

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cross-level coordination among international organizations: Dilemmas and practices

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This article contributes to the understanding of inter-agency coordination among international organizations, conceived as international public administrations (IPAs). We adopt a practice-based approach to study the dilemmas of coordination across levels of government in the empirical setting of United Nations agencies involved in field-level development activities. Based on elite interviews in both pilot countries and agency headquarters, complemented by extensive archival analysis, we track the emergence of a specific type of coordination dilemma that has been understudied, that is, the dilemma of inter- and intra-agency coordination. We identify two sets of coordinating practices that aided in balancing the dilemma, that is, 'systemic thinking' and 'jointly mobilizing resources and consensus', and we discuss the organizational factors mediating the perception of each set of practices.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The awareness that complex and interdependent societal problems require integrated public solutions (Roberts 2000) has granted sustained currency to a broad stream of literature focused on the 'collaborative imperative' (Bingham and O'Leary 2006; Thompson and Perry 2006). This literature asserts the need to move beyond boundary-based solutions, which are considered 'out of sync with 21st century problems' (Kettl 2006, p. 13), through shared arrangements (for a review, see Emerson et al. 2012) either across sectors (Bryson et al. 2006; Ansell and Gash 2008) or among public agencies (Bardach 1998; Thomas 2003; O'Toole and Meier 2004; Askim et al. 2011; Bel and Warner 2015).

Considering that most of our current societal problems are interdependent and can rarely be addressed by a focus on individual countries, international organizations (IOs) have been entrusted with the explicit mandate of tackling these problems by developing a multilateral approach. Over time, scholars—in large part from the disciplinary quarters of international relations—have conceived the capacity of IOs to tackle complex problems primarily as a function of their ability to achieve agreement among member countries. Such a perspective, in line with the traditional state ontology that has characterized the study of IOs for several decades, overlooks the organizational challenges associated with the implementation of integrated solutions as well as the practices that may help in managing those challenges. This is precisely the focus of our study.

We build on scholarship that has analysed IOs as organizations (Ness and Brechin 1988; Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Baccaro and Mele 2011, 2012) and more specifically as public organizations (for a review, see Trondal 2007,

2011, 2016). Similar to what happens in domestic settings, studies focused on IOs have acknowledged that the delivery of integrated solutions requires overcoming fragmentation and siloed thinking (Trondal et al. 2010) through coordination or the alignment of interdependent activities to accomplish a collective organizational task (Jarzabkowski et al. 2012). Within the scholarly debate on inter-agency relationships in modern political-administrative systems,¹ a coordination perspective focuses specifically on how to create more consistency among decisions horizontally as well as vertically (Egeberg and Trondal 2016) by leveraging the administrative capacity of agencies (Thompson and Perry 2006). However, coordination is likely to activate a series of tensions that, taken as a whole, make such harmonized activities oscillate between the search for integration and maintaining the participants' autonomy. The picture is complicated by the so-called coordination dilemma: efforts aimed at increasing coordination at one level are often deemed incompatible with coordination across levels (Egeberg and Trondal 2016).

The setting of our study is the United Nations (UN) system, a compound bureaucracy (Trondal et al. 2010) characterized by fragmentation among its subunits. As an independent UN evaluation reports, 'the UN was assembled through a historic process of creating separate but overlapping mandates or *fragments*, which have not yet been brought together in a coherent manner' (UN Independent Report 2012, p. 6, emphasis added). Against this backdrop, system-wide coherence has been cyclically addressed by the UN, and, since the early 2000s, has scored very highly on the UN reform agenda (Ghebali and Tortora 2007), especially in the context of operational activities for development (von Freiesleben 2008). Development activities are crucial for the UN, for they engage over 30 UN agencies and benefit approximately 90 recipient countries (UN Secretary General Report 2016).

The empirical context of our study is Delivering as One (DaO), a UN initiative aimed at achieving system-wide coordination in field-level development activities. First tested in eight volunteer pilot countries, DaO is currently undertaking a significant scaling-up process. However, the efforts aimed at reducing fragmentation within the UN system have been hampered by incoherence and hierarchy within individual organizations, resulting in an explicit trade-off between inter-agency, system-level coordination and intra-agency coordination (Hanrieder 2015a). Based on 84 elite interviews with staff working both in the pilot countries and in several agency headquarters as well as extensive archival analysis, the article distils the main traits of the specific type of coordination dilemma that emerged from the early implementation of the DaO reform. It identifies two sets of cross-level coordinating practices, 'systemic thinking' and 'jointly mobilizing resources and consensus', which aid in balancing the trade-off between inter-agency and intra-agency coordination. The article further discusses the organizational factors that alter the perception of effectiveness of each set of practices on the original trade-off, three of which amplify it ('non-resident status', 'small specialized status' and 'politically sensitive mandate') and one that reduces it ('strong brand').

Together, the results from this study contribute to the literature on inter-agency coordination and specifically on the coordination dilemma by advancing a practice-based approach to the everyday effort of coordinating.

