

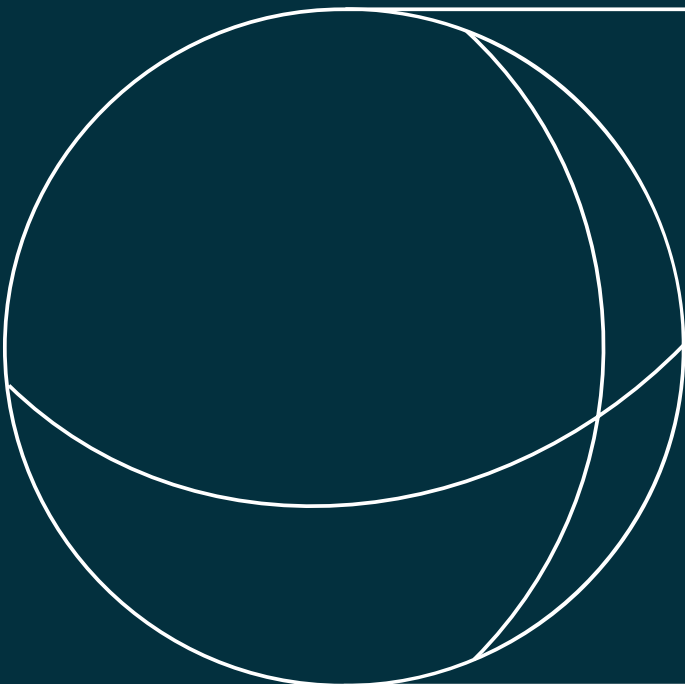
research report

Between Stability and Stagnation:

The Performance and Openness of International Organisations in a Changing Global Order

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Abstract

This report presents descriptive evidence on recent developments in the effectiveness and openness of international organisations between 1980 and 2023. Building on updated versions of two core datasets – the PIO dataset on output performance and the Transaccess dataset on non-state access – it provides comparative evidence on whether global governance has experienced stagnation or decline amid rising geopolitical tensions and autocratisation. The analysis shows that decision-making performance has remained relatively stable, with modest recovery following pandemic-related disruptions, while institutional openness has largely stagnated since 2010. These findings suggest that earlier momentum toward greater democratic participation in global governance has levelled off but has not regressed. At the same time, the analysis reveals no apparent trade-off between institutional effectiveness and inclusiveness: both dimensions appear to be shaped by the democratic composition of member states. Overall, the report finds that multilateral institutions remain institutionally robust, maintaining stable outputs and participatory rules despite growing political pressures.

Citation Recommendation

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Introduction

Multilateralism is under pressure. Over the last decade, international institutions have navigated an increasingly hostile environment driven by populist challenges to cooperation and democratic erosion within member states. External forces compound these challenges, as geopolitical rivalries, economic disruptions, and transnational crises test institutional resilience. Critics claim that multilateralism has failed to deliver a viable solution to ongoing crises: a failure driven in part by great power struggles – which paralyse international negotiations – and a growing tide of nationalism and autocratisation that challenges liberal democratic norms. In the face of these daunting struggles, the ENSURED project investigates how the European Union (EU) can defend and transform global governance to make it, among other things, more effective and democratic.

The purpose of this report is to build an up-to-date knowledge base on the effectiveness and democracy of international institutions.

An important precondition for this investigation is a solid basis of empirical evidence on how these features have evolved in recent years.

Although effectiveness and democracy have long been central themes of International Relations (IR) scholarship, most reliable datasets end around 2010. This is a major limitation: they predate many events associated with the ongoing crises affecting multilateralism, including Brexit (2016), the first Trump

administration (2017–2021), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), and the wars in Ukraine (2014–present) and the Middle East (2023–present). This temporal gap makes it difficult to systematically assess how recent pressures have impacted the effectiveness and democracy of global institutions. The purpose of this report is to build an up-to-date knowledge base on the effectiveness and democracy of international institutions, complementing and aiding other ENSURED scholarship in five distinct issue areas. We ask whether there is evidence of a broader shift in the effectiveness and democratic character of international institutions beyond individual cases or specific issue areas. Furthermore, we assess whether changes in these two institutional features are interrelated, or whether they may be influenced by other factors like domestic autocratisation (Debre and Sommerer 2025), the level of institutional authority (Hooghe et al. 2017), or the scope of an organisation's mandates (Hooghe et al. 2019).

This report presents an analysis based on the update of two core datasets. The first sample, the Performance of International Organisations (PIO) dataset, represents the most extensive study available on “policy output performance,” or the ability of an international organisation (IO) to develop rules, norms, and policies (Sommerer et al. 2022). Such organisational outputs are a necessary first step to achieve *effectiveness* in global governance, which is an IO's ability to achieve the goals for which it was established and to successfully address policy challenges (e.g., Sommerer and Liese 2024). The original dataset covers 30 multilateral institutions between 1980 and 2015: we updated this dataset to the year 2023 and extended it to a sample of 35 IOs.

The second sample, the Transaccess dataset, captures non-state access to 50 IOs between 1950 and 2010 (Tallberg et al. 2014; Sommerer and Tallberg 2016). Access is understood as formal privileges to participate in decision-making and other governance functions and enables a variety of non-state actors – ranging from scientific experts and professional organisations to business associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and advocacy groups – to observe, address, or even vote in interstate decision-making. Allowing these actors to participate in IO decision-making is seen as a prominent way to advance the *democratic character* of international institutions (Sommerer and Liese 2024). For this analysis, we updated the Transaccess dataset to the year 2023 for a sample of 34 IOs.

This report explores how IOs have evolved in terms of both output performance (PIO dataset) and openness (Transaccess dataset) since 1980, focusing on the recent period from 2010 to 2023. We find that while output performance saw a slight increase in recent years, formal participatory arrangements for non-state actors have largely stagnated since 2010. We then examine whether a trade-off exists between effectiveness and democratic legitimacy, finding only limited support for such a relationship. We also find that the type of domestic regime within member states influences both institutional performance and openness at the international level. However, despite growing autocratisation, there is no clear evidence of a democratic rollback within global governance, although the expansion of participatory arrangements has slowed down.

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Structured around these two expanded datasets, this report first assesses recent trends in IO output performance, exploring whether and how the ongoing endogenous and exogenous challenges facing multilateralism have affected IO's decision-making capacity. Then, we plot and analyse changes in non-state access to IOs, updating existing evidence on changes in the democratic nature of international institutions. Finally, we provide a comparative analysis of these two institutional features over time and offer up additional factors, including domestic regime type, institutional autonomy, and policy scope, to explain the observed pattern.

Effectiveness and IO Output Performance, 1980-2023

Effective global governance refers to whether an institution or regime achieves the goals for which it was established (Young 1999; Sommerer et al. 2022). However, effectiveness is difficult to measure because IOs' goals may be ambiguous or not *a priori* defined (Underdal 1992). Scholars often circumvent these roadblocks by discussing effectiveness in terms of "output performance," or the degree to which international institutions can take decisions on crucial global problems (Tallberg et al. 2016a; Sommerer et al. 2022). Output performance is measured by looking at what an IO produces – typically decisions. Outputs are a necessary first step in establishing whether international institutions reach their goals, e.g., ending wars, reducing poverty, and fighting environmental pollution. Also, output is largely within an IO's control and is easier to measure and compare across organisations than alternative conceptualisations of performance.

Still, outputs alone may prove insufficient as an indicator of IO effectiveness, as policy outputs may be inadequate or fall short of the actor's ambition.

Outputs are a necessary first step in establishing whether international institutions reach their goals.

The volume of output is a standard measure in studies of domestic legislative performance (Olson and Nonidez 1972; Arter 2006; Damgaard and Jensen 2006). There are also a few studies that assess the policy volume of IOs, including that of the UN General Assembly (Holloway and Tomlinson 1995) and the Security Council (Allen and Yuen 2014). In studies of international courts, the volume of decisions often features as an indicator of their effectiveness (e.g., Alter 2014). Studying the scope and change of decision output may help answer a variety of questions related to IO performance. Have certain organisations become more or less productive over time? If policy volume has changed, can it be explained by organisational reforms, new accessions, or conflicts among member states? Are there similar patterns in outputs across organisations, issue areas, and regions that indicate a trend toward higher or lower performance in global governance?

For a long time, prevailing expectations regarding the productivity of international institutions have varied, ranging from claims of overregulation by the EU (e.g., Majone 2002) to fears of deadlock in the UN Security Council (e.g., Hale et al. 2013). In recent years, multiple crises have altered the overall perception. Endogenous challenges – such as the rise of nationalism and the withdrawal of IO membership by core supporters – and exogenous shocks – including wars and the COVID-19 pandemic – have lowered expectations about what global governance institutions can deliver.

To date, the most comprehensive study on IO policy outputs examined the main decision-making bodies of 30 multilateral institutions between 1980 and 2015 (Sommerer et al. 2022). Unsurprisingly, this study revealed considerable variation in how many decisions organisations adopt. For example, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) only produces a

handful of decisions per year on average, while the EU generates several hundreds. Looking at trends over time, many of the 30 bodies show large fluctuations in the number of decisions from one year to the next. For instance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) saw a striking peak in decisions at the turn of the millennium, while other organisations, such as the African Union (AU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), experienced a long-term upward trend in levels of outputs between 1980 and 2015. In contrast, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the now-terminated North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) presented a long-term downward trend. Taken collectively, however, the 30 IOs maintained a relatively consistent level of decision-making across the decades in question.

