

# **NGOs and Transnational Networks**

**Wild Cards in World Politics**

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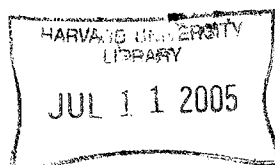
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## Introduction

Observing world politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seem to be everywhere, and they often work in mysterious ways. If omnipotence remains yet out of reach, it is not for lack of effort, since NGOs cumulatively claim to be able to do almost anything in world politics, from feeding famine victims and protecting endangered species, to eliminating nuclear weapons and AIDS, to democratizing Russia and the Arab world.

NGOs are both prominent and obscure in world politics. They are prominent, for example, in organizing massive street protests in February 2003 against the U.S. "War on Terror."<sup>1</sup> NGOs are also obscure, for example, as shadow partners in international legal maneuvers. Chilean General Augusto Pinochet found himself stranded in London for more than a year—from November 1998 to January 2000—while the British government considered whether to extradite him to Spain. Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon had charged Pinochet with crimes against humanity for acts of torture and killing after the 1973 coup, which overthrew Chilean President Salvador Allende. While the affair was ostensibly a negotiation between two governments, the deeper political process was catalyzed at every stage by human rights NGOs. Operating largely behind the scenes, a network of NGOs had initiated the original indictment in Spain, and promoted Pinochet's extradition across Europe and North America. However, Amnesty International—the prominent human rights NGO based in London—had penetrated the case so deeply that a decision by a panel of British law lords was reversed when personal links by one of the lords to Amnesty were revealed.<sup>2</sup> Britain finally denied the extradition and returned Pinochet to Chile for health reasons. Nevertheless, a spokesman for Human Rights Watch declared, "The Pinochet decision was a wake-up call to dictators around the world. If you torture somebody today, you can get arrested for it tomorrow almost anywhere."<sup>3</sup>

NGOs are actively engaged at both the top and the bottom of world politics. At the top, the U.S. National Security Council guiding American foreign policy consisted of 99 policy assistants in 1999, more than a third of whom were on loan from non-profit think-

tanks and NGOs.<sup>4</sup> During the Rwandan genocide from April to July 1994, Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch briefed both the UN Security Council in New York and the U.S. National Security Council in Washington, DC with real-time information on the course of the killings.<sup>5</sup> The bottom of world politics is so densely populated with grassroots NGOs operating in every region that counting them has become a cottage industry among scholars and officials. For example, Charles William Maynes, president of the Eurasia Foundation, reports that 80,000 NGOs have somehow sprung up in Russia since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>6</sup> UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali pleaded for help from tens of thousands of grassroots NGOs to persuade member nations to support United Nations activities: "I wish to state, as clearly as possible—I need the mobilizing power of NGOs."<sup>7</sup>

The NGO organizational form has become so irresistible that a broad assortment of notables, missionaries, and miscreants are creating their own NGOs. Middle-power governments are privatizing some of their diplomatic functions to NGOs. For example, International Crisis Group, an "early warning" NGO headed by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, strives to head off emerging conflicts by collecting and analyzing information whose sensitivity ranges somewhere between investigative reporting and strategic intelligence.<sup>8</sup> Christian churches in Africa undergo "NGO-ization" as African clergy rely on networks of international relief and development NGOs for communication, transportation, and general support.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, some of the shadier operators in world politics cloak criminal activities under NGOs to gain the veneer of respectability. Before his mysterious murder in January 2000, Arkan, the Serbian paramilitary leader, indicted war criminal, and smuggler/businessman, founded and supported his own charitable foundation, "The Third Child."<sup>10</sup> The U.S. government has frozen the assets of certain international Islamic charities, accusing them of channeling aid to terrorist groups.<sup>11</sup> Top Israeli leaders have been accused of illegally passing foreign campaign donations through non-profit organizations.<sup>12</sup>

NGOs do work in mysterious ways. While they sometimes achieve much more than promised, frequently they accomplish much less. Their real significance is that NGOs *often create inadvertent political consequences whose impact is more important than either success or failure in reaching official goals*. The influence of NGOs in world politics is greater than either their boosters or their detractors claim.