2 | THEORETICAL APPROACH

2.1 | International organizations and fragmentation

Two opposite stances have animated an intense and protracted debate on the nature of IOs—that is, the one between rational-choice intergovernmental theory and functionalism (for a synthesis, see Mathiason 2007, pp. 6–15). A third stream of research informed by sociological institutionalism has started to analyse IOs as

¹The extensive literature on inter-agency relations does not agree unanimously on terminology, drawing as it does from a wide variety of perspectives. As a consequence, terms that are frequently cited interchangeably include cooperation (Busuioac 2016), network management (Ansell and Gash 2008; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010), inter-agency collaboration (Vangen and Huxham 2012) and coordination (Egeberg and Trondal 2016). While acknowledging the variety of perspectives on the theme, we employ the term 'coordination' (Egeberg and Trondal 2016) to refer specifically to the deliberate and orderly alignment or adjustment of agencies' actions to achieve jointly determined goals (Gulati et al. 2012).

organizations (Ness and Brechin 1988; Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Ellis 2010; Brechin and Ness 2013; Abbott et al. 2015; Stone and Ladi 2015). In line with the last stream, a group of scholars has employed organization and public administration theories to conceptualize IOs. The notion of international public administration (IPA) suggests precisely that complex intergovernmental settings are amenable to being investigated through the lenses developed for the study of national bureaucracies (Trondal 2007; Trondal et al. 2010; Baccaro and Mele 2011; Ansell et al. 2016; Bauer et al. 2016). By applying these lenses, scholars have explored the actual autonomy of IOs (Bauer and Ege 2016; Ege 2017), especially by bringing organizational structure and ways of organizing back into IO studies (Trondal 2016) and by attending to their effects on the actions, role perceptions and loyalties of international civil servants (Mele et al. 2016). In this vein, international organizations have been conceptualized as complex and compound bureaucracies characterized by the coexistence of different logics, ranging from an epistemic to a supranational one. If we look at individual international organizations, the fact that the mandate and activities of IOs are typically organized by 'major purpose' is conducive to a strong cohesion of the specific thematic units or sectoral portfolios of IOs. A 'departmental logic' will therefore be evoked and often prevail over, among others, the logic that incarnates the international organization in its entirety, triggering 'patterns of cooperation and conflict among incumbents along sectoral cleavages' (Trondal et al. 2010, p. 26). Such cleavages are associated with siloed thinking and fragmentation, which have been defined as both an organizational outcome and an organizational process marked by the simultaneous influence of powerful subunits (Hanrieder 2015a) that may be in competition with each other (Hanrieder 2015b). Reducing fragmentation is considered a tough task, as the independence enjoyed by sub-units is sticky and rarely reversible. Therefore, attempts aimed at increasing coordination among fragments may often trigger specific tensions.

The public administration scholarship has identified an array of tensions resulting from concerted efforts to work together either spontaneously or more often as a result of external pressures. In stylized terms, struggles for autonomy versus integration (Thomas 2003; Provan and Kenis 2008) or, in a different nuance, for diversity versus unity (Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010; Saz-Carranza and Ospina 2011; Vangen and Huxham 2012) are likely to emerge. In a similar vein, a still limited set of studies of international organizations has identified a 'coordination dilemma', that is, tensions related to combining coordination at one level with coordination across levels, especially between the national and supranational levels (Busuioac 2016; Egeberg and Trondal 2016). For example, attempts by national governments to enhance policy coherence within their territorial boundaries may collide with the collaboration efforts occurring among their own national agencies, with the European Commission, among various EU agencies and among the corresponding agencies in other member countries (Egeberg and Trondal 2016).

2.2 | Intra- and inter-agency coordination: dilemma and practices

Scholars have recognized, although seldom empirically analysed, the fact that attempts to instil more coherence among UN agencies in the field are bound to increase fragmentation within single UN agencies and more specifically between their headquarters and the field offices (Hanrieder 2015a). We posit that understanding the contours of this dilemma as well as ways to attenuate it is a promising intellectual endeavour. A few studies of the coordination dilemmas in IOs have suggested that structure and organizational arrangements such as layering upon pre-existing institutions may help the actors to address the trade-offs (Egeberg and Trondal 2016). Our study is designed to complement these findings by analysing how a trade-off is generated and addressed over time through coordinating practices that address both the inter-agency and intra-agency levels.

In public administration and organization theory, studies have acknowledged that effective inter-agency coordination relies not only on an *ex ante* shared understanding of the benefits of coordination or on its rules but also on how actors' actions are aligned in the coordination process. Such a view of coordination as nonlinear and emergent (Thomson and Perry 2006; Gulati et al. 2012) hints at the generative nature of inter-agency coordination, namely, how coordination requires a continuous (re)construction and adaptation of the guiding mechanisms as actors perform tasks over time.

Espousing this conceptualization, we argue that understanding the emergent, cross-level nature of the coordination dilemma and how it is addressed can be served by a practice-based approach to coordination (Jarzabkowski

et al. 2012). Such an approach focuses on the everyday activity of organizing in both its routine and improvised forms (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011). Specifically, practices can be defined as those social actions that recursively produce and reproduce the structures that constrain and enable actions (Giddens 1984), and they have recently been invoked for the study of everyday life in IOs (Adler-Nissen 2016). Adopting a practice-based view, therefore, implies shifting the focus from coordination, defined as the alignment of interdependent activities to accomplish collective organizational tasks (Jarzabkowski et al. 2012), to coordinating, defined as the ongoing enactment of elements both originally codified by and emergent from the interaction itself. As such, practices are not only defined a priori but 'are constituted *through* coordinating' (Jarzabkowski et al. 2012, p. 907, emphasis added). Furthermore, the practice perspective maintains that the value created through coordinating can be thoroughly assessed by studying the activities of actors as they interact both with each other and with the context. In other words, it requires multi-level analysis of how organizational and inter-organizational dynamics are mutually related and produce cross-level effects (Berends et al. 2011).

We adopt the dynamic and relational perspective offered by the practice-based approach to explain how the cross-level coordination dilemma can be addressed. Specifically, we ask (a) what are the coordinating practices that enable a balance in the trade-off between agency and inter-agency coordination? and (b) how do specific organizational features mediate the perception of those practices?

