

Do international treaties actually work? Study says they mostly don't

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Credit: Nataliya Vaitkevich from Pexels

International treaties are often used by countries to address concerns that cross national boundaries, including the environment, human rights, humanitarian crises, maritime issues, security and trade.

But while over 250,000 international treaties exist, no study has ever compiled and analyzed the decades' worth of research that assesses such treaties' effectiveness.

That changed on Aug. 2 with the publication of "International Treaties Have Mostly Failed to Produce Their Intended Effects," a landmark study produced by the York University-affiliated Global Strategy Lab and appearing in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The researchers found that with the notable exception of treaties governing trade and finance, international treaties have generally failed to produce their intended effects.

"Not only did many treaties have no measurable impact, but some treaties may have even led to unintended harmful impacts," says study author Mathieu J.P. Poirier, professor in the Faculty of Health at York U and co-director of the Global Strategy Lab. "For instance, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was found to be the treaty associated with the most [harmful effects](#), including worsened human rights practices, no improvements in health outcomes and, paradoxically, increases in child labor.

"These counterintuitive impacts could stem from repressive governments seeking diplomatic rewards for signing human rights treaties while facing few consequences for failures to comply with treaty provisions."

Importantly, for treaties governing environmental, [human rights](#), humanitarian, maritime, and security policy domains, the only modifiable treaty design choice with the potential to improve effectiveness was the inclusion of enforcement mechanisms, such as prescribing financial sanctions on countries or expelling countries from [treaty](#) bodies.

In contrast, the study found other mechanisms, such as complaint, oversight, and transparency clauses, were not associated with greater effectiveness.

"The implications are huge for [civil society](#), multilateral organizations and all [government agencies](#) involved in negotiating treaties," says Poirier. "Today there are at least 250,000 treaties, yet relatively few have been evaluated for impact, which means we do not know whether these instruments are effectively serving their intended purpose. And yet, leaders from government, academia, business and civil society routinely call for new treaties to address global challenges under the assumption that most treaties work as intended."

The only exceptions to the rule of ineffectiveness, the researchers found, are treaties governing [international trade](#) and finance, which consistently produced intended effects.

The study, produced out of the Global Strategy Lab by an international team of researchers, was led by Steven Hoffman, professor at Osgoode Hall Law School and Dahdaleh Distinguished Chair in Public Health, and Mathieu Poirier, assistant professor at the York U School of Global Health and York Research Chair in Global Health Equity.

Using innovative global legal epidemiological methods, the researchers evaluated which treaties have effects, what those effects are, and how future treaties could be designed for greater effectiveness. To that end, GSL researchers conducted a systematic field-wide evidence synthesis, which included a rigorous systematic review of all existing quantitative impact evaluations of treaties.

More information: Steven J. Hoffman et al, International treaties have mostly failed to produce their intended effects, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2122854119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2122854119)

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