

# NGOs and States in Global Politics: A Brief Review

Written by Sarah Stroup

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/03/ngos-and-states-in-global-politics-a-brief-review/>

SARAH STROUP, AUG 3 2020

Over the past three decades, the study of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in international relations (IR) has moved from a peripheral concern to the center of the field. NGOs have long been active in global politics (Davies 2014, Charnovitz 1997), but IR scholars began to take NGOs seriously in the 1990s. Today, there are many signs of the prominence of NGO scholarship. The study of NGOs has been taken up across theoretical approaches, from constructivism to realism and from institutionalism to feminism. IR scholars study NGOs' work in the issue areas of terrorism, civil war, religion, migration, finance, human rights, and environmental protection.

A persistent theme in NGO research has been the relationship between NGOs and the state. Early research on NGOs largely focused on demonstrating that they had the ability to influence state policies (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Princen and Finger 1994) and shape state interests (Finnemore 1996, Boli and Thomas 1999). While these early studies are impressively rich and complex, the IR establishment tended to collapse discussions of NGOs into debates about state power and sovereignty (Mathews 1997, Krasner 2009, though see Raustiala 1997). Thankfully, that simplified approach to NGOs is disappearing. NGO scholarship demonstrates the diverse sources of NGO power and authority that shape the many ways that NGOs and states interact. This work has been enhanced by the laudable dismantling of the IR-comparative divide, easing comparison among NGOs operating in local, national, and transnational settings.

This short review highlights two themes in recent research on NGO-state relations (for longer treatments, see here and here). I first offer a snapshot comparison of the power and authority of NGOs and states, then explore four types of relations among the two actors.

### NGOs and States: Understanding Actors on the Stage of Global Politics

The early IR field privileged attention to coercive and material power and largely focused on states (Baldwin 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, international organizations and multinational corporations (wielders of material and coercive power) did receive serious attention as actors beyond the state. Still, over the past two decades, the big policy questions – terrorism, refugee crises, civil conflict, global corporate regulation – are ones in which many non-state actors play outsized roles. New, multifaceted examinations of power and authority in global governance (Barnett and Duvall 2005, Avant et al. 2010) have thus enabled a rich comparison between states and NGOs.

Material power does matter for NGOs, as resources provide capacity and offer leverage over other actors. Compared to states, NGOs are still relatively small. World Vision is the world's largest INGO, but its annual budget of around \$2 billion only outpaces the GNI of a handful of (mostly island) states. Additionally, states are important sources of income for many INGOs (Mitchell and Schmitz 2014). The preferences of states' aid agencies can shape NGO programs and strategies (Cooley and Ron 2002, Bush 2015). Importantly, however, in many national and local contexts, NGOs are wealthy and independent from their host states. In Kenya, for example, NGOs receive almost none of their funding from the state, but sizeable international funding allows them to play a major role in service provision and governance (Brass 2016).

Beyond this coercive capacity, many other types of authority empower NGOs as they engage with states. Rarely, NGOs are delegated authority over particular policy areas or regulatory issues (Green 2013). More often, NGOs

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claim authority based on their principled commitments (Hopgood 2006) or expertise (Gourevitch, Lake, and Stein 2012; Wong 2012). Of course, states enjoy these same forms of authority too, which can create interesting contests of morals and knowledge. Some critics of NGOs celebrate the principle of broad representation advanced by democratic governments in the face of seemingly narrowly self-interested NGOs (Anderson 2009). Elsewhere, the expertise of NGOs on corporate financial reporting and taxation is contested by state regulators working with corporate allies (Seabrooke and Wigan 2015).

Authority exists in specific social relations, and thus must be cultivated with different audiences. At the global level, as few leading INGOs are authoritative in the eyes of multiple audiences, while most others are ignored (Stroup and Wong 2017). Yet these leading INGOs can struggle to achieve their goals in specific local or national contexts where states or beneficiaries do not trust them (Balboa 2018, McMahon 2017).

## Relational Dynamics in NGO-State Interactions

The popular conception of the NGO-state relationship is a confrontation between David and Goliath, where small, powerless activists take on bullying states. Yet scholars have documented many dynamics – cooperation, conflict, competition, and cooptation – in NGOs' relations with states (Najam 2000).

NGO-state *cooperation* emerges when both are committed to the same goals, as in election monitoring (Hyde 2011) and the advancement of new treaty law (Rutherford et al. 2003). Cooperation appears particularly frequent in sectors where service delivery is the primary focus. In global development, NGOs have been supported by donor governments as efficient and effective ways to advance grassroots poverty alleviation (Edwards and Hulme 1996). In DR Congo, INGOs promote attention to gender violence and prop up local legal institutions, making this site a leader in international criminal law despite broader state weaknesses (Lake 2018). When goals differ, *conflict* emerges. In human rights and environmental protection, NGOs select recalcitrant states and then target them with shaming strategies (Ron et al. 2005, Murdie and Urpelainen 2014). In illiberal states, NGOs with foreign funding or a focus on political advocacy face an increasing wave of restrictions (Dupuy et al. 2013, Christensen and Weinstein 2013).

While conflict and cooperation have received the most attention in studies of NGO-state relations, competition and cooptation are equally interesting. NGOs and states *compete* in various ways. As regulators, NGO-led private standards can displace efforts at state regulation (Auld 2014, Vogel 2008). Rarely but visibly, NGOs claim to enforce laws when states fail, as in the fascinating case of Sea Shepherd and anti-whaling laws (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Bondaroff 2014). *Cooptation* of NGOs by states is little discussed in IR. Many argue NGOs are instruments of general principles of Western culture (Boli and Thomas 1999) or liberal logics of governmentality (Sending and Neumann 2010), but this isn't the clear take-over of NGOs by states for an entirely different purpose. In the comparative politics literature, cooptation has received much attention in states like China and Georgia (Heurlin 2010, Grodsky 2012).

This typology is a rather static simplification, of course, but hopefully demonstrates that there is no modal NGO-state relationship. States and NGOs learn from one another and adapt their strategies (Brass 2016, Noakes and Teets 2018). In some cases, NGOs can shape the regulatory environments of their host states to become more favorable (Heiss 2019). Dynamics that may appear cooperative in the short term may not yield long term success. INGOs and states cooperate in responding to gender violence in DR Congo, but may contribute to the continuing fragility of the state (Lake 2018).

## Future Research Paths

To keep the discussion of NGO-state relations lively, researchers can push on a few new questions. First, it is essential to look within states and NGOs to explain cooperation and conflict, as Rich (2018) does to explain NGO-state cooperation in Brazil on HIV/AIDs. For NGO scholars, this requires close observation of or collaboration with practitioners (Mitchell et al. 2020). Second, researchers should focus on the other actors present in NGO-state interactions, particularly the business groups that are often pushing back on NGOs' call for greater regulation (Hanegraaff 2019). Finally, there is growing evidence that the golden era of NGO expansion may be over, as

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population growth rates slow (Bush and Hadden 2019) and states adopt more restrictive laws (Chaudhry 2016). Greater competition and external challenges to legitimacy might encourage NGOs to become more accountable and representative, but it is also possible that NGO influence will decline.

The IR scholarship on NGOs has unearthed new insights on NGO-state relations but avoided a myopic focus on the state. NGOs work with the full array of global actors – international organizations, global corporations, labor groups, religious institutions, peacekeepers – to affect global policy, deliver important services, and advance social change. Wonderfully interdisciplinary and tackling all levels of analysis, the NGO research community should resist attempts by the still-state-centric IR subfield to caricature the complex dynamics of NGO-state relations.

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