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Policy Brief

Operationalizing Institutional Vitality: A Framework for Analysis

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Key Recommendations

- Diagnose institutional vitality using observable indicators (in this applied case, patterns of meetings and outputs) rather than relying on reputational assessments of crisis or decline. Diagnosing institutional vitality provides a foundation for more effective multilateral reform by distinguishing among different patterns of organizational change; institutions that appear similarly challenged may in fact occupy very different vitality states and therefore require very different policy responses.
- Evaluate changes relative to each organization's historical baseline to distinguish meaningful shifts from short-term fluctuation.
- Use a structured framework to identify whether an institution is in a state of life, stagnation, change or decline. Without a diagnostic framework, policymakers may misidentify the source of institutional problems and pursue reforms that fail to address the underlying dynamics.
- Distinguish between political demand constraints and bureaucratic capacity constraints before pursuing reform.
- Understanding institutional vitality provides a foundation for more effective multilateral reform by distinguishing between different patterns of organizational change. Align reform strategies with diagnosed vitality states: support adaptation where change is underway, address capacity gaps where demand exists and avoid premature restructuring or termination where institutions could retain latent value.

Challenge

It seems tempting to describe international organizations (IOs) as being in crisis, obsolete or in need of reform. Particularly in a period marked by geopolitical fragmentation and fiscal constraint, calls for restructuring or replacement can be rife. At the same time, the empirical record across nearly a century shows that IOs very rarely die outright, which suggests that they tend to withstand contestation.[1] But in what form?

At a basic level, institutional vitality depends on observable dimensions. Although relevant factors vary depending on an institution's form, function, issue area and ultimate mission, at a basic level most organizations share at a minimum two factors: whether they convene relevant actors, and whether they generate outputs consistent with their mandate. These dimensions – in the framework employed here, meetings and activities, although other dimensions may be more appropriate in other contexts – do not always move in tandem. An organization may continue to meet regularly but produce limited outputs; it may generate new forms of activity even as formal convening declines; or both dimensions may fluctuate over time.

Such variation creates a diagnostic problem. Similar surface conditions can reflect very different underlying dynamics. Continued meetings without outputs may indicate stagnation, or it may signal a transitional period of negotiation. Rising activity may reflect adaptive change or, conversely, short-term responses to external shocks. Declines in both meetings and outputs may signal structural disengagement or alternately a temporary contraction prior to renewal.

Policymakers must, then, interpret patterns of change across relevant dimensions. Many accounts portray organizations as moving through a linear trajectory of growth, plateau and decline. But institutional trajectories are rarely linear. Organizations move across combinations of increasing, stable and declining activity. Without a structured framework for comparing changes in relevant inputs and outputs over time, policymakers risk misdiagnosing institutional conditions. This can lead to reform strategies that target the wrong problem. A systematic approach to diagnosing institutional vitality is therefore essential for aligning reform efforts with underlying institutional dynamics.[2]

Approach

A strategic approach to institutional vitality begins by shifting from intuition-based assessments to structured diagnosis based on observable institutional behaviour over time. [3]

1 Gisela Hirschmann, "International Organizations' Responses to Member State Contestation: From Inertia to Resilience", *International Affairs*, vol. 97, No. 6 (2021), pp. 1963–81; Stefanie Walter and Nicole Plotke-Scherly, "Responding to Unilateral Challenges to International Institutions", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 69, No. 2 (2025). Henning Schmidtke and Tobias Lenz, "Expanding or defending legitimacy? Why international organizations intensify self-legitimation", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 19 (2024), pp. 753–784.

2 See Julia Gray, "The life cycle of international cooperation: Introduction to the special issue", *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 19, No. 4 (2024), pp. 641–664; Julia Gray, *The life cycle of global governance* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).

3 Julia Gray, "Life, Death, or Zombie? The Vitality of International Organizations", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 62, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1–13. See also Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, "What Kills International Organisations? When and Why International Organisations Terminate", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 27, No. 1 (2021), pp. 281–310; Hylke Dijkstra and Maria J. Debre, "The Death of Major International Organizations: When Institutional Stickiness is not Enough", *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, No. 4 (2022).

Step 1:
Conceptualize vitality as a set of states rather than a binary

Rather than assuming a fixed and linear life cycle, policymakers should assess which of four broad vitality states best characterizes an organization – or subagencies within an organization, as will be discussed below – at a given time.[4] These four states provide a common diagnostic baseline that policymakers can readily identify across a wide range of organizations, although various issue areas or organizational forms may warrant additional distinctions. The four states are:

- **Life:** sustained levels of meetings and outputs.
- **Stagnation:** continued institutional presence with limited or declining outputs.
- **Change:** observable adaptation in outputs, mission or institutional practice.
- **Decline/death:** sustained reduction in both activity and engagement.

