# Threatening the Moral Authority of NGOs: Inequality in the World Polity and the Advent of Regressive Globalisation

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For a long time, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were viewed predominantly as socially and morally progressive organisations. Yet, this dominant perception of NGOs as do-gooders has been challenged in recent decades – especially after 9/11. As David Lewis points out aptly, "[l]ong gone are the days when NGOs could simply rely on the 'moral high ground' to give them legitimacy and justify their work" (2007: 11). Criticisms have come not only from the traditional left and developing countries, but also from the (neo-) conservative right. The former criticise NGOs for "supporting or facilitating neo-liberal policy orthodoxies" and the latter see "NGOs as potentially harmful to [a country's] foreign policy and business interests" (Lewis 2007: 10).

This essay focuses on two of the many potential challenges to the political claims of NGOs: the inequality in the world polity and regressive globalisation. The first challenge refers to the predominance of Western NGOs in the world polity and resulting legitimation problems. The second challenge refers to the ascendency of actors who favour globalisation only when it is in their own interest and who do not take into account "negative consequences for others" (Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius 2003: 5). As an analytical starting point, this essay relies on the assumption that the political claims of NGOs rest for a large part on their authority to act, which – following Weber – in turn is based on their power and legitimacy to act. Following Hall and Biersteker, political claims of NGOs are seen to depend mostly on their possession of "moral authority", which is in turn based on their agenda-setting potential, their possession of expertise and their reputation as a neutral and normatively progressive force (2002: 14). This essay will highlight how the inequality in the world polity and regressive globalisation might impact on NGOs' authority.

The first section argues that the world polity is characterised by severe inequality, arguing that NGOs are predominantly from rich Western countries, and consequently points out that this inequality has consequences for NGOs' claims to universality and representativeness – problematising their independence and normatively progressive nature. The second section points to the recent ascendency of self-interested regressive globalisation and argues this could pose a threat to the political claims of NGOs, because it endangers the previously receptive habitat of NGOs and concurrently also their agenda-setting potential, funding opportunities and independence. The conclusion restates the threats to the political claims of NGOs and assesses their urgency.

## Inequality in the World Polity: Problematising the Independence and Normatively Progressive Nature of NGOs

In Inequality in the World Polity: The Structure of International Organization Jason Beckfield shows that the world polity is dominated by the West. Defining 'membership' of a country to an NGO as "at least one organisation or resident of [a] country" belonging to the NGO, he finds that "[m]emberships in international nongovernmental organisations are distributed as unequally as world income, and this inequality has decreased only slightly, or remained stable, since 1960" (2003: 406, 420). Importantly, Beckfield further qualifies this inequality, drawing on world systems theory and Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' for conceptual background. He finds

formidable evidence that "[r]ich, core, Western states and societies dominate the world polity, which implies that the world culture produced in the world polity [...] may be strongly influenced by [these] powerful states" (2003: 418). His descriptive statistics and analysis clearly show that especially poor and peripheral countries have few membership ties to NGOs, which additionally have not grown significantly over the last forty years in relation to Western countries' membership ties.

This inequality in the world polity has as a practical effect that most of the NGOs that claim to represent 'global civil society' and values such as development and human rights have few if any membership ties to the countries in which they put these values into practice and on behalf of whom they lobby. Most 'service providing' NGOs, such as development oriented NGOs, are based in the West. Although many of the larger organisations such as Oxfam or CARE have some membership ties to developing countries, these ties remain weak. For instance, Oxfam International consists of a confederation of thirteen organisations based in thirteen Western countries (with the possible – but explicable – exception of Oxfam Hong Kong) with members of the executive boards all residing in these countries (Oxfam International Annual Report 2006: 2). Although it must be noted that Oxfam is committed to consultation with local partners and stakeholders, decision-making remains firmly a Western preoccupation. Similarly, only one member organisation of the CARE international confederation is not based in the West, namely CARE Thailand. Conversely, many 'advocacy' NGOs, Amnesty International being a prominent example, have much stronger ties to non-Western countries – with local offices and members across the world. Amnesty International has "more than 2.2 million members, supporters and subscribers in over 150 countries and territories, in every region of the world" (2008). Yet, if we look at the membership of the Executive Committee of Amnesty International, residents of non-Western countries are notable for their absence (although some have been born in non-Western countries, all have been educated and live in the West). These examples are merely the tip of the iceberg. Beckfield does well to point out that – on the whole – citizens and organisations from non-Western countries are severely underrepresented in the world polity.

