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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Persistence Against the Odds: How Entrepreneurial Agents Helped the UN Joint Inspection Unit to Prevail

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Abstract

Since its inception in 1966, the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) has prevailed in the face of significant existential challenges. Against this backdrop, we investigate how and why the JIU persisted over time. Combining delegation and historical institutionalist approaches, we posit that entrepreneurial agents and layering processes together help us better understand persistence of international organizations. Based on semi-structured interviews with UN staff and JIU inspectors, we examine three critical junctures in the history of the JIU. Our results show that entrepreneurial agents and stakeholders in the JIU managed to avoid the closure or demotion of the JIU by engaging in a strategy of institutional layering. Our analysis, however, also demonstrates that the JIU survived at the price of losing its privilege as the central UN oversight body. These findings have implications for the study of international organizations and for the reform of the UN system at large.

1 | PERSISTENCE AGAINST THE ODDS: THE UN JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Founded in 1966 and established on a permanent basis in 1976, the Joint Inspection Unit (henceforth JIU or the Unit) is the only external oversight institution of the United Nations (UN) system not subject to the authority of the Secretary-General. Yet, throughout its history, the JIU has faced significant existential challenges: some of its 28 participating organizations threatened to leave the Unit and member states called for its eradication, pointing to its alleged failure to fulfill its mandate, inadequate qualifications of its inspectors, and the poor quality of its reports. In spite of these challenges, however, the Unit persisted without major organizational changes. Not even the creation of a competing UN oversight institution in the 1990s, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), led to its dissolution. From a rationalist perspective, an international organization (IO) that does not fulfill its mandate properly, or which is replaced by another institution should not survive. Yet, the JIU has surprisingly done so.

How to explain the persistence of IOs, and the JIU in particular? We define persistence as the ability of an institution to adapt to changing circumstances in the face of internal and external shocks.[1] In this piece, we examine how the JIU persisted against all odds. This is an insightful case because the JIU witnessed significant existential challenges since its foundation but it survived all of them. Drawing on delegation and historical institutionalist approaches, we argue that the

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combination of entrepreneurial agents and layering processes of gradual institutional adaptation helps to account for the observed persistence of the JIU. Based on semi-structured elite interviews with UN staff and JIU inspectors, we examine three critical junctures during the history of the JIU: the foundational moment ; the creation of a competing institution; and attempts to dissolve the Unit.

We show that the initiation of layering processes by entrepreneurial directors were central for the JIU to persist over time. Yet, this came at the price of losing focality and relevance within the UN system. The creation of OIOS dramatically weakened the JIU, not least because member states started to shift funding to the competing institution. To regain focality in UN oversight, the Unit improved its system-wide reports; initiated internal administrative reforms; expanded its mandate towards new areas – such as cybersecurity and sustainable development goals – and widened its strategic focus by preparing new reports, including reviews of whistle-blower policies and practices among UN organizations and of the audit and oversight committees in the UN system. In sum, these agent-driven layering processes have enabled the Unit to withstand existential challenges including attempts to dissolve the organization.

This paper contributes to IO research in three ways. First, our perspective provides an empirical illustration of how persistence can result from the combination of layering processes and individual agency. This resonates with prior studies' emphasis on change agents (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) and bureaucratic agency (Conceição-Heldt, 2013, 2017; Hanrieder, 2014) as important elements in gradual adaptation processes, which have been central to historical institutionalist studies on change and continuity in world politics (e.g. Fioretos, 2011; Fioretos et al., 2016; Hanrieder, 2015; Rixen et al., 2016). Our focus on entrepreneurial agents further corresponds to work on the impact of executive heads in IOs (Hall & Woods, 2018) and the influence of international bureaucrats during the formation of IOs (Johnson, 2014). Beyond these, our paper speaks to the broader literature on multilateral governance (Faude, 2020; Fioretos & Heldt, 2019; Hale et al., 2013), IO decay and survival (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020; Gray, 2018), and, more specifically, to studies investigating the current challenges facing the UN system (Acharya & Plesch, 2020; Lyon et al., 2020). Second, this study contributes to the principal-agent literature. Delegation theorists tend to focus on the principal-side of the delegation process, in particular on the range of control mechanisms available to member states (Delreux & Adriaensen, 2017; Hawkins et al., 2006). We add to this literature by focusing on the agency aspect of delegation (Conceição-Heldt, 2017; Cortell & Peterson, 2006; Gould, 2006; Heldt, 2021), namely on how agents' behavior is relevant in understanding persistence of IOs. Specifically, we posit that the JIU has endured because entrepreneurial agents – which we define as international officials with an incentive to push for an IO's maintenance and expansion – managed, with the support of some pivotal member states, to pursue a gradual process of internal adaptation through layering. Finally, this contribution is, to the best of our knowledge, among the first in-depth studies on the JIU. The focus on this small but central UN organization, enables us to better understand the challenges involved in reforming the UN. The analysis draws on two sets of empirical material: primary documents and interviews with UN officials. We collected JIU reports and material from the UN General Assembly, as well as documents from governmental agencies (e.g. US General Accounting Office), and private entities (e.g. PricewaterhouseCoopers). To gain first-hand information not entailed in official documents, and also