To be clear, a given vitality state does not, on its own, indicate whether an organization is functioning well or poorly relative to its goals.[5] Periods of stagnation may, in some cases, reflect politically useful dormancy rather than dysfunction. Organizations that maintain minimal operations can preserve legal authority, institutional memory and coordination infrastructure at relatively low cost, allowing them to be reactivated if political conditions shift. Similarly, periods of change should not be assumed to be inherently beneficial. Organizational adaptation may reflect strategic realignment, but it could also represent reactive or suboptimal responses. Even sustained activity does not guarantee effectiveness, as organizations may remain highly active while producing outputs of limited substantive impact. Conversely, decline or contraction may, in some contexts, represent an appropriate winding down of an organization that has fulfilled its purpose or lost its relevance. Assessing performance or effectiveness would require a separate set of evaluative criteria.

Step 2:
Measure vitality using meetings and activities (or relevant dimensions)

Policymakers should select observable dimensions that capture an organization's core functions. Different organizational mandates and institutional forms may call for different dimensions (for example, adjudicative bodies may require measures of case resolution, while financial institutions may require indicators of lending or resource mobilization). Here, for illustration, we can think of two general observable dimensions that could provide a practical basis for diagnosis.

Meetings capture whether an institution continues to convene relevant actors. These may include summits, ministerial meetings, technical working groups or consultations with external stakeholders. *Activities* capture whether an institution produces outputs consistent with its mandate, including policy decisions, reports, monitoring and implementation initiatives. In combination (and acknowledging that these dimensions could move in different directions at different times), these indicators provide a baseline measure of operational vitality.

Step 3:
Evaluate change relative to institutional baselines

Vitality should be assessed relative to an organization's own historical pattern. IOs differ significantly in mandate and operating rhythm, which can make universal benchmarks misleading. Changes in meetings and activities should therefore be evaluated over time, using recent patterns as a baseline.

Step 4:
Map institutional behaviour across dimensions

Combining changes in meetings and activities produces a structured diagnostic framework. Rather than a simple binary distinction, institutional trajectories can be understood across three levels (decrease, stability/status quo and increase) on each dimension.

4 Julia Gray, "Life, Death, Inertia, Change: The Hidden Lives of International Organizations", *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 34, No. 1 (2020), pp. 33–42.

5 Ranjit Lall, *Making International Institutions Work: The Politics of Performance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023).

When both meetings and activities increase or remain stable, the organization is operating in a life state, reflecting sustained engagement or growth.

When activities decline while meetings persist, or when both remain flat at low levels, the organization is likely experiencing stagnation. In these cases, formal structures remain intact, but substantive output is limited.

When activities increase (particularly in new forms) while meetings remain stable or decline, the organization may be undergoing change. This reflects adaptation in response to shifting political or institutional conditions.

When both meetings and activities decline over time, the organization is entering a period of decline, indicating a sustained reduction in engagement and output.

Many of these combinations carry ambiguities. For example, increases in meetings without corresponding outputs may reflect either stagnation (routine convening without results) or transition (preparation for reform or renegotiation). Such cases would require assessment over multiple periods to determine whether they resolve into change or continued stagnation.

This structured comparison allows policymakers to distinguish between four core states of vitality while preserving the nuance of intermediate conditions.

Step 5: Distinguish sources of constraint

Once vitality is assessed, policymakers could identify the primary constraint shaping institutional performance. For example, political demand constraints arise when Member States are unwilling or unable to authorize meaningful action.[6] These often manifest as continued meetings with limited outputs. Bureaucratic capacity constraints arise when demand exists but the institution lacks the administrative or technical capacity to respond effectively.

Distinguishing between the relevant constraints helps determine reform efforts. Institutional redesign cannot substitute for political authorization, and additional resources cannot resolve coordination failures among Member States.

Questions for Policymakers Diagnosing International Organization Vitality

- Are meetings and activities (or whichever dimensions are relevant to the IO in question) increasing, stable or declining relative to the organization's recent baseline?
- Are patterns of activity sustained or episodic?
- Is limited output driven by weak political demand or by administrative constraints?
- Does continued convening indicate latent coordination value or inertia?
- Are observed changes part of a transition toward adaptation or toward a pattern of stagnation?