If NGOs are rarely what they seem, then political analysis of NGOs ought to include a measure of skepticism, even irreverence, concerning the sacred global norms they claim to serve. For example, NGOs are conventionally categorized according to the norms articulated in their mandates. Government officials, international organizations, scholars, journalists, and the general public all follow this lead and conceptualize NGOs within issue-areas of related normative goals, such as human rights, humanitarian relief, or environmentalism. With a dose of agnosticism introduced into our internationalist faith, we may find it conceivable that these issue-area boundaries are not the best points of departure for analyzing the politics of NGOs.

This book aims to analyze NGOs across all these issue-areas. The point of departure here is not the norms NGOs proclaim, but the structure of transnational action they share, a common structure that forms the basis of seemingly infinite tactical variations. Norms and ideas are not disregarded (this is not a materialist analysis), but neither are they taken at face value.

This structure of transnational action shared by all NGOs is spelled out in chapter 2. One element of that structure may be touched upon here, however, to indicate the unconventional approach taken in this book. Whatever its issue-area, every NGO articulates a promise of future progress and gives supporters a taste of that promise today. NGOs move people and influence events as much by evoking a progressive future as by taking action in the present. To make a better future *feel possible*, or at least a bit less impossible, may be enough to sustain an NGO project. For example, Amnesty International and the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina promise a world of universal respect for human rights; CARE, Oxfam, and Save the Children promise a better life for the poor; Greenpeace promises protection for endangered species and ecosystems.

With all due respect to these authentic human aspirations, which I happen to share, the NGOs that evoke them take rather tiny steps toward utopia in any particular year or decade. Moreover, at the level of NGO operations, to make even these small steps requires amalgamating the conflicting self-interests of societal and political partners in several countries. One core challenge for NGO professionals, therefore, is to infuse very small steps with very large meanings, and thereby either to transform or obscure the self-interests of partners.

This challenge is to evoke a progressive future and to make that future present today. In this view, the NGO pledging "sustainable

development" by distributing condoms is attempting something like the sacramental rite of the priest evoking the Kingdom of God, the revolutionary praxis of the agitator prodding history toward the classless society, or the medieval alchemist mixing base ingredients to make gold.

And yet—if it would not ruin the magic—one is tempted to ask a few political questions: Who benefits from faith in progress in this particular form? What alternate political faith is displaced? What is the impact on local society of importing money, ideas, and international linkages? I would suggest that another metaphor is most apt: NGOs are wild cards in world politics—their impact is up for grabs, and they attract local and global actors who compete, and sometimes cooperate, to play, capture, or neutralize them.

As NGOs have proliferated in numbers and influence, especially in the last decade, a growing body of scholarship has addressed the NGO bloom (see chapter 2). However, many analysts tend to celebrate and promote the NGOs they profile. The tendency by scholars to credit utopian promises based on mundane practices reflects the self-understanding of NGOs themselves. Such scholarship identifies too closely with NGO goals and reiterates in theory the self-legitimizing discourse of NGOs. The tunnel vision of such approaches fails to reveal the politics of NGOs in its full range and complexity. This book, in contrast, portrays NGOs and their networks as international institutions in which political conflict is inherent, not incidental. Instead of tunnel vision, it cultivates "peripheral vision" to perceive unintended side effects. The proliferation of NGOs does indeed transform world politics, but often not in the directions that NGO advocates claim.<sup>13</sup> In sum, this book seeks neither to bury NGOs nor to praise them, and still less to reform them. Its purpose, rather, is to understand the actual consequences and uses of NGOs in world politics.

Chapter 1 begins with examples of NGO action from several fields, in the form of "Your NGO Starter Kit." It spells out the claims and contradictions involved in initiating any international NGO. Specific examples of NGO politics illustrate the need for a fresh analytical approach formulated with greater independence from the worldviews of NGOs themselves. Chapter 2 offers a new structural theory, portraying NGOs as sites of institutionalized political conflict at three levels: within themselves as organizations; in the networks they create; and in the regional and global systems they inhabit. Chapter 3 examines historical origins of NGOs prior to 1945, emphasizing the

religious roots of modern NGOs, the stamp of American government and society on NGO origins, and the shifting norms of progress that NGOs have enacted.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 illustrate three distinct power relationships between state and society embodied by NGOs, the most significant consequences of which fell outside official NGO goals. Human rights and other NGOs inadvertently transformed the authoritarian regime in Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s (chapter 4). NGOs permeated the wars of Yugoslavia's collapse during the 1990s, shaping the conflicts by being incorporated in the strategies of all the warring parties and outside powers (chapter 5). Several groups of NGOs are joined in a growing "NGO war" to reengineer sexual relations, women's fertility, and families on a global scale (chapter 6). Chapter 7 addresses the future of NGOs, including emerging trends of NGO–corporate partnerships, the resurgence of religious identities in NGOs, the post-humanist trend, and NGOs in the "War on Terror."