Policy implications

- The institutional history of the JIU documents the importance of selecting personnel for key positions based on qualification. When determining the future of composition of the JIU and similar organizations within the UN system, member states should place due emphasis on the qualifications of individuals as a criterion of equal importance to geographical distribution.
- During the early stages following its inception, the JIU did not possess clear standards of assessment. These improved over time, also through the initiatives of entrepreneurial agents within the Unit. By way of a general recommendation, UN oversight agencies should strive to establish robust and transparent mechanisms for assessing the performance of UN organizations and programs.
- In order to focus scarce financial and human resources within the UN system, member states' representatives should consider reducing or merging the number of oversight institutions within the UN system.
- Alternatively, the existing UN oversight institutions could further develop specializations and a clear division of labor between them to help reduce the existing complexity and dysfunctionality of the UN system.
- UN member states should adopt standard accountability mechanisms for all UN agencies to counteract the myriad of existing overlapping committees and units within single institutions.

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to learn about organizational practices in the UN system, we further conducted 17 semi-structured elite interviews – including with seven current JIU inspectors (out of a total of 11), one former JIU inspector, three current and one former member of the JIU's Secretariat staff and a high-ranking former OIOS official.[2]

The paper proceeds as follows. We first engage with the existing literature and outline observable implications of our perspective on persistence of IOs. In the empirical section, we apply this framework to examine three critical junctures, understood as events that had a major and enduring impact on the Unit: its foundational moment in the 1960s; the creation of a competing institution in the 1990s; and abortive attempts to dissolve the Unit in the 2000s. The final section concludes and discusses our findings in terms of their implications for global governance, what we can learn from the history of the JIU, what other organizations should be studied next, and what can be the next steps in terms of studying accountability of IOs.

2 | EXPLAINING PERSISTENCE: ENTREPRENEURIAL AGENTS AND LAYERING PROCESSES

The extant literature on IOs offers rich explanations for their creation, institutional design, performance, legitimacy, and effectiveness (e.g. Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Johnson, 2014; Koremenos et al., 2001; Tallberg et al., 2016; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Though smaller in scope, a dedicated literature has focused on the duration and persistence of IOs (Shanks et al., 1995; Strange, 1998), contributing case studies on NATO (McCalla, 1996; Thies, 2009) and the Bank for International Settlements (Bernholz, 2009), among others. In recent years, work on the vitality and demise of IOs has seen a resurgence with efforts at constructing datasets on large numbers of IOs through time (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020; Gray, 2018). An early study on the years 1981–1992 indicated that the death-rate among IOs was about 30 per cent (Shanks et al., 1995), a figure that was essentially confirmed in a recent analysis for the period 1815–2015 (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020). This shows that, irrespective of questions of measurement and classification (cf. Debre & Dijkstra, 2021) and contrary to anecdotal evidence of seemingly 'immortal' organizations, a fair share of IOs has died throughout the contemporary era. In sum, these studies find that 'younger and smaller' IOs face a higher death risk (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, p. 364), while IOs that are subject to conflicting preferences are 'more likely to be replaced' (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021, p. 24).

States' preferences and power configurations play an important role in the creation, evolution, and persistence of IOs. Powerful states determine institutional design aspects of IOs – including voting rules, issue scope, governance structure, and flexibility – and the extent to which states delegate authority to them (Hawkins et al., 2006; Heldt & Mahrenbach, 2019; Koremenos et al., 2001). More heterogenous state preferences increase the risk of gridlock (Faude, 2020), are the main hindrance to reforming the UN system (Weiss, 2011), and reduce the likelihood that states will create new IOs (Hale et al., 2013). Thus, the preferences of powerful states matter in explaining the survival of organizations, since it is ultimately the member states who determine whether or not an IO shall be dissolved.

These functional and power-based approaches are an important first step towards accounting for change (or the lack thereof) in IOs. Yet these approaches are less useful in helping us understand IO persistence. Delegation approaches enable us to better study the causes and consequences of delegating power to IOs. So far, the delegation perspective has a state-centric understanding of IOs: member states (principals) transfer power to international bureaucracies (agents) – and pay little attention to the role played by agents at the post-delegation stage (for exceptions, see Hawkins & Jacoby, 2006; Heldt & Dörfler, 2021; Heldt & Mueller, 2021). Since states are seen as the ultimate constituency of IOs, delegation theorists conceptualize IOs as responsive to state demands to avoid losing their support. Consequently, less attention is paid to other potential actors for change, especially international bureaucrats. Undoubtedly, diverging preferences among powerful member states are a main reason for the lack of progress in IO reform. Equally important, however, is the role played by entrepreneurial agents in IOs. As historical institutionalists highlight, new institutions can cause the development of new constituencies or client groups who have incentives to push for these institutions' maintenance (Farrell & Newman, 2010; Hacker & Pierson, 2014). A growing strand of IO literature has emphasized how individual actors within international bureaucracies play a central role as active agents in shaping the evolution of institutions (Gray, forthcoming; Johnson, 2014; St John, 2018). Officials within IOs can thus act as entrepreneurial agents, help IOs to prevail and thus prevent their dissolution. In the case of the UN, policy entrepreneurs have been able to initiate change by (re)interpreting their mandates and setting the agenda for member state negotiations (Güssmann, 2015).

