

Organizational culture of the OPCW Secretariat

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The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) oversees the international chemical weapon disarmament and non-proliferation regime. Based in The Hague, the OPCW is made up of three elements: the Conference of the States Parties (CSP), the Executive Council and the Technical Secretariat. The CSP is composed of representatives from all states parties of the OPCW; it oversees the implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). The Executive Council promotes the effective implementation of and compliance with the CWC, and comprises representatives from forty-one states parties. The Secretariat carries out the actual verification measures outlined in the CWC and assists the CSP and the Executive Council.

Little has been written about the internal workings of the Secretariat. This article provides a glimpse of the unique culture of the Secretariat (including the Provisional Technical Secretariat) and how this culture has influenced the OPCW's development and actions. The wider influences of both external factors (such as its contacts with states parties) and internal factors (such as the relationship between the Secretariat and the Executive Council) will only be touched upon here as they are beyond the scope of this paper. This is an area that would considerably benefit from study and reflection, perhaps through the lens of organizational or strategic management theory.

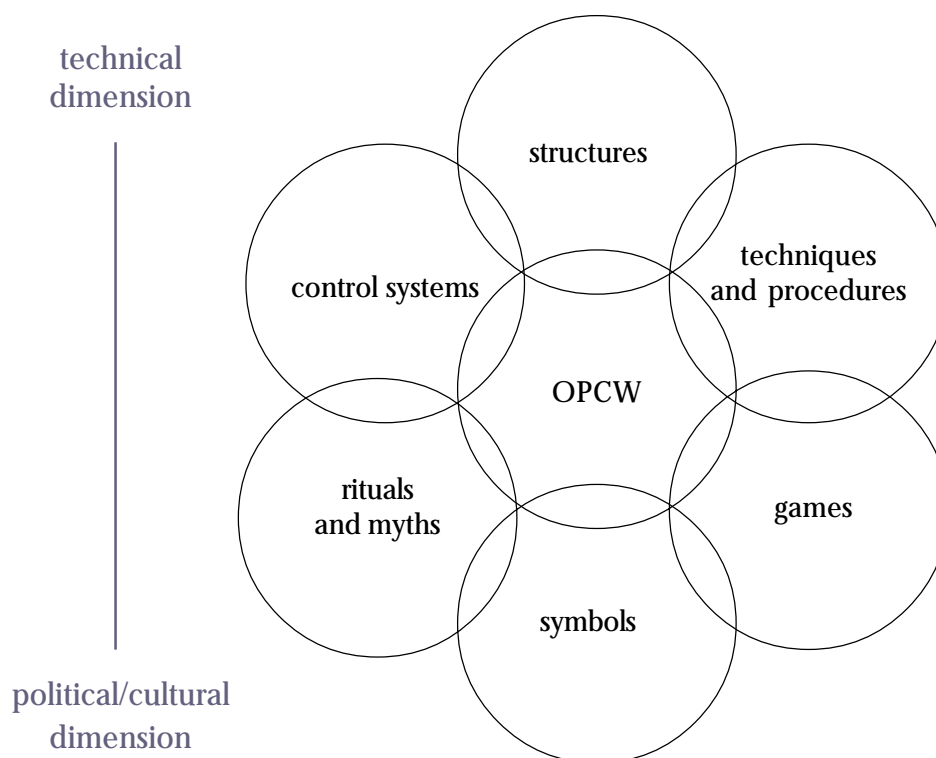
Acknowledging the complexity

The process of becoming an organization is simultaneously (i) the growth and maintenance of relationships among a set of individuals who are working towards a common goal, and (ii) the actual accomplishment of tasks, individually and collectively. Although it is impossible to distinguish these processes in real terms, it is important to distinguish between them at the conceptual level.

Looking at the OPCW Secretariat, one can identify various 'characteristics' or features, such as its physical location, the rules of interaction that are taught to newcomers, the basic values and beliefs that underscore the OPCW's founding idea or philosophy, the underlying conceptual categories and assumptions that enable members of the Secretariat to communicate and to interpret everyday occurrences, etc. These characteristics can be grouped into two 'dimensions': the *technical dimension* and the *political/cultural dimension*.