The data coverage for that original study ended in 2015. As mentioned, recent years have seen many crises impacting IOs. Did these crises affect IO performance output? Or did the pattern of stable output continue post-2015? To answer these questions, we updated the original dataset to the year 2023, capturing a recent period of political instability, from Brexit and the first Trump election to the global COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Updating the PIO Dataset

Sommerer et al. (2022) constructed the PIO dataset to analyse the output performance of IOs from 1980 to 2015. The organisations were selected through a stratified, random sample from the Correlates of War IGO (COW-IGO) dataset (Pevehouse et al. 2020), adjusted based on data availability in corresponding IO datasets. The sample of 30 IOs was balanced, comprising 15 global and 15 regional IOs. Of these, 15 were narrowly focused on a single task, while the remaining 15 addressed a broad range of policy issues.

For the updated PIO dataset in this report, the sample includes 35 IOs from 1980 to 2023 (see Table A.1), which differs from the original selection. We excluded 12 IOs from the original dataset because their main decision-making bodies publish only joint statements referring to common decisions, but no individual output, making comparability difficult. In addition, we added 17 organisations with individual decision output, pulled from the Measuring International Authority (MIA) dataset (Hooghe et al. 2017). The resulting selection includes 13 regional and 22 global organisations, as well as 10 general-purpose IOs and 25 task-specific ones. Data on important covariates, such as formal authority (Hooghe et al. 2017), policy scope (Hooghe et al. 2019), and member-state regime type (Debre and Sommerer 2025), are available for all 35 organisations.

The PIO dataset captures the output of the main interstate decision-making bodies within IOs.

The data captures the output of the main interstate decision-making bodies within these organisations, such as the Council of the EU or the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS; see Table A.1). According to Sommerer et al. (2022), these bodies constitute the principal locus of authority within an IO, establish its core policy direction,

and set the overarching agenda for other bodies within the respective IOs. They are the closest global equivalent to a domestic legislator, capable of making political commitments that represent the collective will of the organisation. Focusing on these main decision-making bodies enhances the comparability of IOs and avoids the possible double-counting of initiatives originating from lower levels of the decision-making structure.

For the update, we gathered the IO decision data using online archives.¹ The dataset includes a wide range of decision types, such as resolutions, declarations, decisions, and regulations, following the nomenclature stipulated by each IO. IOs typically record decisions in chronological lists, with links to agreement texts. The updated dataset presents the data in two different forms. First, the raw count of IO outputs indicates the absolute number of decisions, with zero meaning an IO has been entirely inactive. This number also gives a precise representation of the changes in an IO's productivity over time. However, for comparisons across organisations, this count is inadequate, as IOs vary widely in their outputs, mandates, and organisational cultures. A comparison of count data would only capture structural differences across IOs.

For this reason, Sommerer et al. (2022) developed an alternative measure of decision-making performance based on the *growth rate* of decision output. Growth rates make otherwise disparate data relatively comparable by adjusting for the initial level of underlying activities (Mitchell 2002), thereby helping to address heterogeneity among IOs. This measure of decision-making performance assumes that positive growth rates are indicative of more smoothly functioning IO machineries, whereas negative growth rates suggest discord and deadlock. For instance, the drop in the World Trade Organization's (WTO) productivity over the past two decades reflects the high level of tumult in the organisation – also illustrated through the lack of progress in the Doha Round negotiations.

The growth-rate indicator comes in two variations, capturing both short-term and long-term performance. The short-term variation compares an IO's output in the year of observation with its output over the three preceding years. This approach captures short-term changes while levelling out extreme events. A constant output yields a score of 100, whereas scores above 100 indicate short-term increases in decision-making productivity. The long-term variation, by contrast, compares an IO's output in the year of observation against the mean output across all preceding years, also using a score of 100 as the baseline. By encompassing the entirety of an IO's history, this version highlights structural shifts in IO decision-making. These two measures are complementary, each shedding light on different dimensions of IO output performance. For example, when an IO recovers from a crisis, only the short-term performance measure may capture this upward trend. Conversely, when an IO's average output exceeds that of previous decades, minor downturns will not result in negative performance scores. Table 1 summarises the key features and changes between the original dataset and the updated dataset used in this report.

¹ Where electronic archives were not available, we followed the procedure from Sommerer et al. (2022).

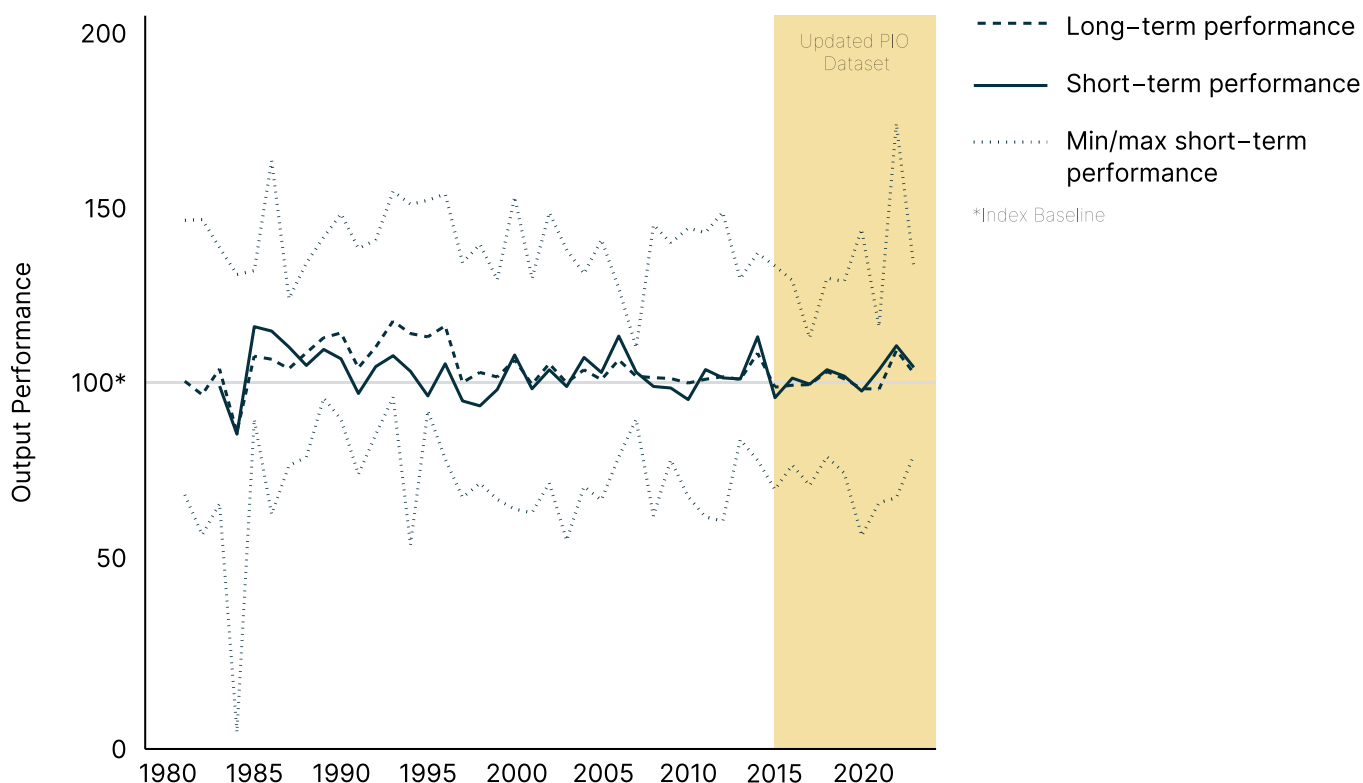
Table 1: Comparison of Original and Updated PIO Dataset

	Original Dataset	Updated Dataset
Coverage period	1980-2015	1980-2023
Number of IOs	30	35
Selection and composition	<u>Stratified random sample from COW-IGO:</u> 15 global / 15 regional 15 task-specific / 15 general-purpose	<u>Revised selection:</u> 12 IOs excluded (no individual decision data) 17 IOs added from MIA sample <u>Final composition:</u> 22 global / 13 regional 25 task-specific / 10 general-purpose
Level of observation	Principal interstate decision-making body	
Types of decisions	Resolutions, declarations, decisions, regulations, and recommendations	
Indicators	1) Raw counts 2) Growth-rate indicators (short-term and long-term)	
Data sources	IO online archives, official decision lists	

Stability Across Variation: Trends in Output Performance, 2015-2023

How has the aggregate output performance of 35 IOs developed since 2015? *Figure 1* displays the pattern for the two above-mentioned performance indicators across the observation period (from 1980 to 2023) for the updated PIO sample. The yellow area indicates the new data from the update. Our analysis reproduces the pattern from Sommerer et al. (2022): there was no significant shift in decision-making productivity after 2015, as both long-term and short-term performance measures remained within the range of previous years. A closer look, however, reveals two deviations from this overall pattern. First, output performance was slightly below the benchmark score of 100 in 2015 and 2016, as well as in 2020 and 2021. While the former years cannot easily be linked to exogenous shocks, the latter can clearly be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted decision-making routines drastically and forced IO decision-making bodies to turn to new forms of communications, such as virtual and hybrid meetings. Given the widespread perception of deep gridlock in global governance, it is remarkable that these dips are not more pronounced. Thus, we find no indication that the decision-making machinery in global governance has been seriously hampered. Second, and in contrast, there is an upward trend at the end of our observation period, with higher long-term and short-term performance in 2022 and 2023. This suggests that multilateral institutions may be responding to ongoing crises and pressure by increasing their productivity.

