A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING NON-STATE ORGANIZATIONS?

a One Earth Future
Research Report by

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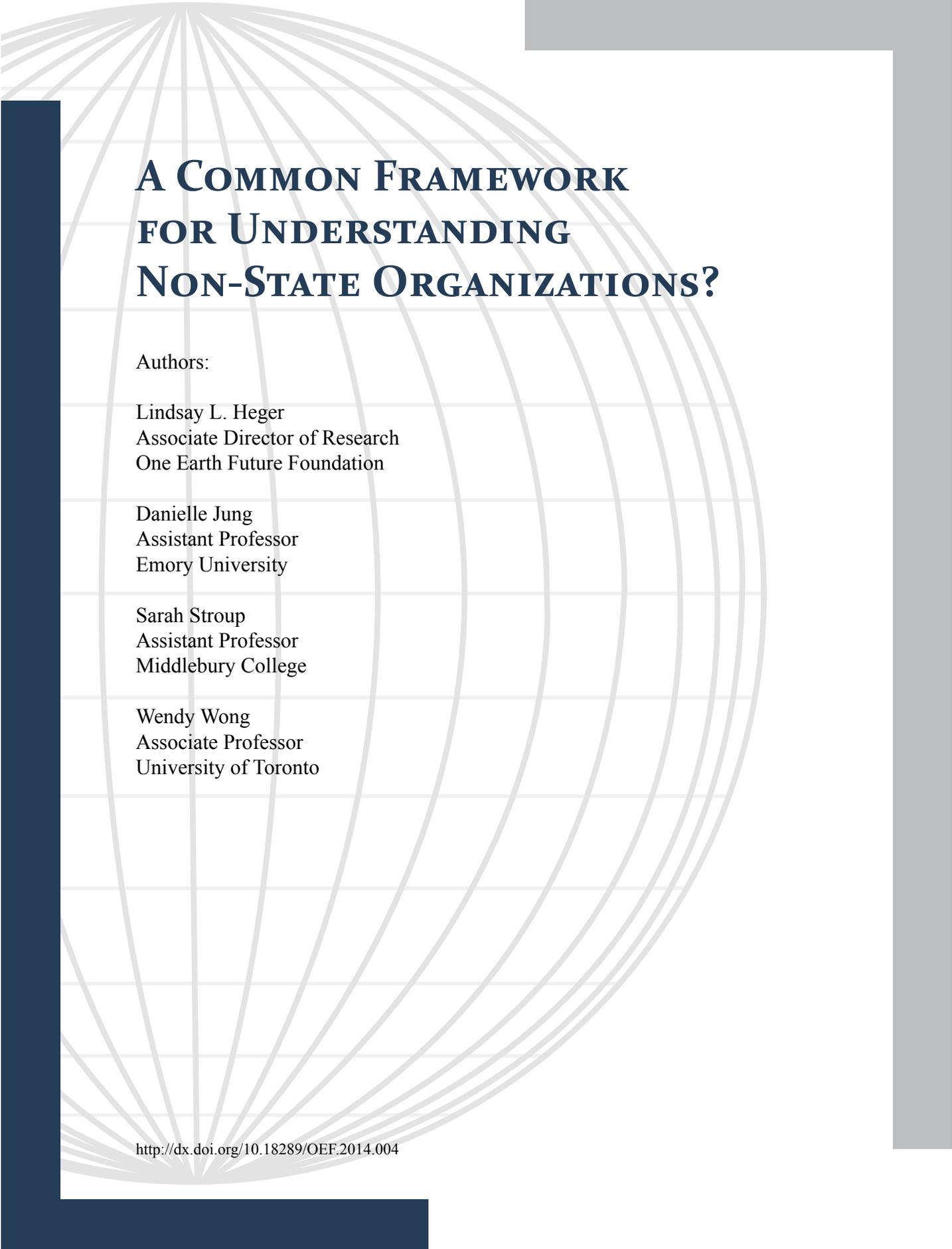
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A Common Framework for Understanding Non-State Organizations?[1]

The prevalence of non-state actors in political discourse and policy implementation is a striking new feature of the contemporary global political arena. Evolving policymaking paradigms now routinely incorporate the preferences, know-how, and abilities of these actors in many areas including peacebuilding, international disaster response, human rights, regional and global trade, and even diplomatic exchange. The recent literature on the importance of non-state actors for global political outcomes is sizeable,[2] with several prominent volumes advancing theoretical frameworks to help us better theorize and situate such actors in International Relations (IR) and policymaking. We take the importance of such actors as a given, and seek to build bridges between scholars and practitioners working on/in non-state organizations.