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The bi-dimensional map of the OPCW



The technical dimension includes characteristics that are generally 'visible' but might be difficult to decipher. It includes the following elements.

1. *Control systems*—recruitment mechanisms, administrative rules and procedures, personnel evaluations, the budget, etc.;
2. *Structures*—not merely departments, divisions and branches, but also the physical facilities, the layout of offices, information systems, etc.; and
3. *Techniques and procedures*—professional performance, the verification process and its evaluation, working methods, etc.

The technical dimension affects almost all tasks undertaken by the Secretariat. The rigid set of bureaucratic norms and procedures of the United Nations, known as the 'common system', has made a powerful contribution to the technical dimension where administration, management, resources and programmes are concerned.

The political/cultural dimension is more intangible and strategic in nature. The day-by-day operating principles that guide the behaviour of the members of the system are derived in large part from this level. Here we find the basic assumptions about the essence of the Secretariat's culture. Culture plays a vital role in an organization's ability to develop, adapt and maintain itself. The political/cultural dimension comprises three groups of characteristics: 'rituals and myths', 'symbols' and 'games'.

RITUALS AND MYTHS

Rituals and myths are important elements of culture. Through common 'language' and behaviours, conceptual categories and collective perceptions, an organization can develop a sense of internal integration. Internal integration lead to rituals and myths shared by the members of the organization. For example, one of the 'founding myths' of the OPCW was that it would be completely unlike UNSCOM; it would work in a multilateral fashion and be 'above' the political games played during the Iraqi inspections.

SYMBOLS

In a sense, all cultural learning ultimately reflects the original values of individuals, and their sense of what 'ought' to be as distinct from what is. When a group faces a new task, issue or problem, the first solution proposed to deal with it might be considered a value because there is not as yet a shared basis for determining what is factual and real. Someone in the group, usually one of its founding members, has convictions about the nature of reality and how to deal with it, and will propose a solution based on those convictions. That individual may regard the proposed solution as a belief or principle based on facts, but the group cannot feel the same degree of conviction until it has collectively shared in the successful resolution of the problem. If the solution works, and the group has a shared perception of that success, the value gradually starts a process of cognitive transformation into a symbol. As will be described in detail in a later section, many in the Secretariat considered the Director-General's resistance to letting the OPCW be 'pushed around' by strong states parties as a symbol of his commitment to the independence of the organization.

GAMES

In organizational theory, games are defined as the systems of influence of an organization, which are distinct from the administrative power structure or hierarchy. Games can be overt or covert, intricate or simple, played simultaneously or singly. Some of the more popular games that have been observed at the Secretariat are noted here.

- *Sponsorship games* are played to build a power base by using superiors; individuals attach themselves to those with higher status, and offer professional loyalty in return for power.
- *Alliance-building games* are played amongst peers—often branch heads or inspectors—who negotiate implicit contracts of support for each other in order to build a stronger power base.
- *Empire-building games* are played by middle managers or directors to build power bases, not cooperatively with peers, but individually with subordinates.
- *Budgeting games* are played overtly and have relatively defined rules; resources, not positions *per se*, are the ultimate prizes.
- *Expertise games* are the non-sanctioned use of expertise to build a power base, either by flaunting or by feigning such expertise. Experts play by exploiting their technical skills and knowledge, by emphasizing its uniqueness, its indispensable nature, and also by keeping the knowledge to themselves or controlling information flows.

- *Management versus staff games* are of a sibling-rivalry type, played not just to enhance personal power, but to defeat a rival; they pit middle management with formal decision-making authority against staff advisers with specialized expertise. Each side tends to exploit legitimate power in illegitimate ways.
- *'Whistle-blowing' games* are generally brief and simple, and can be played to effect organizational change; privileged information is used by an insider, usually a lower level participant, to 'blow the whistle' on questionable behaviour.

This list is far from exhaustive. Other games include gender games, regional grouping games, nationality games, etc.

