When It Comes to Global Governance, Should NGOs Be Inside or Outside the Tent?

The current "global governance architecture" has been described as including multi-lateral intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) such as the United Nations and its specialised agencies, the Bretton Woods organisations, and regional bodies such as the Council of Europe – together with national governments[1]. In recent years this architecture has been supplemented by a growing panoply of non-state actors – including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

This enquiry will consider whether it is better for NGOs to operate on the 'inside', or the 'outside' of formal governance structures with specific reference to the process of governance and their own effectiveness, sustainability and mission achievement.

Firstly, our narrative arc will broadly define NGOs in terms of their values and functionality, before describing both the pros and cons for NGOs (and their beneficiaries) of proximal relationships with governance bodies. Having surveyed the options open to NGOs 'within the tent' of global governance, we shall then turn to an assessment of those organisations that choose to stay 'outside' in order to directly challenge the extant governance order. Finally, and briefly, we will consider those NGOs that occupy a middle ground, able to mobilise IGO and state resources, whilst remaining resistant to being strategically subsumed by their more powerful partners.

We shall conclude that whilst it is true to say that some NGOs can be considered as insiders and others as anything but, a *binary* categorisation of their relationship with IGOs and governments is inadequate. Rather, a third, median classification is advisable. Within this tripartite typology, it remains difficult to pronounce with certainty as to which is 'better', as each type of NGO/IGO relationship classification brings both opportunities and limitations. That said, our heuristic conclusion will be broadly that *proximity* to the centres of power offers resources and results, but that this power might corrupt; whereas *distance* offers freedom of movement, but risks limited immediate salience.

NGOs are defined by Robert E. Kelly as "non-profit, principled, or value-based actors engaged in the promotion of social change"[2]. In practice, this means working in broad areas such as human rights, peace, the environment, humanitarian aid or development, or in more specific issue areas such as, for example, gender justice,[3] the prohibition of torture or disability rights[4]. With around 60,000 NGOs estimated to exist in 2014[5], they have become a significant "force in the contemporary world."[6]

Categorically, NGOs tend to have one of two orientations – either *advocational*, i.e. seeking to exert pressure to influence formal decision makers, or *operational*, existing to deliver services on the ground to individuals or groups in need[7] (some of course do both of these things).

Advocacy oriented (as opposed to operationally purposed) NGO's can affect global governance by taking action at a number of points on a continuum of direct/indirect engagement with IGOs, states and other bodies. At one end of this spectrum of engagement, where contact, communication, negotiation and persuasion have the fewest impediments, we find NGOs involved in government delegations, consultations, evaluations and "global regulation itself". [8]

When It Comes to Global Governance, Should NGOs Be Inside or Outside the Tent?
Written by Mark Butcher

To illustrate, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) accredits NGOs as part of its policy formulation process. These insiders can observe in committee meetings and submit written and verbal opinions. From just 40 such NGOs in 1948, there are today 2719,[9] with the entire U.N system accommodating a total of 5000 NGOs with 'consultative status'.[10] All of these can bring influence to bear. For example, at the Earth Summit of 1992, strategically positioned environmental NGOs successfully pressured both national governments and international institutions to adopt agreements aimed at mitigating climate change.[11]

It has been argued that NGO moral authority helps to cement "regime rules, principles and decision-making structures".[12] Thus, although NGOs have no formal legal power to influence global policy, they certainly have the 'soft power' generally ascribed to regimes – i.e. the ability to create " expectations, "beliefs" and "standards of behaviour"[13] and thus make the political weather.

Take the role that NGOs played in the ban on cluster munitions. Acting in coalition, NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Landmine Action and the International Committee of the Red Cross were able to frame the debate so as to establish a normative precautionary principle as the basis for discussion during the talks leading up to the 2008 Oslo Convention. Specifically, the burden of proof was placed on the participating states "to prove that their weapons did not need to be banned".[14] As well as defining the terms of the discussion, NGOs also worked directly with political decision makers, "formulating, testing and communicating arguments … (and) "systematic[ally] targeting … decision makers in parliaments and cabinets".[15]

In another example, Elizabeth Donnelly ascribes the success of the Jubilee 2000 Campaign (aimed at bringing about the cancellation of debt in the global south), to the moral authority wielded by a civil society coalition (including Christian Aid U.K. and Oxfam). As the campaign gathered momentum, a 1998 conference put faith and NGO groups in the same room as the World Bank President, IMF Managing Director and the Deputy Secretary of the U.S Treasury, where a "spirited and forthright discussion" included "an exchange of views" on the morality of international debt, whether conditionality worked and where debt cancellation was most needed.[16]