Figure 1: Output Performance for 35 IOs, 1980-2023



Declining Output Performance

While IO decision-making appears relatively stable in aggregate, earlier studies point to a pattern of significant variations in output performance between organisations. To examine this using the updated data, the next stage of our analysis outlines different trends in IO decision-making. We begin by presenting organisations that have shown a downward trend during the last decade. *Figure 2* plots the raw decision count and both performance indices for six selected organisations, listed in alphabetical order.

The first example shows the African Union's (AU) output performance between 1980 and 2023. The transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the AU in 2002 led to an initial uptick in decision output for both short-term and long-term performance measures. After a few years of growth, however, the two indicators began to diverge. This is due to a plateau effect in short-term performance: once a higher level of output is sustained for several consecutive years, this measure no longer indicates high performance, as intended in its design. Following a peak in output productivity in 2010, we observe a downward trend throughout the remaining observation period (Söderbaum 2016; Agné and Söderbaum 2022). This development culminated in performance scores in 2020 that were comparable with those recorded in the late 1990s. This example shows that the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic affected IOs with weaker administrative capacity and resources – such as the AU – more severely than others (Debre and Dijkstra 2021).

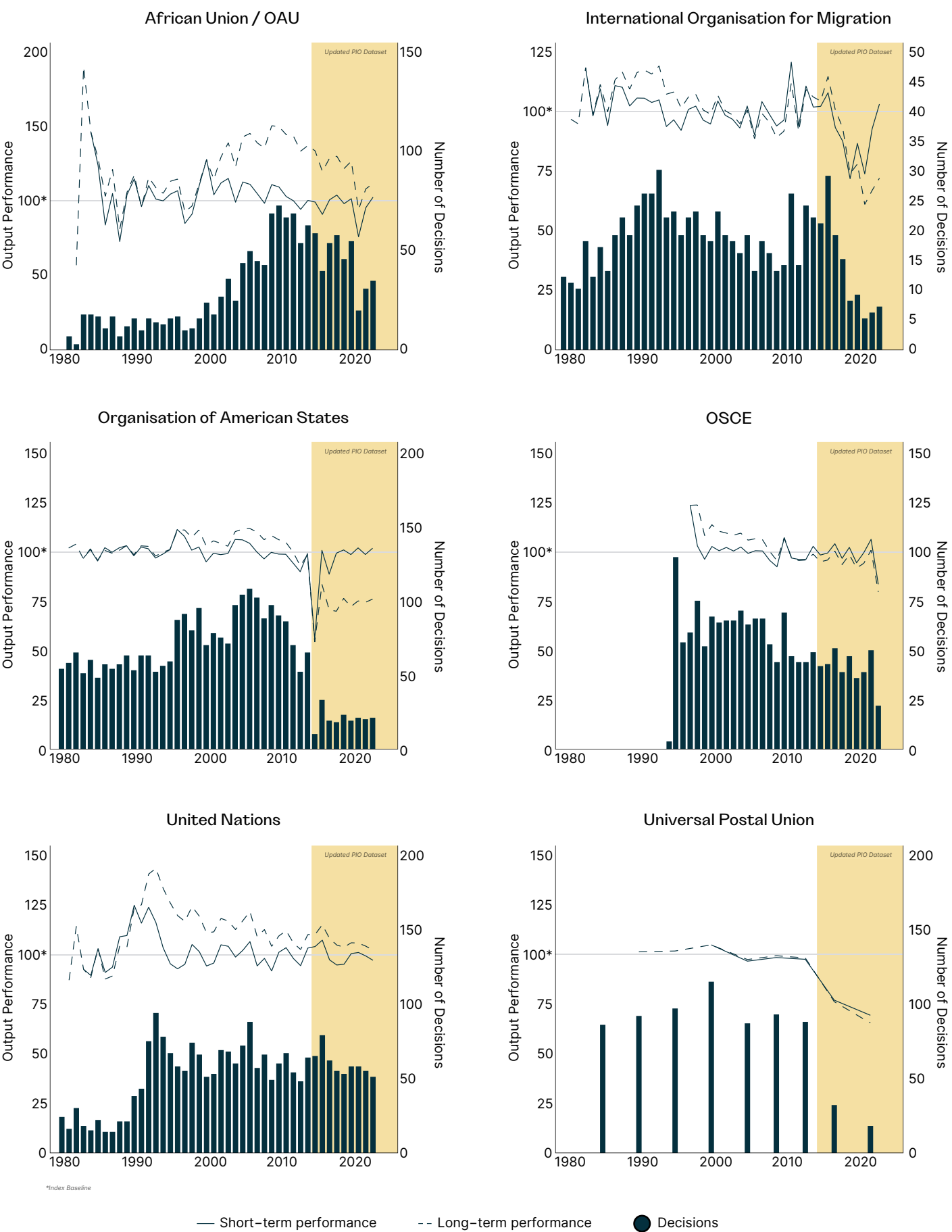
Our second example of a downward trend in output performance is the International Organization for Migration (IOM). After several fluctuations in decision-making productivity during the first two-and-a-half decades of our observation period, we note a sharp decline in the number of adopted decisions after 2016. Since 2021, IOM's average annual output has been roughly half the level recorded in the 1980s. We observe an almost identical pattern for the third case, the Organization of American States (OAS), in *Figure 2*. In 2015, OAS's decision-making capacity fell to almost zero: the organisation has barely recovered since. The performance measures suggest that this trend had already begun in the mid-2000s, when regional tensions started to grow, fuelled by regime changes and later by the first term of the Trump administration (Briceño-Ruiz 2024).

The fourth organisation, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), also experienced a downward trend in output performance starting in 2008, which continued steadily for the rest of our observation period. The rise of (semi-)autocratic rule in several member states, escalating conflicts with Russia, and its internal budget crisis provide a textbook case of dwindling performance due to endogenous challenges (Schuette and Dijkstra 2023). Much has been written on the gridlock within our fifth example, the UN and its Security Council. Our data reveals several well-documented waves of fluctuation in its decision-making performance since the turn of the millennium (Hale et al. 2013; Allen and Yuen 2014). The data does not, however, capture the distinction between major conflicts involving UNSC permanent members and minor conflicts among less powerful UN member states. Even with this caveat, the effect of the crisis in recent years is less pronounced than for other IOs. However, there are signs of a downward trend emerging since 2020. A similar pattern is visible across the UN system, such as in the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as well as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The Universal Postal Union (UPU), the sixth organisation in *Figure 2*, provides strong evidence that the political crisis of multilateral governance has deepened. The UPU's decision output almost came to a standstill after 2015, reflecting a significant crisis triggered by the intensifying struggle between the United States (US) and China, and the US withdrawal under the first Trump administration (von Borzykowski and Vabulas 2025).

These six organisations provide clear evidence of a downward trend in multilateral decision-making. While instances of complete breakdown are rare, most instances of weaker performance remain within the historical margin of fluctuation. However, our data may still underestimate the scale and significance of the development to come. Ongoing autocratisation in IO member states (Debre and Sommerer 2025) may drive even deeper polarisation that threatens to disrupt decision-making routines, while the looming budget crisis – now starting to hit a growing number of IOs (Patz 2025) – could seriously undermine the organisational capacity required to sustain intergovernmental decision-making.

Figure 2: Six Examples of Declining Output Performance of IOs, 1980-2023



Increasing Output Performance

Still, the overall pattern for the full sample of 35 IOs is one of stability. As seen in *Figure 1*, our data suggests that some organisations may have improved their output performance in recent years. In *Figure 3*, we identify a selection of six organisations for which growing decision-making productivity has been recorded.

The EU, our first example, stands out as the IO with by far the largest decision output. The previous PIO data illustrated some of the well-documented historical pathways of European integration, showing the highest levels during the 1980s and several subsequent cycles of growth and decline in productivity (Alesina et al. 2005). Interestingly, our update reveals an unexpected pattern for the years since 2015. Although there was an initial decline following an output peak in 2014, the EU's output showed a modest yet steady growth up to 2023 – defying common expectations of institutional gridlock in the European decision-making machinery. While this data does not account for the ambition or direction of the decision output, our analysis nonetheless suggests functioning routines and responsiveness to mounting challenges like Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Scholarship on the EU has explained this resilience through the emergence of new modes of policymaking in times of multiple crises (Rhinard 2022).

The EU's output has seen a modest yet steady growth – defying common expectations of institutional gridlock.

Our second example, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) – an environmental IO established after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 – initially exhibited the typical pattern of a new organisation: its output performance grew continuously from the mid-1990s onward. Although this trajectory was briefly interrupted by a few years of declining performance, our analysis finds high levels of output in recent years, particularly between 2018 and 2022. Scholars have linked this renewed growth to the GEF's expanding role in capacity-building, triggered by the Paris Agreement (Khan et al. 2021).

Our third organisation, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), represents another example of a global, task-specific IO that has exhibited an upward performance trend since 2015. The IAEA reached its highest level of output performance following the end of the Cold War, which is unsurprising given its central role in nuclear energy management (Simpson 1994). Unlike other UN agencies in *Figure 2*, the pattern of IAEA output performance showed signs of increasing decision-making capacity, demonstrating its relevance in crises in North Korea, Iran, and Russia (e.g., Duliba 2023; Robinson 2021).