Of the many ways to divide up these actors, one potentially fruitful avenue is to focus on those non-state actors that have some identifiable aspects of formal organization—"non-state organizations" (NSOs).[3] The idea of NSOs is still a broad one, a category that includes a number of important players in global politics but seemingly frustrates attempts at generalization. This paper serves as an introduction to conceptualizations of NSOs and, in particular, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations (MNCs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and dark networks. We focus on those groups here as they constitute a sizeable portion of contemporary NSO activity and we anticipate a useful synthesis from a narrower approach.

For individual groups, there are many potential explanations for both why an actor might choose a particular organizational structure as well as the effects of that choice on the work of the organization.[4] Generally, we observe a number of theories imported into the study of NSOs, yielding a wide range of exciting works. Yet there are few scholarly comparisons across different actors or rigorous tests of competing explanations. For practitioners, siloed managerial practices similarly stymie organizational development. The potential for NGO, private sector, and civic leaders to learn about cross-sector efficiency and assessment protocols is vast and not fully tapped.

We have two goals for this framing paper. First, we hope to identify a common set of concerns that all NSOs face (if possible). We hope to highlight the challenges faced by scholars and practitioners in understanding NSOs, and to bring to relief themes and concepts that might run across more than one of these types of actors. We begin with the basic choice of organizational structure. Corporations, terrorists, charities, and intergovernmental organizations must constantly revisit the question of how to organize themselves. Through a comparative analysis of organizational structure, we hope to advance our knowledge of both individual types of NSOs as well as the category as a whole.

Second, our goal is to bring together practitioners and policy-oriented perspectives with scholarly research. Research on NSOs is fragmented, and the quality of the conversation between practitioners and scholars can be weak at best—a real detriment for the study of NSOs. From the outside, the transparency of decision making processes can be quite limited, leading to incomplete and possibly

misleading inference. Meanwhile, if the scholarly analysis of organizational design does not translate into clear, practical, useful advice for those involved in creating organizational structures, practitioners may be increasingly reluctant to open up to scholarly analysis. We know of a number of NGOs suffering from this sort of fatigue—tired of being put under the microscope without getting useful insights in return.

Modestly, we aim to shrink the distance between the two communities in two ways. First, we hope to forge a path toward creating a community of interested entrepreneurial researchers and practitioners who find value in the groups' collective insights and contributions. Second, we hope that this sort of discussion will generate a common language and set of metrics that we can all use to communicate better these insights and advance our individual understandings of how best to conceptualize and/or participate in important policy arenas.

Below we review our understanding of how and why NSOs make organizational choices. Additionally, the effects of organizational structure have broad-reaching implications for other kinds of questions, which we discuss below. The discussion below is broken into three sections: choice of organizational structure, effect of structure, and assessment of structure. In each section we outline our thoughts on the issue and provide guiding questions to motivate participants' contributions.

I.   CHOOSING AND COMPARING ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

We begin with a discussion of the varieties of organizational structures across NSOs and why NSOs choose particular organizational forms. In other words, what explanations exist for structure as a dependent variable? We also discuss a number of dimensions along which we can make comparisons among different types of organizations.

Theoretically, the menu of organizational forms includes hierarchies, networks, and markets (Powell 1990), a typology that emphasizes both variation in formality and lines of authority. While markets are "flat" and lack regularized authority, hierarchies are characterized by clear "vertical" lines of authority and obligation. In this typology, networks are "in-between," though there are a number of conceptions that challenge this neat set of models.[5]

Given the plethora of organizations that are "non-state," we have a rich pool of varied organizational structures.[6] How do groups as diverse as MNCs, terrorist groups, IGOs, and NGOs choose their structures? Are particular types of actors more likely to exhibit particular organizational characteristics, or do we see similar variation in organizational type within each category? Are there advantages to certain types of structures for a type of actor, or does organizational choice vary with other external or internal factors?