## I Your NGO Starter Kit

"Mister," he said with a sawdusty sneeze,  
"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees."

Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*, 1971

NGOs are increasing in number and influence in all regions of the world, and across a growing roster of issue-areas.<sup>1</sup> The primary geopolitical focus of their normative agendas is to influence the "Third World" of former European colonies, and the "Second World" of former (and remnant) communist states. The broad turn to NGOs reflects a largely unexamined faith that they are the most effective vehicles for social and political transformation. Does NGO proliferation necessarily contribute to progressive change? This chapter examines an assortment of NGO claims and discovers some contradictions lying just beneath the surface.

NGOs are so numerous, operate in so many countries, and address so many disparate issues that most accounts of NGO politics follow conventional approaches to partition the NGO world for easier study.<sup>2</sup> Four well-worn premises frequently serve. First, NGOs are divided between international agencies based in prosperous Western countries and local or "grassroots" organizations working directly with the poor or the victimized. Second, much is made of the "issue-areas" that are assumed to be hermetically sealed from influencing each other. Third, there is a strong assumption that NGO influence on how the world works follows automatically from NGO participation in formulating "global norms" in international conferences and treaties. Finally, a sharp distinction is drawn between service NGOs presumed to work in partnership with governments, and advocacy NGOs presumed to challenge government policy and legitimacy. All four premises, which are drawn directly from NGO self-understandings, conceal much more than they reveal of the politics of NGOs. NGO cases and vignettes recounted in this chapter illustrate why these conventional premises are illusory and misleading for research.

Most observers assume that the best answer to the question "What do NGOs do?" can be found in their normative principles, that is, in what NGOs say. This assumption is fundamentally misleading for

understanding NGOs in world politics. For example, the development fundraising technique of individual child sponsorship, pioneered by Save the Children Fund U.S. in the 1940s, provides the donor with a photo of the sponsored child, a family history, and even personal letters. Implicit in the idea of sponsorship or adoption is a direct line between one donor and one child. This approach is fraught with controversy, however, even among the NGO professionals who use it. In reality, the organizations themselves often have no way of tracking whether or how the contributions affect individual children. Nevertheless, NGOs are unable to give up the direct mail and televised appeals because child sponsorship raises an estimated \$400 million each year in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

In this case, and generally in international NGOs, the beneficiaries are separated from financial donors by thousands of miles, and the NGO staff is positioned between beneficiaries and donors, controlling the flow of information, funds, and services. In this far-flung organizational formation the professional NGO staff wields tremendous discretionary power, unaccountable to either beneficiaries or supporters, to massage information to reflect the expectations of the partners rather than the reality of the mission. No NGO can continue to exist for long without the generosity of donors, the cooperation of home and host governments, an identifiable beneficiary population, and a societal pool from which to draw committed staff members. Each partner must be given a plausible rationale for cooperation with the NGO, or nothing happens. To make far-reaching normative claims is built into the structure of NGO action. It is simply the price of admission to the NGO game. NGOs must mislead in order to exist.

At the theoretical level, leading interpretations testify to the primacy of *principled ideas* about right and wrong, justice and injustice, in NGO activity, with *causal ideas* about how the world works taking a decidedly secondary place. From this premise, much of the leading research proceeds logically to emphasize how NGOs and their networks frame normative appeals and implant their principled ideas in the minds of target audiences. Such research, while interesting and useful, does not, in my view, reveal the full significance of NGO activity in world politics. Instead, I would argue, all transnational NGOs make causal claims about the structure of the problems they address and the solutions they offer, but these causal claims are veiled behind their normative appeals. The causal claims must be obscured because they cannot sustain close scrutiny.

In the debate on normative frames versus causal claims, I argue for the primacy of the latter. This chapter shows how NGOs smuggle in implicit causal claims under the noise and fury of their powerful normative appeals.

