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NGOs in International Politics

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NGOs *in International Politics*

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NGOs and International Relations Theory

A Tale of Three NGOs

During World War II, Greece was occupied by the German army. As part of the war effort the Allies blockaded the country, which resulted in widespread hunger there. In Britain a nationwide coalition of peace and relief groups organized a campaign to petition the British government to allow humanitarian relief to Greece. Professor Gilbert Murray and the Rev. R. T. Milford of Oxford University, Edith Pye, and a few others established a relief committee in October 1942. Each of the key founders had prior experience with volunteer work in other organizations. The following year the coalition registered as a charity under the name Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam).¹ Along with other organizations the committee approached the government to ask it to allow humanitarian relief to Greece and other blockaded countries. It also organized a famine relief fund to which citizens could donate and organized local support committees around the country. While many organizations wound up their efforts at war's end, Oxfam continued its activities.

Following the war Oxfam focused its attention outside Europe, beginning with a clothing and supplies operation to Middle East refugees in 1948. It has grown over the last half century, becoming one of the most widely recognized private relief and development organizations in the world. Today it describes itself as “a development, relief, and campaigning organization dedicated to finding lasting solutions to poverty and suffering around the world.”² Oxfam has been active in establishing relief facilities in the wake of natural disasters and civil wars; in the latter

capacity it has played an instrumental role in defining proper NGO conduct in humanitarian emergencies.³

In 1995 Oxfam transformed itself from a British NGO into a transnational federation—Oxfam International. It now has member chapters in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It is one of the Big Eight federations that control about half of all NGO relief assistance.⁴ Member organizations cooperate but remain formally independent of one another. While Oxfam's coordinating secretariat remains in Oxford, Oxfam International has lobbying offices in Washington, D.C., New York, Brussels, and Geneva. Its American advocacy offices lobby not only the US government but also the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the UN.

In 1971 Muhammad Yunus, a professor of economics at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh, founded the Grameen Bank. During his early days there he came to recognize the huge gap between mainstream economic theory and the actual conditions of poor citizens in the area. He became aware of the potential for poor people such as itinerant peddlers and stall vendors to improve their livelihood if financial institutions would be willing to provide loans of less than thirty dollars. Unable to obtain funding for his unconventional development ideas, Yunus started his bank with personal funds. Unlike either commercial or official development banks of the time, Grameen Bank undertook to lend to the poorest level of Bangladeshi society (*grameen* is the Bengali word meaning "village"). Such people could not borrow from traditional lending institutions because they did not own property that could be used as collateral to guarantee the loans. Yunus's approach provided small loans against no collateral to the members of bank-organized groups of five or six people (overwhelmingly women). Members of each group then decided who among its members should receive loans. The system proved surprisingly successful, with nearly universal repayment by borrowers.⁵ Grameen Bank grew from a small, nearly one-man operation, to a nationwide network. Today, Grameen Bank has hundreds of thousands of members and thousands of employees. Its activities encompass not only small-scale loans, but the organization has progressively added nonprofit companies to foster poor people's skills in weaving, fishery, agriculture, information technology, communications, rural power, and venture-capital development.

Grameen's microcredit scheme has attracted international attention, with multilateral lending institutions like the World Bank publicly supporting its efforts. Grameen has become the model for micro-lending programs in thirty countries as diverse as Kenya, Ethiopia, Philippines, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka. The Good Faith Fund is one of a number of nonprofits in the United States that have emulated the Grameen model. The Grameen Trust was founded in 1989 to aid this transnational learning effort. Yunus has been honored with the Ramon Magsaysay Award; former President Clinton deemed him a worthy candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize;⁶ and Yunus was in fact awarded that prize in 2006.

In 1990 Harry Wray, now a retired professor of American studies living in central Japan, founded CANHELP Thailand. On a trip to Northern Thailand to visit a former student, he had been struck by the absence of primary schools in the region despite the central government's commitment to universal education. Returning to Japan, Wray set about organizing a volunteer group that could build schools in Thailand's poorest regions. Each summer since then CANHELP Thailand has organized up to four construction projects using Japanese volunteers who spend a month at a Thai site.