The growth stages of the OPCW Secretariat

It has been argued that the creation, development and maturation of an organization can be compared to the life cycle of a living organism. Organisms require a genetic code. In this case, the CWC might be considered the OPCW's DNA—its blueprint for future development. Examining the OPCW's growth phases could help us understand how the Secretariat has coped with conflict and crises, and how well it has met its aspirations. This sort of stocktaking is especially important as we approach the first Review Conference.

The lifetime of the young organization could be roughly divided into the following stages:

1. Its gestation during negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament, followed by its birth with the establishment of the Preparatory Commission at the CWC signing conference;
2. Infancy, the work of the Provisional Technical Secretariat;
3. The Secretariat's first steps following entry into force;
4. Growing pains, as evidenced by financial, political and administrative crises; and
5. Moving towards adulthood under new leadership.

How have the political/cultural and technical dimensions outlined in the previous section played a role in the Secretariat's stages of growth and development?

GESTATION AND BIRTH (PRIOR TO 1993)

The end of the Cold War, concerns raised over chemical weapon (CW) use in Iraq, and the bilateral American-Soviet agreement¹ on the elimination of their CW stockpiles all raised the profile of and expectations for CW disarmament and non-proliferation. This was a conducive environment for the gestation of the CWC through negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament. The long-awaited convention was born in early 1993. At its signing conference in Paris, a Preparatory Commission was created to 'look after' the infant organization until entry into force (EIF). To accomplish all of the necessary preparations for EIF, the Preparatory Commission lost no time in establishing the Provisional Technical Secretariat (PTS), which would be the precursor of the OPCW Secretariat.

INFANCY (1993–1997)

During the infancy period of the PTS, both the technical and political/cultural dimensions played crucial roles. Concerning the technical dimension, the genetic code of the CWC dominated most administrative aspects, such as the decision to adopt the United Nations common system. The verification process as codified in the text of the CWC was conceptualized and assumed an embryonic form, and the relevant models, procedures, training methods and manuals were crafted accordingly. The first wave of personnel were recruited, predominantly experts from former CW-developing countries.

As for the political/cultural dimension, the ‘founders’ of the PTS perceived themselves as disarmament pioneers with a shared vision. They were convinced that the CWC was the most sophisticated arms control tool ever developed, that the organization would be truly multilateral and staffed by ‘the best of the best’. Their mantra was to create a managerially unique organization, a polar star for the rest of the United Nations system—a system unanimously perceived as politicized and ineffective. As most of the first employees were either diplomats or experts straight from the negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament, they quickly developed a strong set of shared rituals, myths and symbols.

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FIRST STEPS FOR THE OPCW SECRETARIAT (1997–1999)

On 31 October 1996 the deposit of the sixty-fifth instrument of ratification triggered the 180 day countdown to EIF. Uncertainty about the actual timeframe of the sixty-fifth ratification and about the participation of the two major possessor states had complicated planning and final preparations. As a consequence of the legally binding timelines stipulated by the CWC, which had been optimistically agreed over a table in Geneva, there was an enormous amount of work to be done in a short amount of time. Several of the tasks that were to be completed before EIF on 29 April 1997 remained unfinished due to political disagreements and at EIF were passed to the Executive Council to resolve.

In less than a year, more than 100 inspectors (CW and chemical industry experts, analytical chemists, and logistical, health and safety specialists) were selected and trained to verify the incoming declarations from states parties. The Secretariat staff at headquarters almost doubled in size, reaching a total of about 400 individuals at EIF. With EIF, the Secretariat began processing the initial declarations from states parties and started inspection activities. One week after EIF, Ambassador José Bustani was confirmed as the OPCW’s Director-General. The massive number of new staff from a diversity of cultures generated a positive cultural shock, and the ‘genetic code’ was reproducing itself as quickly as possible, with all efforts focused on the effective fulfilment of the CWC’s timelines. Inspection procedures and a manual, verification reporting templates, a declaration handbook and risk assessment processes were finalized by the Secretariat and put into practice immediately after EIF.