3 | RESEARCH STRATEGY

3.1 | Empirical setting

Our study is empirically based on an analysis of DaO (2006), a landmark in the system-wide coherence trajectory of UN reforms that was initiated in the late 1960s and vigorously addressed in the late 1990s by the reform package of Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

In eight pilot countries, namely, Albania, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Pakistan, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uruguay, and Vietnam, UN agencies were required to collaborate at the field level while maintaining solid coordination with their parent headquarters. Specifically, the DaO collaborative framework rested upon four pillars. The One Leader concept envisioned a strengthened role for the Resident Coordinator, that is, the designated representative of the Secretary-General. The Resident Coordinator was expected to provide strategic guidance throughout the development programming process in collaboration with the UN agencies' representatives composing the country team. Country team members had to contribute to the elaboration of one nationally owned strategy (One Programme), centred around a set of strategic outputs based on national priorities. In the original design, the results of the UN country teams had to be presented in one financial framework showing each agency's planned input together with the funding source. The results of the financial framework could be funded by agencies' core resources, national government contributions, or direct contributions from donors (One Budget & Fund). Finally, to further strengthen the coherence of action and reduce operational costs, field agencies were encouraged to share common premises and services by relocating their activities into One Office.

We selected a single-case—that is, the UN—and holistic—that is, the DaO reform—design with an exploratory research purpose (Yin 2003; Seawright and Gerring 2008) to unpack the understudied cross-level coordination dilemma and advance new theoretical insights into the emerging practices designed to address it. First, with its legally autonomous agencies accustomed to operating independently on the one hand and the strong push towards collaboration in the field on the other, tensions between UN inter-agency and intra-agency coherence certainly characterized the efforts to 'deliver as one'. In addition, the different mandates, diverse approaches and strong individual distinctiveness of UN agencies constantly challenged the attempts to reduce the fragmentation of a loose family of agencies under what can nonetheless be considered a strong symbolic UN heading. Last, the traditional accountability of UN agency staff working in the field towards their headquarters was undeniably confronted with new mechanisms devised to strengthen the local accountability of UN agencies towards their partners and host governments, hence exacerbating the fragmentation between headquarters and field.

3.2 | Methodology

To unpack the evolution of the coordinating practices, we developed a research design able to longitudinally trace (2006–17) the relationship between headquarters and field agencies as well as among field agencies in the pilot countries of the DaO reform. Figure 1 provides a graphical overview of our research design.

3.2.1 | Data sources

Interviews are a rich source of insights into practices (Adler-Nissen 2016) and everyday actions and meanings (Fontana and Frey 1994). After reconstructing the UN agencies composing the country teams in the eight pilot countries, we conducted a total of 84 semi-structured elite interviews (Berry 2002). We contacted and interviewed the Resident Coordinators and the staff working in the Resident Coordinator’s Office (20 total) as well as the country representatives of the specific UN agencies serving as members of the country team—the composition of which is heterogeneous across countries—and staff in the agencies’ headquarters (64 in total). The different number of interviews by agency reflects the heterogeneous composition of agencies across the country teams. We employed interviews to capture the informants’ self-perception of the inception of DaO, its evolution over time, how the coordinating experience impacted their agencies and the informants’ own roles and daily activities. The interviews were audio-recorded, generating over 792 pages of transcripts.

The semi-structured interviews were complemented by archival data, including legislative policy documents, internal documents of DaO (both at the country and Secretariat level), governmental documents, reports and policy briefs from the DaO pilot countries. More than 150 documents were analysed in total, with the aim of both

