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1 NGOs, International Relations and the UN System – Introductory Observations

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become an integral part of the United Nations (UN). Since their increasing recognition as influential actors in global affairs, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the UN realized the benefits of working with them. Over the course of the last decade, the UN opened up for more interaction with NGOs and created diverse ways of bringing them into its system. In this book I explore how NGOs reacted to this increase in opportunities for participation with the UN. Instead of concentrating on NGO influence on the UN – as most research has done so far – this work focuses on the NGOs themselves. It examines the following questions: how have NGOs responded to increasing possibilities for interaction with the UN since the mid-1990s? And what accounts for different NGO responses?

This study reveals that NGOs have changed their interaction with the UN over the last decade. NGOs responded to increasing options and prospects for interaction by adjusting their patterns of activity vis-à-vis the UN. Though the opening of the UN system to NGO participation constituted the precondition for a shift in their activities, different organizations adjusted their patterns to varying degrees. Several factors account for this variation. In this work I show that such differences can be explained by how NGOs organize their representation to the UN and by how their accreditation with the UN is perceived. These factors, in turn, are highly dependent on the characteristic features of NGOs, that is, their composition and their functions.

This book explores the relationship between NGOs and the UN through eight single cases. The NGOs analysed are some of the most renowned players on the international scene: Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), the Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH), the International League for Human Rights

(ILHR), CARE International, the International Save the Children Alliance (ISCA), Oxfam International and Action Aid Alliance (AAA). Their individual relationships with the UN are traced over time and contrasted to each other, paying particular attention to changes since the mid-1990s. Based on expert interviews conducted with NGO representatives and UN staff members, this work presents new and original information about NGOs and their activities in international relations.

In this introduction I lay out my argument regarding NGO adjustments in their patterns of activity to the UN system and set it into the context of current research on societal actors and their involvement in international relations. I first explore NGO participation in global affairs and their relationship with intergovernmental organizations. In this context, I also outline the focus of present studies on NGOs and their relationship with the UN. Then, I explore how current theoretical approaches present the NGO relationship with the UN and reveal the gaps in these studies, showing how the theoretical framework of my study fits into the body of academic work on societal actors and official institutions. I also explain the research design and the methodology and, finally, briefly outline the structure of the book.

NGO participation in global affairs

NGOs have become prominent players on the international scene over the last decade (Salamon 1994; Mathews 1997). Their growth has surpassed that of intergovernmental organizations, and made them a visible participant in global affairs. Since the early 1990s, the number of NGOs increased continuously and reached almost 6600 by the year 2004. The growth of IGOs, by contrast, decreased in recent years. Since the late 1980s, when IGO numbers peaked at 309, they have slowly dropped to 238 (Union of International Association 2004). In the 1980s, the ratio of NGOs to IGOs stood at 15 : 1, whereas today the relation is 28 : 1.

NGOs have grown not only in numbers, but also in reach: they have become increasingly transnational. Many organizations that initially worked within the domestic sphere gradually expanded beyond national boundaries. Some NGOs founded new branches of their organization in several other states (for example, Amnesty International, Greenpeace International or CARE International). Others gradually became international by merging with organizations with similar aims and goals. They founded an international federative body to coordinate and develop common strategies or expanded their international scope by integrating other national organizations into the international federation (like the Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme, Friends of the Earth International or Oxfam International).

Today, NGOs work in a variety of issue-areas and promote a wide range of aims and goals. Most prominent NGO involvement occurs in the fields of human rights, environment, women's rights, development assistance, humanitarian aid, peace, and family issues (Smith 1997: 47; Keck and Sikkink 1998a: 11; Boli and Thomas 1999b: 42). However, NGOs are also active in politically volatile arenas such as disarmament and military surveillance (Price 1998; Rutherford 2000; Fitzduff and Church 2004). Moreover, they also engage in what has often been called 'non-political matters' such as leisure activities, recreation clubs and sports associations (Rittberger and Boekle 1996; Kim 1999).