The organization remained skeletal during the 1990s. While a board of directors exists to oversee finances and basic policies, board members point out that leadership was largely a one-man show until Wray's retirement in late 1998. The organization has no formal membership and collects no dues, although it is supported by a student organization on Wray's home campus. Summer volunteers are university students and area citizens. Finances have been a constant headache. Individual contributions and bazaar sales have provided an inadequate base for organizational support. The problem has eased somewhat since 1997, when CANHELP Thailand began to receive grants from the Japan Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications' International Volunteer Savings scheme. Wray expressed frustration at the organization's inability to raise long-term funds from philanthropic groups in the community. When one of us opined to a board member in early 2001 that CANHELP Thailand appeared to be continually on the edge of dissolution, the member replied that that had always been the impression. Nevertheless, it continues to function under new leadership as of this writing, one of the many thousands of small NGOs that receive little attention but undoubtedly make up the numerical majority of voluntary development organizations in the world.

What Are NGOs?

Defining NGOs turns out to be a key problem in determining what they are and what they do. Organizations are often called NGOs with little concern for clarity of meaning. Scholars tend to define them in ways that suit their particular research agendas. NGOs themselves sometimes use different definitions; for example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is defined as a nongovernmental humanitarian *agency*, the last word denoting an intermediate status between NGO and intergovernmental organization (IGO). PVO (private voluntary organization) is sometimes used in the United States and is synonymous with NGO used in other countries. Today, NPO (non-profit organization) and NGO are used nearly synonymously in the United States, although that is not always the case elsewhere in the world, and this book makes a distinction between them (see Box 1–1).

This book adopts the UN definition of NGOs: “Any international organization which is not established by inter-governmental agreement shall be considered as an NGO.” The only constraints are that a NGO cannot be profit-making; it cannot advocate the use of violence; it cannot be a school, a university, or a political party; and any concern with human rights must be general rather than restricted to a particular communal group, nationality, or country. This book also distinguishes between Northern NGOs (NNGOs) based in the industrial democracies and Southern NGOs (SNGOs) based in developing countries because the distinction aids clarity of meaning in some of the discussions below.⁷

For purposes of this book, then, neither government agencies nor corporations are NGOs. The definition also excludes political parties, religious groups per se, private hospitals, and schools, which better fit the broader category of nonprofit organization (see Box 1–1). It also excludes organizations such as sports clubs and fraternal organizations because they are not concerned with economic and political development issues. Finally, the term is not as broad as *non-state actor* as conventionally used in international relations. The latter term includes multinational corporations (MNCs), organized crime groups, international producer cartels like OPEC, and organizations like the Palestine Liberation Organization that are not states but are not usually understood to be NGOs.

Box 1–1. Are NGOs and NPOs Different?

The terms NPO and NGO are nearly synonymous in the United States. For practitioners, there is good reason for this. Lester Salamon and Helmut Anheier define the NPOs as follows:

NPOs . . .

- have formal organization;
- are organized independently of government;
- place constraints on redistribution of earnings;
- practice self-governance; and
- have voluntary membership.*

All of these conditions apply to NGOs, and they are treated in this book as an important component of the nonprofit-sector universe.

* Lester Salamon and Helmut Anheier, *The Emerging Nonprofit Sector: An Overview* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994).

NGOs and International Relations Theories

There has been a boom in academic studies of NGOs in recent years. Discussions now appear in many textbooks on international relations, although these tend to be short and often appended near the end under rubrics like “new trends in international politics.” But there has been much less attention given to the question of how NGOs fit into mainstream international relations theory. There are two main reasons why this is so.

First, the study of these organizations crosses disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. There is no unified body of NGO literature that can be readily accommodated by mainstream theories in international relations (or elsewhere, for that matter). For example, NGOs are a subset of the domestic nonprofit sector, which makes them a concern of public administration, a sub-field removed from international relations. NGOs can also fit into the theoretical framework of social movements,⁸ and they have been studied as public interest groups.⁹ A common feature of

these approaches is that they treat NGOs essentially in terms of domestic politics or comparative politics rather than international relations. Finally, many studies of NGOs as development organizations discuss their roles in technical terms specific to disciplines outside of the social sciences, for example, agriculture, health and epidemiology, or engineering.

Second, mainstream international relations theory has tended to ignore the emergence of these new actors in areas directly concerned with international politics. Calls for new directions in the study of foreign policy¹⁰ and new thinking in international relations theory¹¹ have not compelled mainstream scholars to include the study of NGOs in those efforts.