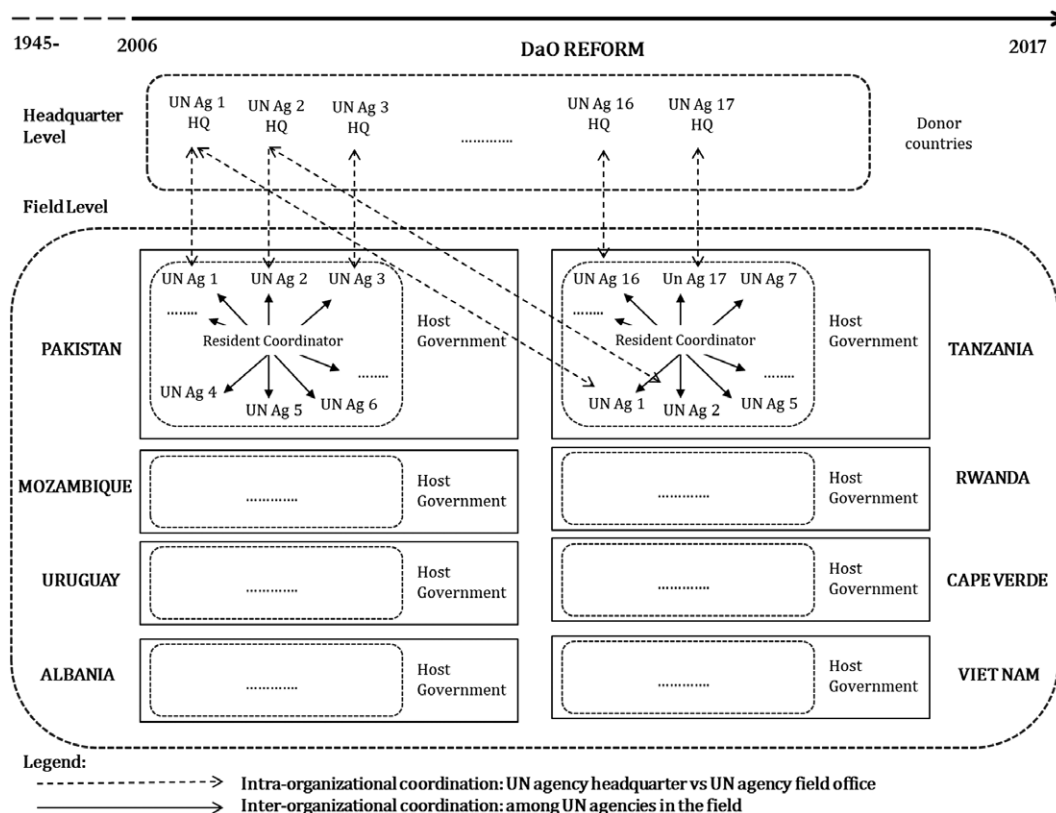


FIGURE 1 Research design

triangulating evidence of the coordination dilemma and reconstructing the formal encoding of the emergent coordinating practices identified by the informants in official documents.

3.2.2 | Data analysis

After reconstructing the historical narrative of the reform, we content analysed the interviews to elicit the original coordination dilemma triggered by the implementation of DaO in the pilot countries. Sensitized by a set of analytical questions—including ‘how was DaO first implemented and what were the challenges associated with its early implementation?’ and ‘how did the early implementation of DaO impact the activities of the specific agency (1–17)?’—we elicited a number of grounded themes related to the emergence of a coordination dilemma. These themes derived from accounts of how early efforts to increase inter-agency coordination at the country level through the implementation of the four pillars of the reform (One Programme, One Budget & Fund, One Leader, and One Office) had yielded negative consequences for intra-agency coordination. To overcome the potential retrospective bias of our interviewees, we triangulated the interviews with archival data produced by both individual UN agencies and country teams in the first years of DaO reform.

In a second step, we considered practices of collaboration as our unit of analysis. We interrogated our interview and archival data with the question ‘what practices did country teams develop over time to overcome the initial challenges of DaO implementation?’ We paid close attention to coding fragments where interviewees made a deliberate effort to both describe the practice as a social act in itself, that is, the enactment of elements both originally codified in the pillars and emergent from the interaction, and to elaborate on how the specific practice allowed the originally identified intra- and inter-agency coordination tension to be overcome. Through our iterative and comparative analytical approach, we identified six practices, which we labelled coordinating practices, and we further grouped them in two broader sets. In unpacking the impact of the emergent coordinating practices on the coordination dilemma, we noticed a variance among UN agencies in the relative perception of the effectiveness of each set of coordinating practices. In the final stage, we thus more systematically coded the organizational factors that impacted the perception of the effectiveness of each set of coordinating practices, triangulating interview data with a systematic analysis of the documents produced by individual agencies. Table 1 presents the results of the analysis.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | The coordination dilemma

Evidence from the early phase of implementation of DaO in the field shows that elements of a coordination dilemma were felt by UN staff involved in the reform.

The original efforts to horizontally coordinate the planning of activities of all UN agencies at the field level ‘around agreed goals’ encountered the contradiction that ‘the people working in these different organizations’ still had ‘a vertical accountability to their respective headquarters’ (Interview, Agency 4). Therefore, inter-agency coordination and needing to plan together at the field level (One Programme) was perceived as an increased burden, leading to double reporting at the organizational level. As argued by one of our informants, ‘it was challenging for us because we needed to do two procedures, two reports and even if we got the project approval here in the country, then we needed to set the project in the system in the headquarters’ (Interview, Agency 11). In the early phase, difficulties in balancing the intra- and inter-agency levels led to limited effectiveness of the inter-agency coordination needed to jointly plan UN activities (One Programme). This was evidenced by the first UN country plans, described by our informants as ‘simply a sum of individual agencies’ plans’ rather than the outcome of a joint coordination effort.

Furthermore, attempts to increase coordination to collect and manage financial resources across UN agencies in the field (i.e., a common budgetary framework and One Fund) were perceived as bringing about a duplication and

TABLE 1 Organizational factors mediating the perceived impact of coordinating practices on the coordination dilemma

Agency	Country	Organizational factors				Perceived impact	
		Non resident status	Small specialized status	Politically sensitive mandate	Strong brand	Impact of systemic thinking	Impact of resource sharing and consensus
Agency 1	C1	x				x	
Agency 2	C1	x	x			x	
Agency 5	C1		x			x	
Agency 6	C1	x	x			x	
Agency 7	C1						
Agency 9	C1	x				x	
Agency 10	C1		x	x		x	x (+)
Agency 13	C1				x		x (-)
Agency 17	C1	x				x	
Agency 1	C2	x				x	
Agency 7	C2						
Agency 10	C2			x			x (+)
Agency 13	C2						
Agency 14	C2	x	x			x	
Agency 7	C3						
Agency 9	C3						
Agency 12	C3						
Agency 13	C3				x		x (-)
Agency 17	C3						
Agency 4	C4	x				x	
Agency 7	C4						
Agency 8	C4	x				x	
Agency 10	C4			x			x (+)
Agency 16	C4	x	x			x	
Agency 17	C4						
Agency 1	C5						
Agency 4	C5						
Agency 11	C5	x	x			x	
Agency 14	C5	x	x			x	
Agency 1	C6						
Agency 3	C6	x				x	
Agency 4	C6	x				x	
Agency 10	C6			x			x (+)
Agency 11	C6	x	x			x	
Agency 13	C6				x		x (-)
Agency 14	C6	x	x			x	
Agency 17	C6						
Agency 7	C7						
Agency 9	C7	x				x	
Agency 12	C7						
Agency 1	C8						

