

# Experiencing Time and Space within the United Nations

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## Abstract

Departing from an objective understanding of time and space, this article investigates time and space together as daily individual and social experiences within the United Nations (UN) system. Focused on both staff members and civil society partners, it explores how experiences of time and space affect the way the UN functions. Based on two case studies, it first shows that time and space as they are experienced by individuals shape UN everyday practices pointing to a form of unlimited connectedness among individuals and overlapping and delocalized temporalities. It then demonstrates that time and space constitute socially constructed resources to maintain hierarchical relations: looking at temporal and spatial experiences gives insight into power dynamics over decision-making within the UN. Overall these findings show that time and space are relevant to capture overlooked dimensions in the study of the UN.

## Policy Implications

- Be mindful of different ways time and space can be experienced: temporal and spatial opportunities are relative and differ from one organization to another, influencing reform initiatives and decision-making.
- Increased collaboration can be fostered by considering different organizational working paces and spatial constraints which affect how UN entities work individually and together.
- Various organizational calendars must be taken seriously to facilitate participation.
- Growing familiarity over time and across spaces among UN staff, member state delegates and other partners could facilitate or hamper negotiations and their outcomes.

Situating the United Nations (UN) action in time and space implies presenting contextual elements and their potential influence. It paints a picture of the external constraints imposed onto the organization. In this article we shift the focus by analyzing time and space as they are individually and socially experienced *within* the UN. Contributing to growing scholarship on everyday practices in international organization (IO) studies, we show how the temporal and spatial experiences of individuals involved in UN processes shape the way the organization functions.

June 2011, International Environment House, Geneva: a research assistant hired by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) is helping to prepare a report on the environment, natural resources and peacekeeping operations. Data collection has been challenging and the drafts kept undisclosed. The team leader shows much frustration toward their partners in the departments of peacekeeping operations (DPKO) and field support (DFS)<sup>1</sup>: they have been slow in answering emails, not always cooperative and do not see the opportunity of such a publication to push the environmental peace-building agenda forward.

November 2012, UN Headquarters, New York City: a volunteer has been appointed to work on peacekeeping and the environment within a division shared between DPKO and DFS. Her first task is to 'translate' UNEP's recommendations into feasible suggestions for peacekeepers in order to regain 'ownership' over a report dedicated to peacekeeping missions but written by 'outsiders'. The New York team is frustrated with UNEP: UNEP is not realistic enough, does not understand DPKO and DFS political and material constraints and does not respect their specific *pace*.

Different thematic foci, distinct status within the UN system, divergent agendas and contrasting organizational cultures hamper the collaboration between these two UN bodies. Yet observing both situations helps discern misunderstandings rooted in *spatial and temporal* considerations: UN staff experience time differently in Geneva and New York. UNEP in Geneva has more autonomy regarding its schedule and the demands of its member states based in Nairobi. DPKO and DFS in New York follow the rhythm imposed by the Security Council and the daily pressure of member state permanent representations.

July 2014, plenary meeting, Geneva: a doctoral student is granted access by the Women's group advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment to the first Preparatory Committee, in the lead up to the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction. Embedded within the women's civil society group throughout the process, she experiences security checks, witnesses the grand meeting halls, hears English as the *lingua franca*.

March 2015, negotiation sessions, Sendai: the doctoral student takes part in the final phase of negotiations. After an eight-month long process in Geneva, the last discussions were transposed to Sendai. People remained the same and practices unchanged. Even the chain hotels located outside the conference center, which hosted members from around the world, did not give an account of the different time zones and the long trips that led to Japan.

Being an observer throughout the creation and ratification of an international agreement highlights a process which apparently transcends time and space. Locating negotiations in Geneva or Sendai seems to have little, if any, impact on who attends the meetings, on the practices and routines at play and on the main spoken language.

These observations raise two main questions for UN scholars. On the one hand, they challenge our methodological tools to properly capture this apparent paradox: the very same people, artifacts, infrastructures and practices reappear in highly heterogeneous locations over different time periods; expected regularities in the way the organization works are overturned by specificities that have been overlooked. On the other hand, they raise critical analytical questions on the UN's complex relationship with respect to time and space. First, the organization is highly dependent on both a strict institutional calendar and schedule (same meetings every year, international/world days, etc.) and an evolving context where it needs to adapt to unpredictable events on the international stage. Second, despite Geneva and New York being main hubs, the UN is scattered around the world. The coordination among regional and local offices implies considering time zones, schedules, various languages, different scales of activities, etc. Empirical observations reveal deep-rooted ambivalences: the UN is at times decontextualized, at others localized, at times dependent on specific timeframes, at others oblivious to temporal constraints despite time differences or regular working hours.