The central role played by entrepreneurial agents as the propellers of persistence, needs to be linked to historical institutionalist approaches with their focus on 'exogenous shocks that bring about radical institutional reconfigurations, overlooking shifts based on endogenous developments that often unfold incrementally' (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 2). Historical institutionalism helps us explain why change in formal IO governance structures often fails to keep pace or is not perfectly aligned with changes in their environments.

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This approach seeks to establish conditions which on their own or in combination are sufficient or necessary for particular institutional outcomes to occur. By doing so, historical institutionalism underlines the relevance of the legacies of founding moments in shaping long-term power relations. It also pays attention to the 'prevalence of incremental reform over stasis and fundamental transformations' and to positive feedback processes (Fioretos, 2011, p. 396).When actors receive positive feedback, this encourages them to take further steps in the same direction. Agency is the propeller. In processes propelled by positive feedback, events that occur early in the sequence are more likely to have a stronger causal impact than subsequent events (Fioretos et al., 2016; St John, 2018). As such, historical institutionalism enables us to study how layering can lead to the persistence of IOs. Layering means that member states and international bureaucrats add new rules on top of existing ones and that limited adjustment takes place. Layering is understood as additions, and not as something that entails revisions only within IOs. Existing IOs are more likely to endure if they are transformed through layering. This is a common strategy used by actors who want institutional change but face gridlock.[3] Layering can result when dissatisfied actors are unable to reform a focal institution and, in order to circumvent gridlock, add new rules or set up an alternative institution. While actors that layer new rules on top of a focal institution accommodate and thus adapt the logic of the preexisting system, they also change the ways in which the original rules shape the behavior of the actors involved and may thus alter the logic of functioning within the focal institution (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Thelen, 2003).

Overall, we argue that the creation of a new IO can cause the development of a new constituency with an incentive to push for the IO's maintenance. To ensure organizational survival and their own material security, international bureaucrats are interested in the survival and growth of their organization as a form of adaptation to challenging environments. This leads to the following observable implications. First, international bureaucrats will seek to acquire resources adequate to achieve their substantive and organizational goals. Second, if they cannot obtain those resources from their member states, international bureaucrats will be instrumental in starting layering processes. Third, layering – with new institutional components added incrementally without supplanting the existing institution – are more likely to emerge in gridlock situations, when it is relatively difficult to dismantle existing organizations.

Our argument follows historical institutionalism, which, alongside critical junctures and path dependencies, emphasizes the role of 'change agents' (Fioretos et al., 2016; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). The perspective differs from both rational choice institutionalism, where the focus lays on exogenous factors (e.g. changes in material conditions), and sociological institutionalism, emphasizing persuasion and socialization. Even within historical institutionalism, most attention tends to go to critical junctures and path dependency, whereas the role of policy entrepreneurs is often less developed. We seek to overcome this weakness by zooming into the role that entrepreneurial agents play in the persistence of IOs.

3 | PERSISTENCE OF THE JIU IN PRACTICE

In this section, we examine three critical junctures during the lifetime of the JIU: its foundational moment in the 1960s; the creation of a competing institution in the 1990s; and attempts to dismantle the Unit in the 2000s. Rather than leading to abrupt change, these critical junctures created opportunities for entrepreneurial action and, consequently, gradual adaptations through layering processes.[4]

3.1 | The foundational moment of the JIU

The JIU was created in 1966 as an instrument to solve the first UN budgetary crisis, which erupted when France and the Soviet Union withheld their financial contributions to the UN claiming that the General Assembly had illegally authorized and funded the UN Emergency Force in the 1956 Suez Crisis and the ONUC Peacekeeping Operation in Congo in 1960 (Boulden, 2015). The two countries suggested the creation of a new independent oversight body to monitor UN institutions. In 1965, this led to the creation of an ad hoc committee to examine the finances of the UN and its specialized agencies. This committee recommended creating a small inspection unit on an experimental basis 'consisting of a limited number of specialists highly qualified in financial and administrative matters' (UNGA, 1965). This led the General Assembly to establish the JIU on a provisional basis for a period of four years, renewing it twice, before, in 1978, UN member states gave the Unit a permanent statute. Equipped with modest resources, the Unit was created as the focal oversight body in the UN system. Today, 28 out of 35 funds, programs, specialized agencies, and other UN organizations participate in the JIU Statute.[5]

At the foundational moment, UN member states opted for a delegation design with a broad mandate, but also with extensive budgetary control mechanisms. Member states agreed that JIU would finance its operations through cost-sharing between participating organizations. The size of their contributions was in proportion to their own size and budget: the largest contributor was the UN Secretariat, followed by the FAO, WHO, UNESCO, ILO, and IAEA. In the early

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1970s, for example, the total costs of the Unit were in the order of $120,800. By comparison, the budget of the UN Board of Auditors was $406,700 and that of the Internal Audit Service $628,900. Overall, the budget for oversight bodies comprised 1.6 per cent of the entire UN budget (UNGA, 1970).