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Agency	Country	Organizational factors			Perceived impact		
		Non resident status	Small specialized status	Politically sensitive mandate	Strong brand	Impact of systemic thinking	Impact of resource sharing and consensus
Agency 3	C8	x				x	
Agency 4	C8	x				x	
Agency 13	C8				x		x (-)
Agency 15	C8		x			x	

dispersion of efforts in the relationship between field offices and headquarters as well as between the latter and external stakeholders, such as donors and implementing partners:

We were told to work together at the country level, but at the HQ level, people still didn't work together! This had very concrete implications: for example, we had projects with implementing partners and maybe five different UN agencies supporting the project, and they had to do five different reports because each HQ wanted to have its own format; they wanted to see where their money was going because the donors in New York or Geneva were also requesting this, so there was a lot of this distortion. (Interview, Agency 16)

Over the first years of the reform implementation, members of the country teams gradually elaborated a number of coordinating practices that created a balance in this emergent trade-off between organizational and inter-agency coordination. The results from our analysis identified two sets of such coordinating practices, both of which emerged from the ongoing enactment of elements originally codified in the four pillars and from the interaction itself. After accounting for the evidence of the coordination dilemma, we now describe each set of cross-level coordinating practices and its impact on the dilemma, showing how these practices were able to not solve but address and limit both intra-organizational and inter-agency fragmentation.

4.2 | First set of coordinating practices: systemic thinking

Over time, the activities and interaction associated with the implementation of One Programme led to the emergence of a set of coordinating practices that we label 'systemic thinking'. A milestone of systemic thinking was the shift from autonomous agency interventions to horizontal interventions across agencies through a practice termed *thematic clustering*:

We started doing business in a more horizontal way. Where you see an infant health promotion programme and you see a maternal health promotion, you see how Agency X and Agency Y can feed into each other very nicely together with Agency Z, which is promoting girls' education or women's education. (Interview, Resident Coordinator's Office)

Thematic clustering was achieved by reducing the number of priority areas and by basing inter-agency negotiations on joint planning at the level of long-term outcomes rather than individual, agency-specific outputs. In the vivid words of one of our informants,

The aim (of the new planning) is to come down to a limited number of outcomes; in the former we had 14, now we came out with four. Furthermore, we changed the agencies from the output to the outcome level just to avoid this kind of friction of 'who is doing what'. What we are trying to do now is not a sum-up of every agency's activities in the country; rather, what we as UN should need to achieve. (Interview, Agency 10)

The shift from outputs to outcomes was matched by the identification of a lead agency that, leveraging its expertise and competitive advantage in a certain area, could take responsibility for a specific outcome, orchestrating the contribution of the participating agencies and reporting to the team, to the headquarters and to relevant stakeholders, such as host governments and donors.

Progressively, agencies learned to value and promote their complementarity, thus developing a second practice of systemic thinking that we labelled *focusing on the synergies*. Typically, this practice resulted in either different sectoral contributions to a common policy problem or in an explicit attempt to avoid 'overlapping one with the other' (Interview, Agency 11). In a few cases, it was also interpreted as a complementarity between mandates and enabling resources, such as in the case of technological capacity provided by one agency being leveraged to serve the mandate of other agencies.

The DaO mechanism can be very productive when you have agencies that either have complementary mandates or, as my agency, have the technology to manage the mandate of another agency, such as health or energy, so we have really complementary functions. (Interview, Agency 2)

While thematic clustering and leveraging synergies worked at the strategy-making level, a third coordinating practice focused on the operational level, and it entailed the *procedural alignment* of joint programming. Through a closer connection between headquarters and field agencies, the timeframe of some procedures was harmonized to enable the implementation of joint planning, as discussed by one informant with reference to the programming cycle:

As an agency, we have a three-year programming cycle, while the UN has a five-year programming cycle. Agency 17's programming cycle is January to December, while the government and the UN have just agreed locally that our cycle will be July to June. That is the start of an interaction around how we can harmonize these processes together with our headquarters. (Interview, Agency 17)

Procedural alignment also implied modifying the technical requirements and areas of responsibilities of specialized bodies in the agencies' headquarters, gradually adjusting them to the needs of joint planning:

Now that we are planning together, we are approving and signing a programme with the government without really waiting for the technical clearance (of the headquarters) because the sequence is different. (Interview, Agency 1)

4.2.1 | Impact on the dilemma and the mediating role of organizational factors

The three coordinating practices constituting 'systemic thinking' allowed the coordination dilemma to be addressed by simultaneously enabling inter- and intra-agency coordination.

On the intra-organizational dimension, two impacts could be discerned. First and foremost, these practices brought about *new information flows* between field offices and headquarters as well as across field offices (inward and outward). As recalled by one of our informants, 'I'm able to spread this information [collected through the country team] to other representatives or national correspondents [of my agency] in different countries' (Interview, Agency 1). Increased information flow resulted from the intentional alignment between the individual agency and the country team programme of activity. While the early phases of DaO were based on a limited level of engagement from the headquarters, leading to a series of 'stand-alone' interventions, the evolution of the One Programme pillar and the emergence of the associated coordinating practices led to 'conscious efforts that everything that Agency 7 does in this country is fully aligned with the joint planning' and that 'all the initiatives are coherent, and whatever we have agreed with the headquarters is contributing clearly to the country team results' (Interview, Agency 7). Understanding the mandate and operations of other agencies, a prerequisite for both thematic clustering and

framing, was recognized by our informants as an experience that, once transferred back to the headquarters, yielded more intense learning than the one developed through traditional knowledge transfer.

