants from different academic communities. It will allow for an interdisciplinary dialogue based on the commitment and the active contribution of all participants.

The workshop will also comprise two public roundtables. Confirmed speakers and moderators include Irène Bellier (EHESS-CNRS), Laëtitia Atlani-Duault (IRD, Columbia University), Michael Barnett (Elliott School of International Affairs), Mathilde Bourrier (UNIGE), Sandra Lavenex (UNIGE), Birgit Müller (EHESS-CNRS), Bob Reinalda (Radboud University) and Thomas Weiss (CUNY). These conferences will be the opportunity to open the debate to a larger audience.

Detailed and finalized program will be available on the website shortly <http://unige.ch/run2018/>

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## Timeline

We invite abstract proposals from interested scholars from all disciplines. Proposals should not exceed 500 words in length. Preferred format for all submissions is PDF. Please send your proposal as an attachment to [run2018@unige.ch](mailto:run2018@unige.ch) and insert “Submission: RUN 2018 Workshop” as the subject line of the message.

**The deadline for abstracts is 15 October 2017.**

All proposals will undergo peer review. Notification of acceptance will be sent out by December 2017. Full papers are expected to be delivered by May 2018 for circulation among participants.

We expect to be able to provide support as regards to participants’ travel expenses when necessary.

## Venue

University of Geneva, (Switzerland)  
Uni Mail  
40 boulevard du Pont d’Arve, 1205 Genève

Geneva has built both a long tradition of hosting International Organizations and been at the heart of discussions on international relations. Indeed Geneva is the second duty station of the UN organization: among the thirty-eight structures composing the Secretariat (Departments, Offices, Conferences, Commissioners, etc.) about 10 are based in Geneva and gather approximately 3500 persons who work directly for UN Secretariat entities. Geneva is also known as the operational center of the UN system. It addresses humanitarian and human rights issues as well as other topics considered less political than the ones tackled in New York. Aside from UN entities, Geneva is also at the core of the multilateral system: 34 international organizations - a majority of them linked to the larger UN system, including ones among the largest of the system such as ILO or WHO – 350 NGOS and 175 countries are based, or represented in the Swiss city. A total of over 30’000 persons work and are integrated into what is called the International Geneva.

Furthermore Geneva also hosts some of the most famous academic institutes that concentrate their study on multilateral issues, such as the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) and the University of Geneva.

### Scientific Committee

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