What, then, are the consequences of this inequality in the world polity for the political claims of NGOs? The underrepresentation of non-Western countries poses a major challenge to NGOs' reputation as neutral and normatively progressive actors and subsequently to their moral authority. On one extreme, "it is argued that NGOs are merely the 'handmaidens of capitalist change', with little serious concern for effective poverty alleviation strategies. They are seen and the 'modernisers and destroyers of local economies', introducing Western values and bringing about 'economicide'" (Kaldor 2003: 93; note this is not Kaldor's opinion). Arguably, this is an overly pessimistic view of NGOs, but it does point to the problem that NGOs – being mostly based on Western values – are not necessarily seen by everyone as independent and normatively progressive actors. In the end, they represent the interests and values of their organisation and their members, which in many cases have a Western cultural background. Kenneth Anderson and David Rieff do well to point out that, although many international NGOs claim to represent the peoples of the world, they – like in domestic civil society – do not represent anyone else but themselves and their own visions and/or interests (2005).

Next to the abovementioned extreme example of a perception of NGOs as agents of 'modernisation and economicide' the doctrine of universal human rights provides another good illustration of the cultural relativity of NGOs' values. A substantial number of non-Western governments (and human rights scholars) denounce the idea of 'universal' human rights (as laid down in – to name but a few – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). Most important in this regard is the West-centrism (in the application) of these rights: the aforementioned non-Western governments argue that economic, social and cultural rights have been underrepresented in the current 'universal' human rights regime. They say that when conflict arises between certain economic, social and cultural rights and certain civil and political rights their culture prescribes precedence of the former over the latter (whereas Western culture – and importantly many prominent NGOs such as Amnesty International – prescribe precedence of civil and political rights over economic, social and cultural rights). Although some commentators rightly see this opposition as attempts by autocratic governments to maintain their sovereignty, other commentators have equally appropriately pointed to the culturally relative nature of human rights – drawing special attention to the Western bias in the current 'universal' human rights regime. Again, (predominantly Western) NGOs which base their advocacy on the universality of human rights are in effect advocating particular rights which may not be universally held at all. In

all, these examples point to the fact that NGOs' claims to universality and representativeness are unwarranted. Coupled with the domination of the world polity by the West, which was discussed above, this could lead to a legitimacy crisis in NGOs – calling into question the independence and progressiveness of NGOs.

An important mechanism through which the inequality in the world polity could initially impede on the political claims of NGOs would be discursive delegitimation (which can already be observed to some extent). When this discursive delegitimation reaches a critical mass – i.e. when most states, citizens, international organisations, etc. view NGOs as particularistic actors instead of neutral and normatively progressive ones – NGOs will lose an important basis for their authority. A corollary of such a development could be decreased access to decision-makers and decreased funding, which could in turn result in less agenda-setting potential and less expertise. The conclusion will come back to this 'doomsday' scenario for NGOs' political claims. It is now time to consider another challenge to the political claims of NGOs: the threat to their habitat.

**Regressive Globalisation: Endangering NGOs' Habitat**

Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier and Marlies Glasius refer to regressive globalisers as "individuals, groups, firms or even governments that favour globalisation when it is in their particular interest and irrespective of any negative consequences for others" (2003: 5). They argue that these actors view the world from a zero-sum game and nation-state perspective (i.e. the want to get the most out of globalisation for those they represent).Although these groups have always been present, they have come to the fore since 9/11 – the unilateralist Bush administration as well as militant transnational religious and nationalist groups being prime examples. One could question whether Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius are justified in stigmatizing certain actors as purely 'regressive globalisers', since this concept seems more like a Weberian ideal-type than a real-world example: even relatively unilateralist Bush administration does not think purely in terms of national interest and does not always attempt to 'use' globalisation for its own goals irrespective of other's interests.

Yet, what is interesting for our essay is not the question whether regressive globalisers really exist in such a pure form, but what the consequences are of the rise of these actors for NGOs. Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius are particularly fearful of a dominancy of regressive (who think and act unilaterally) and rejectionist (who reject globalisation as such) globalisers, which might cause polarisation – consequently "squeezing the middle" (2003: 30). As will be argued below, the changes in the geo-political environment following 9/11 have resulted in challenges to the "infrastructure of global civil society and the broad value base of cosmopolitanism" threatening NGOs' previously comfortable habitat (Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius 2003: 29).

Although Kaldor, Anheier and Glasius are not particularly clear on how the above-mentioned challenges might affect NGOs, it is possible to speculate on how they might threaten the three ways in which NGOs exercise moral authority. Sidney Tarrow makes an interesting argument when he points out that "[i]nternational institutions serve as a kind of 'coral reef', helping to form horizontal connections among activists with similar claims across boundaries" providing as it were a political space for contentious politics (2001: 15). In a related manner, it has also been argued that international NGOs have thriven in recent decades because of a new 'governmentality' in which states and international organisations provide access to and promote international NGOs (Sending and Neumann 2006). As mentioned above, Kaldor points to the possibility of another, recent, change in governmentality that might threaten NGOs, noting that

"the global unilateralism of the United States, as expressed not only through the war on terror but also the repudiation of treaties like global climate change or the international criminal court, and interference in the functioning of international institutions, undermines both the concrete achievements of global civil society as well as its norms and values; it marks a return to geopolitics and the language of realism and national interest (2003: 148).