Through Agency 14 in this country and my reporting back, we learn better how the other UN organizations function. This was deeper learning than what our leaders or functional focal points learned when they got together one or two times every year in these New York-based committees. (Interview, Agency 14)

Second, practices of systemic thinking fed back into the internal functioning of agencies through the *development of novel areas of competence*. By working together, the innovative areas of competence of individual agencies enabled a mandate enlargement, which was then transferred to the headquarters level and across field offices.

DAO allowed us to open up to new topics and action areas. For example, we had never worked specifically on the prison system. We received the opportunity to participate in a joint programme, together with other agencies, to support the process of reforming the prison system in the country. Of course, we participated in our capacity and therefore provided inputs in our area of expertise. The point is that alone, surely we would not have engaged in this work. This allowed us to gain a new perspective and subject area of work that became one of our new areas of research in Geneva. (Interview, Agency 3)

The main impact of the practices of systemic thinking and, in particular, of thematic clustering, on the inter-agency dimension was the development and consolidation of *mutual knowledge* through discussions and interactions at the country team level. The respondents pointed repeatedly to an increased awareness of 'the cards that everyone is laying on the table, the interests everyone has, the culture of the organizations and how they implement projects' (Interview, Agency 15) or even higher tolerance and appreciation that, in turn, led to a shift in the perception of belonging towards the country team:

As time passed and people learned how the other UN agencies were working and what they were working on, we became more tolerant. Because knowledge made us more tolerant and appreciative of each other's mandates and comparative advantages and the team work became easier. (Interview, Agency 14)

Not all agencies perceived the impact of coordinating practices on the coordination dilemma equally (see Table 1 for systematic evidence). Our systematic analysis identified two organizational factors that amplified the perceived effectiveness of the set of systemic thinking practices on the trade-off between intra- and inter-organizational coordination. A first condition was represented by non-resident status. Becoming a member of the UNCT and carrying out joint planning allowed UN agencies that typically felt excluded due to the lack of a physical presence in the country to fully integrate into the team and to increase information flows to agency headquarters and create novel areas of competence. A representative of one such UN agency explained the concept as follows:

As non-resident agencies, we were not able to go and be in the field all the time, but with Delivering as One, all the agencies in the country are collecting all relevant information. And this information is very relevant for us, and we would not be able to collect those data otherwise because we are not in the country. So, I think this [impact] is a bit more important for the non-resident agencies and for [my agency] as well. (Interview, Agency 9)

Furthermore, small specialized agencies specifically benefited from the mutual knowledge developed at the inter-agency level in that participating agencies felt that 'we became more pragmatically part of the puzzle so we observed how our cooperation fits into the big picture' (Interview, Agency 2). These agencies also perceived that the increased

participation in collective decision-making processes positively encouraged larger agencies to take them into consideration when developing joint planning:

Agency 14 and other smaller technical agencies gained a very special achievement, that is, fully fledged participation in the activities of the UN at the country level. Prior to DaO, there was some sort of discrimination; smaller agencies, agencies with small offices with no formal accreditation were not meant to participate in decision-making processes related to the UN country team or any other decision-making bodies at country level. (Interview, Agency 14)

4.3 | Second set of coordinating practices: jointly mobilizing resources and consensus

The practices of systemic thinking emerged in parallel with a second set of coordinating practices based on joint resource deployment and consensus mobilization. These coordinating practices were developed to overcome the partial downsizing of the One Budget & Fund pillar, which originally faced strong resistance due to the limited willingness of agencies' headquarters to redirect all agency-specific financial resources to a common UN fund.

The first practice centred on *establishing clear allocation criteria* to allocate funds mobilized by individual agencies for ad hoc activities connected to the inter-agency effort as well as for the management of the so-called 'multi-partner trust funds', a specific mechanism through which donors could fund the activities of the country teams for specific initiatives. In the words of one of our informants,

Putting in place clear resource allocation criteria is one way to address [the competition among agencies], together with having a resource mobilization strategy so whatever agency is mobilizing bilaterally, it is shared with all the other agencies, and donors are approached collectively. (Interview, Agency 7)

Criteria were introduced not only to manage financial resources but also to clarify the responsibilities associated with working on a country team while belonging to specific agencies. This practice was enacted through quasi-formal devices such as codes of conduct for the country team members. As stated in the mid-term review of DaO, 'It was very important, the voluntary agreement of UN country team members to a code of conduct governing the relationship between their individual organizational interests and those of the UN country team as a whole' (Archival, DaO independent evaluation). In the same vein, the establishment of 'firewalls' attempted to ensure the *super partes* role of Resident Coordinators by defining in detail the boundaries between their loyalty towards the specific organization of origin vis-à-vis their role as representatives of the whole UN system in the country. Lastly, efforts to ensure the clarity and relevance of the activities of country team members also involved the elaboration and inclusion of a peer review by the country team in the official evaluation exercise traditionally managed by the agencies' headquarters: 'We now complete questionnaires that are a kind of evaluation, and these then go to our headquarters. So, it's a peer review, also for us to learn which are our weak points and improve ourselves' (Interview, Agency 17).