In UN and IO studies, three trends have addressed time and space. First, scholars pay attention to temporal and spatial conditions as external elements that (in)directly affect IOs: they explore the context of IO emergence and evolution, and the impact of external events and locations on their functioning and legitimacy (Maertens et al., 2021). Second, a growing literature draws on the temporal turn in social sciences and international relations to address time in the study of IOs (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling, 2009; Louis and Maertens, 2021; Verlin, 2021). Third, scholars have studied the spatial materializations of IOs especially for headquarter cities and field interventions (Campos, 2021; Dairon and Badache, 2021). While the first trend limits its understanding of temporal and spatial dimensions as external elements potentially influencing IOs,

the second and third trends focus exclusively on one of the two dimensions. Building on this work, we contribute to IO scholarship and provide complementary insights on UN practices by investigating time and space together as daily individual and social experiences. We aim to answer the following question: how do experiences of time and space affect the way the UN functions?

Here we approach time and space as relational elements and consider the individual and social experience of time and space. With data generated through participant observations and interviews, we focus on two types of actors: UN staff members and UN civil society partners. The subsequent demonstration is two-fold: time and space as they are experienced by individuals shape UN everyday practices (Section 2); these experiences produce power dynamics within the UN (Section 3). In conclusion, we highlight the contribution of approaching time and space as internal, performed and negotiated elements, to study how IOs function. We then suggest methodological cues to foster researchers' interest in time and space.

## 2. Bringing space and time into the study of UN practices

IO literature considers temporal and spatial conditions among the multiple factors which explain the success or failure of an IO (Cox, 1992; Kott, 2011). Going forward, we account for time and space as individual and social experiences and explore them in terms of practices studied through fieldwork within the UN.

### 2.1. Time and space as individual and social experiences

Time and space have been critically addressed in social sciences for decades. On the one hand, in the 1930s, sociologists Sorokin and Merton (1937, p. 626) discussed the contrasting disciplinary understanding of the notion of time and questioned the 'conventional nature of time designation' inspiring much work on the 'social time' and 'social periodicities'. Unpacking time to better address organizational change, Dawson (2014, p. 286) asserts that 'temporality (tensed time) captures the sense of temporal flow and movement in which our experiences are not isolated "now" moments (tenseless time), but engage with and are informed by memories of the past and anticipations of a future yet-to-come'. As 'the socially and individually experienced and constructed quality and status of time' (Verlin, 2021 p. 2), the concept of temporality allows for a nuanced understanding of the variety of temporal experiences within the UN and of the tensions and contradictions at stake between different paces. Political scientists have explored the role of time in public policies since the 1970s, capturing the possibly contradictory temporal logics among political actors (Commaile et al., 2014). Growing literature on time and temporalities in world politics (Hom, 2018; Hutchings, 2013) also challenges 'assumptions of unified and singular temporalities [that] put limits on how world politics can be understood and judged' (Hutchings, 2018, p. 255).

On the other hand, space has been central to geographers despite being difficult to define and highly contested (Kobayashi, 2016). Until the 1950s, space was defined as an 'embodied concept', understood as place, landscape, environment and the locale (Merriman et al., 2012). Moving beyond absolute terms, scholars have reconceptualized space as relative and co-produced (Kobayashi, 2016) depending on perceptions shaped by spatial *and* temporal contexts (Starr, 2005). For instance, the less abstract concept of spatiality accounts for human relationships in an intersubjective manner (Kobayashi, 2016, p. 6). Interpreting *situated corporeal attitudes* as ways of acting in the world (Simonsen, 2007) reconnects 'the spatial with the political' (Massey, in Merriman et al. 2012, p. 4). In UN scholarship, McConnell (2017) refers to the spatiality of diplomacy when focusing on the subjectivity and experiences of actors involved in UN processes. This literature stresses the interlinkages between space and time: they are both critical elements to contextualize social behavior and interactions (Starr, 2005). We draw on this work to appreciate the relativity of space as it is experienced within the UN. It provides significant insight to understand the power revolving around space (Starr, 2005) while linking individual experiences of the UN space with time.

Recent literature in IR has challenged conventional understandings of temporal and spatial conditions and proposes to address them together. While Kratochvíl (2020) argues that the analysis of time helps to study spatial aspects of world politics and vice-versa, Bueger (2015) claims that epistemic practices are tempo-spatially distributed, with epistemic infrastructures scattered across different sites which exert more control than others. Likewise, we consider organizations such as the UN as distributed across time and space at 'the interplay between institutional contexts and the actions of people who inhabit them' (Allen and May, 2017, p. 4). Rather than studying actors *in* time and *in* space, we analyze them as *inhabiting* space and time (Simonsen, 2007).