The fourth example, the OECD, has exhibited considerable volatility in its decision-making output since the start of the original observation period. Nevertheless, our analysis identifies a sustained upward trend in the OECD's decision-making performance that already started in the mid-2000s and is still ongoing. Unlike most other formal IOs, the OECD has expanded its membership in recent years, which may motivate greater decision output (Davis 2023).

Fifth, the World Health Organization (WHO) and its Assembly produced a relatively stable number of decisions during the first decades of the observation period, resulting in only negligible differences between short-term and long-term decision-making performance. From 2000 onward, however, the WHO Assembly underperformed for several years relative to both its historical and recent average, as reflected in both performance measures. While the measure for short-term performance recovered relatively quickly – the number of decisions doubled between 2000 and 2003 – long-term performance took longer to rebound, reflecting the methodological distinctions between the two measures. The aftermath of the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak seemingly boosted WHO output, although it continued to vary considerably (Kreuder-Sonnen 2019). In the most recent years covered by our update, both long-term and short-term performance show an upward trend, which is largely attributable to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, even amid great power conflict, decision-making in

the WHO's main intergovernmental body remained functional. Whether the resulting output was adequate to solve emerging problems in global health, however, is not captured by our data.

Decision output varies across organisations, but in aggregate, it is relatively stable over time.

Our final example, the WTO, constitutes an unexpected case among the IOs: it has exhibited at least modestly positive output performance in recent years, despite its widespread association with institutional paralysis and low effectiveness since the mid-2000s (Parizek and Weinhardt 2025). The number of adopted decisions has remained low since the late 1990s, after reaching near rock bottom following the 1999 WTO protests (also known as the “Battle of Seattle”) and the failure of the Doha Round. While still low in numbers, we observe a light increase in decision output around 2020. It remains uncertain whether this modest growth is sufficient to counter the doomsday views of the organisation, especially in light of more recent developments in global trade politics not captured by our data.

Takeaways on Output Performance

Overall, the data from the updated PIO dataset for 2015–2023 reaffirms two main observations from previous scholarship: (1) decision output varies across organisations, but in aggregate, (2) it is relatively stable over time. This shows that intergovernmental decision-making follows routines that are not easily disturbed by endogenous and exogenous crises. Interestingly, the expected downturn in IO performance has not materialised – at least not up to 2023. For many IOs, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a modest decline in decision-making, yet we observe clear signs of post-pandemic recovery. Some IOs even display a moderately upward trend in their short-term and long-term output performance. However, *Figure 2* also highlighted several prominent cases in which the expected scenario of declining decision-making capacity has already become reality. It remains to be seen whether these organisations are the forerunners of a broader pattern in global governance.

Figure 3: Six Examples of Increasing Output Performance of IOs, 1980-2023



Democracy and IO Openness, 1980-2023

The participation of non-state actors has figured prominently in debates on the democratic features of global governance (Sommerer and Liese 2024; Macdonald 2008). There is broad consensus that democratic international institutions should include *all* stakeholders and not merely member government representatives (Tallberg et al. 2013). Non-state actors (NSAs) – such as NGOs, philanthropic foundations, scientific experts, and multinational corporations – can function as a “transmission belt” between citizens and the international arena (Steffek, Kissling, and Nanz 2008). The opening up of IOs is commonly understood as the formalisation of privileges enabling transnational NSAs to participate in decision-making and other governance functions. NSA involvement includes observing, addressing, or even voting in interstate decision-making (Tallberg et al. 2013; Tallberg et al. 2014).

This opening up is not a recent phenomenon, dating back to the early post-World War II international order and beyond (Charnovitz 1996). However, between 1990 and 2010, IOs increasingly involved NSAs to a larger degree (Tallberg et al. 2014; Steffek, Kissling, and Nanz 2008). Global multilateral arenas like the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (O’Brien et al. 2000; Schroeder and Lovell 2012), but also regional organisations such as the EU (Kohler-Koch and Quittkat 2013), have all been well-documented in their inclusion of actors beyond the state. The most comprehensive

How have the democratic features of international institutions evolved amid growing autocratisation and multiple crises?

comparative study of non-state inclusion to date is based on the Transaccess dataset and revealed an increase in formal participation opportunities across global regions and issue areas (Tallberg et al. 2013). Drawing on a sample of 50 IOs, it found that by 2010, around 70 percent of all organisational bodies provided some form of non-state access (Tallberg et al. 2013), with only about 10 percent of organisations without any formal access rules.

How has this democratic feature of international institutions evolved in recent years amid growing autocratisation and multiple global and regional crises? Have participatory arrangements remained robust – or even expanded – or are they in decline? There is some indication that the period of increasing access ended around 2010. In many autocratic states, “political pushback against the international engagement of civil society actors has taken place and some states have attempted to erode formal arrangements” (Dupuy et al. 2021; Glasius, Schalk, and De Lange 2020; Nandyatama and Grzywacz 2025). However, there is no systematic evidence as to whether these domestic restrictions have translated into reduced non-state access at the IO level, as the Transaccess dataset ended in 2010. To answer these questions, we updated the data to cover the period up to 2023.

Updating the Transaccess Dataset

To date, the most comprehensive study on non-state access to IOs examined the formal rules governing participation in decision-making and other governance functions across 50 IOs from 1950 to 2010 (Tallberg et al. 2014; Sommerer and Tallberg 2017). This widely used dataset contains information on the level of openness of these IOs to NSAs over time, allowing scholars to map this phenomenon and its variation across different periods, issue areas, and world regions. Our updated sample includes 34 organisations (see Table A.1), 17 of which have a regional focus.² We only updated information on those IOs that are also covered by other relevant datasets (Hooghe et al. 2017; Hooghe et al. 2019; Debre and Sommerer 2025; Sommerer et al. 2022). While the original dataset covered the period from 1950 to 2010, this report extends the data by an additional thirteen years, up to 2023.³ Data on formal rules is captured at the level of organisational bodies and types of IO bodies, ranging from summits and ministerial councils to committees, secretariats, and courts. The original dataset primarily drew from official documents such as treaties, protocols, rules of procedure, policy documents, and staff guidelines, complemented with additional data from annual reports and meeting documents. We use the same type of sources for the update.⁴

NSA access is measured across four dimensions. The *depth* of access captures the level of involvement offered to NSAs through institutional rules, ranging from passive observation to full member status. The *range* of access captures the breadth of eligible groups and individuals entitled to participate in IO decision-making: whether access applies to everyone or merely to a carefully selected set of experts has a large impact on an IO's accessibility. *Permanence* and *codification* of access mainly shape the regularity and revocability of these provisions.

To assess the overall degree of NSA access to IOs, Tallberg et al. (2013) developed a composite index combining all four dimensions. This index allows for a comparative and systematic assessment of institutional openness. It captures the average level of openness by giving equal weight to *depth* and *range*, while using *permanence* and *codification* as weighting factors. The index can be calculated both for individual IO bodies and for the entire organisation (see Sommerer and Tallberg 2017). Table 2 summarises the key elements of the Transaccess dataset and the changes introduced in the updated version.

2 Due to the differing origins and research strategies of the two datasets used in this report, there is only a partial overlap between the two samples (n=22).

3 In the following analysis, we only use data from 1980 to 2023.

4 For a more detailed description of sampling and data collection, see Sommerer and Tallberg (2017).

Table 2: Comparison of Original and Updated Transaccess Dataset

	Original Dataset	Updated Dataset
Coverage period	1950–2010	1950–2023
Number of IOs	50	34
Selection and composition	<u>Stratified random sample from COW-IGO:</u> 15 global / 35 regional 33 task-specific / 17 general purpose	<u>Revised selection:</u> 16 IOs excluded (not part of MIA sample) <u>Final composition:</u> 17 global / 17 regional 23 task-specific / 11 general-purpose
Level of observation	Formal rules at IO body level (summits, councils, committees, secretariats, and courts)	
Performance measures	Four dimensions (depth, range, permanence, and codification) combined into composite openness index	
Data sources	Treaties, protocols, rules of procedure, and staff guidelines; complemented by reports and meeting documents	

