

Highly Structured Intergovernmental Organizations and Escalation of Low-Level Armed Domestic Conflicts to Civil Wars

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Abstract: Conflict management benefits of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) are well established in the international conflict literature. Yet, IGOs' abilities to address conflicts *within* member countries are not all that well understood. This is an important omission as most recent conflicts are taking place within – as opposed to between – countries. This paper investigates how well IGOs can help mitigate the problem of armed domestic conflict by focusing specifically on the conflict phase in which low-level violence escalates to civil war. We argue that, despite a large and ever-growing number of IGOs, it is specifically those IGOs with high degrees of institutional depth that have the most impact on the evolution of domestic conflicts. These highly structured IGOs (HSIGOs) are typically most affected by domestic instability in member states, giving them an incentive to address the conflict early on and thus prevent its escalation to civil war. Furthermore, because HSIGOs tend to be more important to and have the leverage to influence member governments' behavior, they have more ability to pressure the member governments to address grievances of potential rebel groups – lest the IGO sanction and deny privileges of membership to the state due to the conflict. Finally, facing external reputational and material costs for renegeing, memberships in HSIGOs serve as credible commitment signals when governments bargain with the rebels to end the conflict. All these functions help reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation to civil war in member countries. Our expectations are confirmed with a series of tests on all domestic conflicts from 1945 to 2000.

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For a copy of the paper, please contact the authors.