For example, one reason NGOs have not received much attention from international relations theorists is that theories still place primary importance on nation-states. *Realism* in particular has been the dominant paradigm for the last half century, and it is a theoretical approach notoriously indifferent to non-state actors. Realism's attention to the state stems from its understanding of the bases of international politics. Realism posits an anarchic international system (that is, one without a world government) in which nation-states must rely on their own devices (self-help) to maintain their own security. International politics is therefore a power game in which military power and economic power are used to ensure state survival and in which conflict is the expected mode of state interaction. This self-help security dilemma determines state interests, with state preservation being the ultimate national interest. A statement by Kenneth Waltz, the most prominent realist scholar today, aptly sums up this approach's indifference to NGOs and other transnational actors: "States are not and never have been the only international actors. But then structures are defined not by all the actors that flourish within them but by the major ones."¹² NGOs do not qualify as objects of realist attention.

Liberalism would seem like a good starting point for studying NGOs. It posits a more peaceful world than that described by realists in which a variety of cooperative relationships is possible because security considerations do not dominate all fields of activity. Liberalism allows for more attention to transnational interactions outside the state, for example, those between sub-national governments, agencies within national governments, and MNCs. It also posits a host of cooperative international relations outside of the realist concern with security.¹³

The emergence of *interdependence theory* in the 1970s, the major strand of international liberalism, however, did not lead to greater attention to NGOs. MNCs received the bulk of scholarly attention within this school. The challenge of interdependence failed to displace realism's dominance, moreover, because the two schools have since been locked in a debate about whether or not the state remains central to the study of international relations. In either case, the state remains the major object of study in this debate.¹⁴

Regime theory, an outgrowth of interdependence, potentially has a great deal to suggest about how informal interactions in the international arena can promote cooperation. Regimes are conventionally defined as sets of principles, norms, and expectations that guide behavior in certain areas of international politics.¹⁵ At their core, regimes typically consist of participating governments and international laws, but research on how regimes come about and how they are sustained repeatedly points out the contributions of non-state actors. K. J. Holsti points out that "non-state actors play critical roles in helping to launch new forms of international regulation. Interest groups, transnational coalitions, and individuals lobby governments to solve some international problem. Environmental groups, for example, have been instrumental in helping to create international regimes to protect animal species and to reduce harmful effects of industrial and other forms of pollution."¹⁶ Attention to regimes, therefore, highlights the ways in which state and non-state actors interact in certain areas of international cooperation. (Chapter 10 illustrates NGO participation in the creation and maintenance of an international environmental regime.)

The crucial problem in studying NGOs within the framework of international relations is that they organize for action in ways that are not readily seen in traditional political-science terms. They do not possess the great resources of state-centered international politics: sovereignty, territory, and coercive capability. Nor do they enjoy economic power on a scale comparable to many MNCs, the standard non-state actor of interdependence theory and international political economy. NGOs have yet to hold sovereignty at bay, and no one states, as is often claimed of the largest MNCs, that Greenpeace or Amnesty International (AI) or the Grameen Bank command economic resources greater than the GNP of the world's smaller nations. Much of the developmental work carried out by NGOs, moreover, is not seen as specifically political. Technical assistance to increase agricultural productivity, the construction of

village schools in developing countries, and efforts to immunize children against disease do not appear political, although in the long run their effects may be.

This is not to say that NGOs have no power. Many scholars argue that they do, but that such power takes nontraditional forms that do not always appear political. Indeed, one good reason NGOs have not commanded greater attention from mainstream political science has to do with their avoidance of standard political repertoires. Many do not see themselves as interest groups, although advocacy NGOs clearly are. They do not view themselves as akin to political parties. They do not contest elections (usually). Indeed, the many thousands of NGOs working in the fields of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and social and economic development do not define their work as political. AI, which has defined a mission of changing government policies on prisoner abuse and torture, long described its advocacy as apolitical as a means of deflecting criticism of its work.¹⁷ Only recently has it acknowledged that human rights advocacy means engaging in politics.

New Theoretical Frameworks and NGOs

International relations theory after World War II was vitally concerned with the operations of interstate relations in the context of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War represented a serious challenge to the discipline. The result has been a fragmentation of theoretical unity in the study of international politics. Following the logic of this argument, NGOs are an object of study for negative reasons; that is, the absence of a dominant theoretical paradigm allows them a place in the field of inquiry.