The JIU covers three of the four elements in external oversight: evaluation, inspection, and investigation. By contrast, auditing remains the domain of the UN Board of Auditors. The Unit prepares management and administrative reviews of single organizations in terms of their structure, governance, management, administration, financial framework, and strategic planning and risk. Its mandate was concisely described as follows:

> The Inspectors shall have the broadest powers of investigation in all matters bearing on the efficiency of services and the proper use of funds […] shall provide an independent view through inspection and evaluation aimed at improving management and methods and at achieving greater co-ordination between organizations […] The Unit shall satisfy itself that the activities undertaken by the organizations are carried out in the most economical manner and that the optimum use is made of resources available […] On its own initiative or at the request of the executive heads, the Unit may also advise organizations on their methods for internal evaluation, periodically assess these methods and make ad hoc evaluations of programmes and activities.
>
> (UNGA, 1976, p. 164)

However, because of its scarce resources, the Unit focused in the first decades of its existence on evaluation and inspection. By contrast, investigations were 'a big exception' at JIU due to the lack of staff.[6] From the very beginning, limiting the Unit's material resources was a way for member states to rein in and control their agent, the JIU.[7]

When the JIU started operations in 1968, the allocation of the eight inspectors' seats reflected the power configuration during the Cold War.[8] From 1978 on, the number of inspector positions increased to eleven, but with an overall balance in representation between West and East: the Soviet bloc (USSR/Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia) and the Western bloc (United States and Western European countries) each held two permanent seats. In addition, to the 'Western' seats, France was to have a de facto permanent seat until the end of the Cold War. The remaining seats were determined by regional criteria. More importantly, at the foundational moment of the JIU, member states agreed on a delegation design that gave inspectors extensive powers and a high degree of independence from the UN Secretary-General – as indicated in the formulation that inspectors were to have 'the broadest powers of investigation' (UNGA, 1976, p. 164). UN member states also delegated extensive powers to JIU inspectors to attain greater coordination among UN institutions.

Nonetheless, from the very beginning, the low qualification-level of individual inspectors had negative repercussions for the overall output of the Unit, including a lack of joint evaluation guidelines to prepare consistent and comparable reports. Member states displayed a 'recurring neglect of their own stipulations for the inspectors as people who must have been members of national or international inspection bodies or have equivalent experience' (Childers & Urquhart, 1994, p. 148). These requirements, however, were ignored for decades, as were numerous JIU reports. In many cases, JIU member organizations dismissed recommendations or failed to follow-up on them. This pattern may be explained by the fact that during the Unit's early years, almost all inspectors were career diplomats with little interest in the intrusion that the evaluation function of the JIU implied. Obtaining the post of inspector at JIU was often considered a political reward for public officials nearing retirement, ensuring a five-year long placement in Geneva, essentially 'a good life by the lake,'[9] as one JIU inspector put it.

However, when the Unit was founded, the central role played by the first chief director, Maurice Bertrand, was crucial in initiating gradual institutional development and layering in the Unit. Inspired by the French administrative court, the *Cour des Comptes* (Ghébali, 1986), where he had previously served as an auditor, Bertrand had a profound influence on the Unit during his directorship from 1966 to 1985. Described as the 'Dag Hammarskjöld of the JIU,'[10] he was to be the longest serving inspector. At that time, he was one of the few to fulfill the primary requirement under Article 2 of the JIU Statute: expertise and experience in 'national supervision or inspection bodies' (UNGA, 1976). Maurice Bertrand's intense commitment was decisive during discussions on prolonging the JIU in 1972. While other inspectors held the view that the JIU should not go beyond making recommendations, Bertrand was the 'guardian' of a more salient and incisive role for inspectors as experts to be involved in implementing recommendations. This position was contested within the JIU, as other inspectors were career diplomats favoring a more neutral role for JIU inspectors. During discussions in the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions of the UN General Assembly, a few member states – including France and Greece – supported this perspective (UNGA, 1972). In the end, UN member states rejected Bertrand's proposal for giving JIU inspectors a stronger role. After his long experience at JIU, acting as an entrepreneurial agent,

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in the 1980s Maurice Bertrand published what became known as the 'Bertrand Report' (UNJIU, 1985). In blunt terms, he underlined deficiencies in the UN system:

> Joint planning has remained wishful thinking; development strategies applied by each organization have continued to diverge; and 'country programming' and 'field co-ordination' have never been anything more than meaningless terms. Lack of intellectual preparation for work of programming, inadequate analysis of the role assigned to United Nations System in the general scheme of technical assistance requirements of the various countries, absence of a unified concept of development, lack of satisfactory machinery at the central and local levels to ensure the preliminary work of co-ordination of contributions by the various agencies. (…) The notion of an 'integrated approach to development' (…) has remained for the United Nations System an empty formula.
>
> (UNJIU, 1985, p. 10)

Bertrand also directly addressed existing deficiencies within the Unit by criticizing the geographical distribution of posts, which had in his view produced an inefficient system characterized by 'the general mediocrity of the outputs, and the inadequacy of the qualifications of too large proportion of the personnel' (UNJIU, 1985, p. 23).[11] Even though the Bertrand Report was unprecedently disavowed by all other inspectors, its main points were addressed in the 1990s, following the creation of OIOS as a competing oversight organization within the UN system. Hence, it took an exogenous shock to start a process of layering that finally addressed shortcomings that had been present at the JIU since its creation (i.e. recruitment and quality control). Faced with this first critical juncture, the JIU adapted to a changing environment and prevailed.