Unilateralist policies by regressive globalisers and critiques of NGOs by neo-conservative organisations such as NGO Watch as well as transnational groups that see NGOs as agents of theUnited Stateshave created an increasingly less hospitable environment for NGOs – in which claims previously made against NGOs are aggravated. As a result of this return – by some states – to an older (state-centric) governmentality and as a result of increased

attention to the (alleged) deficits of NGOs, NGOs might expect to see a loss in access (less agenda-setting authority), funding (less scope and expertise) and/or independence (less neutrality).

Firstly, as mentioned above, NGOs thrive partly because they have access to and are taken seriously by decision-makers in states and international organisations. NGOs can only set the agenda of decision-makers if these decision-makers value or at least acknowledge their input. In this sense, unilateralism by regressive globalisers may 'squeeze' those in the middle, i.e. NGOs – who find that they face reduced agenda-setting possibilities and hence have less moral authority. Secondly and in a similar manner, regressive globalisers are less likely to provide funding for NGO activity that does not directly serve their narrow interests. Thirdly and importantly, funding is more likely to be tied to specific projects and subject to tighter regulations, which would greatly reduce NGO independence/neutrality (Lewis 2007: 10). Additionally, perceived problems of NGO accountability may lead countries to tighten up national regulations and oversight, which can decrease NGO scope for manoeuvre and increase their administrative burdens. Because of scarcer funds and a shorter leash, a troublesome situation might arise in which NGOs may have to choose between losing their 'voice' or losing their funding. One can currently observe in Iraq that NGOs, which are funded by USAID and need the logistical support of the US, have little independence in the sense that they cannot voice critical opinions and have to act in accordance with US demands (Sunga 2007: 115). In general, the post-9/11 environment is less hospitable to NGOs, but it remains to be seen to what degree this second 'doomsday' scenario is unfolding before our eyes.

**Conclusions**

This essay has discussed two potential challenges to the political claims of NGOs, which has been assumed to rest largely on their moral authority to act, which in turn is for a large part derived from their capacity to set the political agenda, their expertise and their perceived neutrality and normative progressiveness. Firstly, inequality in the world polity – in other words the domination of the world polity by the West – has been presented as a serious challenge to the assumption that NGOs are representative, neutral and progressive actors, revealing that NGOs are not neutral (often prescribing Western values) and subsequently not necessarily normatively progressive (since the norms they advocate are not seen as beneficial by all; they are merely the values of the NGO, not of the world population). Secondly, regressive globalisation has been viewed as a potential challenge to the habitat of NGOs: the institutional framework and governmentality favourable to NGOs is – to a certain extent – being replaced by more unilateral action, compromising NGOs' ability to set the agenda, obtain funding and maintain their independence.

How serious are these challenges? Regarding inequality in the world polity, the most intractable problem for authority of NGOs seems to relate to their claim to representativeness – which as Anderson and Rieff point out, is not valid, since NGOs necessarily only represent their own interests and values (2005). Yet, Anderson and Rieff further draw our attention to the undeniable expertise and competence of NGOs and argue that NGOs should focus on these as the bases of their legitimacy, "giving up the pretensions […] of the ideology of global civil society" (Anderson and Rieff 2005: 38). Even though basic conceptions of fairness and appropriateness point to the necessity of greater representation of developing countries in the agents of their own development, the underrepresentation of non-Western countries is not necessarily an intractable problem as long as both governments and general public opinion (in the West and in non-Western countries) continue to see NGOs as providing effective and especially appropriate services. For instance, most humanitarian relief organisations seem to have the approval of donors as well as recipients in most cases – even though these organisations are largely based in the West and based on Western values. Yet, it remains to be seen how realistic Anderson and Rieff's proposed abandonment of claims of universality and representation is, since many NGOs consciously rely on these claims in order to gain access, funding, etc. Inter-NGO competition further increases this tendency to make claims of universalism and representation – since those NGOs forsaking these claims would put themselves at a disadvantage.

The impact of regressive globalisation on the political claims of NGOs is even more difficult to assess. As it stands, it seems that the alarm of Kaldor, Anheier und Glasius might be slightly premature. Although including powerful actors, regressive globalisers are still in the minority – and the extent to which important actors like theUnited States are (or will remain) truly regressive remains unclear. Yet, one important effect of the recent changes in the international environment (and one to which regressive globalisers have contributed significantly) is the increased attention to the

role, nature and 'problems' of NGOs, who can no longer solely rely on the 'moral high ground' as a source of legitimacy.

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