To cope with the pace of the verification activities a second group of about eighty inspectors and some headquarter staff were selected and recruited. This had a significant effect on the political/cultural dimension. The selection process was not immune from certain alliance-building games and political pressure from states parties. The influx of new staff was perceived as less committed to the ideals of the CWC, which diluted the strength of shared symbols, myths and rituals of the previous stage.

States parties responded at different rates to obligations concerning the CWC declaratory process and their national norms. For instance, the United States mastered the CW side of the verification equation, but its delay in adopting a national normative mechanism left the American chemical industry unverified until long after EIF. Several states parties placed the Secretariat under enormous political pressure, demanding why their chemical industry facilities were being inspected while those in the United States were not. The Director-General pleaded with states parties to not hold the CWC verification regime, the OPCW Programme of Work and its budget 'hostage' to this issue.² By the time on-site inspections of American industrial facilities began in 2000, the whole verification process had become convoluted, suffering from unnecessary political scrutiny from the Executive Council and states parties, and resulted in a hostile, uncooperative climate in the Secretariat.

At the same time the CWC in particular, and disarmament-related issues in general, slipped down the political agenda of most states parties. As little attention was paid in capitals to questions concerning CW, implementation of their CWC obligations and the OPCW itself, delegations were left waiting for instructions and were unable to offer their informed participation in the CSP or in the Executive Council. This contributed to a cycle of poor and slow decisions from the Executive Council and the CSP, which impeded the work of the Secretariat, which in turn raised questions regarding the effectiveness of the Secretariat, etc.

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In this phase it became clear that the Secretariat needed 'just-in-time' guidance on political matters from the Executive Council. The backlog of necessary decisions remaining from the period prior to EIF and political disagreements within the Executive Council slowed the number of decisions that it was able to take. Left adrift, the Secretariat was forced to adopt informal practices (concerning, for example, the inspections manual, verification reporting templates and the declaration handbook) while awaiting formal decisions or approval from the Executive Council and the CSP.

To illustrate, according to the CWC the Secretariat must negotiate a draft Facility Agreement (a kind of facility-specific contract between the inspected state party and the OPCW that regulates all future inspections of a site) no more than thirty days after a site's initial inspection, and have it approved by the Executive Council. To insure consistency in how inspections are conducted the Executive Council was tasked with developing Model Facility Agreements that would be the basis for those that the Secretariat would negotiate. The Secretariat began inspections in 1997, but only in 2000 did the CSP finally agree on all of the modalities concerning Model Facility Agreements. Yet despite the fact that there is now an agreed framework upon which to base future agreements, few Facility Agreements have been approved by the Executive Council.

For example, to date there have been 196 inspections at 181 Schedule 2 facilities.³ Over a dozen Schedule 2 facilities have been re-inspected without a Facility Agreement to simplify the inspection process. The backlog is mainly due to dissent among the states parties concerning the non-proliferation risk posed by the various types of industrial facilities and how frequently a certain facility ought to be re-inspected. As long as the Executive Council does not approve specific Facility Agreements, the more complicated the work of the Secretariat becomes as inspectors' access might need to be renegotiated for each subsequent inspection of a site.

GROWING PAINS (1999–2002)

The OPCW approached the new millennium with significant internal tensions as the consequences of the diplomatic and financial compromises made during the CWC's negotiation surfaced. During the

negotiations there was a tacit understanding that the personnel would be 'undergraded' with the comprehension that once the CWC entered into force, the grade of professional Secretariat posts would be reassessed. At the request of the Director-General, in the beginning of 1998 an external consultant undertook the reassessment and recommended to raise the grade of many Secretariat staff. The Director-General informed the Secretariat of the results of the reassessment in August 1998 and announced his decision to apply the reassessment as of 1 January 1999.

The Executive Council and later the CSP stated that reclassifying posts was not within the power of the Director-General and decided to postpone the decision considering reclassification. Additionally, the CSP formally requested the Director-General not to move ahead with the reassessment in the meantime. The ensuing battle over who had the authority to make such a decision divided the three components of the OPCW. A group of eighty-nine Secretariat personnel eventually tired of waiting and took their grievance to the Administrative Tribunal of the International Labour Organization in mid-1999—which ruled in their favour in July 2000. By late 2000, the Tribunal's judgement was implemented in the Secretariat, the costs being partially offset through a reorganization of the planned activities for the end of 2000 and 2001.