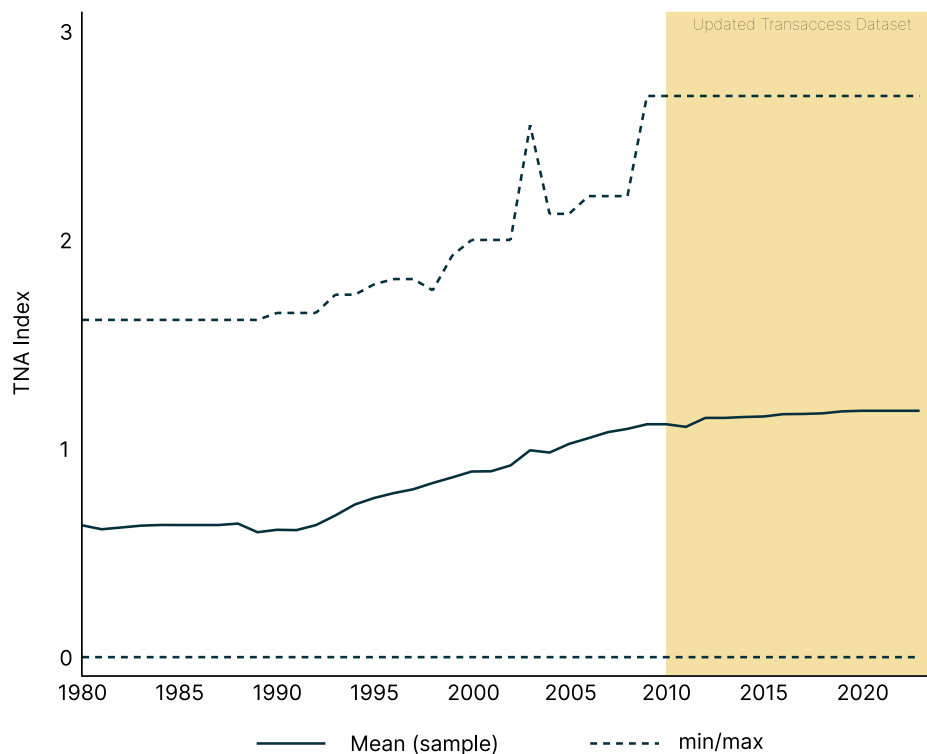
Persistent Stability: Trends in Non-State Access, 2010-2023

The updated Transaccess dataset reveals that the rapid expansion of non-state access seen from 1990 to 2010 has slowed significantly. Since 2010, non-state access has remained institutionally stable, with access levels remaining virtually unchanged. *Figure 4* plots the mean index score for the sample of 34 IOs. From 2010 onward, we observe a stagnation in the average openness toward NSAs (with the yellow area indicating the updated data post-2010). By 2023, the level of access granted to these actors is almost identical to that recorded in 2009.

The persistence of formal access provisions can be interpreted as a sign of robustness.

This development mirrors the pattern of the 1980s, suggesting that the period between 1990 and 2010 may have been a historical exception. It also highlights that formal institutional rules do not change easily. However, this inertia of formal, international rules can also be interpreted as good news for democratic global governance: the difficulty of changing the institutional design holds in all directions. This is to say, both expanding and narrowing non-state access is difficult to do. In this sense, the persistence of formal access provisions can be interpreted as a sign of robustness, preserving the democratic standards achieved during earlier decades. The dotted lines in *Figure 4* represent the variation of institutional openness within the sample, demonstrating (1) that even the most open IO – the International Criminal Court – has not changed its access rules and (2) that some IOs, like the Arab Maghreb Union, do still not provide any access to the selected bodies.

Figure 4: Transnational Access for 34 IOs, 1980-2023



Regional and Global Trends in IO Openness

When zooming in on how individual IOs fared regarding non-state access, we see a rather uniform pattern of rule stability emerge. *Figure 5* illustrates this for eight regional IOs (a selection of eight global IOs will follow later in this chapter). The selection includes organisations from all world regions, each with different levels of access. The OAS, the EU, the AU, and the Andean Community display scores above the sample mean, while ASEAN, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation are largely inaccessible to non-state actors.

What these eight organisations have in common is clear: they have experienced almost no change in non-state access since 2010, with only some minor increases for CARICOM and the EU. One notable exception is the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which significantly expanded its formal access during the early 2010s, with its index score almost doubling within a short period. In light of the broader trend of rule stability, this change can be understood as a delayed adaptation to the earlier wave of institutional opening seen in other organisations (Sommerer and Tallberg 2019).

Figure 6 presents similar data for eight global IOs representing a variety of issue areas. Regardless of each organisation's level of openness in 2010, we find almost no change in formal access rules thereafter. By contrast, almost all global IOs experienced considerable institutional opening after the end of the Cold War. That being said, we have noted some minor instances of increasing openness in select global organisations since 2010, notably within the World Bank, the WHO, and the OSCE.

Figure 5: Transnational Access for Selected Regional IOs, 1980-2023

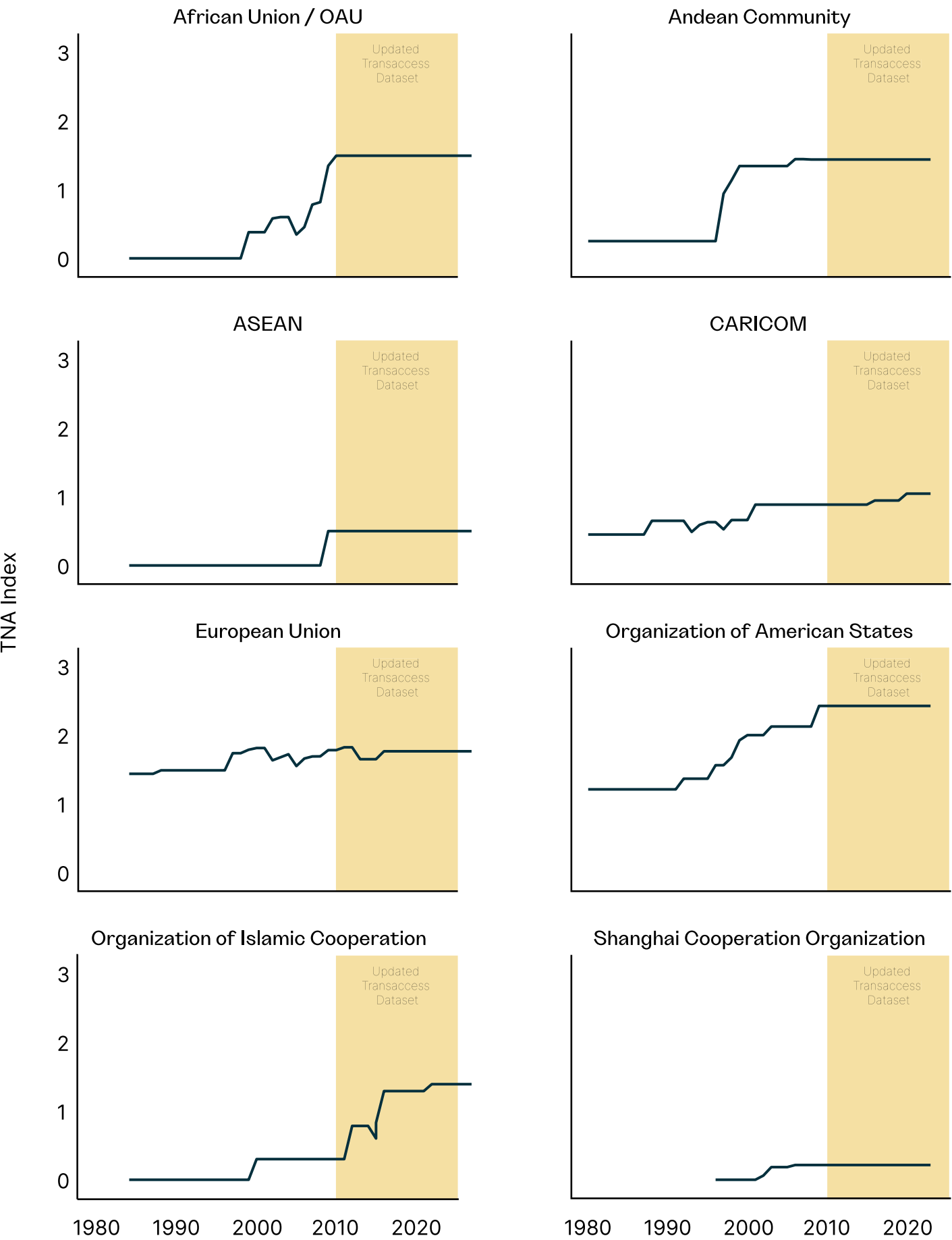


Figure 6: Transnational Access for Selected Global IOs, 1980-2023



Non-State Access in IO Decision-Making Bodies

Figure 7 shows the levels of non-state access for six selected IO bodies between 2010 and 2023: the CARICOM Summit, the EU Commission, the IWC's Scientific Committee, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the OIC Summit, and the WHO Assembly. The CARICOM Conference of Heads of Government expanded its non-state access in 2016 and 2019 by allowing affiliated institutions and private-sector organisations to participate (phrased in two extensions of existing rules). However, both provisions held that participation was conditional on invitation. Although it looked generous on paper, this extension was therefore relatively weak in practice.⁵

In 2012, citizen access to the European Commission was expanded through the implementation of the first steps of the European Citizens' Initiative; this new instrument was broad and inclusive, though relatively shallow.⁶ In our third IO body, the IWC Scientific Committee, a revision of its rules of procedure extended a long-established participatory arrangement to include accredited observers, allowing for more active participation during committee meetings.⁷ The fourth body, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, was able to expand access to its meetings by creating focal points of engagement in 2019, despite facing intense pressure from democratically backsliding member countries for many years.⁸

The fifth case, the OIC, stands out as the IO with the most comprehensive expansion of non-state access. Its institutional reforms affected several of its bodies, including its Summit, which serves as the organisation's highest decision-making body. In 2012, the OIC established a new arrangement that allows humanitarian NGOs from its member states to orchestrate consultative meetings in parallel to the Summit.⁹ Finally, the WHO Assembly adopted new rules of procedure in 2019, allowing NGOs with official ties to the WHO to participate and make statements on invitation. These new rules codified existing arrangements in a more robust format.¹⁰

Takeaways on IO Openness

Overall, our analysis of changes in formal non-state access to IOs after 2010 reveals a pattern of stagnation. Although several IOs have taken minor steps toward greater inclusion of private stakeholders, the scope and depth of these changes are limited and often include conditional access provisions that member states can veto.

