

Transparency as a Governance Mechanism

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Transparency is a widely used concept in debates on international politics, from transnational anti-corruption campaigns to renewed requests for greater disclosure on health, finance, or even security issues. Calls for transparency date back at least to the League of Nations, when internationalists demanded open diplomacy. Yet, it is in the subfield of GEG, and its developments on nonstate actors as a key research topic (see introduction), where the practice and theory of transparency has made the most profound inroads (Gupta 2010a). GEG has been a particularly fertile ground for the development of informational governance (Mol 2008) and the rise of numerous transparency initiatives which have been analyzed in a rapidly developing literature. Importantly, current GEG research is also highly relevant for other IR subfields. For one, recent GEG research can help IR scholars to further refine the concept of transparency and to increase conceptual clarity and sophistication. Second, research on GEG has improved our understanding of the factors that determine the effectiveness of transparency as a governance tool in international politics.

Transparency can be defined as any attempt to reduce secrecy by bringing information to a wider audience. To be qualified as a transparency initiative, the circulating information must be accompanied by two other important features. First, the information to be made available must have been *previously inaccessible*. Second, the provision of this information must occur voluntarily, that is, *by mutual consent* (otherwise it is considered as denunciation, as for instance in the Wikileaks controversy).

Current GEG research further differentiates between two additional dimensions of transparency. First, the transparency of *processes*, an area that has been widely studied in international politics, especially regarding the openness of negotiations (Stasavage 2004). Second, *substantive transparency*, that is, the information that is actually reported or disclosed. Among mechanisms that seek to address substantive transparency, one can further distinguish between information that is provided to public authorities and information that targets consumers and the market. GEG has been particularly prolific in creating mechanisms in both categories.

To cite a few examples in the first category, the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers to the Aarhus Convention, in force since October 2009, is the first legally binding international instrument that grants access to pollution inventory information. Likewise, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, finalized in 2000, adopted the key “prior informed consent” procedure (borrowed from the 1989 Basel Convention on hazardous wastes and the 1998 Rotterdam Convention on hazardous chemicals). By this procedure, countries exporting genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that can be introduced into the environment must inform importing states that their shipments contain such GMOs. A third example is the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit

Sharing, which establishes an international certificate to be used as evidence that the genetic resources it covers have been accessed in accordance with domestic regulations. A final example is the REDD+ measures requiring states to disclose the terms and conditions of their agreements with forest-dependent communities (Lawlor, Weinthal, and Olander 2010).

In addition to these initiatives that involve public authorities, GEG is also full of private transparency initiatives adopted by and for the market (see Roger and Dauvergne above). Highly innovative and influential examples are the Forest Stewardship Council and the Marine Stewardship Council, two partnerships between environmental NGOs and business associations to develop informative labels that may help consumers identify products that have been produced with lower environmental and social impacts. Other private initiatives include the Equator principles adopted by a group of banks in 2003 and asking major borrowers to disclose the environmental risks of their project and consult with local stakeholders. The underlying assumption behind all these mechanisms is that transparency can improve environmental performance. Researchers in GEG have shown that what citizens ignore can often have a great impact on their lives (Tienhaara 2006). But for substantive transparency to hold its promise, scholars realized that at least three parameters had to be controlled closely.

First, recent research has shown that the quality of the disclosed information matters. Studies in the subfield of security had already established that too much information can have counterproductive effects (Finel and Lord 1999). Studies in GEG further indicate that the disclosed information should be as precise as possible. In the case of GMOs, for instance, exporting states only have to indicate that their shipments “may contain” GMOs, leaving the burden on importing states to develop complex infrastructures of sampling, testing, and verification to determine which GMO in which precise quantity is actually contained in the shipment (Gupta 2010b). In this case, substantial transparency serves the already powerful actors. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the Aarhus Convention. Here, a fair amount of decisions regarding the disclosed information is left to the discretion of the parties concerned, undermining the effectiveness of the agreement (Mason 2010). In the same line, transparency aimed at the broader public does not always work. One reason is that the citizens who are expected to use the disclosed information may not understand the figures or may not have the resources to hold governments and elites accountable (Hauffer 2010).

Second, looking at who discloses the information is also relevant for making transparency work as a governance tool. In the Aarhus Convention, most provisions target public authorities as opposed to private firms, which leaves key information protected by corporate secrecy rules (Mason 2010). Often, the actions taken are more effective when they come from the players themselves, rather than when they are imposed by third parties. This has been the case for large institutional investors such as pension funds and mutual funds with regard to the adoption of environmental reporting (Helleiner 2011). Moreover, national and local contexts matter because they impact on the choice of the actors and the channels through which information will be transmitted and interpreted (Florini 2010).

Third, research shows that reputation is an important mechanism triggered by transparency. This explains why transparency directed at the market often works better than transparency aimed at public authorities. For instance, the reporting and disclosure of environmental information in the financial sector works mostly because reputational costs are involved (Helleiner 2011; Sievänen, Sumelius, Islam, and Sell 2013). However, this led some authors to suggest that disclosure of information to the market might not be appropriate for every policy domain.