The second coordinating practice was *defining common flagship programmes*, and it centred on prioritizing interventions among UN agencies, agreeing with the agencies' headquarters, and orchestrating the associated joint fundraising:

[Thanks to the flagships], things are more coordinated, and we started to elaborate a strategic approach for the resource mobilization: it is now clear to everyone what their role is, how to approach it and how to mobilize together and for all the activities; this is the way forward, and I think it's a good approach. (Interview, Agency 14)

Fundraising activities associated with the flagship programmes were led by individual agencies depending on their comparative advantage in terms of areas of expertise and reputation. Streamlining priorities and reciprocally

reinforcing the key purpose of the UN as a team was not limited to raising funds but also extended to raising awareness and advocating—key components of the institutional mandate of the UN.

Finally, the third coordinating practice, *speaking with one voice*, simultaneously built on and complemented the other two practices. While the shared approach to reaching out to main stakeholders and fundraising relied heavily on the role of the Resident Coordinator, these functions were also performed by other members of the country team who temporarily gave up their organizational identity to speak on behalf of the entire UN team in the country:

At the programme level and operational level, we speak with one voice, but that doesn't mean that one single person is speaking; we do coordinate a little bit before talking to partners, but we have different mouthpieces and different spokespersons, and depending on the agenda, on the mandate and the comparative advantage. (Interview, Agency 13)

Speaking with one voice clearly required identifying and aligning key messages on common issues to be provided to the interlocutors, so that 'whether it is the Agency 13 representative who is interviewed by the media or myself, I know that on a number of areas we'll be able to speak of it in the same language' (Interview, Agency 7). Individual agencies were not only taking turns to represent the entire UN but also—and typically through the attendance of the Resident Coordinator at sector-specific events, be it healthcare, women's rights or education—learning to leverage the entire UN voice to reinforce their own message:

The Resident Coordinator has been very helpful in advocating for some issues that are important to us. She would appear in bigger conferences and speak on behalf of all other agencies about health, for example. So, I think her voice is heard, and it reinforces ours. (Interview, Agency 17)

4.3.1 | Impact on the dilemma and the mediating role of organizational factors

Coordinating practices based on joint resource deployment and consensus mobilization allowed the coordination dilemma to be addressed.

At the intra-organizational level, the change in the way in which agencies raised their funds led to *increased interactions between headquarters and field offices*. The joint work performed at the country level catalysed the attention of donors, empowering country offices vis-à-vis headquarters or broad regional offices. Agency headquarters had to provide support and engage with country offices given the progressive shift of donor funding from headquarters to the joint UN programmes in the country:

There [in the headquarters] it is more difficult to mobilize funding individually; here we are dealing with the programming level, which means we need synergy and support and to collaborate with the other agencies. Here we managed to access an amount of funds locally in the country that was unprecedented. DaO gave some leverage to mobilize funding, and in a way, we are able to tell our office in New York what we want to do with that money. (Interview, Agency 11)

In addition, the change in the nature of inter-agency competition to raise funds led to strengthened interaction with agency headquarters. As argued by one of our informants,

Now you have to make a case for why your project is good, and you have to make your project really stand out because the projects are not just supported by UN country team, they also have to go through an assessment by the headquarters that need to approve it and improve it if needed. (Interview, Agency 8)

Finally, although quasi-formal devices such as codes of conduct were aimed at delimiting responsibilities and accountability between headquarters and field, their introduction required a sustained exchange both among agencies and between the two organizational levels:

All of these things [included in the code of conduct] were proposed by our country team and of course had to be cleared by headquarters. Because setting a precedent in some of these issues has potentially global implications for the whole of our organization, which required very close collaboration with our headquarters colleagues. (Interview, Agency 14)

Simultaneously, these coordinating practices enabled a *rebalancing of the influence of headquarters versus field offices*. On the one hand, examples of such rebalancing cited by our informants include simplification such as reductions in the use of authorizations or strict monitoring systems due to the increased trust and quality of the interactions.

On the other hand, inter-agency coordinating practices rebalanced the influence between headquarters and country offices, which also strengthened ties with external stakeholders. The institutional weight harnessed by 'speaking with one voice' enabled field offices to have a greater say and to strengthen their influence:

For me, the relevance of my agency is measured according to its impact. And the impact is not only whether you vaccinated 5,000 people; for me, the impact is whether I manage to have access to a government, a prime minister, a minister of economy or trade and then they implement my ideas. Now the impact is much higher because even if the ministries want a seat in the important UN meetings with the big names, they know that here we all take the decisions. (Interview, Agency 6)

Not all agencies perceived the impact of coordinating practices on the coordination dilemma equally (Table 1). Our results pointed to a specific organizational condition, namely, a politically sensitive mandate, that amplified the perceived effectiveness of the set of practices based on joint resources and consensus on the trade-off between intra- and inter-organizational coordination. Those agencies whose mandate was either perceived as not 'appealing to donors' (Interview, Agency 10) or that encountered socio-cultural resistance benefited the most from the increased interaction with external stakeholders and perceived an increase in the level of political support:

We work on sexual education and health, and in many countries, we find some resistance. So, one implication is to get more political support for our mandate because our agency has a difficult mandate and it is easier to work on it with the whole UN team than to do it on our own. (Interview, Agency 10)

In contrast to this position, we found systematic evidence, both self-reported and noticed by their peers, that UN agencies with a strong brand had an urge to preserve their organizational identity and perceived these cross-level coordinating practices as less effective from an organizational viewpoint or indeed as bearing negative consequences:

Some agencies had concerns that a strong UN corporate communication platform might reduce the visibility of their specific 'brand', with negative consequences for their reputation and associated funding. (Archival, DaO independent evaluation)

This was especially true for the agencies characterized by a 'sexy mandate that otherwise would get diluted' (Interview, Agency 13).