5 CARICOM 2016: Rules of Procedure, Rule 13 and CARICOM 2019: Memorandum between CARICOM and CPSO.

6 EU 2012: Regulation Citizen's Initiative – Article 10b.

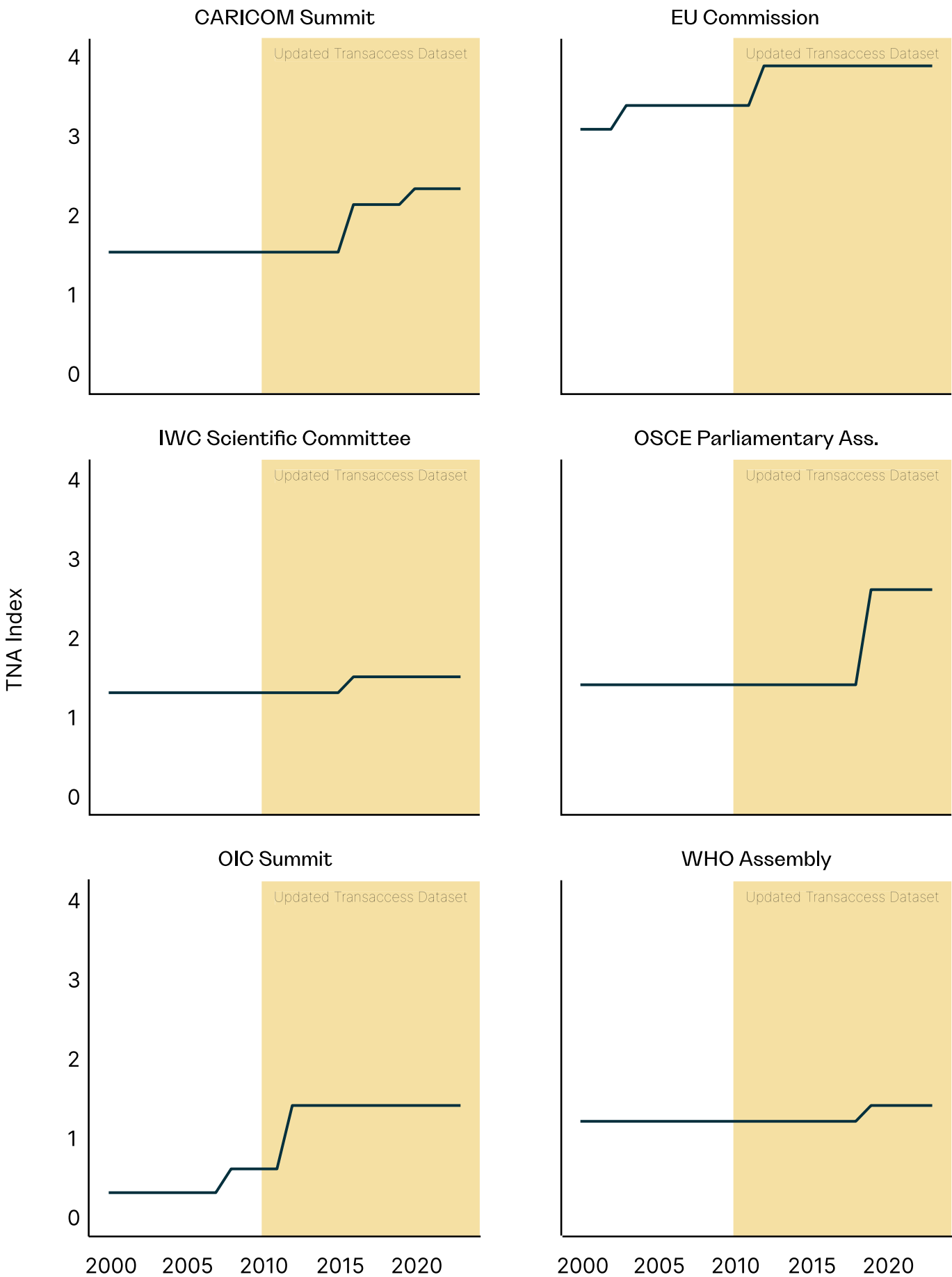
7 IWC 2016: Report of the 66th Annual Meeting, 19.2.5: Development of the Scientific Committee's Rules of Procedure).

8 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly 2019: Resolution on the Role of Civil Society – Individuals and Non-Governmental Organizations – in Realizing the Aims and Aspirations of the OSCE.

9 OIC 2012: Rules for Granting OIC Consultative Status to Humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations.

10 WHO 2019: Rules of Procedure of the World Health Assembly, rule 20 and 48.

Figure 7: Change in Non-State Access in Six Selected IO Bodies, 2000-2023



Explaining Trends in Openness and Output Performance

In the fourth section of this report, we analyse two relationships: we explore (1) the relationship between changes in IO output performance and non-state access and (2) the relationship between these two features of global governance taken together, and member state regime type. Are the two observed trends of stable output performance and stagnating institutional openness related? Is there a trade-off between effectiveness and democratic features in global governance? Has the global wave of autocratisation already impacted the productivity and inclusiveness of multilateral institutions?

Mutual Impact?: IO Output Performance vs. Openness

To compare the relationship between effectiveness and democracy within global governance (and vice versa), we first examine the average output performance of IOs, split into two different groups: those with low non-state access and those with high access.¹¹ The upper panel of *Figure 8* presents this data. Between 2015 and 2023, IOs that are less open to NSAs display higher index scores for decision-making performance. This pattern is not new: previous research has shown that even extensive non-state access alone does not improve IO performance. However, positive effects are more likely when greater access is combined with other design features, such as majority voting (Sommerer et al. 2022). The notable exceptions to this trend are the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, where lower NSA access was linked with decreased output performance. This may reflect either the positive role of stakeholder involvement in maintaining routine processes during crises, or the fact that lower levels of non-state access often go hand-in-hand with limited organisational capacity (Tallberg et al. 2014; Liese 2010).

The lower panel in *Figure 8* reverses this perspective, plotting changes in NSA access for IOs with lower and higher output performance scores. We demonstrate that IOs with less output have a slightly higher level of access provisions than those with higher productivity. This difference is likely the result of a process of institutional “catching up” that began around 2005 and culminated in the reforms of organisations like OIC and CARICOM. These latecomers – typically IOs with low organisational capacity and thus lower output performance – took longer to implement participatory norms at the international level (Tallberg et al. 2014; Tallberg et al. 2020).

¹¹ The overlap of the PIO dataset and Transaccess dataset captures 19 IOs. For details, see Table A.1 in the Appendix. The categorisation of IOs into low / high NSA access and output performance is based on the median scores for the period 2000 to 2023.