Going forward, we approach the experience of time and space at the UN as both individual and social. Concretely, final moments of a negotiation are individually experienced (time pressure, jetlag, sleep deprivation, etc.) and socially meaningful for the organization (institutional calendar and deadlines, milestones agreement, etc.). The spatial perimeter of the organization is individually experienced (deployment and housing, expat communities, etc.) and socially meaningful (international territory, on the ground presence, zone regulations, etc.). Each actor therefore experiences spatial and temporal dimensions individually but in a social context in which these dimensions are meaningful.

## 2.2. Rethinking time and space through UN practices

To study individual and social experiences of time and space, we draw from practice theory in international relations (Bueger and Gadinger, 2018) and the interactionist theory in the sociology of organizations (Scott, 2004; Weick, 1993).

In IO scholarship, the concept of practice is commonly used to refer to 'socially organized and meaningful patterns of activities that tend to recur over time' (Pouliot and Thérien, 2018, p. 163). Practices are understood as performances (Goffman, 1959), ways of doing things (Adler and Pouliot, 2011), which reflect the shared knowledge and competences within the organization. They tend to be accepted and approved by staff and viewed as the taken-for-granted way of doing certain tasks (Autesserre, 2014; Kostova, 1999; Pouliot, 2016). They reveal the micro level of diplomatic dynamics (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014) and their ordering effects (Pouliot, 2016). In UN literature, research accounts for the evolving practices of the Security Council (Bode, 2015; Walling, 2020), captures controversies and the evolution of international practices at the Intergovernmental Panel of experts on Climate Change (De Pryck, 2021), unveils how regional practices shape UN diplomacy (Laatikainen, 2020), sheds light on the discrepancy between UN peacekeeping practice and doctrine (Peter, 2015), and reveals the day-to-day activities both at UN headquarters and in the field (Müller, 2013; Niezen and Spagnoli, 2017). Drawing on this literature, we address the experience of time and space through practices.

In IO literature, Goetz (2009, 2014) and Goetz and Meyer-Sahling (2009) provide some of the few studies addressing practices and time. They identify a specific 'European Union timescape' which helps understand the role of temporal issues in EU enlargement, integration and democratization based on different conceptions of time. They look into time budgets, time horizons, the temporal features of decision-making and of the time structures embedded in policies all of which sheds light on the distribution of power, as well as on the legitimacy and performance of the organization (Meyer-Sahling and Goetz, 2009). Recent research further attempts to conceptualize the spatial and temporal contexts in which IOs evolve and the specific temporalities they shape (see the articles in this special issue). For instance, analyzing UN planning instruments for humanitarian action applied in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, Verlin (2021) questions IOs' 'strategic use of time' to (re)produce norms and power relations. Similarly, Louis and Maertens (2021) analyze the temporal dimensions of depoliticization practices within IOs pointing to the co-construction of the opportunistic or constraining value of time in IO negotiations and reforms.

Research regarding space and IOs are still – to our knowledge – scarce. Overall contributions acknowledge that office locations have an impact on networks (Wiseman, 2015) and access to decision-making centers especially for civil society organizations (Schwartzberg, 2016). Dairon and Badache (2021) further explore these spatial dynamics in their study of Geneva as an ecosystem. While multiple embodied spaces where the UN is active have been explored, few studies focus on the experience of the UN space. Drawing on critical geography and securitization theory, Lemay-Hébert (2018) investigates the social construction of the UN space by unpacking the concrete practices and social effects

of the definition of a 'yellow zone' by the UN in Port-au-Prince (Haiti), echoing Duffield's (2010) work on the fortification of aid compounds.

We build on this work to rethink time and space as co-constitutive of practices through which the UN materializes and performs in world politics. Such a take helps appreciate how individual experiences of time and space within the UN are enacted through practices but also how temporal and spatial constraints and opportunities are socially constructed highlighting power dynamics within the organization.

### 2.3. Methodology: observing experiences of time and space at the UN

To address experiences of time and space within the UN system, we focus on two types of individuals. The UN, like other IOs, is the 'concrete manifestation of regularized international relations' (Archer, 2014, p. 3) as a coordination mechanism instated in a founding act (the Charter) and enacted through a material framework (headquarters, funding and staff) (Smouts, 1995). Presenting itself as the 'one place where the world's nations can gather together, discuss common problems and find shared solutions' and acknowledging that it 'has evolved over the years to keep pace with a rapidly changing world',<sup>2</sup> the UN is composed of numerous entities working on a wide variety of policy areas. Building on Hurd's (2017) triptic, defining IOs as actors, fora and resources, we consider the UN as a sum of individual and collective actors. Among these, Weiss and Thakur (2010) distinguish between the First, the Second and the Third UN: the First the arena of member states, the Second the secretariats and individuals working for the organization, and the Third the non-state actors collaborating with the UN. We here concentrate on the Second UN (staff) and the Third UN (comprising non-state actors, non-governmental organizations, external experts, scholars, consultants and committed citizens involved in UN processes), and this for two reasons. We unravel the concrete practices for both 'insider-insiders' (Second UN) and 'outsider-insiders' (Jolly et al., 2009), who form an integral part of the UN. We also focus on individuals who more likely experience the dilemma ensued by the functional fragmentation of the UN system.