Many NGOs nowadays seek to shape the proceedings and outcomes of international negotiations. NGOs are most visibly active outside of the venues in which governmental representatives meet and discuss international treaties and agreements. The anti-globalization protests in Seattle and beyond attracted large numbers of nationally and internationally operating NGOs. These occasions clearly revealed their potential to affect international decision making processes. In addition, the extent and the intensity of participation on the part of NGOs in the events showed their capacity for mobility and networking across borders (Smith and Johnston 2002; Andretta *et al.* 2003; van Rooy 2004).

However, NGOs are also often directly involved in designing programmes and policies, and therefore shape political processes from inside the official arenas. In particular, NGOs contributed to the proceedings of the world conferences of the early 1990s (Messner and Nuscheler 1996; also Schechter 2001) not only as outside spectators but also as official participants. Around 1400 NGOs officially took part in the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 (Clark *et al.* 1998: 18), up to 150 nations had NGO representatives for the preparatory meetings or the actual conference on their governmental delegations (Princen and Finger 1994b: 4), and the island state of Vanuatu even placed its delegation in the hands of an NGO (Mathews 1997: 55).

Although NGO–IGO relations have become particularly intense over the last decade, they have a long tradition. Both types of organizations were already interlinked in several ways during the nineteenth century when they worked hand-in-hand on important issues during international congresses (Charnovitz 1997: 191). NGOs interacted with the League of Nations and gave presentations before committees, submitted reports and participated in discussions (Hüfner 1995: 15). NGOs were also involved in the early phases of the UN because the US delegation invited 42 NGOs to send representatives as consultants to the founding conference in San Francisco (Robins 1960; Charnovitz 1997: 251).

Today, it is especially international NGOs which aim at working together with intergovernmental organizations (Anheier *et al.* 2001: 5; Smith *et al.* 1998: 396–7). Of these, the UN has become a major target. In the aftermath of the conference series of the early 1990s, many NGOs sought to become formally accredited to the UN and applied for consultative status in order to stabilize their relations. As a result, the total number of NGOs registered at the UN has risen to a striking level: from the introduction of the status in the 1940s to mid-2005, the number of accredited NGOs has increased from 40 to 2614 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2005). In response, many other IGOs, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Council of Europe, followed the example of the UN and set up directives for cooperation with NGOs.

In reaction to the increasing significance of NGOs in international affairs, the UN began working more closely with them. As part of the reform process after the end of the Cold War (Taylor *et al.* 1997), UN institutions offered greater possibilities for interaction with NGOs. In fact, the IGO sought 'to be open to and work closely with civil society organizations that are active in their respective sectors, and to facilitate increased consultation and co-operation between the United Nations and such organizations' (UN Doc. A/51/950 §59). Today, even the main organs take into account the opinions and contributions of NGOs. Most strikingly, since 1997 Security Council members meet regularly with NGO representatives – often even on a weekly basis – to get briefed on current affairs.

In his Millennium report, Secretary-General Kofi Annan re-emphasized that strengthening the relations between the UN and private actors constitutes a priority of his mandate. He sought '[t]o give full opportunities to non-governmental organizations and other non-state actors to make their indispensable contribution to the Organization's work' (UN Doc. A/54/2000 §367). To review the relationship between the United Nations and civil society and offer practical recommendations for improved modalities and interaction, Annan appointed a 'Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations' (UN Doc. A/57/387). Chaired by former Brazilian President Fernando Cardoso, the panel examined existing guidelines, decisions and practices that affect NGO access to and participation in UN processes. Its report, released in June 2004, provides the basis for ongoing discussions about reforming the UN system for NGO activities (UN Doc. A/58/817).

Although the NGO–UN relationship has long been of interest to political scientists (Liang 1954; Bock 1955; Stosic 1964; Chiang 1981), most academic works on the subject were only written after the mid-1990s. In many of these studies, scholars explore the relationship between NGOs and the UN by focusing on particular issue-areas of NGO activity or on the relationship between NGOs and a relevant UN organization. The majority of these works are overview studies that intend to show NGO impact on UN processes. Most often, scholars seek to demonstrate how NGOs improve their chances to affect international affairs when cooperating with intergovernmental organizations. Collections of such studies herald NGOs as the 'conscience of the world' (Willetts 1996a) or the partners for a joint 'global governance' (Weiss and Gordenker 1996; Weiss 1998).