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The design of our study and its focus on the everyday experience of coordinating complement the public administration literature on 'inter-agency collaboration' (Bardach 1998; Thomas 2003; O'Toole and Meier 2004; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010; Askim et al. 2011; Saz-Carranza and Ospina 2011; Bel and Warner 2015) by adding a cross-level dimension to the notion that tensions are activated when agencies work together and to the practices that address those tensions.

Specifically, our findings integrate the results of the few studies that have explored the coordination dilemma in IOs and the organizational arrangements that are in place to address it (Egeberg and Trondal 2016). The dynamic and relational perspective offered by the practice-based approach led to the identification of two sets of coordinating practices that create a balance in the trade-off between organizational and inter-agency coordination. While these two sets of coordinating practices display a degree of interaction and synergy, we may argue that one set is more related to the core mandate and competencies, while the second set is more oriented towards securing resources and stakeholder consensus.

More specifically, we have labelled as *systemic thinking* the set of practices that promoted coordination of the core UN activity in the field and enabled agencies to move beyond the coordination dilemma and their early response in the form of decoupling. Over time, agencies reorganized their intervention around thematic areas resulting from a concerted effort to synthesize rotating leadership based on expertise (thematic clustering), thereby fitting their mandate within a broader puzzle and aligning the technicalities of specific procedures. We may argue that this type of coordination of practices creates a 'new inter-agency space of knowledge' that includes, instead of fending off, agencies' headquarters (Hanrieder 2015a). Therefore, rather than exacerbating, these practices enable improved management of the coordination dilemma. Coordination among the agency representatives in the field became an enabler of information flow with the HQs. Resistance by HQs, in turn, was prevented by the acquisition of new knowledge that had the potential to lead to a broadening of the mandate, which cast collaborative endeavours as more appealing and through which single agencies were asked to share their competitive advantage in terms of knowledge and know-how.

A second set of practices that we have labelled *jointly mobilizing resources and consensus* enabled coordination among agencies on issues that involved external players, be they donor countries or host governments. Previous studies focusing on the coordination dilemma in the EU network governance recognized that through supranational networks, national agencies find peers and supporters outside the national boundaries and become more empowered in relation to their parent ministries (Egeberg and Trondal 2016). Our findings confirm this dynamic and complement previous insights by accounting for the specific practices that determined a rebalance in the relationship between headquarters and field offices in the search for donors' funding and in attempts to influence the host government agenda. We found that agencies demarcated a field of play by setting criteria for resource allocation and by specifying the behavioural expectations of local team members, particularly with regard to their loyalty to their headquarters. Agencies leveraged selected common areas of intervention to attract funds (flagships) and learned to speak with one voice, both through the UN Resident Coordinator and through a system of rotation typically based on thematic expertise. Taken as a whole, we may argue that these practices create 'a new inter-agency space to reach out', shifting the individual efforts of UN agencies to the background but also making the perception of the field more salient thanks to the critical mass of UN agencies working together at that level. In turn, concerted efforts in the field activate a virtuous circle in that they require the active participation of agency headquarters to support the activities of institutional relations and advocacy.

Our findings point to the fact that not all agencies perceived the impact of coordinating practices on the dilemma equally. This variation responds to a call for the inclusion of a comparative perspective in the current studies of IOs (Trondal et al. 2010) and to the specific recommendation that 'reforms that aim for policy coherence must also be tailored to the different preconditions of specific institutional trajectories within the UN' (Hanrieder 2015a, p. 137). We

found evidence of the importance of the interplay between specific organizational factors and the coordinating practices. In particular, practices of 'systemic thinking' seem more salient for non-resident and small specialized agencies. Meanwhile, practices aimed at the 'joint mobilization of resources and consensus' appear to be more salient for agencies with a politically sensitive mandate and for those with a strong brand. The identification of specific organizational factors related to the modus operandi of individual agencies (i.e., geographical deployment and size of the agency), the characteristics of their mandate (i.e., highly specialized and politically sensitive) and the strength of their brand provide additional ammunition to the strand of research concerned with the organizational features and administrative structures that confer an autonomous agentic power to international bureaucracies (Bauer and Ege 2016; Trondal 2016; Ege 2017). In particular, the influence of the brand strength of specific agencies on how those agencies perceive coordinating practices resonates with the relevance of reputation in previous studies of cooperative arrangements at the European level (Busuioc 2016). An immediate implication of this finding is that mapping the different reputational impacts of coordination for the agencies concerned implies the need to be prepared to concede some brand visibility to resistant members in order to keep them committed.

This study points to the importance of international civil servants as agents of change and information brokers (Trondal et al. 2010; Weller and Chong 2010; Saz-Carranza 2015; Mele et al. 2016) and gives voice to how they perceive their institutional and professional lives. In so doing, it addresses the call to base our understanding of the functioning of IOs on a 'frank and confidential dialogue' with the large numbers of individuals working there (Trondal et al. 2010, p. 197). The international civil servants we interviewed embody roles that are strongly rooted in the agency to which they belong. However, in their words we found strong evidence of the positive impact of engaging in system-wide practices, such as rotation in both thematic and managerial duties, on the emergence of their inter-agency sense of belonging.

To conclude, in spite of the specificities of IOs and of the UN system, we believe the implications of our study lend themselves to serious consideration by any administrations engaging in inter-agency coordination. In particular, these implications seem extremely suitable for settings such as one-stop offices or local networks operating close to their users in which members operate remotely from their parent organizations (Askim et al. 2011; Bel and Warner 2015).

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