3.2 | The creation of OIOS as a competing oversight institution

In the two first decades of its existence, the JIU remained the focal institution in the UN oversight system.[12] Before the creation of OIOS in 1994, the JIU was the only organization in charge of system-wide oversight. It was an 'indispensable part of the UN system' and a 'mentor' for other UN institutions. For example, the JIU launched several initiatives to streamline understandings of evaluation among different UN institutions and to guide them through the establishment of their own internal evaluation systems. This situation changed with the creation of OIOS as another UN oversight institution and thus as a direct competitor to the JIU. How did the Unit adapt to these new circumstances?

Critique to the work of the JIU had been building for some time. In the mid-1980s, after analyzing over 87 reports issued by the Unit between 1978 and 1984, the US General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report evaluating the effectiveness of the JIU as oversight institution within the UN system. The verdict was devastating:

> JIU's effectiveness is limited by several factors. While some of its reports have been useful, the Unit's credibility has been harmed by uneven report quality. JIU does not systematically follow up on its report recommendations. In addition, the responsibility of U.N. system agencies for addressing JIU reports is unclear and fragmented. Consequently, the agencies have tended to set aside reports without taking specific action.
>
> US General Accounting Office (USGAO=, 1986, p. 2)

Among other points, the report criticized the poor qualifications of inspectors, highlighting that only four out of 11 inspectors had the required background in accounting, finance, or evaluation. At the same time, the GAO noted that Unit reports read more like a compilation of the wishes of individual inspectors, lacking written reviews, reporting standards, and follow-up procedures (USGAO, 1986).

In 1999, the US Congress passed the Helms–Biden Act – which defined a number of conditions for reform of the UN budget before the US would proceed to release massive arrearages due to the UN (CRS, 2018; Müller, 2006). While the GAO recommended to strengthen oversight of the Unit by the UN General Assembly's Fifth Committee (USGAO, 1986), the inability of UN member states to agree on institutional reform led to the creation of an alternative oversight institution, OIOS, with almost exactly the same functions. The mandate of OIOS includes monitoring, internal auditing, inspection and evaluation, as well as investigation (UNOIOS, 2014). Overlaps between the two oversight institutions are extensive – including reports on the efficiency of organizational structures and investigation matters. For example, the latter is formally part of the Unit's mandate, but it had never been put into practice due to a lack of resources.[13]

The heterogenous preferences of pivotal member stages on the JIU also explain the creation of a new UN oversight institution. Whilst the US favored the dissolution of the Unit, Russia mobilized to ensure the organization's survival. After the end of the Cold War, it was of utmost importance for the Russian government

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to keep this UN institution, where Russia had a permanent inspector seat.[14] Hence, gridlock between the two most powerful states in the UN system led to the creation of a new oversight institution. According to the founding head of OIOS, Karl Theodor Paschke, the institution was created because there had not been any 'real oversight in the UN' before that.[15] Obviously, OIOS challenged the focality of the Unit and questioned its effectiveness in supervising UN institutions. In our interviews with JIU inspectors, several reasserted the focality of their organization in the UN system on the grounds that JIU is 'the only organization with a system-wide mandate.'[16] Several interviewees also argued that OIOS simply fulfills the role of 'an internal auditor and nothing beyond'[17] and has not the same level of independence as the JIU.[18] However, the establishment of a new oversight institution within the UN system with a very similar delegation mandate runs counter to these assertions. The decision to create OIOS and to provide it with extensive material resources relegated the JIU to the back seat of UN oversight. While OIOS had a staff of about 325 and a budget of around 28 million, the JIU had 11 inspectors, a staff of only 20, and a budget of around 6.5 million (UNJIU, 2019, 2020).[19] Equipped with extensive resources, OIOS now has oversight powers over more UN organizations than JIU. In contrast to JIU, OIOS is much better equipped and prepared to oversee peacekeeping operations. JIU's loss of focality began in the mid-1990s. Indirectly, several inspectors and JIU secretariat staff confirmed this by stating that JIU reports are still hardly noticed within the UN system.[20]

Confronted by a competitor, the Unit suggested broadening its mandate to include non-member UN organizations, taking over some 'investigative assignments' from other UN oversight institutions, and being empowered to supervise all internal UN oversight bodies, particularly OIOS:

> internal bodies, including for example, the new United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services, should themselves be subject to monitoring and oversight. This can be accomplished by external oversight bodies responsible to Member States, such as JIU and the external auditors.
>
> (UNGA, 1996, p. 46)

However, member states did not support these attempts to strengthen the Unit. During this period, JIU was also challenged by the ILO, whose Secretariat openly tried to withdraw its membership from JIU. This was not an isolated case, as member organizations expressed 'oversight fatigue' and dissatisfaction with the supervision of JIU,[21] with some of them considering 'getting out from behind closed doors' (Münch, 2018, p. 30). This culminated in 1996 in an attempt by the UN Administrative Committee on Coordination – where the executive heads of the agencies are represented – to suspend the filling of foreseeable vacancies within the Unit.