As a first exercise in bridging the different fields in which we each work, we present the "landscape" of existing analyses of organizational structure (Table 1 below). In each of the cells of the table, we offer an example of current claims about the relationship between a particular factor and organizational structure. These examples come from both the academic and practitioner literatures, and we have focused more on concrete causal claims over broader theoretical perspectives. This is most definitely a work in progress, and we do not pretend to offer an exhaustive review of NSOs.[7] Still, this exercise helps us individually situate ourselves while advancing a collective conversation about the state of our knowledge.

The rows identify factors that affect organizational structure across a range of NSOs. For example, the role of donors in shaping the organizational structures of IGOs and NGOs has been explored using principal-agent models and resource dependency theory.[8] Normatively, many practitioners question how to establish alternate accountability mechanisms for a wider range of stakeholders beyond donors.[9] There are a number of additional factors that could be included as determinants of organizational structure, including the role of leadership, the effects of an organization's history (path dependence), the opportunities created by new technologies, and the interaction of agency and structure.[10]

The columns identify the four types of NSOs included here. As experts in a particular field, we tend to silo ourselves into the study of specific actor types. Yet comparisons among types of NSOs are growing. Prakash and Gugerty (2010) liken advocacy NGOs to firms. Heger, Jung, and Wong (2012) draw on the ideas of transaction costs and functional differentiation to explain the relative efficacy of violence for more centralized violent NSOs. Inspired by the argument that there are many "varieties of capitalism" from which MNCs originate, Stroup (2012) argues that international NGOs similarly are shaped by their national environments. These pieces suggest different constellations of effect, internal structures, and external environment and, taken together, paint a more complete picture of what shapes NSO activities.

We recognize that there are other ways to divide the complex category of NSOs beyond the "actor type" method used in the table columns. We could also differentiate among NSOs based on whether they are illicit (dark) or licit, self-interested (primarily MNCs) versus other-interested, religious (a crosscutting category) or secular, or we could consider their geographic scope (regional versus global). We could also divide up the field based on issue area—many analyses of global governance tackle the issue of NSOs by examining the "multi-stakeholder systems" that operate in particular issue areas (e.g., global health, climate change, natural resource extraction).[11] Insofar as these alternate dimensions are relevant to a discussion of the organization of NSOs, they likely deserve attention.

We view organizational attributes as a dimension on which all types of NSOs co-vary and, thus, as a useful starting point. And we anticipate a number of interesting exchanges. For example, the illicit nature of dark networks limits the formal nature of their organization as well as the transparency of their processes—the Weather Underground never filed IRS Form 990. But if these "illicit authorities" (Hall and Biersteker 2002) are providing goods and services the state is unwilling or unable to provide, they need some basic organizational capacity and coordination to do so effectively. Are

dark networks as a type more networked/less hierarchical than other types of NSOs because they operate beyond state and global regulation? It is this sort of question that we hope is provoked by the organizing exercise of the table.

A. COMPARING ORGANIZATIONS

The question of variations in organizational structure across NSOs is an important one. However, beyond establishing a typology and range of organizations such as that in Table 1, we also seek a discussion around dimensions of organizational structure that are consequential for understanding how an organization relates to its peers (NGOs in relation to other NGOs, for example) and other actors in global politics. To that end, we identify seven features relevant to NSO structural outcomes.

- **Agenda-setting**: How does the organization decide to take up a new issue or create a new product? Who are the veto players within the organization?

- **Implementation**: Who is tasked with putting organizational plans into action? How independent are these players from the agenda-setters?

- **Porousness**: How fixed are the boundaries of the organization? Are individual units given autonomy to pursue more or less robust relationships with other actors (e.g., collaboration on research and development [R&D] among aviation companies, coordination among humanitarian relief providers through the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA])?

- **Branding**: Has the organization developed and protected a particular brand? How did this brand emerge, and how is the brand promoted and defended in relation to other actors?

- **Scale**: How does the size of the organization affect coordination problems, economies of scale, and the legitimacy of the organization across a range of contexts?

- **Resource acquisition and allocation**: What are the sources of organizational support? How numerous and diverse are those supporters? For corporations, who are the buyers of the MNC product? How does the organization engage in the task of resource acquisition and subsequent allocation among its component parts?

- **Personnel:** Who works for the organization? What are the mechanisms for recruitment and retention? What qualifications must individuals possess to work for the organization,

and how have those standards evolved over time? Are organizations in a single field (e.g., human rights activism) adopting uniform professional standards, or is there substantial differentiation, and why?