Two approaches to international relations that emerged in the 1990s are more congenial to the study of NGOs. One is *transnationalism*. The other is *constructivism*. Transnationalism, an outgrowth of interdependence theory, reemerged in the 1990s. It is an effort to revive the promise of interdependence theory to broaden the study of international politics beyond the scope of the state. Thomas Risse-Kappen, a proponent of this revival, defines transnational relations as “regular interactions across national boundaries when at least one actor is a non-state agent or does not operate on behalf of a national government or international organization.”¹⁸ Similarly, Fred Halliday refers to international society as “the emergence of non-state links of economy, political association,

culture, ideology that transcend state boundaries and constitute, more or less, a society that goes beyond boundaries.”¹⁹ NGOs are thus part of a larger collection of non-state actors that includes MNCs, epistemic communities of scientists and technical specialists, ethnic diasporas, cross-border terrorist and criminal organizations, and so forth.

The logic for considering such an approach is well illustrated in a comment by Edith Brown Weiss and Harold Jacobsen:

The traditional view of the international system as hierarchical and focused almost exclusively on states has evolved into one that is nonhierarchical. Effective power is increasingly being organized in a nonhierarchical manner. While sovereign states continue as principal actors, and as the only ones that can levy taxes, and conscript and raise armies, these functions have declined in importance relative to newly important issues, such as environmental protection and sustainable development. There are now many actors in addition to states: intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), nongovernmental organizations, enterprises, other nonstate actors, and individuals. . . . Nonstate actors are performing increasingly complex tasks, especially in the newer issue areas.²⁰

Although this approach does not concentrate exclusively on NGOs, it argues that there is increasing new space in international relations for actors such as NGOs, and new issues over which such organizations have influence. The transnational perspective is especially useful for thinking about a dynamic form of NGO cooperation (the transnational network is discussed in Chapter 2). NGOs have formed coalitions across borders to tackle global issues, and they often do this independent of governments.

Constructivism also has the potential to help clarify what NGOs do in international politics. This approach to international politics argues that interests, identities, and roles are socially defined. Constructivists criticize the realist assertion that anarchy necessarily creates a self-help security dilemma that drives states into conflict with each other. A key constructivist insight is that the environment—the international system—is not fixed and immutable and therefore does not determine actors’ behavior. Rather, the international system is created through the repeated interactions of states and other actors. The kind of international system that exists at any one time is the result of how key players

understand the system and, therefore how they understand their interests and identities, and those of others, within that system. Constructivists point out that states define their relationships with one another as competitive or cooperative depending on how they define their identities toward one another and how they are defined by their counterparts in turn. As Alexander Wendt observes:

A fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of meanings that the objects have for them. States act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends, because enemies are threatening and friends are not. . . . U.S. military power has a different significance for Canada than for Cuba, despite their different “structural” positions, just as British missiles have a different significance for the United States than do Soviet missiles.²¹

There are already a number of divergent approaches within this school, but in general, constructivist analysis focuses attention on ideas, norms, epistemic communities, global civil society, and regimes—areas of international politics most conducive to the exercise of NGO influence. The approach assumes the institutions of traditional statecraft and builds beyond them, as do NGOs. Constructivist analysis allows the possibility that national interests are not fixed, that states’ understandings of what is appropriate political behavior can be changed.²² By extension, NGO attempts to change the ways in which states act and how they define themselves and their roles have the *potential* to transform the international system.

Constructivism addresses a critical issue in the discussion of NGOs in international politics: what kind of power such organizations have. It is clear that NGOs do not have the kinds of power resources that states do. They are not sovereign and therefore legally not the equals of states. They cannot make law or enter into treaties. They are observers rather than full members of the formal international organizations. They do not possess coercive power; nor do they maintain armies or police forces to compel obedience and compliance. But they do act in international politics, and they do exercise some kind of power.

Constructivism is a useful tool for thinking about how NGOs influence international politics because it is concerned with the exercise of power through communication. When people, governments, or non-state actors

communicate with one another over time, that communication can create common understandings of roles and behaviors. Over time, these understandings become rules that govern behavior and further communication.²³ Thomas Risse-Kappen provocatively entitled a recent article on international politics “Let’s Argue!” The article portrays international politics as a discourse, an unfinished conversation about who exercises power and why.²⁴

The power of NGOs, then, is the power to persuade. Their power consists of demonstrating through persuasion and action that there are other ways of organizing social and political arrangements besides those currently in use. Consider the common activities of NGOs (discussed further in Chapter 3): educating the public, advocacy, empowering people through local economic development and network construction, and monitoring international agreements. None of these involves coercion, all take place within legal frameworks established by states either individually or collectively, and all involve persuasive communication. And all aim at building or changing understandings of how the world operates and why. It is clear from the varieties of NGO activities that they operate *as if* constitutive norms exist and are an appropriate object of the conduct of international politics.