Figure1: Conceptualizing vitality through meetings and activities

		Meetings ↓	Meetings →	Meetings ↑
Activities	↓	Decline	Stagnation	Stagnation / Transition
Activities	→	Stagnation	Life	Stagnation / Transition
Activities	↑	Change	Change	Life (growth)

6 See Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, *Exit from International Organizations: Costly Negotiation for Institutional Change* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025); Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Daniel Verdier, "To reform or to replace? Succession as a mechanism of institutional change in intergovernmental organisations", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 19 (2024), pp. 691–719; Averell Schmidt, "Treaty withdrawal and the development of international law", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 19 (2024), pp. 785–808; Yoram Z. Haftel and Bar Nadel, "Economic crises and the survival of international organizations", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 19 (2024), pp. 665–690 (2024); Inken von Borzyskowski and Felicity Vabulas, "Public support for withdrawal from international organizations: Experimental evidence from the US", *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 19 (2024), pp. 809–845.

A General Framework for Diagnosing Institutional Vitality

The framework outlined here is intended as a general approach to assessing institutional vitality across a wide range of international organizations. [7] At the same time, these dimensions should be understood as flexible. What counts as meaningful activity or output may vary across organizational forms and issue areas. In climate governance, outputs may take the form of regulatory standards, reporting frameworks or compliance mechanisms. In security institutions, outputs may consist of declarations, resolutions or coordination of joint actions. In development or economic organizations, activities may include technical assistance, monitoring or programme implementation.

Similarly, meetings vary in structure and significance. High-level summits, ministerial gatherings, technical working groups and multi-stakeholder forums all represent forms of institutional convening, but their importance depends on context. In some organizations, the composition of delegations, level of representation and frequency of meetings may be more informative than the number of meetings alone.

In applying this framework, policymakers should tailor the specific indicators to the institutional context, ensuring that the measures used reflect the substantive functions, mandates and modes of operation of the organization under review.

For illustration, the early days of the World Bank and the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) prove illuminating. Although the immediate post-war period is often invoked as a golden age of multilateral institution-building, profound uncertainty reigned. Governments confronted the immense task of reconstruction while navigating the onset of the Cold War, competing political and economic models and mutual distrust. Many newly created international organizations therefore struggled to establish stable patterns of activity. Examining these early institutional experiences illustrates how a framework for diagnosing institutional vitality can distinguish between temporary stagnation, genuine decline and successful adaptation – an important lesson for policymakers confronting institutional challenges today.

Case Study: From Stagnation to Sustained Expansion (World Bank, 1950s–1970s)[8]

In the 1950s, the World Bank faced an uncertain institutional future. Although created to finance post-war reconstruction, that mission had largely been overtaken by the Marshall Plan, leaving the Bank to redefine its role. In that decade, the World Bank exhibited a pattern consistent with stagnation when assessed through meetings and outputs. The institution continued to operate and approve loans, but it focused narrowly on project-based lending, primarily in infrastructure and energy. Lending operations generated regular meetings, but the Bank produced a limited range of outputs and devoted little attention to broader development analysis or policy engagement.

During this period, economic analysis occupied a marginal place in the Bank's operations. The institution produced few analytical outputs and rarely integrated them into decision-making. As a result, the organization remained active but concentrated its efforts in a narrow set of functions, reflecting constrained institutional vitality rather than decline.

By the mid-1960s, changing global priorities and new leadership drove the bank in new directions. As governments turned their attention toward economic development and newly independent countries, President George Woods (1963-68) repositioned the Bank from a reconstruction lender into a development institution. Woods expanded the role of the International

7 This and subsequent sections draw from Julia Gray, "The Vitality of Global Governance", unpublished manuscript.

8 See also Mirek Tobiáš Hošman, *Development Brokers: The World Bank, Economic Expertise, and Global Governance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Eugénia C. Heldt and Henning Schmidtke, "Explaining coherence in international regime complexes: How the World Bank shapes the field of multilateral development finance", *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 26 No. 6 (2019), pp. 1160–1186.

Development Association and made economic research and policy analysis central to the Bank's lending strategy.[9]

As such, the Bank expanded both the range and volume of its outputs, particularly through the rapid growth of economic analysis, policy work and research. New forms of activity emerged, including publications, cross-national economic reports and expanded engagement with external actors such as governments and academic institutions. At the same time, internal coordination increased through new committees and regularized interactions among staff, which supported the integration of these outputs into the Bank's operations.

