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Asmara Klein, Camille Laporte, Marie Saiget, *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales*

(The good practices of international organisations)

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Reviewed by Yannick Fiedler

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Among those buzzwords that have spectacularly gained in popularity among various professionals since the 1990s, the notion of ‘good practices’, which originated in the private sector to describe a technique which has constantly shown to be successful in achieving a certain goal, definitely holds a prominent place. Far from being an exception, international organisations (IOs) have been a constitutive part of this trend, increasingly reverting to a ‘pragmatic’ policy based on good practices rather than ‘politicised’ norms. From a perspective of both practitioners and scholars, an overview and first analysis of the “plurality and scope of the use of good practices” (p. 22) by IOs has thus been overdue. The authors of the book *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales* propose a contribution to this field.

The authors have the ambition to deconstruct the apparently technical notion of good practices by analysing how and in whose interest they are developed and materialised, and what impact their utilisation has on the broader environment. Accordingly, the authors focus on different organisations, spanning a wide array of issues and decades. As is often the case in publications containing contributions from various authors, the book presents different angles of analysis – from sociological to economic, from political scientist to socio-historic. The only contribution missing would have been a political economy approach explaining in depth the structural issues in the global political economy that may account for the emergence of the use and promotion of good practices among international organisations (to be fair, some of these are addressed in the introduction).

The structure of the book itself is quite logical, analysing the genesis of good practices, before enquiring how and why they are used by international organisations, as well as how they have an impact on the representation of concerned third parties (i.e. States). The first two chapters provide the necessary historic depth. Simon Tordjman’s and Guillaume Devin’s is an excellent introduction in this regard for those who seek to understand in how far the increased use of good practices can be understood as a “vector and revealing factor of change in international organisations”¹. The second

¹ Simon Tordjman & Guillaume Devin, ‘Les bonnes pratiques. Vecteurs et révélateurs du changement au sein des organisations internationales’, in *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales*, pp. 41–59

part, which analyses how and for which reasons IOs increasingly revert to the use of good practices, is particularly interesting when contributors explain how official motives (e.g. improving the delivery of goods) may at least be partially superseded by others (manage funds efficiently)². All over the book, the authors demonstrate well that often quite political reasons may push IOs to produce apparently technical documents, as in the case of OECD³. The last part, which analyses the ‘effects of (re) classification’, may be valuable for all scholars and practitioners who seek to go a step further. If stated and unstated motives may not always be entirely clear to the general public, they may nonetheless have unintended side-effects. For example, the World Bank’s Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, which is understood in this publication as a means to improve the management of funds, may have the unintended side-effects of redefining the social reality of the concerned states⁴.

This book contributes well to current debates among scholars about the process of policy making in international organisations, i.e. the actually not-so-neutral character of ‘technicised’ language⁵ and the elaboration of norms within IOs⁶. The fact that IOs are often considered as actors with their own specific interests is particularly important to overcome both classic ‘realist’ and liberal ‘principal-agent’ debates. Indirectly, this publication also contributes substantially to the debate on the question in how far IOs may be considered as (at least partially) autonomous actors⁷.

Despite all the praise this publication rightly deserves, it does not resolve one basic challenge: providing a clear definition of ‘good practices’ in the context of international organisations. Indeed, unfortunately, the different definitions of a ‘good practice’ leave the reader at times rather confused. The authors evidently managed to ‘deconstruct’ the idea according to which there is only a single definition of ‘good practices’. Conversely, they did a less satisfying job with limiting the terrain.

In the introduction, the authors rightly refer to two clear definitions provided by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in a learning toolkit⁸, stating that a good practice can be defined as either a) the most efficient means (processes, methods) to realise a specific objective or b) a practice that can be recommended because it has been tested on the ground and obtained good results. Subsequently, they retain two important constitutive ideas – ‘fruits of experience’ and pragmatism⁹. A definition based on these constitutive ideas would have been sufficient and operational.

Then however, the authors claim that good practices may materialise in the form of “guides, learning material, toolkits, procedures, rules, methodologies, lessons

2 Dominique Kerouedan, ‘Les bonnes pratiques de la Global Health. Améliorer la santé ou bien gérer l’argent?’, in *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales*, pp. 97–112

3 Samuel Beroud & Thomas Hajduk, ‘L’OCDE et les bonnes pratiques. Une histoire inséparable’, in *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales*, pp. 61–78

4 Soraya Sidani, ‘Les bonnes pratiques de la gouvernance. Résistance et déviance’, in *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales*, pp. 189–206

5 Birgit Müller, *The Gloss of Harmony: The Politics of Policy Making in Multilateral Organisations*, (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

6 Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

7 Joel E Oestreich, *International Organizations as Self-Directed Actors: A Framework for Analysis* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2012).

8 FAO, Identifier et partager les bonnes pratiques, SDC Knowledge Management Toolkit (2004), quoted in Asmara Klein, Camille Laporte, Marie Saiget, *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales*, pp. 28–29.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

learnt, codes of conduct, etc.”¹⁰ More than that, they state that their ‘ambiguous’ character allows for multiple interpretation of their utilisation, as “good practices are used both as guidelines for action, which follow the principle of efficiency, as well as instruments of change”¹¹. Starting from there, everything from the FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (a political document which was negotiated by thousands of state and non-state representatives over several years) to a simple workshop report (which may collect ‘lessons learnt’) may qualify as ‘good practices’. Going back to the abovementioned keywords, it would rather make sense to claim that while some ‘guidelines’ may *contain* or even *entirely consist of different* good practices, they may actually not be good practices *themselves* (although stakeholders may agree over time that applying a specific set of guidelines constitutes a good practice).

Paradoxically, in this case, the broad and rich empirical basis of the book may have been an obstacle to the development of a clearer definition. Indeed, quite obviously, the different contributions contain research on “guides, manuals, toolkits, procedures, rules, methodologies, lessons learnt, codes of conduct” etc. If all of these articles are to be included in a book on ‘good practices’ a flexible definition of the latter is needed. Providing a clearer definition would have implied providing a thinner publication and, quite unfortunately, excluding some of the best and most interesting chapters of the book¹².

However, this (one and only!) shortcoming should not detract the reader from the richness and the high quality of the publication, which should be considered as a major contribution to an important topic and may be of interest to both practitioners and scholars.

10 “Les bonnes pratiques se matérialisent par des guides, manuels, boîtes à outils (toolkits), procédures, règles, méthodologies, leçons apprises, codes de conduit, etc.”, (p. 30) – reviewer’s translation)

11 “les bonnes pratiques sont utilisées à la fois comme guides pour l’action, répondant au principe de l’efficacité, et comme instruments du changement [...]”, (p. 31).

12 Notably Samuel Beroud & Thomas Hajduk, ‘L’OCDE et les bonnes pratiques. Une histoire inséparable’, in *Les bonnes pratiques des organisations internationales*, pp. 61–78