It is worth mentioning that the World Bank, in particular of the above-mentioned actors, has explicitly credited NGOs as being effective advocates for policy change and multiplied its NGO liaison ability twelve-fold since 1990 in order to improve access, increase transparency and undertake robust consultation.[17]

However, it is not just this kind of *direct* engagement with IGOs that can be demonstrated to get results. Activities such as lobbying national executives, influencing legislative branch debates and engaging with sub-state authorities, (to influence national or sub-national positions on international issues) are all deployed by NGOs. To illustrate (with specific reference to the latter of the techniques listed), environmental campaigners have encouraged U.S. 'greening cities' to take action on climate change mitigation despite the effective rejection of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and 2015 Paris Agreement by the U.S government.[18]

At an even further step removed from direct engagement with formal regulatory organisations, NGOs work to change the wider conversation about global governance issues by reaching out via "political parties, the mass media, companies (and) online social networks"[19]. Thus, a few months after the meeting in which that 'spirited and forthright' exchange took place between Jubilee 2000 campaigners and Bretton Woods officials, and following a series of workshops and meetings in Peru, an anti-debt petition that attracted an eventual 17 million signatures from 160 countries was organised by civil society activists.[20] This was ultimately presented to the G8[21] to complete a 'two-pronged assault' (i.e. mobilisation of public support, channelled through NGO advocacy) with the ultimate result that more than $100 billion of debt owed by 35 of the poorest countries in the World was cancelled.[22]

Just as advocacy oriented NGOs have demonstrated how a close relationship with 'the powers that be' can influence global policy, those with an operational purpose too have benefited from synergistic partnerships that harness the resources of states and IGOs to their own expertise, local knowledge and flexibility in the effective delivery of public goods.

In fact, much of the operational activity delivered by NGOs 'on the ground' is the result of close strategic partnerships

When It Comes to Global Governance, Should NGOs Be Inside or Outside the Tent?
Written by Mark Butcher

with IGOs or national states, with 13% of global development spending ($20 billion) in 2011, and 72% of emergency relief funding ($40.4 billion) in 2015, being channelled through NGOs.[23] Oxfam U.K. serves as a case in point. In 2017/18, £119.6 million was provided by a wide range of governmental and institutional donors to pay for humanitarian and development work in locations such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Tajikistan, Zambia, Bolivia. [24]

On the other hand, *too close* an intimacy with the organs of global governance can be problematic. Specific challenges can include, cultural co-option, strategic compromise and perhaps even a corruption of the ideals and values (i.e. being mission driven and beneficiary focused) that have become normative (and usually a legal requirement) for many northern NGOs (e.g. U.S. 501[c] registered bodies and U.K. charities).[25]

To continue with Oxfam U.K. as an example; the money on offer from a long list of IGOs, governments and regional bodies such as the E.U, is clearly of critical importance to the range, scope and efficacy of the programmes that Oxfam offers around the world. However, Joachim tells us that NGOs often find themselves "too preoccupied with the needs of the funders whose projects they implement"[26] suggesting a constant danger that a potentially thin line between 'strategically partnered' and 'co-opted', will be crossed.

Similarly, in seeking sustainability via funding from Bretton Woods organisations, NGOs sometimes find that they must embrace market-led practices (such as competitive contract tendering) despite these being at odds with their values and mission. To illustrate, in 1994/95, contracts related to post Rwandan genocide relief, worth $1 billion, were offered by the UNHCR. This resulted in something of an unseemly feeding frenzy amongst the two hundred or so NGOs that arrived on the scene to form a "hypercompetitive relief market" with local NGO managers under intense pressure to win contracts.[27] What resulted was a "three-ring circus of financial self-interest, political abuse and incompetence" creating "chaos and madness".[28]

Indeed, some scholars would have it that the notion of NGOs as inherently altruistic actors, is a flawed, liberal institutionalist pre-supposition. For example, with the case of north/south NGO partnerships and campaigns, "big but improbable goals"[29] are often 'sold' to first-world donors, bringing significant fundraising gains for the northern NGO doing the selling, but little meaningful change for intended beneficiaries in the south. In fact, northern NGOs may be actively disincentivised from investing in long-term, structural change, preferring instead quick 'wins' to satisfy funders and early campaign exits so to move on as soon as possible to the next sales pitch.[30]

In this interpretation, inbuilt power imbalances between London, New York or Brussels on the one hand and Dhaka, Maputo or Quito on the other, hint at a darker aspect of the relationship between northern and southern NGOs – namely that the whole northern dominated NGO sector is little more than a masking façade for an interminable imperialism that fixes the Global South in enduring poverty.