Figure 8: IO Output Performance and Non-State Access, 2000-2023

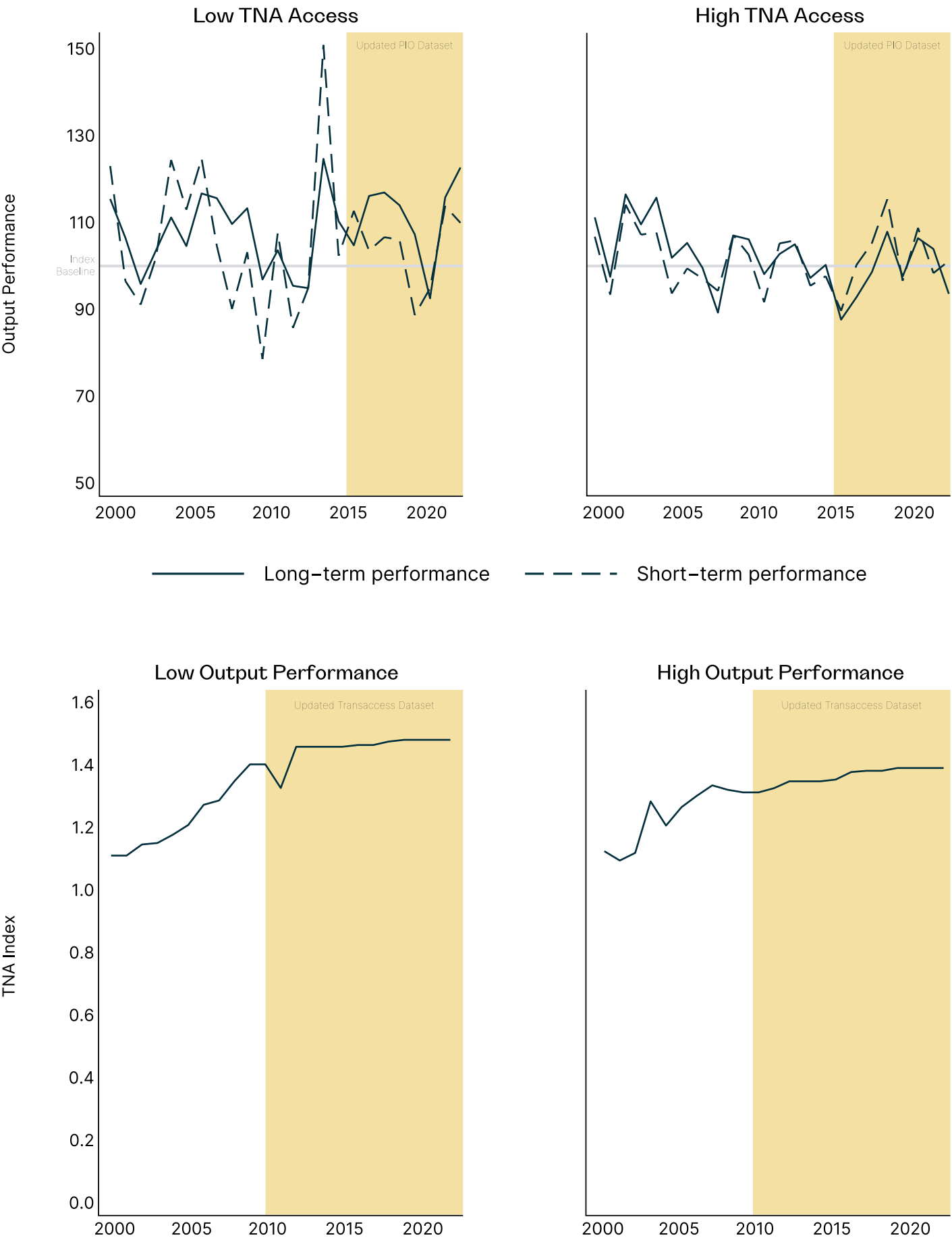
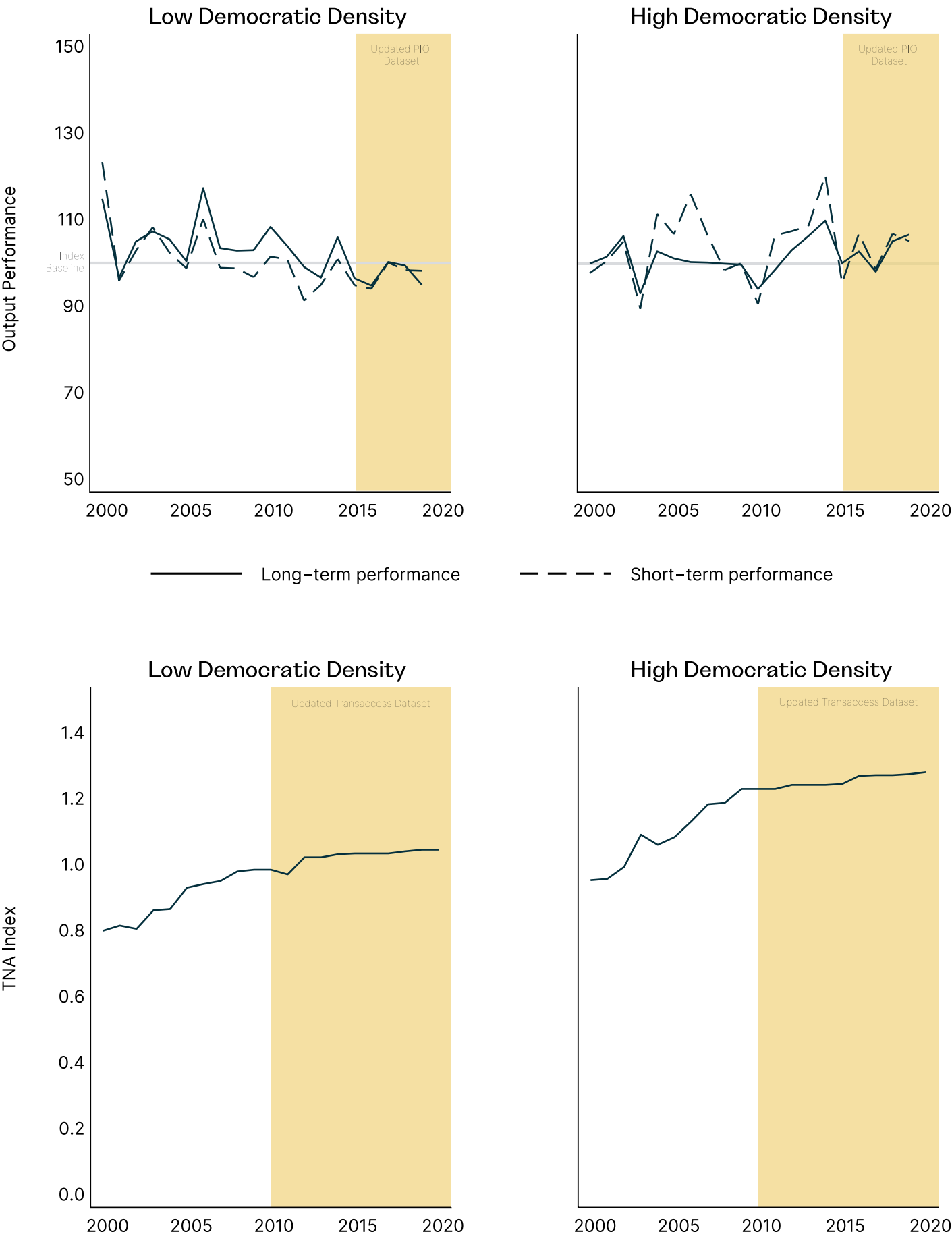


Figure 9: IO Output Performance, Non-State Access, and Domestic Democracy, 2000-2020



Since 2013, however, the expansion of non-state access in IOs with lower output performance has stagnated, whereas organisations with higher levels of performance have slightly increased their participatory arrangements. Overall, the updated datasets provide new evidence for the absence of a trade-off between organisational effectiveness (as measured in output performance) and participatory governance (in terms of NSA access) in recent years.

The Significance of Democratic vs. Autocratic Membership

In the final part of our empirical analysis, we explore whether domestic regime type has any bearing on the development of both IO effectiveness and their democratic character. Democracies and autocracies are known to hold systematically different preferences regarding core IO characteristics. Previous scholarship has shown direct and indirect effects of the democratisation of IO membership – particularly during the third wave of democratisation – on the expansion of non-state participation and performance (Tallberg et al. 2016b; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006; Lall 2017). In recent years, however, we have seen a global wave of autocratisation, driven by recessions within established democracies (Debre and Sommerer 2025; Nord et al. 2025). Despite growing research on this topic, it remains unclear in what ways this autocratic backlash will change, or has already changed, multilateral cooperation (e.g., Debre and Sommerer 2025; Cottiero et al. 2024; Tallberg and Vikberg 2025).

IOs with weaker democratic membership exhibit a downward trend in both long-term and short-term performance.

The upper panel of *Figure 9* shows the development of output performance for IOs with both low and high democratic density.¹² IOs with weaker democratic membership exhibit a downward trend in both long-term and short-term performance since 2010 – a pattern that would have been difficult to detect without the updated data. By contrast, IOs with greater democratic density perform better during the same period. As established in previous research, the level of non-state access is significantly higher in IOs dominated by democratic members (Tallberg et al. 2016b). The lower panel in *Figure 9* shows that this trend also holds for the 2010s: IOs with high democratic density see moderate growth in NSA access, while access rates stagnate for those with fewer democratic members.

We conclude our analysis of the relationship between democratic membership, output performance, and non-state access with an examination of four individual organisations: two regional organisations (the EU and the OSCE) and two global organisations (the UN and the WHO). This data is featured in *Figure 10*. Since the early 2000s, the EU has experienced a continuous decline in its democratic membership.

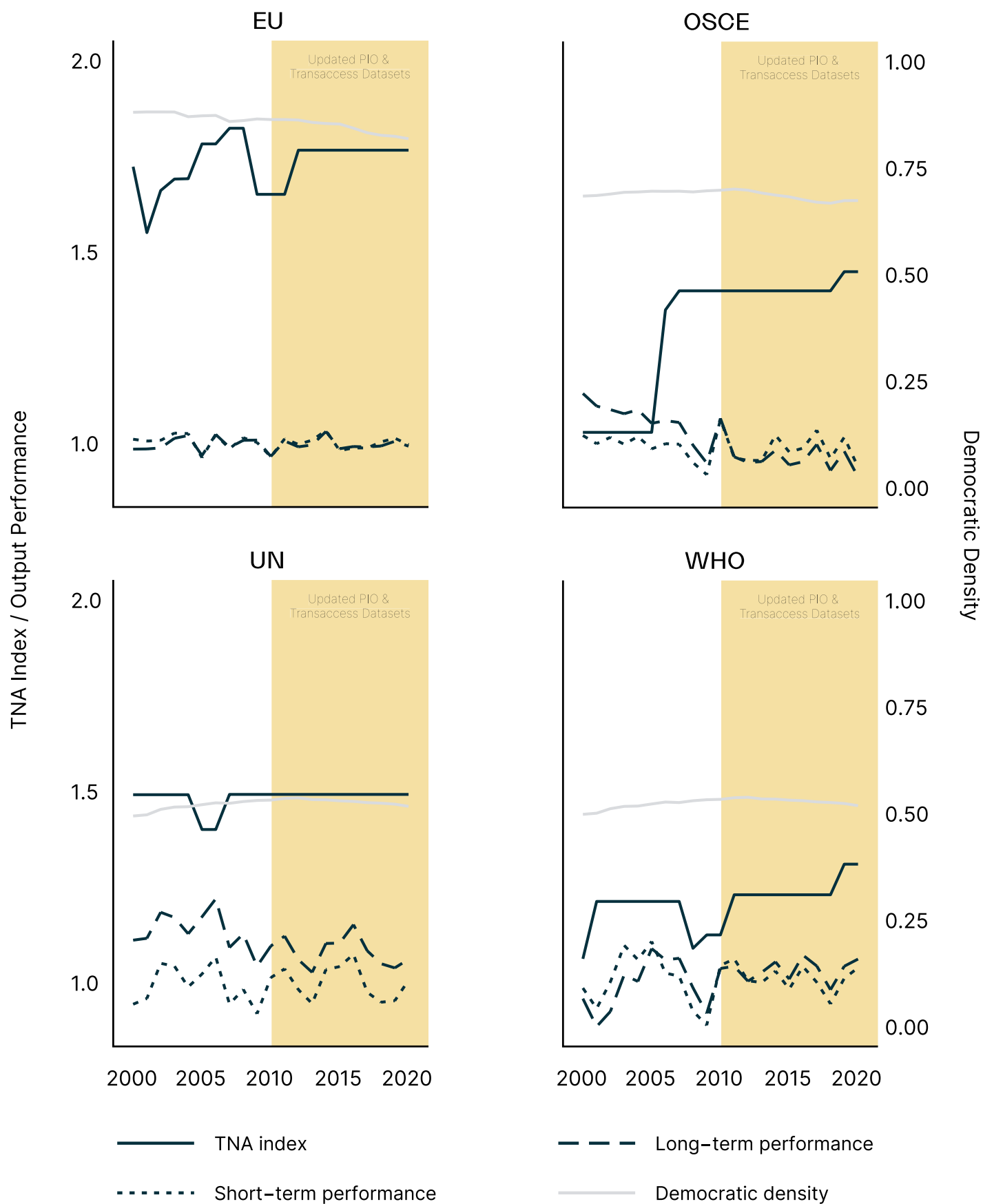
¹² We draw on data on democratic membership of IOs from Debre and Sommerer (2025). This data only covers until 2020. Democratic membership is measured by the average of the V-Dem polyarchy score.