Two important caveats are necessary. First, these dimensions of organizations are not static, either for individual actors or for organizational fields. One central question for discussion is whether, over time, different types of NSOs are converging along some of these dimensions. For example, the language of branding has been taken up far beyond the field of corporations; NGOs like Oxfam and IGOs like UNICEF work hard to identify and protect their brands. Does branding mean the same thing for different types of NSOs? To what extent are all of the intra-organizational dimensions identified above characteristic of all organizations, and to what extent do some "belong" to certain types of NSOs because they are more prominent concerns?

A second caveat is that we need to unpack the formal organizational structure from the informal practice within the organization. In a widely cited essay from 1997, John Meyer and Brian Rowan characterized formal organizational structure as "myth and ceremony" often decoupled from the actual work of the organization. We are deeply interested in the range and type of disconnect between formal and informal practice across the span of NSOs, as well as explanations for why this disconnect is created or persists. Because some of the more interesting organizational insights happen outside of the organizational flow charts, terms of reference, and other formal mechanisms, we recognize it is also important to identify each of these dimensions, where possible, at the informal level.

II.   STRUCTURE AND OUTCOMES

We are also interested in structure as an independent variable. Ultimately, as scholars and practitioners, we care about organizational structure because we think it has consequences for organizational practices. Different structures affect the efficiency, effectiveness, prominence, or even the very survival of a non-state actor. A few examples from the different types of actors are illustrative:

- **Efficiency**: Centralization of decision-making may minimize the administrative costs of the organization and allow for more specific targeting of resources across the organization in a way that maximizes the bang for each buck. Interestingly, efficiency concerns seem to be prominent across the range of NSOs, though for different reasons. Multinational corporations can maximize profits by minimizing expenses, while NGOs and IGOs are able to deflect heightened scrutiny from their funders by providing evidence of the efficient use of funds[12] or by taking advantage of organizational forms that allow for economies of scale.

- **Effectiveness**: Centralization within terrorist and rebel groups has proven to shorten the length of conflict, but also increases the damage inflicted by attacks. Groups that are centralized tend to do so along functional dimensions (i.e., functional differentiation). In turn, differentiation produces specialization and, for terrorist groups, the result is on average more lethal attacks.

- **Salience**: The United Nations Development Programme is highly decentralized and engaged in multiple networks. According to Craig Murphy, this makes it a creative learning organization (unlike most IGO bureaucracies), but the organization is also poorly funded and a low priority for the major bilateral donors (Murphy 2006: 18–22). UNDP's more networked form may make it a better incubator for new development ideas, but perhaps at the cost of the sort of prominence that might make it able to translate those ideas into practice.[13] Similarly, international criminal networks face a challenge with the concealment-coordination dilemma (Kenney 2009), since they need coordination to achieve their goals, but too much organizational structure leads to detection by authorities and works against remaining concealed.

- **Survival**: Networks may be highly effective in the short term, but without the creation of a centralized structure and formal organization, they may disappear as issue areas from the global agenda or as networks. Famously, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines had no office or bank account when it won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, but as of 2012 it had offices in Geneva and London, a staff of eleven, and a budget of $3.6 million (all of which are shared with the Cluster Munition Coalition).[14]

Structural choices may have unintended effects, which we find to be one of the most compelling aspects of studying organizations. For example, structural changes undertaken to please external donors (the creation of an office for monitoring and evaluation, for example) may have the unintended or unwanted effect of changing organizational practice in another area (changing the type of services offered or level of transparency). Structural choices have effects on the perceived effectiveness and efficacy of an organization. These effects may attenuate over time.

III. Measuring and Assessing Organizational Structure

The micro-level task of assessing organizational structures is a challenging one, and has enormous effects at the macro level when we think of comparing different types of actors and organizations. For scholars of different types of NSOs, we seek to compare notes about creating indicators of organizational structure. For practitioners, the utility of assessment for internal growth and development is still not fully embraced and where it exists the mechanisms are not entirely consistent with social scientific principles.

Organizational structure may be stickier than practitioners like to think in the way that organizational ethos endures, branding matters, and changing organizational structures can often be a struggle. Conversely, organizational structures may be more ephemeral than scholars would like, with informal arrangements dominating and even overshadowing more easily documentable formal structures and shifts in leadership resulting in widespread organizational change.