The parallel analysis of the Second and Third UN provides a larger basis to understand how time and space are individually experienced, therefore capturing their social effects in terms of power dynamics. Indeed we intend to grasp power dynamics among UN staff and in relation to member states, but also assess how time and space, as socially constructed opportunities and constraints, shape the engagement of civil society within the UN. We base our empirical analysis on two qualitative case studies. The first case focuses on the UN staff engaged in peacekeeping activities. Data generated through participant observation within the Policy, Evaluation and Training division shared by DPKO and DFS (October 2012–February 2013) is supplemented with a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in New York (USA, 2013, 2016) and in Haiti (Port-au-Prince, Port-Salut, Les Cayes, 2016, 2017). Through an initial focus on the

integration of environmental matters into UN peacekeeping (see for instance Maertens, 2019), we had access to the everyday practices through which UN staff experience time and space. The second case uses participant observation and semi-structured interviews to study the process toward the ratification of the Sendai Framework dedicated to Disaster Risk Reduction from Geneva to Sendai (July 2014–March 2015). It reveals the spatial and temporal experience of the Women's civil society group and marginally of the UN staff throughout the intergovernmental negotiations (Kimber, 2020).

## 3. Shaping UN practices

The two case studies first show that the material reproduction of the UN perimeters across time and space frame UN staff and civil society's practices by creating an unlimited connectedness between individuals. Second these practices are also shaped by overlapping and delocalized temporalities which challenge temporal continuity between different UN sites.

### 3.1. Enacting unlimited connectedness

UN settings change over time and space. However, empirical data also reveals the reproduction of the UN material enactment in very different contexts. These repeated institutional arrangements shape the practices of UN staff and civil society representatives in two ways: individuals reproduce the same practices on multiple occasions and in different places as if temporal and spatial conditions were overturned; the material reproduction creates a sense of familiarity shared among UN actors and a form of *entre-soi* dynamics in their professional interactions.

In both cases, we observed recurring practices and same individuals circulating around and between sites, at different periods of time and in different places all over the world. In the case of the UN framework for disaster risk reduction, the negotiations began in Geneva in July 2014, and were finalized at the Third World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Japan in March 2015. Despite the different sites (Geneva and Sendai) a continuum remained through a common materiality among the individuals who attended the meetings (UN staff, country representatives or civil society members) and through the consistency of protocols during the negotiations. Indeed, the artifacts through which the UN is performed are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed over time and space and continuously (re)deployed by its staff:

Technically, it's true because by the time we prepare a UN conference, regardless of where it is located, one fundamental pre-requisite is that we determine a perimeter; 1 meter, 10 meters. I don't know. Within that perimeter everything becomes a diplomatic territory which belongs to the UN for the time of the conference. There's usually a ceremony where we raise the UN flag and where the country hands



us over the keys of that territory which hosts the conference. We find that scheme at *any place and any time*, whether it be at the Centre International de Conférence, Genève (CICG), in Sendai or elsewhere. And you will notice the same security guards move, just like us, to those different regions. [...] So wherever you are in the world you have exactly the same organization from Albania to Zimbabwe, or whatever it is. The scheme is the same. (UN staff interview, Geneva, 2016)

The reproduction of a specific materiality goes along with the use of polished language – positive Globish (Kimber, 2019) – and particular phrases repeated at each session such as ‘May I take it that the preparatory committee is taking this proposal? I see no objection. It is so decided’. It also includes the use of a wooden hammer tapped on the front table to announce the beginning and the end of a Plenary session or the exchange of business cards among delegates. In the case of UN peacekeeping, the security protocol experienced in Port-au-Prince to enter the premises of the UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) barely changed from the one observed in New York (Bellier, 2012). The same (numerous) acronyms were used in a mix of French and English and the tempo set by the Security Council framed daily routines of UN staff both seated in the main building of the Secretariat and the ones in charge of reporting activities in Port-au-Prince.

