Abstracts

Why do regional organizations actively engage in certain transnational issues while persistently stagnating in others, despite having the institutional capacity? This paper introduces the concept of weaponized incompetence, the strategic performance of ineffectiveness by ROs to evade politically costly engagement while preserving legitimacy. Focusing on human rights and forced displacement, it argues that inaction is not always a sign of dysfunction, but a calculated move to avoid internal dissent and external accountability. Through comparative case studies of ASEAN and CARICOM, the project investigates why ROs selectively disengage from key transnational issues. It highlights ASEAN's robust economic integration alongside chronic inaction in addressing the Rohingya crisis and human trafficking, challenging prevailing explanations that attribute stagnation to structural design flaws, resource constraints, or defensive institutional logics not accounting for within-organization variation and persistent inaction in high-stakes issue areas. These patterns of symbolic engagement reveal a strategic form of covert delegation, wherein responsibilities are shifted to external NGOs, states, or international agencies. This paper is situated within broader debates on regional security, international human rights norms, and the politics of institutional responsibility. It theorizes that weaponized incompetence is most likely when two conditions are present: (1) high political sensitivity, where decisive action risks internal fracture or external backlash, and (2) the presence of credible external actors, who can absorb the burdens of engagement. The paper employs qualitative case studies and process tracing, with ASEAN and CARICOM as focal cases. By theorizing stagnation as a strategic, externally conditioned organizational behavior, this study contributes a framework to understand how inaction itself can be instrumental in managing contested authority and shared responsibility in multilateral settings.