There is a Gramscian theoretical thread to this argument, which sees the transmission of information and conceptual framings of fundamental importance to the maintenance of north/south power structures. Thus, "dominant states [impose] dominant ideas [on the south, in pursuit of] … the interests of the capitalist class".[31] This however is done in such a way that the oppressed "consent to domination through shared ideas", with the hegemonic order being reinforced as the dominant social strata of southern states "acquiesce" in the adoption of "the ways of doing and thinking of the dominant social strata of the dominant state or states".[32]

Gina Porter tells us that there exists, 'a transmission belt of … powerful language and … Western concepts of development". This "carr(ies) resources, authority and concepts from the core to the periphery", and whereas some "little ideas" flow in the opposite direction, the "big ideas" that "shape the direction of projects and programmes"[33], inevitable have a World Systemic, quasi-imperial look to their top-down flow. Thus, northern NGOs are characterised not as "benign actors", but as "agents of penetration" working in concert with the "comprador class" (i.e. those co-opted 'acquiescent' elites in the developing world) to ensure that southern states are locked into a permanent dependency upon the North.[34].

This theme is pursued with vigour by James Petras, in an excoriating critique that describes NGOs as an intrinsic part of a structurally exploitative system, and accuses them of deflecting criticism from the imperialist capitalists who

When It Comes to Global Governance, Should NGOs Be Inside or Outside the Tent?
Written by Mark Butcher

are subjecting the developing world to "pillage".[35] In Petras' analysis, NGO managers are self-serving, hypocritical, complacent and complicit in a process that reinforces structural inequality by "pushing [key neo-liberal doctrinal concepts such as] privatisation 'from below'" and focusing on "self-help projects instead of social transformation".[36] This results in "grass roots self-exploitation" and limits change only to those marginal economic and politic areas of life that are "permitted by the neo-liberal state and macro-economy".[37]

So far we have examined the role of NGOs through a lens that locates them – for good or ill – firmly 'within the tent' of global governance. However, by no means all scholars agree that the most efficacious route to meaningful social change is best accomplished from an inside track. Others position themselves as 'outsiders'.

Nicola Bullard, for example, eschews attempts to reform a discredited international system in favour of empowering "the global justice, anti-war, anti-globalisation, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist movements",[38] that stand in opposition to it. She tells us that the "main sources of the global 'democracy deficit' (are) the market and militarised, globalised capitalism"- factors which the U.N. cannot address. As a foil to this institutional impotence, Bullard cites NGOs as being crucial in the international "movement of movements" that seeks to reinforce collective grassroots efforts in pursuit of the transformational idea that "we the peoples" are not "objects of an imaginary benevolent state … (but) active subjects in building global democracy"[39]. Thus, she points to the agency of 'outsider' NGOs to go beyond the direction, scope and conceptual parameters of the status quo, to initiating action as a precursor of real change.

This takes us somewhat into the territory of scholars like Robert Cox who have argued for the creation of "an alternative social order at local, regional and global levels" that will "[recover] citizen control of public life" and "[subordinate] the world economy to a regime of social equity."[40] Views such as these, expressed in 1999, surely provided an ideational jump start to the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle, that same year. In seeking to not just influence the issues being debated, but also to challenge the legitimacy of the neoliberal underpinnings of global governance, these protests disrupted WTO meetings, undermined the U.S. position in trade talks and "inspired hundreds of millions across the globe"[41].

The Seattle protests placed the issue of globalisation and its harmful effects four square and centre in national and international debates. In the U.S. it helped to strengthen activist networks, mobilise opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership and create a baseline for anti-globalisation positions within the Democratic Party that are still reflected today in policies espoused by Presidential nominee candidates Bernie Saunders and Elizabeth Warren.[42]

The Climate Justice Movement is another regime where the importance and urgency of the problem has generated a wave of extramural protest in which NGOs figure centrally. Rallying to a cry of "ecology and capitalism are, by their nature, in opposition"[43], a growing number of Environmental NGOs such as Climate Justice Now, Oilwatch International and Friends of the Earth International seek to bring *external* pressure to bear on ongoing multilateral climate negotiations such as the UN Climate Change Convention Conference of the Parties meetings. As Patrick Bond has remarked, "if you support climate justice, going inside is suicide".[44]