In both cases, individuals enact the same practices in different settings, embodying the UN delocalization, as if external temporal and spatial conditions did not specifically matter, as acknowledged in an interview:

Even if the space was not like that, they would go in and make it like that. So, you know you go to a meeting wherever it is in the world and it’s the same people from Geneva or New York who are going and setting everything up, so it all looks the same. (UN’s civil society representative, online interview, 2016)

Over time this material reproduction then translates into a shared experience among the actors involved, accompanied by an apparent growing sense of familiarity. Familiarity emerges from working toward common predefined objectives which unite UN actors despite their different positions within the system. Indeed actors circulate between UN places allowing UN individuals to be included in a network that densifies throughout the years. This process inevitably contributes to a sense of familiarity, or an *entre-soi*, a sense of community constituted by an international anglophone elite migration (Adly, 2013). In other words, these individuals experience the UN as a familiar ecosystem (Dairon and Badache, 2021) which reappears in different places and on multiples occasions, as explicitly expressed in interview:

Interviewer: Geneva, Sendai, New York seem the same.

UN staff: Yeah, exactly, absolutely the same. We were at the World Humanitarian Summit in Berlin, in Geneva, in Istanbul. It’s the same people, same community. Also, you start bonding, it’s the same faces. It’s exactly the same thing. (UN staff interview, Geneva, 2016)

This excerpt shows how shared experiences point to a constant connectedness among actors involved in UN processes, who, in return, may develop new practices such as walking up to a familiar face in an airport – upon arrival at a destination where a UN summit is about to take place – and initiating conversation about the event ahead. At the same time, considering each department also uncovers profound diversity in the way UN actors approach the temporal and spatial conditions in which they evolve.

### 3.2. Performing delocalized temporalities

Under the large UN umbrella, each sub-division and each professional field can hold its own pace. Data from both case studies shows that UN individuals experience multiple, potentially colliding, temporalities. On the one hand, UN staff and civil society representatives experience both sudden intensity and deep slowness, transforming their daily routines depending on which speed prevails. On the other hand, practices are shaped by the delocalized paces which give the tempo for each department that are not necessarily contingent on their local context, and not necessarily coordinated ahead of time to avoid events to overlap.

Wherever and whenever the UN deploys its resources, it simultaneously comes with sudden intensity, which does not apply uniformly to all settings. For instance, in the lead-up to a text ratification, the pace fluctuates starting with a meeting held once a month, and usually ending with successive meetings toward the final deadline. While the long-term presence of the UN in cities such as New York or Geneva tends to delude the intensity to a couple of blocks, the arrival of a new peacekeeping mission or a world summit highlights how intense UN deployments can get. For the world conference on disaster risk reduction, a UN official explained:

For the World Conference we were more to organize the logistics. The whole Japanese Foreign Ministry was present, all the Japanese people who work directly with Disaster Risk Reduction. [...] Then there was a whole UN format that was dealt with by the specific offices in New York, the office for conference, the office for protocols, etc. (UN staff interview, Geneva, 2015)

In the case of UN peacekeeping, a DFS staff underlined that since the development of ‘big missions’ in 2004, the UN would ‘bring big complex systems’ (UN DFS staff interview, New York, 2013) which have major impacts on the host country, notably on its local economy and its natural resources.

Likewise, if observers often criticize the slowness of the organization to answer to crises like in the case of the civil wars in Syria or Yemen, world summits bring a sense of time intensity and high acceleration. During the last round of negotiations in Geneva before Sendai, a UN official restlessly admitted:

I wish I had food for all of you, but I wish you had some for me because I am starving. I've been here since like 6.30am. And I'm sure you've all been. Any other ... issues? (Fieldnotes, Geneva, 2015)

Individuals involved in UN processes therefore experience intense moments of spatial spreading and temporal acceleration and other moments where time just seems to freeze and space shrinks. Restricted movements in supposedly threatening environments ('red zones') contain the UN experience to a limited space. Likewise, such experience depends on practical time constraints like different time zones, the final round of a negotiation process planned over multiple years, the annual meeting of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (the C34 which usually meets between mid-February and mid-March) or the closure of a peacekeeping mission. Simultaneously the UN system also appears out of time when its procedures take years to adapt to a very urgent matter. Louis and Maertens (2021) further analyze the way IOs postpone decision-making over time as a form of depoliticization where political momentum decreases, political content dissipates, and political interest is progressively lost. As shown in the previous quote, individuals experience the delocalization and have to adapt to the specific paces imposed onto them. The following example reveals another experience of a high-paced temporality and its implications in terms of everyday practices. In this email, a UN staff member working for the MINUSTAH under apparent time pressure apologized for not immediately answering our request for an interview:

I apologize for not answering any earlier. Please understand, the Unit is understaff [sic] and with the end of the mission in site ... we are here very busy at the moment. I keep seeing your message coming, therefore I am replying to this message without further delay, because this week schedule is already full with field inspections, meetings and reports to be submitted to O/USG. I would suggest you share your questions in writing. (Fieldnotes, Haiti, 2017)

While this quote reveals the way this person perceived our understanding of a supposedly normal time-lapse to answer such a request, it also demonstrates the daily temporal constraints that their unit was facing.