Scholars and practitioners may also value different kinds of evaluation. Social science values systematic, generalizable measures that may not be possible given the nature of some NSOs and the paucity of available (or realistically attainable) data. Academics and policymakers also prioritize accountability and building institutions to maximize such concerns. Practitioners may have an altogether different orientation. Whereas on-the-ground assessments may improve delivery of services, they may not improve the overall efficiency of an NSO. Similarly, things that "work" for dark networks may prove very costly, or they may degrade communications between different parts of a group in order to maximize concealment. Using the same types of measurements, over a long period of time, may not make sense for many practitioners as problems shift and priorities respond to these shifts. Tracking GDP per capita for "development" may seem antiquated in 2014 in light of the multiplicity of ways development is affected, but it provides the longitudinal consistency academics crave.

One conversation that may be unavoidable here is the challenge of defining "effectiveness" or "success" for different NSOs. This conversation is an important one, and insofar as we are interested in the question above about the effects of organizational structure, we cannot avoid the subject. Still, our collective comparative advantage may be in brainstorming ways of tracking changes within these organizations rather than tackling weighty questions like "how should we define development" or "how do we know if an audience to terror attacks has been terrorized?"

IV. CONCLUSION

One of our central goals is to build bridges across a number of different, sometimes disconnected, groups. We wish to challenge the self-categorization and isolating differentiation that curtail much contemporary research on NSOs. Intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, and violent groups all operate alongside states and are all important players in global politics, but we understand little about the characteristics that unite them as a category. The organizational dimension is one issue that all NSOs face, though we leave it up for discussion whether the question of organization is a unifying one for the range of NSOs under examination.

Additionally, we seek to bring together practitioners and scholars interested in the same sorts of questions but perhaps coming at them from different angles and with different end goals. For those in the field who develop and implement programs and seek to enhance their returns and efficiency, we hope that more conversations toward a common language and series of metrics will allow opportunities for cross-fertilization. Sharing insights between practitioner and academic communities is one way this can be achieved. We see real potential in the exchange of practical lessons across different types of NSOs. We also expect that a fertile exchange between researchers and practitioners will help hone the conversation toward issues and topics that are relevant to real-world advances in understanding and interacting in our increasingly complex global arena.

TABLE 1 ORGANIZATIONAL TRAITS AND NSO TYPES				
FACTORS	**NGOs**	**IGOs**	**MNCs**	**DARK NETWORKS**
Level of centralization	Campaigns with centralized agenda-setting and decentralized implementation are more effective (Wong 2012)	States choose informal IGOs (like the G20) over centralization when uncertainty and sovereignty costs are high (Vabulas and Snidal 2013)	Efficiency goals encourage centralization the need for local tailoring discourages it (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1998)	Al Qaeda's core group is more lethal but its planned attacks are less successful than peripheral movement groups (Helfstein and Wright 2011)
Donor preference	Bilateral donors pressure NGOs to professionalize and centralize (Roberts, Jones, and Frohling 2005); NGO effectiveness suffers as a result (Cooley and Ron 2002)	Donor countries to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are overrepresented in IMF governance, despite 2010 reforms (Wade 2011; Leech and Leech 2013)	MNC subsidiaries that are more dependent on outsiders are less likely to follow local practices in human resource management (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994)	To assure external sponsors of their importance, rebel groups in western Uganda engaged in dramatic attacks against civilians (Hovil and Werker 2005)
Legitimacy concerns (Dimaggio and Powell 1983)	ActionAid restructured to claim legitimacy as a global NGO (Jayawickrama and Ebrahim 2013)	The EU has created European citizenship and a parliament to boost legitimacy (McNamara 2010)	European firms favored liberalization of service trade even when it threatened their monopolies (Woll 2008)	
Transaction costs			Firms internalize production to limit transaction costs (Williamson 1981)	Terrorist leaders face significant inefficiencies due to skimming along the management chain (Shapiro and Siegel 2007)
Bureaucratic politics	NGOs protecting white rhinos face a trade-off between long-term security and conservation (Avant 2004)	Concern over the UN's legitimacy led the Secretary-General to ignore signs of genocide in Rwanda (Barnett and Finnemore 2004)	Excessive monitoring within MNCs reduces flexibility and information flow (O'Donnell 2000)	Terrorist organizations face the same bureaucratic constraints as firms (Shapiro 2013); insurgent organizations use their compensation structure as a tool to solve management problems (Bahney et al. 2013)