These works have been necessary in order to show the increasing significance of NGOs and their growing recognition by intergovernmental organizations. In particular, they provide empirical evidence and concrete examples of NGO–IGO relations. Nonetheless, knowledge about the interaction between the two types of international organizations is still rather one-dimensional, as many aspects have not been sufficiently explored yet: research has focused on NGO influence on the UN, while other spectra of the relationship have been neglected. Regarding the interaction with the UN and its implications for NGOs, many scholars have pointed to a variety of possible developments; however they remain only speculative as far as specific results are concerned. My study fills at least part of this knowledge gap by focusing on the NGOs themselves and how they have adjusted the pattern of their activities with the UN.

Theoretical approaches to NGO-IGO relations

The growing involvement of NGOs on the global stage has been recognized by the social sciences in theoretical terms. International relations theory was extended to societal actors when scholars acknowledged non-governmental activity by turning away from state-centric perspectives to society-dominated views on world politics. The 'new transnationalists' examined the conditions under which NGOs gain influence on state institutions and intergovernmental organizations (Risse-Kappen 1995a). Others identified a 'boomerang effect' by which advocacy networks, including NGOs, bypass state blockages (Keck and Sikkink 1998a). Still others translated NGO participation in transnational relations into the concept of 'world culture' in which NGOs play the dominant role (Boli and Thomas 1999a).

Moreover, conceptualizations of societal activism which had developed within the domestic sphere were lifted onto the international level. That is to say, studies of societal actors and their relationship to the state were applied to internationally operating NGOs and their activities in international affairs. Scholars drew analogies from works on the national level for the study of the activities of 'transnational' social movement organizations (Princen and Finger 1994a; Smith, Chatfield and Pagnucco 1997; della Porta *et al.* 1999; Khagram *et al.* 2002); others also considered the role and limits of the 'global' civil society (Lipschutz 1992; Wapner 1997; Uvin and Weiss 1998; Taylor 2004; Centre for the Study of Global Governance 2004) or studied the 'third sector' from an international comparative perspective (Salamon *et al.* 1999; Anheier and Kendall 2001; Priller and Zimmer 2001).

Such theoretical analyses account for the importance of NGOs in world politics. In particular, these approaches show that NGO–IGO relations increase the impact of NGOs on global affairs. From working with IGOs such as the UN, NGOs gain greater opportunities to advance their objectives and to shape political processes in the international sphere. These models concentrate on explaining the influence of NGOs in world affairs, but neglect to account for the repercussion for the NGOs themselves. The theoretical literature thus provides an important but not the only perspective on the issue at stake.

Social scientists have always taken an interest in exploring societal actors and their relations with official institutions. Disciplines like sociology, political science, and economics investigate social movements, interest groups, and NGOs and their interaction with state institutions. Indeed, relations between societal actors and state institutions are one of the oldest themes of modern political science (Tocqueville 1835/1997). Of particular interest have been the rise and fall of societal activism, the reasons for the emergence of pressure groups, and the way they express their dissatisfaction with governmental politics.

Scholars have also pointed out the conflicting dynamics underlying societal activism. Economists have argued that the logic of collective action lies in individual profit: an individual of a group acts out of self-interest and not the group's interest (Olson 1965/2000). In studies on corporatism, interest groups have been shown to be dependent on state recognition and support, and are therefore caught between the conflicting interests of influence and membership (Schmitter 1979; Schmitter and Streek 1991). The American approach to interest group research argues that voluntary associations emerge to stabilize the relations between various groups in society. Interaction with the institutional environment

is inevitable if groups want to exercise political pressure through conventional lobbying of governmental institutions (Truman 1951/1971).

Of the various approaches to societal activism in relation to official institutions, works on social movement organizations capture particularly well the way NGOs interact with official institutions and its implications. Models used to analyse social movement organizations explain not only their emergence, but also the ways in which they expand and intensify their interactions with official institutions. Social movement theory is thus a dynamic theoretical construct since it focuses on the different stages of relations between societal actors and official institutions.