This combination of expanding outputs and evolving institutional practices reflects a transition into a change state. Importantly, this shift did not involve a reduction in meetings; rather, what changed was what those meetings produced. Economic analysis became increasingly central to lending decisions, and outputs diversified beyond project finance.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Bank had moved into a life state characterized by sustained increases in both meetings and outputs. Economic research, policy analysis and lending activities expanded significantly, and the organization developed a continuous flow of outputs across multiple domains. This period illustrates how an institution can move from constrained activity to sustained vitality through the expansion and diversification of outputs, even while maintaining its core convening functions.

Case Study: From Programme-Specific Activity to Sustained Institutional Vitality (OEEC to OECD)

The United States created the OEEC in 1948 as a coordinating body for the Marshall Plan and assembled it quickly to administer a specific programme. Rather than relying on existing multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank or UN Economic Commission for Europe, United States officials assigned the OEEC many of those functions and built a regionally focused mechanism to allocate aid and coordinate policy across European States. The OEEC's initial vitality reflected this clearly bounded mandate. Meetings and outputs centred on implementing a time-limited reconstruction programme.

In its early years, the OEEC could be best described as occupying a life state. Member States met frequently and coordinated closely around Marshall Plan implementation. The organization generated regular and consequential outputs, including aid allocation, monitoring of national recovery efforts and coordination of economic policies among participating countries. Meetings and outputs reinforced one another, producing a high level of institutional vitality around a clearly defined mission.

By the mid to late 1950s, this pattern began to shift. As Marshall Plan funding wound down, the OEEC lost its central purpose. Member States continued to meet regularly, but the organization generated fewer and less consequential outputs. Efforts to develop new activities – most notably negotiations over a European free trade area – failed to produce agreement. The OEEC continued to convene Member States, but it did not generate a corresponding expansion or renewal of outputs.

Yet the OEEC did not immediately enter a period of decline. Regular meetings preserved a forum in which Member States could renegotiate the organization's role and eventually transform it into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This pattern of continued meetings but declining outputs corresponds to a stagnation state. The OEEC retained its institutional structure and convening capacity, but it no longer generated outputs that matched the scale or significance of its earlier activities. Even so, stagnation did not become decline. Member States continued to use the organization as a platform for coordination, even as substantive outputs lagged.

The creation of the OECD in 1961 marked a shift from stagnation to change. Rather than dissolve the organization, Member States redefined its mission and expanded its activities into new areas, including economic policy coordination, data collection, country reviews and development assistance. These outputs differed from the OEEC's earlier programmatic functions, but they accumulated over time and gave the organization a new purpose.

Meetings continued, but they served a different function. Instead of coordinating a single reconstruction programme, Member States used them to exchange information, conduct peer review and set agendas across a broader range of policy areas. The OECD thus entered a change state defined not by more meetings, but by a transformation in the nature and scope of its outputs.

9 Mirek Tobiáš Hošman, "Internal Dynamics as Drivers of Change in International Organizations: The Economists' Takeover at the World Bank", *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49, No. 1 (2023), pp. 41–60.

Over time, the OECD stabilized into a life state. Regular meetings generated a continuous flow of analytical, advisory and coordinative outputs, while those outputs reinforced the value of continued convening. The organization developed a steady operating rhythm and diversified its activities across multiple domains rather than relying on a single mandate.

This trajectory highlights several features of institutional vitality. Stagnation need not lead to decline; continued convening can preserve opportunities for adaptation. Organizations can also enter new vitality states by changing the type of outputs they produce rather than simply increasing their volume. Finally, sustained vitality often accompanies diversification, which reduces dependence on any single function or mission.

Case Study: Divergent Vitality Under Shared Constraints (Caribbean Regional Organizations)

The Caribbean provides a useful illustration of how organizations facing similar external conditions can exhibit markedly different vitality trajectories. Caribbean States share small domestic markets, limited administrative capacity, overlapping memberships, common colonial legacies and relatively low levels of intraregional trade. If vitality depended primarily on economic interdependence or structural conditions, we would expect regional organizations to display similar outcomes. Instead, Caribbean organizations range from outright institutional death to sustained vitality, highlighting the importance of internal organizational dynamics.

The West Indian Federation (WIF) represents the clearest Caribbean example of institutional death. Established in 1958 as a political federation of ten Anglophone territories, it enjoyed broad rhetorical support but never developed sufficient authority, legitimacy or leadership to survive. Disputes over financing, political representation and even the location of the federal capital exposed weak commitment among member governments. Jamaica withdrew in 1961, followed shortly by Trinidad and Tobago, causing the Federation to collapse by 1962. In vitality terms, both meetings and meaningful activities declined simultaneously, producing a classic case of institutional death.