UN staff and civil society's practices also depend on the tempo set up and experienced in different sub-division or units. Indeed, not all UN bodies work homogeneously around the same timeframes and calendars. In fact, each organization often follows its own rhythm, sometimes according to the context in which it is embedded with the UN being scattered

all over the world. Coping with time zone differences appears as the most basic form of situated temporalities:

This is why sometimes negotiations stop for a few hours, because they need to consult with their capitals! Or even a couple of days because you know not all of us are on the time zone. So, we can consult now and then the Japanese are like 'oh people haven't even woken up!'. You need to give us some time for them to get to the office and read the document and get back to us. So ... (UN staff interview, Geneva, 2015)

At the institutional level, experienced and perceived temporalities reveal the large variety of the UN system. The contrast might result from their mandates and professions, like the often-mentioned difference between humanitarians whose focus is to save lives in the short-term horizon and development workers whose aim is to reach long-term goals (Verlin, 2021). It also emerges from their connection to world politics as seen in the example developed in introduction about the misunderstanding between UNEP in Geneva and DPKO and DFS in New York.

While UNEP in Geneva was protesting about the slow pace of DPKO in taking action to deal with the peacekeeping missions' environmental footprint, DPKO and DFS staff in New York complained about UNEP not being able to understand their time constraints especially as a consequence of their relationship with the Security Council. (Fieldnotes, New York, 2012–2013)

It therefore comes with no surprise when a UN staff member in a field office said that 'each organization has its own pace' to explain the process of setting an inter-organizational initiative in the South of Haiti, with some partners having established and staffed the shared program long before others (UN staff, online interview, 2018). Investigating the practices of permanent representations to IOs, Pouliot (2015, p. 102) draws similar conclusions on their 'own temporality': 'the negotiations conducted by permanent representatives have their own specific tempo, which often does not match the pace of negotiations in capitals or other forums'. UN actors' relationship to time constraints and temporal opportunities differ from department to department shaping specific practices which *in fine* affects the way the whole UN system works.

These illustrations show that individuals engaged with the UN cope with an unlimited connectedness and delocalized interlinkages between sites over time and space. Yet not only does the experience of time and space shape everyday practices within the organization, it also accounts for UN power dynamics.

#### 4. Producing UN power dynamics

By revisiting fieldnotes and interview transcripts through the lens of time and space, we analyze *who* has decision-

making power and *how* some actors maintain their privilege in the UN hierarchical order.

#### 4.1. Attributing decision-making power

Despite apparent horizontality resulting from the common experience and the sense of familiarity shared among UN actors, space and time structure power relations within the organization. They affect power dynamics over decision-making in two ways. Not only do some actors gain an upper hand over decision-making depending on when and where UN processes take place, temporal and spatial constraints are also constructed to preserve such dominant positions determining who has decision-making power, be it a host country, a specific UN body such as the UN Security Council, a chair of a given session, or even a supervisor higher up in the hierarchy.

Japan as the host country in the final steps of the Sendai Framework was awarded the power to work on a text – as ‘watered down’ as needed – in order to make it ratified by all member states. A UN staff member shared this:

He told me ‘Japan’ was at the fore front and couldn’t ‘loose’ this [not delivering a text]. He said this would be a dishonor of all things and [Japan] would probably come up with a document member states would have to accept by tomorrow. (Fieldnotes, Sendai, 2015)

Furthermore, what can be perceived as spontaneous decisions at first sight actually reveals the power of chairpersons in international negotiations (De Pryck, 2021). As an example, in the last two days of the negotiations in Sendai, the chair suddenly interrupted the negotiations to welcome a Japanese representative to take the floor and inform delegates of the necessity to deliver a text despite contentious issues:

As host country, we will work in the spirit of compromise to have a good document adopted tomorrow. (Fieldnotes, Sendai, 2015)

Not only do chairs have the power to pause a session, influence negotiations and lobby activities of member states and civil society, they also have the power to extend a deadline. They are far from embodying neutral institutional roles, but rather take on an entrepreneurial version of chairship (Laatikainen, 2020). While the negotiations for the Sendai Framework were scheduled to last until the mid-afternoon to ensure time for the closing ceremony, the chair decided otherwise. He set a new deadline – 11pm that same night – for the lack of a satisfactory text earlier that day. Yet the closing ceremony was to welcome Fukushima’s child survivors to perform as a choir on stage and celebrate the new international framework. Instead, the children were turned down. They returned home after having waited until dawn at the conference center. The chair’s temporality can, as we notice, significantly affect people – here, civil society who was eager to pay a tribute to its community on an international stage.