Studies of social movement organizations have developed into a great body of literature on the processes and dynamics of increased interaction between societal actors and the governmental environment. Scholars have explored and identified the reasons for and results of such relations, which are understood as 'institutionalization'. The argument goes that as societal actors increasingly interact with official institutions, their relationship becomes institutionalized and eventually leads them to adjust their pattern of activity. I will draw from the conclusions about this institutionalization of social movements in my study of NGO responses to extended opportunities for interacting with the UN.¹

Two major tracks of institutionalization have been identified as reasons for these adjustments. First, classic approaches to societal activism (Michels 1911/1970) and resource mobilization theory (Zald and Ash 1987/1966) argue that links between societal actors and official institutions increase *internal* factors, such as professionalization and bureaucratization which lead societal actors to change their patterns of activity in relation to the governmental actor. Second, according to neo-institutionalist theories (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 1991), adjustments in activities are due to perceived *external* factors. These have been described as 'institutional channelling' (McCarthy *et al.* 1991), and refer to the rules and regulations for relations between societal actors and official institutions. These scholars focus on the prospects for societal actors of official recognition and indirect legitimization, which in turn trigger their changed patterns of activity.

Contributions of this study

This book analyses the responses of NGOs to extended opportunities for interaction with the UN over the last decade. In principle, NGOs may participate in all processes of the UN today, however the NGOs examined in this study adjusted their patterns of activity to varying degrees. While some NGOs added new aspects to their spectrum of interaction with the UN or set different priorities, others expanded their involvement only to a limited extent. Following the theoretical approach, these differences are due to internal factors within the NGOs and external demands put on NGOs.

However, the analysis does not stop at this point, but even goes a step further and examines the reasons for such varying degrees of institutionalization. NGOs are categorized by their characteristic features, namely their transboundary composition (centralist versus federative) and their function (advocacy versus service). Applying such conceptualization of NGOs, the theoretical propositions about NGO adjustments resulting from institutionalized relations are specified and associated with these different types of NGOs. Since the NGOs selected for deeper study are representative of these characteristic features, the study accounts for the varying ways they have institutionalized their UN relations. Figure 1.1 presents the idea evaluated in this book in a simplistic way.

The argument of this book is that NGOs change their patterns of activity with the UN depending on how they have institutionalized their relations with the IGO; the degree of institutionalizing, however, depends on the NGO's characteristics. The empirical findings show that internal factors explain most of the differences in the adjustments of the NGO's patterns of activity with the UN; external demands, instead, account for less than the theoretical model suggested. That is to say, how NGOs organize their representation to the UN highly influences their patterns of activity with the UN, whereas rules and regulations for NGO consultation at the UN level are only perceived as formalities which grant access and have fewer implications than assumed. These internal and external factors, however, are themselves highly influenced by the characteristics of NGOs. Most notably, NGOs with a centralist composition, like Amnesty International and CARE International, are best capable of mobilizing resources for their UN relations, and, as a result, expanded their patterns of activity with the UN. An advocacy NGO with a federative

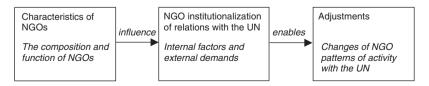


Figure 1.1 NGO institutionalization in the UN system – simplified model

structure like the Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme, by contrast, is most dependent on formal recognition by the UN.

My findings are the result of intensive qualitative research conducted for this book. Over the course of 16 months, 62 semi-standardized expert interviews (Merton and Kendall 1979; Meuser and Nagel 1991; Bogner *et al.* 2002) were conducted in order to gather the information needed for this study. The majority of interviews were conducted with current and former NGO representatives working for the respective NGOs. NGO staff members dealing with UN-related matters were also interviewed at headquarters level. In addition, information was derived from the analysis of documents (Scott 1990; Pole and Lampard 2002; Burnham *et al.* 2004). Most importantly, so-called quadrennial reports provided an excellent starting point for exploring NGO relations with the UN over time: since 1978, NGOs with the highest or second highest status at the UN are required to provide a short report on their activities within the UN system every four years.