These theories inform the understanding of NGOs in international politics throughout this book. Transnationalism and constructivism are useful tools for understanding how NGOs influence international politics and civil society because NGO interactions with one another and with other actors are *transnational* and *potentially transformative*. They are carried out above and below interstate relations and often with the aim of redefining what is appropriate in the conduct of international and interstate relations. Realism, however, reminds us that a state-centered international system still applies significant restraints on what non-state actors can accomplish (Chapter 4, especially, notes the ways in which states frame the activities and even the existence of NGOs.)

Summary

A few years ago Gerald Clarke commented that political science has largely ignored the emergence of NGOs.²⁵ That can certainly be said of international relations. That neglect is unfortunate. First, NGOs have an impact on international as well as domestic politics, as we shall see. Second, political science’s concern with the organization and use of power

in the public sphere inevitably involves voluntary organizations like NGOs. Third, the tools of political science, including study of the organization and activities of public-interest groups and civil society, provide useful means for studying NGOs. That said, critical problems remain. For one thing, the confusion about what NGOs are makes it hard to understand clearly their roles and contributions to international politics. For another, their activities are not always defined in political terms (an issue examined in Chapter 3).

Discussion Questions

1. What is an NGO? Does al-Qaeda qualify as one?
2. Why have NGOs had such a low profile in international relations theory? Should international relations take them more seriously? Why or why not?

Notes

¹ Oxfam became the organization's official name in 1965.

² Oxfam GB, *A Short History of Oxfam*. Available on the oxfam.org.uk website.

³ Deborah Eade and Suzanne Williams, *The OXFAM Handbook of Development and Relief*, vols. 1–3 (Oxford: Oxfam UK and Ireland, 1995).

⁴ Peter J. Simmons, "Learning to Live with NGOs," *Foreign Policy* 112 (Fall 1998): 82–96.

⁵ For accounts of Grameen Bank's approach, successes, and limitations, see David Bornstein, *The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996); and Muhammad Yunus, *Banker to the Poor: Micro-lending and the Battle against World Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999).

⁶ S. Kamaluddin, "Banking: Lending with a Mission," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 156 (March 18, 1993): 38–40.

⁷ The terms *Northern NGO* and *Southern NGO* to describe organizations in the developed and developing countries, respectively, may strike the reader as outdated. This book retains the usage, however, for lack of better shorthand terms and to alert the reader to the fact that NGOs in various regions of the world differ in basic organization and purpose.

⁸ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

⁹ Alan Rix, *Japan's Foreign Aid Challenge: Policy Reform and Aid Leadership* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰ Charles Hermann, Charles Kegley, and James Rosenau, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

¹¹ Michael Doyle and John Ikenberry, eds., *New Thinking in International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

¹² Kenneth Waltz, "Political Structures," in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. R. Keohane (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 88.

¹³ Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 2nd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1989).

¹⁴ Miles Kahler, "Inventing International Relations: International Relations Theory After 1945," in *New Thinking in International Relations*, ed. Michael Doyle and G. John Ikenberry, 20–53 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Stephen Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982).

¹⁶ K. J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), 388.

¹⁷ Ann M. Clark, *Diplomacy of Conscience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Thomas Risse-Kappen, ed., *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 3.

¹⁹ Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 94.

²⁰ Harold Jacobson and Edith Brown Weiss, "A Framework for Analysis," in *Engaging Countries: Strengthening Compliance with International Environmental Accords*, ed. Edith Brown Weiss and Harold Jacobson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 3.

²¹ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 396. Reprinted in Andrew Linklater, ed., *International Relations: Critical Concepts in Political Science* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2:619.

²² Jeffrey Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory," *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (1998): 324–48.

²³ Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1989); Maya Zehfuss, "Constructivisms in International Relations: Wendt, Onuf, and Kratchowil," in *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation*, ed. Karin Fierke and Knud Jorgensen (Armonk, NJ: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 54–75.

²⁴ Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue!': Communicative Action in World Politics," *International Organization* 54, no.1 (2000): 1–39.

²⁵ Gerald Clarke, "Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Politics in the Developing World," *Political Studies* 47 (1998): 36–52.