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NGOs and Transnational Non-State Politics

Thomas Davies

The notion that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are influential in contemporary world politics needs little introduction. Notable literature on the apparent ‘rise’ of NGOs in the three decades since the end of the Cold War has highlighted the impact of NGOs both on the domestic politics of states (for instance, Keck and Sikkink 1998) and on intergovernmental diplomacy (for example, Willetts 2011). Although representing a welcome shift away from the state-centrism of much of the predominant scholarship on international relations of the Cold War era, approaches such as these retain states and intergovernmental relations as a primary focus, with NGOs relegated to a secondary role influencing states and intergovernmental bodies.

Deserving greater attention than has often been applied in the past is the role of NGOs in playing a significant role in world politics without recourse to influencing states or intergovernmental diplomacy to bring about political change. The possibilities of ‘politics beyond the state’ were indicated in a pioneering article by Wapner (1995) and in the period since a promising research agenda has developed with respect to the nature and influence of transnational non-state politics.

In this brief overview, I will highlight four key dimensions of NGOs’ contributions to world politics bypassing states and intergovernmental diplomacy: (i) advocacy targeting non-state actors; (ii) transnational service provision; (iii) transnational governance; and (iv) facilitating a parallel transnational society to the international society of states. The subsequent discussion considers limitations to transnational non-state politics and the challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 crisis.

Four Contributions of NGOs to Transnational Non-State Politics

The first dimension of transnational non-state politics I would like to highlight is transnational non-state advocacy. In contrast to traditional accounts of the influence of NGOs’ advocacy work in bringing about change through the targeting of states and intergovernmental forums, here the focus is on advocacy targeting other non-state actors or the behaviour of individuals. In his study of environmental ‘politics beyond the state’, for example, Wapner (1995) highlighted environmental NGOs’ ability to bring about change by encouraging individuals to transform their behaviour through their responsiveness to public education campaigns, for instance those promoting the desirability of recycling voluntarily. Alternatively NGOs may adopt a wide range of strategies to encourage transnational corporations to change their behaviour, both through negative pressure such as in promoting consumer boycotts, and through cooperative processes such as project collaboration (Newell 2001).

The other best-known dimension of transnational non-state politics is the provision of services directly by NGOs, potentially acting as a substitute where one might normally expect states to be the primary service providers. In some cases the development assistance budgets of NGOs have exceeded those of OECD member states (Koch 2009, xiii), while the reproductive health services of the International Planned Parenthood Federation have exceeded in number those provided by many governments (Davies 2019a, 65). An often-overlooked further form of NGO transnational service provision is globally interchangeable professional qualifications (Rego 2019).

Although much of the literature on global governance places a primary emphasis on intergovernmental cooperation, a promising strand of research has highlighted the importance of NGOs in transnational governance bypassing states and intergovernmental institutions. A core focus has been upon business associations and their private international standards and dispute resolution procedures such as those of the International Chamber of Commerce (Cutler 2014). Also noteworthy are private certification schemes in the environmental and trade domains such as those of the Forest Stewardship Council and FairTrade International, respectively.

Recent years have witnessed proliferation in initiatives for private sector self-regulation, with institutions such as Accountable Now regulating the conduct of participating international NGOs and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) setting standards not only for participating NGOs but also for wider private international actors, including nearly three-quarters of the world's largest transnational corporations (GRI 2020). Initiatives such as these, it has been argued, may provide institutions of mutual recognition and standardised appropriate conduct constituting and regulating transnational actors in transnational society in an analogous manner to the functioning of institutions such as sovereignty and international law in constituting and regulating states in international society (Davies 2019b).

Challenges for Transnational Non-State Politics

Although the variety of manifestations of transnational non-state politics is expansive, there are considerable limitations to their reach, impact, and efficacy. In the case of NGO advocacy targeting transnational corporations, for example, it might be considered to be far less effective than governmental action has the potential to be, and it may even through serving as a substitute for state action help enable corporations to avoid potentially more rigorous regulation by states. Non-state service provision, on the other hand, has been critiqued for a great range of problems, including 'project-duplication, waste, incompatible goals, and collective inefficiency' given the numerous competing NGOs involved (Cooley and Ron 2002, 17). Non-state service provision has also been critiqued for effectively contributing to a 'process of privatisation by NGO' and potentially helping 'accelerate state withdrawal from service provision' and complementing a neoliberal economic agenda (Harvey 2006, 51-51).

A frequently noted problem with transnational non-state governance initiatives relates to their questionable accountability and legitimacy, both in relation to those they claim to serve, and in relation to their donors (Walton, Davies, Thrandardottir, and Keating, 2016). Given their dependence on funding from actors with ample resources, non-state service providers and governance initiatives may reproduce rather than challenge global inequalities (Amutabi 2006).

In recent years, the resurgence of authoritarian forms of national governance has been perceived as having diminished the opportunities for transnational non-state politics to flourish (Heiss 2017). The recent COVID-19 crisis may have exacerbated this problem, as governments have often adopted centralized approaches closing borders and enforcing lockdowns. A particularly significant challenge arising from the coronavirus crisis appears to have been the diminution of funding to non-state service providers, with some calling for a global liquidity fund for humanitarian NGOs (O'Connell 2020).

Despite these problems, COVID-19 has also been perceived to have opened up opportunities for transnational non-state politics, especially given the numerous noted failures of both state and intergovernmental institutions in addressing the pandemic. NGOs have been playing a vital role in the provision of humanitarian and medical assistance where states have been unable to meet

demand, and non-state actors have been vital in public health education and the development and provision of treatments (BOND 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has also been perceived to have provided new opportunities for transnational advocacy and the promotion of alternative ways of life, having brought to attention the failures of existing dominant structures in world politics. According to the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (2020), the current crisis has provided the context for:

an increasing emergence and visibility of an immense variety of radical alternatives to th[e] dominant regime [which] range from initiatives with a specific focus like sustainable and holistic agriculture, community led water/energy/food sovereignty, solidarity and sharing economies, worker control of production facilities, resource/knowledge commons, and inter-ethnic peace and harmony, to more holistic or rounded transformations such as those being attempted by the Zapatista in Chiapas and the Kurds in Rojava.

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Thomas Davies is Senior Lecturer in International Politics at City, University of London. He is the author of *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society* (Hurst and OUP, 2014) and he is the editor of the *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations* (Routledge, 2019). His chapter 'Transnational Non-State Politics' in the *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations* explores the themes in this paper in more depth.