The analysis covers changes in the relationship between the NGOs studied for this work and the UN from the mid-1990s until 2003. This time frame was chosen because the participation of NGOs at the series of conferences in the early 1990s has frequently been described as the 'turning point' in NGO–UN relations (French 1996: 254; Willetts 1996d: 59; Mathews 1997: 55). NGO involvement at these conferences became the impetus for more intense relations with the UN and triggered a review process of UN relations with NGOs (Hüfner 1996: 116; Otto 1996: 120). Thus, the information applies mainly to the last decade, but in order to portray the changes that have taken place over time, the NGO–UN relationship needs to be traced back to the 1980s and 1970s in some circumstances.

As far as terminology is concerned, in this work, 'NGOs' are the subject of analysis. The term was originally coined by the UN in Article 71 of the Charter to apply to international organizations which had links to the IGO but were not governmental; over the years, the term also found widespread application outside the UN context. Although it has been a subject of controversial and sometimes contradictory definitions, 'NGO' remains the most widely applied notion in academic works. Elsewhere, I have defined NGOs as *international, independent* and *formal societal actors* (Martens 2002). The notion of 'societal actors' should be understood as an umbrella term which encompasses the various expressions deriving from the different approaches to social activism, such as social movements, interest groups, NGOs and so on. The term 'societal actor' thus serves as a means to avoid permanent specification of divergent notions.

10 NGOs and the United Nations

	-			
	Membership	Criteria	NGO Status	Example
Intergovernmental Organization	Only governmental members	Links to NGO	NGO links not routine	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
	Only governmental members		NGO links routine	United Nations
	Governments and NGOs	NGO status in the international organization	Government dominant status	International Labour Organization
	Governments and NGOs		Equal status	International Committee of the Red Cross
	Governments and NGOs		NGOs dominant	Birdlife International
	Only NGO members	Governmental funding	Governmental funding welcome	International Planned Parent- hood Federation
Nongovernmental Organization	Only NGO members		Government funding not accepted	Amnesty International

Source: Willetts (1996b: 8) with own additions.

The term 'international organizations' encompasses all kinds of organizations (NGOs and IGOs) which operate across borders (see Table 1.1). 'Inter*governmental* organizations', by contrast, are those international organizations which are set up by agreement between at least two states and their governments (Bennett and Oliver 2002: 2; Rittberger and Zangl 2003: 26–7). 'UN system' is used as an umbrella expression for all bodies and agencies of the UN. This includes UN bodies mentioned in the Charter and the independent UN specialized agencies. NGO 'pattern of activity' refers to different types of interactions NGOs carry out in the UN system. NGO 'institutionalization' refers to a relationship between NGOs and the UN which changes the way that NGOs work with the UN. Such changes in the patterns of activity are called NGO 'adjustments' and explored in more detail in this book.

Organization of the book

Chapter 2 deals with theoretical approaches to the NGO–IGO relationship. First, I examine current accounts of NGOs as to why they seek interaction with the UN. Secondly, I develop the guiding theoretical approach for this research. Based on approaches to social movement organizations, the dimensions of the process of 'institutionalization' are explored in greater depth. I also introduce the two characteristic axes by which types of NGOs are distinguished: composition and function. I then briefly describe the cases chosen for deeper study in this work. The following three chapters present the empirical data. Each chapter contains a brief first section in which I explore general tendencies, followed by more specific parts for every individual NGO.

In Chapter 3, NGO adjustments in their patterns of activity within the UN context are the subject of deeper analysis. According to the operationalization of the dependent variable in the theoretical chapter, I examine NGO activities with the UN. I show how the NGOs responded to increasing interaction with the UN, and adjusted their pattern of activity with the IGO differently. In Chapter 4, I explore internal structures of NGOs in terms of their relations with the UN, examining NGO representation and representatives to the UN. In Chapter 5, I analyse external settings for NGO relations with the UN, exploring the NGOs' perception of rules and regulations for their accreditation to the UN system in detail. Moreover, in these two chapters I show how those two independent variables of internal structures and external settings are influenced by the characteristics of NGOs.

In the concluding Chapter 6, I summarize the findings of this study with reference to the theoretical assumptions about the causes of NGO adjustments in their patterns of activity with the UN. Their implications are embedded in the broader context of NGO studies and international relations. Finally, I indicate subjects for further research in response to the findings of my study.

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