For instance, carbon disclosure might not significantly contribute to emission reduction because of low reputational risk in several sectors (Harmes 2011). And yet, the reputational effects of transparency are increasingly visible in other domains of international politics such as energy politics with oil companies (Gillies 2010).

To conclude, over the past years, GEG has developed a very rich and diverse literature on the role of transparency in increasing the effectiveness and legitimacy of international governance. This research has also shown, however, that “governance by disclosure” (Gupta 2010a) is highly complex and that the effectiveness of transparency mechanisms heavily depends on information types, design attributes, and problem characteristics. Importantly, the use of transparency as a tool does not fundamentally change power relations. Often, transparency empowers the players who already had the capacities to master information and to interpret it (see Morin and Oberthür above). As a result, transparency cannot replace classical governmental regulations, and its use can only partially improve compliance and effectiveness (see Ohta and Ishii below).

Most GEG research on transparency builds on qualitative analysis of particular transparency initiatives. In the future, therefore, more systematic large-*n* analyses could help refine the state of knowledge. In addition, transparency tools could be compared to other governance solutions (environmental targets, environmental clauses in private contracts, etc.). By no means is transparency unique to the subfield of GEG. Accordingly, we see ample opportunities for mutual interchange between scholars of GEG and students of other subfields of IR. This exchange will hardly be a one-way street.

Disaggregating Effectiveness

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Existing institutions seem unable to bring about sustainable development (Biermann, Abbott, Andresen, Bäckstrand, Bernstein, Betsill, Bulkeley, Cashore, Clapp, Folke, Gupta, Gupta, Haas, Jordan, Kanie, Klavánková-Oravská, Lebel, Liverman, Meadowcroft, Mitchell, Newell, Oberthür, Olsson, Pattberg, Sánchez-Rodríguez, Schroeder, Underdal, Vieira, Vogel, Young, Brock, and Zondervan 2012). There is a clear consensus on the current state of institutional deficiencies, but there are many ongoing heated debates on how to improve them. For example, some argue that a World Environment Organization is necessary to improve GEG’s effectiveness, while others argue that it is better to cluster institutions according to different issue areas to generate synergistic effects among them (see Van de Graaf and De Ville above). This has led to the development of a fruitful literature within GEG on the effectiveness and determinants of international institutions.

Effectiveness is a complex and multidimensional concept (Young 1999). Initially, the level of compliance with and implementation of agreements was used

had gradually improved, with explanations of how the three regime components' effectiveness contributed to or constrained the aggregated effectiveness.

Other regime effectiveness studies in the non-environment field include Kelle's study on the Chemical Weapon Control (CWC) regime (Kelle 2004) and Galbreath and McEvoy's study on the European Minority Rights (EMR) regime (Galbreath and McEvoy 2012). The former evaluates the regime effectiveness of the CWC regime in terms of goal attainment and compliance and concludes that while the CWC regime seems to be effective as an infant regime, there is much potential for improvement in future implementation. The EMR regime was evaluated as having contributed to problem solving but with some limitations. Galbreath and McEvoy explain that the limitations are due to high malignancy of the minority rights problem, the weakness of normative persuasion by relevant international organizations (for example, Council of Europe), and the incongruence between policy implementation and state preferences.

Recent quantitative studies in search of correlations among multiple independent variables (for example, uncertainty and malignancy), some intervening variables (for example, improvement of knowledge), and regime effectiveness (behavioral change, problem solving, and compliance) are promising in terms of their application to different issue areas (Miles et al. 2002; Breitmeier, Young, and Zürn 2006). However, further sophistication is needed, for instance, by incorporating domestic politics, power relations, or other drivers of regime effectiveness into quantitative studies (Breitmeier, Underdal, and Young 2011). Similarly, regarding the utilization of the no-regime counterfactual for sorting out institutional effects, it is very important not to neglect "a number of driving forces—including a range of demographic, economic, political, and technological forces" (Young 2001:111) that affect the outcome. Additionally, a promising research direction regarding mixed method research would be to systematically combine quantitative and qualitative analysis by tracing the path from the independent to the dependent variable via a process-tracing technique so that the cause-and-effect relationship between those variables can be established together with statistical validity. Another promising research area would be to study the effectiveness of private regimes or authorities (see Roger and Dauvergne above). Gulbrandsen already indicates that the conceptualization of such effectiveness should be multidimensional and different from the problem-solving approach focusing exclusively on intergovernmental institutions and state behavior (Gulbrandsen 2005, 2010).

We are now able to produce some policy-relevant advice based on the existing literature (Young 2011), including that mentioned above. However, it is clear that in order to advance regime effectiveness research, we must have more quantitative and qualitative analysis which takes the suggestions above into account. We must not forget that by conducting effectiveness research, we are actually participating in the policy-making processes (see Morin and Oberthür above). At the same time, we believe that the aforementioned group of analyses helps us to remind ourselves of our responsibility for and the political implications of effectiveness research, and enables us to provide the policymaker communities with scientifically credible and policy-relevant knowledge of regime effectiveness.

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