The reassessment exercise generated considerable resistance among some states parties, which expressed their dissatisfaction both overtly through the Executive Council and the CSP, as well as covertly through their delegations. Bustani stood firm in his belief that he had the mandate to decide such issues, which led to mounting frustration as states tried to assert their power as the final authority of matters concerning the management of the OPCW Secretariat. A number of states claimed that the reassessment exercise was more a question of status and 'self-promotion' than of fair treatment for Secretariat personnel. There were also strong concerns regarding the financial implications for the organization.

This experience illustrates how an element of the technical dimension (budget authority, a part of control systems) is inseparable from the political/cultural dimension. The fact that the Director-General decided to undertake the post reassessment exercise notwithstanding the opposition of members of the Executive Council became a powerful symbol to the Secretariat of having a leader that was willing to stand up to states parties to defend the integrity of the Secretariat staff and independence of the organization.

Although the OPCW's budget grew from less than US\$ 9 million in 1993 to more than US\$ 50 million in 2001, its inadequacies became impossible to ignore. By far the largest share of the budget was staff costs. These costs included the salaries of inspectors verifying the destruction of CW. According to the CWC, inspection costs associated with verification of CW-related facilities are to be paid by the possessor state. The significant delays before reimbursement meant that the OPCW was operating on 'fictitious income' and constant budget shortfalls. The Director-General viewed this problem as rooted in the technical dimension, stating '... the source of the deficit is structural, and we should now unite to repair the damage, to restore adequate financing, and to ensure, through changes to the structure of the budget, that such a situation never recurs again.'⁴

However, a less widely known contributing factor to the budget crisis derives almost completely from the political/cultural dimension. The principles on which the budget instrument is based were developed by the PTS in 1995, in accordance with the principles of the accounting technique called Activity-Based Costing (ABC). This accounting process proved to be rather cumbersome, and became one of the key elements of the OPCW's financial difficulties. What went wrong? Two of the pillars of ABC were simply not implemented in full. These pillars are: (i) the mechanism for feedback into the budgeting process in order to modify unnecessary activities; and (ii) personal accountability, throughout the managerial chain of command, for any problems with budgetary objectives and/or resources. These are elements of the political/cultural dimension, reflected through political culture, how staff are

rewarded or disciplined, how personnel are held accountable, etc. Implementation of ABC accounting focused on the technical dimension, while the importance of the political/cultural dimension, especially of games and power structures, was neglected. Without feedback and accountability, the Secretariat was unable to modify ineffective activities or minimize financial waste—contributing factors to the crisis.

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The financial famine forced a reduction of the Secretariat's activities across the board, which it carried out amidst growing discontent. The verification process in the industrial facilities of two countries resulted in outstanding uncertainties, mainly due to novel interpretations of the inspection teams' access rights and revisions of the definition of what constitutes the boundaries of the declared facility to be inspected ('facilities delineation'). There were also growing animosities among states parties concerning how well other parties were meeting their CWC obligations. Alliance and empire building, budgeting games and whistle blowing were played between the major states parties players and the Secretariat.

It is worth reflection that despite these administrative, financial and political problems, the states parties decided unanimously in May 2000 to renew the appointment Director-General Bustani for a second four-year term. While some might claim that this reflects the states parties faith in the OPCW and its leadership, others might suggest that it demonstrates a lack of interest in the work of the OPCW and essentially was a decision carried out through apathetic inertia.

By early 2002, the United States made it clear that it wanted a new Director-General, citing 'a steady decline in Bustani's performance'. The American-led initiative (backed by other states including Germany, Japan, Poland and the Republic of Korea) used covert and overt manoeuvres to lobby states parties (and Secretariat staff) for his removal. A range of tactics—asking him to step down, requesting his government to recall him and tabling a no confidence vote in the Executive Council—all failed. Rumours circulated that the United States was threatening not to pay its dues—which make up 22% of the OPCW's budget—if Bustani was not removed. The Secretariat was thrown in to a state of chaos, where game playing, staff divisions, jockeying for power and uncertainty about possible outcomes to the leadership crisis were the main daily activities.