The Association of Caribbean States (ACS), established in 1994, illustrates a different trajectory. Created in response to concerns that the Caribbean might be marginalized by developments such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and Mercosur, the ACS initially pursued ambitious goals of regional integration across a broad Caribbean basin. Yet its large and heterogeneous membership limited cohesion, while overlapping organizations already occupied many of the functions it hoped to perform. Rather than disappear, however, the ACS repeatedly adapted. The organization deliberately abandoned ambitions of economic integration and instead narrowed its focus to functional cooperation in areas such as tourism, transportation, trade facilitation and disaster management. Meetings continued, outputs persisted and the organization survived, but without developing a strong bureaucracy or autonomous authority. The ACS therefore occupies a change state, surviving through continual adaptation but has never transitioned into high vitality.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) occupies an intermediate position among change, life and stagnation states. Established in 1973 as the successor to the Caribbean Free Trade Association, it remains the most visible Caribbean regional organization and continues to generate a steady stream of meetings, plans, communiqués and policy initiatives. Yet observers have repeatedly criticized its chronic implementation failures. Regional leaders have long lamented the gap between ambitious declarations and actual policy execution. The Secretariat lacks meaningful enforcement powers, Member States often send delegates without authority to commit governments, and staffing challenges have weakened institutional capacity. As a result, CARICOM exhibits substantial activity but often limited follow-through. It survives, adapts and periodically reforms itself, but struggles to translate political commitments into sustained outcomes. In vitality terms, CARICOM oscillates among change, life and stagnation states.

One reason CARICOM has remained active despite persistent implementation problems is the gradual migration of vitality into its network of specialized agencies[10] across a long list of issue areas, including trade and economic integration, monetary and development finance, public health, disaster management, security cooperation, education, agriculture and food security, climate adaptation, standards harmonization, judicial cooperation and external trade negotiations. Some of those agencies have developed clearer mandates and stronger operational capacities than the Community itself. As a result, CARICOM's vitality increasingly resides not only in the Secretariat and heads-of-government

10 On variable vitality across and within IO subunits, see Alexander Baturo and Julia Gray, "Leaders in the United Nations General Assembly: Revitalization or politicization?". *Review of International Organizations* vol. 19 (2024), pp. 721–752.

meetings but also in a broader ecosystem of functional institutions that continue to generate outputs – albeit variably – even when the stated overall goal of political and economic integration advances slowly.

The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), by contrast, represents the strongest example of sustained vitality in the region. Established in 1981 among a smaller and more similar group of States, with a mandate focused on economic cooperation, the OECS developed a monetary union, stronger legal authority and a more empowered bureaucracy than its regional counterparts. The Revised Treaty of Basseterre further expanded its supranational functions, allowing regional institutions to draft legislation and coordinate implementation across Member States. Its small size, geographic proximity and shared administrative traditions facilitated cooperation, while its institutions developed habits of regular interaction and policy follow-through. Unlike CARICOM or the ACS, the OECS succeeded in aligning entrepreneurship with bureaucratic empowerment. The OECS therefore occupies a life state characterized by sustained vitality.

These cases demonstrate the full range of vitality outcomes under broadly similar external conditions. The WIF died through lacking both authority and sustained entrepreneurship. The ACS survives through continual adaptation without building significant capacity. CARICOM persists despite struggling with implementation and enforcement, and some of its sub-agencies exhibit more vitality than others. The OECS – albeit with a narrower mandate and fewer, more homogenous members – seems to combine bureaucratic empowerment and entrepreneurship in a manner that produces sustained vitality. The Caribbean experience therefore reinforces the central claim of the vitality framework: organizations operating under similar structural constraints can follow very different trajectories.

In summary, these cases demonstrate the value of moving beyond broad narratives of success or decline to examine patterns of activity within organizations. Stagnation need not lead to institutional death (as seen in the OEEC's transition to the OECD). In turn, adaptation often involves changing the nature rather than simply the volume of outputs (as with the World Bank's shift from infrastructure lending to development research and policy analysis). And organizations facing similar external environments can nevertheless follow very different trajectories (as demonstrated by the contrasting experiences of CARICOM, the OECS, the ACS and the WIF).

A Path Forward

Diagnosing institutional vitality provides a foundation for more effective multilateral reform. By assessing changes in meetings and activities relative to institutional baselines, policymakers can distinguish between temporary stagnation, structural decline and adaptive transformation.

Such an approach helps enable targeted reform strategies. Stagnating institutions may require renewed political commitment or capacity support, whereas those undergoing change may benefit from consolidation; and those in sustained decline may require tough evaluation. In an era of increasing pressure on IOs, a structured diagnostic framework allows policymakers to align their attention with underlying institutional conditions.

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