Decision-making power is also apparent in *who* can set the expected milestones for UN staff. This is precisely the case for DPKO and DFS the work of which is highly connected to the Security Council’s rhythm. While the departments must be able to answer last minute requests in preparation for emergency meetings, they also have to follow the strict schedule imposed by the UN calendar. This includes for instance the C34 annual meetings during which the Secretariat organizes briefings on specific topics (Fieldnotes, New York, 2013) and the Fifth Committee meetings (in a resumed session in May dedicated to administrative and budgetary aspects of UN Peacekeeping) which demand information about budget allocations. Tempo is not only given by member states, but also by UN heads and colleagues in different offices higher in the hierarchy. As an illustration, after multiple years of preparation of the document, it took two years for the UN Office of Legal Affairs to provide necessary legal advice to allow the adoption of the environmental policy for peacekeeping operations though perceived, by some, as an urgent matter (UN staff interview, New York, 2013).

Data drawn from both case studies shows that the way spatial and temporal constraints and opportunities are constructed and experienced enables decision-making power to unfold to the benefit of certain actors.

#### 4.2. Sustaining hierarchical relations

Power dynamics do not only appear in decision-making processes, but also shine through hierarchical relationships. From the perspective of civil society, as a closed institution to which access is not granted to everyone, everywhere at all times (Bourrier, 2017; Tallberg et al., 2013), the UN hierarchizes actors through their right to be present and actively participate. UN staff members experience power dynamics in the way they perceive spatial and temporal constraints.

According to the Third UN’s experience, host countries sustain hierarchical privilege. In the lead up to the Sendai Framework, Switzerland for example was advantaged given the negotiations were held in Geneva. A Swiss delegate shared their impressions showing how they experience spatial constraints differently than other state representatives:

I’m realizing now that we are probably lucky to have the UN in our country because I don’t see how Mozambique for example brings its experts to the UN just for a negotiation. It’s great for us, I mean, from a Swiss perspective to say I’m sending my expert from Bern for the day. [. . .] For us I think it’s easier. (Government representative, phone interview, 2016)

Event location on which civil society does not decide also reasserts hierarchical distribution within the UN with mere to no funding available for the Third UN to ensure its participation wherever the UN is deployed. A representative of the women’s group involved in the Sendai Framework

expresses the lack of opportunities for involvement due to spatial and temporal considerations:

I know lots of people in my generation or older than me who have retired. They have no funds and yet people are still asking them 'are you coming to this conference, are you coming to this meeting'. They would love to, and have loads of years of experience to bring to it, but nobody is paying for them to go, so they cannot go. So we are losing all of them. (UN's civil society interview, online interview, 2016)

Additionally, to collectively edit last drafts and make final suggestions on the text to be ratified, civil society members have trouble finding adequate areas in and around the conference center, such as stated:

Also the infrastructure provided at Sendai was not all that conducive to really work together. It was a bit scattered, the whole way things happened. There was space if you managed to get into these spaces earlier. You had to get to some spaces earlier and then you had that space. If not, it was quite difficult. (UN's civil society interview, online interview, 2018)

Both examples, illustrate how civil society's access and physical participation is impeded in time and space which echoes peripheral access in terms of seating arrangements. The way seats are attributed is known to be well-orchestrated and thus turned into hierarchical spaces: at the forefront the president, the secretary, in the first rows the state delegates, behind them intergovernmental organizations, and then, at the very end, the supporting civil society organizations and academic or research centers (see also Bellier, 2012):

In Plenary sessions we have chairs and tables and two chairs behind the front chairs for delegation representatives. All governments are seated in alphabetical order. You must be careful not to make any mistake for the seating arrangements, not put up the name of a state that is not a UN member or a state that is not yet a UN member etc. (UN staff interview, Geneva, 2016)

On the other hand, civil society individuals continually experience a lack of say in when and where UN meetings are held. They lack power over the spatial and temporal conditions in which discussions around topics that directly concern them are organized:

And if you're not at the table, you're not on the menu. Someone's talking about you without you being there to discuss your own concerns, your own perspective. That is not OK. I do not want that to happen. [...] people, civil society, that are classified as vulnerable or who have something to contribute. They have to be at the discussion. (UN's civil society interview, online interview, 2016)