TABLE 1 CONTINUED				
FACTORS	**NGOs**	**IGOs**	**MNCs**	**DARK NETWORKS**
Functional concerns	The need to quickly and reliably collect and disseminate information on rights abuses led to the centralization of research at Amnesty Int'l (Clark 2001; Winston 2001)	The need for an enforcement mechanism at UN led to creation of Security Council (Bosco 2009); the need for expertise allows bureaucrats at IGOs to participate in institutional reform (Johnson 2013)	The need to produce/ market many related products led to "M-form" corporation (Chandler 1962)	The need to track individual operatives leads to substantial record-keeping among otherwise covert terrorist organizations (Shapiro and Siegel 2012)
Variations in state regulation	Different charity laws facilitate fund-raising in the US and advocacy in France (Stroup 2012); state regulatory rules incentivize trusts, nonprofits, and unincorporated associations differently (Hopkins and Blazek 2008)		Market protection in developing states leads MNCs to create local subsidiaries; differential tax rates lead to transfer pricing	Counterterrorism alters transaction costs and the structure of terrorist organizations (Helfstein 2009); failed states are havens for armed groups (Takeyh and Gvosdev 2002)
Globalization	Growing size/ scale of relief and development sector leads to restructuring of NGOs (Lindenberg and Bryant 2001)	Growth in transborder issues leads to expansion in number and scope of IGOs (Keohane and Nye 1977)	Complexity of global production has led to "alliance capitalism," blurring boundaries among firms (Dunning 2002)	For armed NSOs, globalization enables better communication among network members and their partners/allies (Shultz, Farah, and Lochard 2004)

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Notes

1. The following paper was circulated as the framing paper for the Non-State Organizations Workshop hosted by the University of Toronto and co-sponsored by the One Earth Future Foundation and the Middlebury and Monterey Consortium. It was intended to provide a common context for all participants and to spark debate about what the authors view as a series of questions relevant to both non-state organization practitioners and scholarly research.

2. For two very different examples, see Neumann and Sending (2010) and Avant, Finnemore, and Sell (2012).

3. This conceptualization thereby excludes other forms that non-state actors in IR might take, including social movements and networks of organizations that are not formal groups (e.g., the G20).

4. More formally, structure can be both consequence (dependent variable) and cause (independent variable) in understandings of an organization's practices.

5. See Watts (2004); Lake and Wong (2009).

6. Even states vary in their organizational form (Cooley 2008).

7. Indeed, we invite comments on factors or approaches we have missed.

8. Nielson and Tierney (2003); Barnett and Coleman (2005); Green (2013); Yanacopulos (2005).

9. Ebrahim (2003); Brown, Ebrahim, and Batliwala (2012).

10. Lewis and Steinmo (2012).

11. See Avant, Finnemore, and Sell (2010) for a compilation of examples.

12. Of course, efficiency may be a goal related to the means of an organization rather than the end. The charity rating watchdogs in the United States have come under fire for prioritizing efficiency metrics over effectiveness metrics. The reforms have had mixed results, as efficiency is an easier concept to define and measure. See "How to Choose a Charity Wisely," *New York Times*, November 7, 2013 (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/08/giving/how-to-choose-a-charity-wisely.html); Christina Triantaphyllis and Matthew Forti, "Impact, Not Overhead, Is What Counts," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/impact_not_overhead_is_what_counts) blog, November 13, 2013.

13. Drezner (2007) cautions against confusing visibility with influence. We are not convinced that only publicly visible non-state organizations are effective, but public attention may be one possible route to policy influence.

14. http://www.icbl.org/index.php/icbl/About-Us/Reports (accessed November 14, 2013).

The One Earth Future Foundation was founded in 2007 with the goal of supporting research and practice in the area of peace and governance. OEF believes that a world beyond war can be achieved by the development of new and effective systems of cooperation, coordination, and decision making. We believe that business and civil society have important roles to play in filling governance gaps in partnership with states. When state, business, and civil society coordinate their efforts, they can achieve effective, equitable solutions to global problems.

As an operating foundation, we engage in research and practice that supports our overall mission. Research materials from OEF envision improved governance structures and policy options, analyze and document the performance of existing governance institutions, and provide intellectual support to the field operations of our implementation projects. Our active field projects apply our research outputs to existing governance challenges, particularly those causing threats to peace and security.

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