Both output performance and participatory governance are related to the democratic character of IO membership.

Once a club of democracies, the EU has faced democratic backsliding and autocratisation in several member states since 2010, including Hungary, the Slovak Republic, and Poland. So far, however, these developments have not produced the anticipated adverse effects: the EU's level of non-state access and output performance has remained stable, with signs of a slight upward trend. The situation looks different for the OSCE, where democratic regression has been even more pronounced since 2010. As previously discussed, the OSCE's output performance has been in decline since 2010, a result of growing polarisation among democratic and backsliding member states. By contrast, non-state access expanded slightly in 2019. This opening, however, only affected a single organisational body – the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly – in an attempt to safeguard its autonomy and the democratic principles it represents. As exemplified by the UN and the WHO, democratic membership has also been in decline for global IOs since around 2012, although democratic countries still hold a narrow majority (Debre and Sommerer 2025). Output performance scores for both organisations dropped after 2010, followed by a mild upturn for the WHO at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, *Figure 10* also reveals that for some organisations, the growing number of autocracies has not led to a sharp downturn in performance or even gridlock. Moreover, despite autocratisation, the access provisions for non-state actors are stable (UN) or have even expanded (WHO).

Taken together, *Figures 9* and *10* support the established observation that both output performance and participatory governance are related to the democratic character of IO membership. Assuming that the recent and ongoing democratic decline has not yet affected IOs at full scale, our evidence suggests a downturn in both IO output and access in the years to come.

Figure 10: IO Output Performance, Non-State Access, and Domestic Democracy, 2000-2020



Note: The original index values of output performance were divided by 100 to facilitate comparability.

Conclusion: The Future of Multilateral Institutions

As multilateralism faces mounting challenges, understanding the effectiveness and democratic character of IOs is key to charting the future of global governance. To this end, this report provides new empirical insights into the institutional development of multilateral IOs between 1980 and 2023, focusing on output performance and formal access of NSAs. The findings show that, in aggregate, IO performance was relatively stable between 2010 and 2023. It peaked around 2015 before experiencing a slight decline, particularly among global IOs, with some signs of recovery after 2020. Inclusiveness – as measured by formal non-state access – has also remained largely stable since 2010, with no significant decline, despite a growing global wave of autocratisation. These results suggest that the democratic features of global governance – while no longer actively

expanding – have proven robust. Contrary to common fears, there is no strong evidence of a trade-off between institutional effectiveness and participatory governance. Instead, effectiveness and inclusiveness appear to be shaped by common structural conditions, such as domestic regime type.

The analysis further demonstrates that IOs with a higher democratic membership tend to perform better and provide greater access to NSAs, reinforcing earlier findings in the literature. The recent wave of autocratisation, while not yet causing sharp

institutional regressions, signals potential risks for both IO legitimacy and capacity. Case-level analyses of the EU, OSCE, UN, and WHO reveal that declines in democratic membership have not yet resulted in institutional gridlock or widespread rollback of access provisions, though future effects remain uncertain. The limited reforms observed since 2010 – often limited, conditional, or merely symbolic – underscore the difficulties of creating institutional change in the current geopolitical climate.

Overall, the report concludes that global and regional institutions have proven robust, but are facing headwinds that could challenge both their effectiveness and democratic character in the years to come. Continued monitoring and further research will be essential to assess whether the observed stagnation represents a temporary pause or a long-term turning point in the evolution of multilateral governance.

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Appendix

Table A.1: List of IOs with Data Coverage, 1980–2023 (PIO and Transaccess Datasets)

Continued on the next page

IO	Full Name	PIO	Transaccess	Main Decision-Making Body	New	Issue	Region
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union	x	x	Presidential Council		General	Africa
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation		x			Specific	Asia
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations		x			General	Asia
AU	African Union	x	x	Assembly of the AU		General	Africa
BENELUX	Benelux Union	x		Committee of Ministers	*	General	Europe
CAN	Andean Community	x	x	Commission		General	Americas
CARICOM	Caribbean Community and Common Market		x			General	Americas
CCNR	Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine	x		Commission	*	Specific	Europe
CDB	Caribbean Development Bank		x			Specific	Americas
CERN	European Organization for Nuclear Research	x		Council	*	Specific	Europe
CoE	Council of Europe	x	x	Committee of Ministers		Specific	Europe
ComSec	Commonwealth		x			General	Global
EFTA	European Free Trade Association	x	x	Council	*	Specific	Europe
ESA	European Space Agency	x		Council	*	Specific	Europe
EU	European Union	x	x	Ministerial Council		General	Europe
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization	x	x	Council		Specific	Global
GEF	Global Environment Facility	x		Assembly	*	Specific	Global
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency	x		General Conference	*	Specific	Global
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization	x		Council	*	Specific	Global
ICC	International Criminal Court	x	x	Assembly of State Parties		Specific	Global
ILO	International Labour Organization	x	x	General Conference		Specific	Global
IMF	International Monetary Fund	x	x	Board of Governors		Specific	Global
IOM	International Organization for Migration	x		Assembly	*	Specific	Global

Continued from the previous page.

Interpol	International Criminal Police Organization	x		General Assembly	*	Specific	Global
ISA	International Seabed Authority	x		Assembly		Specific	Global
ITU	International Telecommunication Union	x		Conference	*	Specific	Global
IWC	International Whaling Commission	x	x	Commission		Specific	Global
MERCOSUR	Southern Common Market	x		Council	*	General	Americas
NAFO	Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization	x	x	Fisheries Commission		Specific	Global
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement		x			Specific	Americas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation		x			Specific	Europe
NordC	Nordic Council		x			General	Europe
OAS	Organization of American States	x	x	General Assembly		General	Americas
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	x	x	Council		General	Global
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation	x	x	Conference of Foreign		General	Global
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe	x	x	Permanent Council / FSC		Specific	Global
PIF	Pacific Island Forum		x			General	Asia
SADC	Southern African Development Community		x			General	Africa
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization		x			Specific	Asia
UN	United Nations	x	x	Security Council		General	Global
UNESCO	UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization	x	x	General Conference		Specific	Global
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization	x		General Conference	*	Specific	Global
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization	x	x	General Assembly	*	Specific	Global
UPU	Universal Postal Union	x		Congress	*	Specific	Global
WB	World Bank Group		x			Specific	Global
WHO	World Health Organization	x	x	World Health Assembly		Specific	Global
WMO	World Meteorological Organization		x			Specific	Global
WTO	World Trade Organization	x	x	General Council		Specific	Global

Note: This list includes 35 IOs for which PIO data is available for 1980–2023 and 34 IOs for which Transaccess data is available for the same period. IOs from the original samples whose data have not been updated are not included in this list.

About ENSURED

In an era marked by global challenges, international cooperation is more essential than ever. Yet multilateral initiatives too often end in gridlock, as dominant states seek to bend the global order to their own interests. Enter ENSURED, a Horizon Europe-funded research consortium studying how the EU and its member states can better defend multilateralism and make global governance more robust, effective, and democratic.

ENSURED focuses on key policy domains that by their very nature pose complex transnational challenges. Our research assesses the state of play in these different areas and investigates the EU's strengths and weaknesses as an actor working to defend and transform multilateralism. Embracing the ethos of multilateral cooperation, the ENSURED consortium comprises universities, think tanks, and civil society groups from across Europe, Brazil, India, South Africa, China, and the United States. We aim to equip policymakers in the EU with evidence-based insights, actionable recommendations, and practical tools to promote better global governance for a world in transition.

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