At this second critical juncture, internal structural changes at JIU occurred with the loss of two permanent inspector seats for Yugoslavia and France. While the French seat was replaced in 1990 with a 'European seat' rotating between France and Germany,[22] Eastern European countries (Poland, Hungary, and Romania) rotated in filling the former Yugoslav seat. Notably, these changes took place without modifying the Unit's statute – since the de facto distribution of inspector seats had never been made explicit (UNGA, 1976).

These examples show that, already in the 1990s, the Unit faced a serious challenge from a new competitor, opposition from powerful member states, and from some member organizations. However, the Unit survived owing to layering under the entrepreneurial agent Fontaine Ortiz, JIU's executive secretary from 1994–2002 and inspector from 2002–2012. Building on the recommendations of the Bertrand Report (UNJIU, 1985),Fontaine Ortiz played an important role in mobilizing support for internal adaptation within the Unit. Having previously served on the UN General Assembly's Fifth Committee – as a representative of Cuba, and later as its chairman – he had extensive experience within the UN machinery.

When in 1996 a General Assembly resolution required that JIU reports be given a 'more reader-friendly and uniform format' (UNGA, 1996, p. 5), Fontaine Ortiz reacted by improving the quality of JIU's reports, introducing internal incremental reforms by centralizing Unit operational methods – small independent groups consisting of inspectors and support teams from the secretariat were now in charge of preparing reports. While this may at first seem a minor issue, in fact the varying quality of reports, due to their different lengths and methodologies, as well as the varying qualifications of inspector(s), were vexing problems that had harmed the Unit's effectiveness for decades. After all, the main output of JIU are its reports. These reports are also the main mechanism whereby the Unit can bring about change within the UN system. This requires its member organizations to take the reports seriously and to implement them. However, their length, lack of standardization, and poor quality control were often used as an excuse by member organizations for not following JIU's recommendations (USGAO, 1986).

In the early 1990s, following the appointment of an inspector with a poor qualification, who was also under suspicion of corruption, JIU inspectors demanded the Assembly to change nomination procedures. The investigation of this case led to the revocation of the inspector's appointment by the General Assembly and to his termination from the UN (Shishkin, 2017). The case made a key weakness of the Unit obvious: inspector positions were filled not by the best qualified

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candidates, but following negotiations related to geographical criteria between member states. To overcome this major limitation, the Unit suggested the General Assembly to make its appointment process in two steps: first deciding which country would be represented; and then to select on the best fit to the job of inspector amongst potential candidates from that country. Ultimately, the General Assembly could agree only on requesting governments to attach a name and CV to their proposals (UNGA, 2005). During this period, internal changes also occurred within the JIU secretariat. Fontaine Ortiz was able to recruit what he referred to as his 'dream team' of highly qualified individuals. He introduced significant changes in the working practices of the Unit, including the establishment of a tracking system to monitor the acceptance and implementation of reports by member organizations. Fontaine Ortiz was able to persuade inspectors of the importance of making changes to Unit working practices to preserve the organization in the long term.[23]

In sum, after the creation of OIOS, the Unit persisted primarily because of layering and entrepreneurial action by the Unit's executive secretary. Layering was enabled by UN member state disagreement about how to reform the JIU, inducing them instead to create OIOS as a new institution. Under the entrepreneurial agent Fontaine Ortiz, gradual internal adaptation processes were initiated, and these two factors explain why the Unit survived this critical juncture. But this came at the price of losing focality and material resources within the UN oversight system. These findings on the fragmentation of the UN oversight system resonate with the work by Hanrieder (2015), namely that authorities granted to IOs are easier to reinforce than reverse.

3.3 | Abortive attempts to dissolve the JIU

> The current mandate of the JIU should be discontinued. Matters of audit and inspection across the UN system […] should be covered by, shared, and coordinated OIOS resources
>
> (UNGA, 2006a, p. 14)

At the turn of the millennium, the UN system was under tremendous pressure to reform, not least because of rampant corruption in the UN's largest humanitarian operation, the Oil-for-Food programme. At the 2005 UN World Summit, member states decided to appoint the private consulting company PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) to evaluate UN oversight bodies (UNGA, 2006b). Among other conclusions, PWC recommended the 'discontinuation' of the Unit – basically its dismantlement. The PWC report extensively criticized internal working procedures, the quality of its reports, the qualifications of inspectors, and even the independence of the JIU. PWC suggested instead to strengthen the oversight powers and budget of OIOS, and that each single UN institution should introduce internal oversight procedures, a change that would have made the Unit redundant in the UN oversight system. Thus, the PWC evaluation foresaw the disempowerment and dissolution of the Unit:

> In the context of a […] comprehensive oversight framework throughout the UN system, the JIU may duplicate the activities of existing oversight mechanisms. There is arguably not a role for the JIU if each UN's entity's oversight functions, including audit, investigation and evaluation, were robust[.]
>
> (UNGA, 2006a, p. 13)

The Unit reacted to this strong criticism by preparing an extensive report, in which it appealed to member states to take their oversight role in the UN system seriously. JIU entrepreneurial officials advocated a stronger role for member states in overcoming the current deficiencies. They included insufficient material capabilities for the Unit to adequately fulfill its mandate, in particular in the area of investigation, insufficient follow-up to internal oversight recommendations, and the fragmentation of internal oversight (UNJIU, 2006).[24]

A majority of powerful member states under the leadership of European states – who formed a broader coalition with developing countries – supported the work of the JIU and explicitly advocated the maintenance of JIU. OIOS also positioned itself by supporting the Unit and by opposing the expansion of its own mandate to take over JIU functions across the UN system. Following a discussion in the General Assembly on the possible dissolution of the JIU, a vast majority in the General Assembly supported the Unit (UNGA, 2007).

The Unit conducted two self-evaluations in 2008 and 2010, complemented in 2013 by an external four-expert panel. These exercises translated into a set of guidelines on the implementation of inspections, investigations, and evaluations. The Unit also undertook layering by adding new rules and informally expanding its mandate and scope into new areas, for example, cybersecurity, accountability, ethics, integrity, and sustainable development goal. At the same time, the Unit took the initiative of widening its strategic area of focus by introducing new reports. For example, preparing a review of whistle-blower policies and practices in UN organizations as well as a review of the audit and oversight committees in the UN (UNJIU, 2018, 2019). A recent study by the JIU (2019), shows that, in the meantime, there is a high acceptance and high implementation of 85 per cent. By contrast, low acceptance and low implementation is circumscribed to UNODC and UN-Habitat.

In 2008, to improve implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, pilot system-wide evaluation of the

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effectiveness of all UN development-related agencies in a given country was carried out by the UN Evaluation Group in South Africa.[25] This fueled an internal UN debate on how to improve system-wide evaluation, which culminated in the adoption of several resolutions by the General Assembly and an independent review of system-wide evaluation mechanisms by the Secretary General (e.g. UNGA, 2009, 2010). This report suggested establishing a steering group to coordinate Independent System-Wide Evaluation (ISWE) activities in the UN with the aim of supporting JIU's internal efforts to improve the Unit's role in ISWE. Due to insufficient budgetary and personnel resources, however, JIU was unable to undertake such evaluations.[26] To avoid the transfer of the Unit's mandate on evaluation to another UN oversight institution,[27] JIU inspectors acted collectively to be included in the membership of the ISWE. When UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon created a pilot institution, the Interim Coordination Mechanism, to govern ISWE in 2014, JIU was one of the member institutions (ISWE, 2016). More importantly, the Unit hosted the secretariat of this new institution. This enabled the JIU to temporarily reassert its centrality in system-wide evaluation.

However, in 2017, an external review of the pilot program, recommended establishing an independent system-wide evaluation office, instead of hosting it within the JIU (Daponte & Markie, 2017). This was perceived at the time as a sales pitch for OIOS to take over the JIU's evaluation activities. In 2020, the Secretary-General announced the establishment of an independent system-wide evaluation office to become operational in 2021 and reporting directly to the UN Secretariat. With this move, the JIU lost definitely its focal position within the UN oversight system.

In sum, layering processes by entrepreneurial agents enabled the Unit to persist and adapt successfully over the past five decades. In fact, the Unit was able to persuade member states at the General Assembly to ensure adequate qualifications of its inspectors. In parallel it was able to streamline the content and quality of reports, as well as to establish an online follow-up mechanism to trace back the implementation of its recommendations by member organizations. However, the Unit was less successful in regaining focality, as the case of ISWE illustrates.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to explain why the JIU survived several existential challenges since its inception in the 1960s. Drawing on delegation and historical-institutionalist approaches, we show how a combination of entrepreneurial agents and internal adaptation processes – particularly layering in the form of creating rules and procedures within the Unit, enabled the JIU to persist over time. Our empirical section examined three critical junctures in the JIU's history. First, the foundational moment at which the JIU and its delegation design were created. Second, the emergence of a competing institution and the process of gradual institutional development triggered by the active entrepreneurship of various JIU directors and inspectors. Third, attempts by powerful member states to dismantle the Unit. Our analysis suggests that the involvement of entrepreneurial agents and their initiation of layering processes was decisive for the persistence of this UN organization. In sum, this study illustrates that, under certain conditions, namely when entrepreneurial agents push for the maintenance of IOs, these agents may be able to 'save' IOs by introducing layering. In the context of the JIU, oversight was improved and layering occurred through statutes changes without formal treaty change. At different points in time, the Unit has proven a persistent organization that withstood existential challenges. This persistence resulted from a combination of entrepreneurial efforts by various directors and inspectors together with the layering processes of internal adaptations, rather than sudden modifications. Entrepreneurial agents proved crucial. They all had an interest in the Unit's survival and believed in the system-wide oversight role of their institution. The JIU 'survived' various attempts at dismantlement, but as a result it gradually lost focality. The establishment of OIOS as a competing institution and the planned independent evaluation office outside the institutional structure of the JIU illustrate that, even though the Unit has persisted, it has suffered continuous disempowerment in terms of material resources and competences.