Occasionally, the old adage 'if you want something doing properly, do it yourself' seems to apply. Some NGOs, deriving legitimacy from 'bottom-up' public opinion[45], have taken matters into their own hands and somewhat sidestepped traditional governance structures, to drive a process of *private governance* in pursuit of social change and economic justice. One example of this lies in successfully advocating for voluntary codes of conduct to be adopted by industries that need to be 'cleaned up' – either physically or morally. For example, the South Asian Coalition on Children in Servitude and the Carpet Manufacturers' Association Without Child Labor were instrumental in registering the Rugmark Foundation, which works to eliminate child slavery, in 1994.[46] Similarly, the Clean Clothes Campaign is a world-wide network of 230 NGOs that seeks to improve working conditions in the garment industry in the Global South[47]. Whilst such groups may not necessarily be so antagonistic to 'The System' as those that demand wholesale change, the logic of seeking change through parallel action, necessarily positions participating NGOs as 'outsiders'.

There are of course downsides for outsider NGOs. To begin with, without IGO/State resources or support, the task

When It Comes to Global Governance, Should NGOs Be Inside or Outside the Tent?
Written by Mark Butcher

they face (i.e. changing the status quo) is huge. For example, in the fight for climate justice, Patrick Bond tells us that "there are *no* reliable state allies" which leaves activists "shaking the tree" to harvest ideational fruit, but without a "policy jam-maker [on the] inside".[48] Secondly, although NGOs mobilise together, without a 'structure' to give form to their energy, the climate justice movement remains politically "bifurcated", riven by "fault lines" and characterised by internecine squabbling.[49]

Finally, it is worth saying that the binary picture we have painted of NGOs being either insiders or outsiders, does not tell the full story. Rather, there exists a middle ground – a third way. Plenty of NGOs work within extant governance structures, benefit financially from them and would not think to turn the economic and political status quo on its head – but nevertheless express discomfort if arms-length relationships with states and IGOs become proximal, or the lines between clearly demarcated NGO/state activities begin to blur.

For example, a 2006 report in the Lancet outlined how a number of leading NGOs (including Oxfam America, Medecins San Frontieres and the International Rescue Committee) were "very concern[ed]" at attempts by the U.S. Department of Defence to work much more closely with NGOs to deliver humanitarian aid. Whereas the White House was quoted as seeing "military-civilian teams" as a "critical U.S. Government stability operations tool", the NGOs were in accord that anything that could be construed as the "politicisation of humanitarian aid" or conflating the roles of military and civilian aid workers, would be likely to result in an erosion of trust amongst local populations, compromise the operational independence of aid workers and increase the threat to their safety.[50] It should also be noted, that the picture is further complicated as NGOs are not necessarily monolithic actors, but can be dynamic and somewhat disaggregated communities – thus we are able to point to Oxfam as occupying two of the three 'proximity positions' we have discussed in this essay.

In conclusion, we suggest that because NGOs deploy a wide range of IGO focused relational strategies to influence the process of global governance, the notion that they are straightforwardly *either* 'insiders' *or* 'outsiders' in their interactions with mainstream governance organisations is something of a false dichotomy. Rather, we posit that each individual NGO, by definition, positions itself somewhere on a continuum, with full immersion within 'the system' at one end, and full opposition at the other – but with an interim nodal point in between. Some NGOs work closely with IGOs on policy development and play a normative role in establishing the principles and procedures that frame discussions and processes. Others seek to confront the status quo and invoke a new, anti-capitalist, anti-globalist world order. Yet others sit somewhere between these poles, seeking to work within the system but keep governments and IGOs at arms-length to avoid conflicts of interest. The issue of which is 'better' is dependent upon the political goals and moral frameworks that underpin the choices made by each NGO – and direct comparisons are difficult. Insiders get a seat at the top table, play a meaningful role in global governance and gain access to significant resources. However, they are required to follow the rules, conventions and economic doctrine of neo-liberalism, and so may have their independence and ability to criticise undermined. Outsiders get to avoid ideological compromise, but their influence tends to be less direct, is sometimes single issue based only and, in so far as it targets social change, is more difficult to quantify.

In short, each 'positional type' of NGO can claim victories. Each chosen position brings its own risks. All play a role in a global governance system in which authority and function are diffused.

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Written by Mark Butcher

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