In a final showdown, a special session of the CSP was called in April 2002. In his statement to the Conference, Bustani warned of the dangerous precedent 'whereby the Director-General or Secretary-General of any international organisation can be removed from office at any time during his or her tenure', in essence a situation where an organization is held hostage to the whims of a single state party. In a controversial decision of questionable legality, on 22 April 2002 the Conference removed the Director-General from office by a vote of forty-eight to seven, with forty-three delegations abstaining.⁵

Aftershocks of this power struggle shook the Secretariat to its foundations. A large number of personnel, including some of the 'founders', left the OPCW, thereby depriving it of a significant amount of institutional knowledge. This experience has raised concerns about how any multilateral organization—and the OPCW in particular—can fulfil its mandate in an independent way.

MOVING TOWARDS ADULTHOOD (2002 AND BEYOND)

The new Director-General, Ambassador Rogelio Pfrter, took the helm of the Secretariat in July 2002, indicating new priorities and challenges for the OPCW. In his acceptance speech, he noted that '[t]he Organization, the Member States of the Chemical Weapons Convention have been through one of the most complicated periods in its brief history'. He asserted:

We wish to open a new chapter. First, one of my top priorities will be to ensure appropriate funding in 2003. The destruction of chemical weapons and their production facilities must be completed as soon as possible. A number of countries have yet to join the Organisation and should do so without delay. And finally, the Technical Secretariat must keep pace with new technological challenges and scientific advances to maintain the Convention's security relevance.

While it is too early to evaluate these changes and identify their implications for the Secretariat, it is worth noting that these priorities are related to the technical dimension. The new Director-General should be encouraged to tend to the important political/cultural dimension of the Secretariat.

The first Review Conference and beyond

The individuals present throughout the gestation and birth of the Secretariat developed a unique shared culture. As the OPCW grew, the degree of competence of the new staff was often traded off in political bargains, game playing spread distrust, and the politicization of the verification process poisoned the original culture through disaffection, inaction and bureaucracy. The image of the Secretariat as perceived by capitals was that the OPCW was just 'another UN organization'—a far cry from its original ideals and one that led to disillusionment and disappointment among many in the Secretariat.

Today, few things are as they were when the OPCW was first envisioned. Security threats, the structure of the chemical industry and verification techniques have all changed, and novel toxic chemicals or so-called 'non-lethal' agents pose new threats. Universality, export controls, innovative and safer verification techniques, the implementation of the general purpose criterion, as well as managerial skills and reforms of the administrative system loom large on the agenda of the first Review Conference. The Review Conference offers an opportunity to take stock of how the OPCW can meet these internal and external challenges and remain relevant in our changing world.

Successful responses cannot come from technical solutions alone but by accepting that the technical and political/cultural dimensions are so interlinked that these two distinct, independent elements are like a Möbius strip—where it is impossible to see where one ends and the other begins. Only through the mutual reinforcement of both dimensions will it be possible for the OPCW Secretariat to move forward in a way that couples future developments with the full strategic intent of the CWC.

Notes

1. The 23 September 1989 Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and the USSR.
2. *Statement by the Director-General to the Conference of the States Parties at its Third Session*, OPCW document C-III/DG.12, 16 November 1998. Official documents from the Conference of the States Parties are available on the OPCW web site. Go to <http://www.opcw.org/html/global/docs_frameset.html> and select the relevant session.
3. Data as 2 December 2002. See <<http://www.opcw.org/ib>>.
4. Opening Statement of the Director-General at the Sixth Session of the Conference of the States Parties, May 2001.
5. *Statement by the Director-General at the Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties*, OPCW document C-SS-1/DG.7 of 21 April 2002. Documents from the First Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties are available on the OPCW web site. Go to <http://www.opcw.org/html/global/docs_frameset.html>, click on 'C Series', and then on 'CSS1' on the top of the page.