Our findings raise several questions in terms of opening avenues for further research. First of all, how can the findings of this qualitative study on persistence of a single UN oversight institution be generalized? The JIU case is highly interesting for an understanding of persistence within the UN system and of how difficult it is to reform IOs with almost universal membership acting under consensual decision-making rules. As a small IO that is subject to intense preference heterogeneity, the JIU would have been expected to die or be replaced at some point. Further research is called for investigating how other organizations under pressure adapt over time and whether similar individual agency and layering were at play in the adaptation process.

Second, what can we learn from the history of the JIU? UN oversight agencies, and IOs in general, should strive to establish robust and transparent mechanisms for assessing the performance of UN organizations and programs. Here we see two possible avenues, one would be to consider reducing or merging the number of oversight institutions within the UN system. The second option would be to further develop specializations and a clear division of labor between them to help reduce the existing complexity and institutional dysfunctionality of

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the UN system. Because IOs, including the UN organizations, are currently in a state of permanent mode of crisis, politicization, and pressure, previous responses from IOs included increasing transparency in decision-making processes, opening-up to the outside world, developing new communications strategies, expanding their own mandates by venturing into new fields of activity, or introducing additional accountability mechanisms.

This brings us to the third question, namely what can be the next steps in studying the accountability of IOs? We need a new research agenda outlining specific types and conditions for meaningful accountability, defined as context-sensitive accountability based on a genuine understanding of IOs (see also Heldt & Herzog, 2021), across a variety of issue areas in global governance. One of the most pressing research areas entails the explanation of different patterns of scope and depth of accountability across organizations. What are the conditions that enhance or constrain accountability in global governance? In the event of dissatisfaction with the performance of IOs, how can principals regain control over their agents? How efficient and meaningful are accountability mechanisms? How and under what circumstances can the introduction of accountability mechanisms (de) legitimize global governance? These are some of the fascinating questions scholars could/should address in the future. The discussion in this field is still in its infancy but is crucial in a context of contested multilateralism which has opened up new spaces for challenges. Today, more than ever, a stronger focus on accountability mechanisms of IOs is crucial to increase the acceptance of global rules and the willingness of states and citizens to finance global institutions.

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ENDNOTES

1. Hanrieder (2016) and Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020) use the term institutional robustness to define a situation in which institutions withstand changing environmental conditions. Gray (2021) recurs to the concept of vitality. According to her, the vitality of IOs encompasses four stages: death and life, but also change and inertia. In this piece, we use the term persistence, as it enables us to more accurately describe the adaptation process of the JIU in the face of several external shocks.
2. We conducted interviews in the UN JIU Office in Geneva on 9–10 December 2019 and in Munich on 23 July 2019. The interview with a high-ranking former OIOS official took place via telephone on 20 March 2020. We are grateful to all of our interview partners for their availability and willingness to share their experiences with us. None of the opinions expressed by the interviewees are attributed to a particular person. All interviews are cited in chronological order.
3. This applies in particular to the United Nations, as noted by Ponzio and Bluman Schroeder (2017).
4. Our conceptualization follows Capoccia and Kelemen (2007), who do not regard change as a necessary element of critical junctures.
5. Among major UN institutions only the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO are not members of the JIU due to their special status in the UN.
6. Interviewee #12.
7. Interviewee #3.
8. The initial inspectors were: Maurice Bertrand (France), Lucio Garcia del Solar (Argentina), Sretin Ilic (Yugoslavia), Robert M. Macy (US), R. S. Mani (India), Joseph Adolf Sawe (Tanzania), Sir Leonard Scopes (United Kingdom) and A. F. Sokirkin (USSR).
9. Interviewee #7.
10. Interviewee #12.
11. Interviewees #4 and #12.
12. The complex UN oversight regime is constituted by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions; the Committee for Programme and Coordination; the International Civil Service Commission; the Board of Auditors; the External Auditors; and the Panel of External Auditors.
13. Interviewees #1, 2, and 3.
14. Interviewee #12.
15. Interviewee #14.
16. Interviewee #1.
17. Interviewee #2.
18. Interviewee #3.
19. Numbers for 2018 and 2016, respectively.
20. Interviewee #2.
21. Interviewees #7 and #9.
22. Interviewee #1.
23. Interviewee #12 and #9.
24. These are still some of the most important deficiencies of the current UN oversight system, as several interviewees anonymously corroborated.
25. Interviewee #7.

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26. Interviewee #10.

27. Interviewee #7.

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