At the level of the Second UN, hierarchical relations are reproduced by the ways UN staff members conceive and perceive their own spatial and temporal limits. Indeed, during interviews on their own activities, they often mention a form of path dependency that explains their ways of acting ('it has never been done before', UN staff interview, New York, 2013). In other words, they base their action according to their perception of past experiences constraining themselves to known temporal and spatial limits. For instance, UN staff often justify the limited spatial perimeter of their interventions based on past experiences. This limited spatiality is both a result and a physical testimony of the way UN bodies and other members of the international community divide and attribute ownership to different territories. In Haiti, for example, while the UN Development Programme (UNDP) was in charge of community violence reduction activities in rural areas, the peacekeeping mission had the monopoly over of the same type of activities in cities (UN Staff interview, Port-au-Prince, 2017). Time and space therefore do not only frame UN practices, they also sustain power dynamics by setting spatial and temporal limits.

In spite of yielding to constraints seemingly imposed by the UN's bureaucratic rules, civil society members as well as staff members find arrangements to counter what can be perceived as hierarchical dominations. Civil society members develop a practice to always take the floor in meetings, anytime it is offered to them, and they rely on colleagues to attend meetings and conferences when budgets are too tight to travel. UN staff members build inter-organizational collaborations in order to benefit from the spatial and temporal privileges of their partners and limit the effects of their own constraints.

With these case studies, we argue that analyzing the UN through the prism of space and time reveals how power dynamics unfold: certain actors are able to construct and play with temporal and spatial dynamics to their benefit.

## 5. Concluding remarks and methodological implications

This article opened with the empirical paradox other scholars might have faced while doing fieldwork at the UN. Through its specific rhythm and the reproduction of its materiality across time and space, the organization may appear disconnected from external temporal and spatial constraints. Yet other moments in UN life reveal how the organization highly depends on the place where it is deployed and on the rhythm of global politics. This paradox led us to explore how experiences of time and space affect the way the UN works. Based on two case studies on UN staff members and UN civil society partners, we shed renewed light on everyday practices and UN functioning and contribute to a growing literature which challenges objective understandings of time and space.

The analysis points to two main findings. It first identifies a joint dynamic shaping UN practices: the material reproduction of the UN tends to overturn temporal and spatial conditions creating a sense of familiarity shared among UN actors; UN staff and civil society representatives also experience



fluctuating and delocalized temporalities which impose overlapping and often diverging paces. It then demonstrates that time and space constitute socially constructed resources to maintain hierarchical relations: looking at temporal and spatial experiences gives insight into power dynamics over decision-making within the UN. Overall, these findings show that time and space are co-constitutive of UN practices and draw attention to overlooked dimensions that finetune our understanding of how the UN works in practice.

The contribution of this article is therefore twofold. First, it is analytically audacious by integrating time and space in IO studies as experienced dimensions from within, rather than solely external. It addresses apparent tensions and paradoxes in the way the UN works by valuing individuals' experiences of time and space and the potential effects of these experiences on the organization. Second, it is methodologically engaging as it takes field observations and mundane practices seriously. Though seemingly anecdotal, they actually throw new light on the way the UN functions. We invite researchers who also observe such phenomena not to neglect nor dismiss the significance of time and space for the overall understanding of the UN. We hence suggest several methodological implications.

First we stress the critical role of the selected entry points to conduct fieldwork. While such decision depends on a number of institutional, economic and personal constraints, scholars should reflect on their own spatial and temporal experience of the UN and how it determines what they could observe (Eckl, 2021). Furthermore fieldwork duration shapes access to actors' experiences and practices. Familiarity might materialize rapidly during a fieldwork in a small and highly connected 'international bubble'. It might however require a longer stay within a secretariat, in huge cities where professional and personal lives are more disconnected, or repeated entries in negotiation sessions having to travel to other countries and attend sessions in different rooms. Second scholars should pay attention to the common materiality of the different sites. Such capacity to reproduce its material enactment across time and space affect the UN experience, reinforcing the connectedness between individuals while molding and shaping the repetition of everyday practices. Third even if each investigation requires awareness of specific timelines and time constraints, the analysis of time and space in the UN context leads the researcher not only to notice these different time paces across space, but also to study them in their mutual interactions. Fourth paying attention to time and space is also relevant for data analysis. Indeed in the analysis of observation notes, field photographs, interview transcripts, scholars may revisit certain processes by considering the effect of time and space on individuals. Scholars could learn from identifying diverging temporalities, material reproduction and local specificities to study the everyday functioning of the UN and IOs more generally.

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### Notes

1. DPKO has since been renamed DPO (Department of Peace Operations) and DFS is now DOS (Department of Operational Support).
2. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/>

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