Following these insights, we can identify the essential components of "Your NGO Starter Kit." Imagine you are creating your own NGO. Whatever your personal motives—to make a better world, make a name for yourself, or simply make a living—what must you possess to get started, even before you seek out partners? Joining the NGO game requires four normative claims: a global moral compass, a modular technique, a secular sanction, and a representative mandate. Each of these normative claims serves in part to mask an underlying causal claim about how the world works.

### GLOBAL MORAL COMPASS

A *global moral compass* says something about the world and something about the people initiating the NGO. Concerning the world, it makes a claim of universal, cosmopolitan human needs or rights (or biological rights in the case of environmental causes). It also says something about the NGO leaders—the integrity of their conscience and the intensity of their commitment to spread the universalist faith.<sup>4</sup> A moral "compass" provides direction to NGO strategy, and also encompasses a potential global constituency of rights or needs bearers to whom the NGO is dedicated. In this way an NGO is commissioned for a global scope of action, to be able to go anywhere and assert confidently, in effect, "We already know what is needed here, and we have been sent to help provide it." Claiming a global moral compass is, therefore, an act of self-authorization, appointing oneself as a moral authority in a given issue-area.<sup>5</sup> ("I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees.")

However presumptuous the moral compass asserted by an NGO leader may appear, organizational progress depends entirely on the voluntary assent to this claim by a cluster of partners in several countries. No one is forced to support an NGO. In gaining this cooperation, some NGOs have the advantage of a persuasive and emotionally moving origin story. For example, Amnesty International began in 1960 when London attorney Peter Benenson read a news report of two Portuguese students sentenced to seven-year prison terms by the Salazar dictatorship for raising a toast to freedom in a Lisbon restaurant. Angry at the injustice and frustrated by the

lack of a means to respond, Benenson and friends fashioned the innovative tactic of an international letter-writing campaign to pressure governments to release "prisoners of conscience"—people imprisoned for their beliefs who had never used or advocated the use of violence.<sup>6</sup> In the decades since, tens of thousands of Amnesty International letter-writers have been moved to imitate Benenson's spontaneous response to injustice. In so doing, they have accepted the authenticity of Amnesty's global moral compass.

Within an NGO's global moral compass is hidden an implicit causal assumption about how the world works. There is always some form of claim that progress can be achieved in a selected issue-area with autonomy from the contingencies of the local political and social context. Every NGO must assume this, whether they are addressing infant feeding, peacemaking in civil wars, whale species survival, or any other issue-area. The causality of both the problem itself and the NGO solution must be autonomous from the social context in both directions: the context must not invade or disrupt the circumscribed issue-area, and action on the issue must not produce significant negative effects in the local context. This claim of *circumscribed causality* is essential to NGO action because, if the claim fails, so too does the normative authority of the NGO's global moral compass. If issue causality cannot reliably be circumscribed from the local context, then an NGO's moral commission to go anywhere and generate progress becomes impossibly presumptuous. The normative claim depends utterly on the causal claim, but also serves to screen the causal claim from scrutiny.

Your NGO Starter Kit must include a global moral compass, which comes with a claim of circumscribed causality attached. You will want to keep the latter in the background by drawing attention to moral issues. To see how this can be done, there are no better examples than the Titans of recent NGO history.

### NGO TITANS

A handful of individuals have achieved global influence through the power of a persona—projected onto the world stage by an NGO, conveying a contagious moral conviction, and offering a simple and readily imitated technique for action. Peter Benenson provided such a persona for Amnesty International, until he was forced out of the organization in 1965.<sup>7</sup> In half of the 26 years from 1974 and 1999, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to either an international NGO

or an individual closely associated with an NGO cause.<sup>8</sup> In 1997 the prize went to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, whose influence owed much to highly publicized visits to landmine victims in many countries by Diana, Princess of Wales.

"NGO Titans" illustrate the complex interplay between the projection of a global moral compass and the claim of circumscribed causality. Norman Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his research on high-yield wheat at the Center for International Maize and Wheat Improvement, an NGO in Mexico City. Borlaug not only contributed to the scientific development of high-yield strains, he personally promoted their adoption by India and Pakistan during the 1960s. Despite recurrent famines on the subcontinent, India and Pakistan resisted Borlaug's proposals until their 1965 war created emergency conditions. Progress was rapid after both governments put their full support behind the "Green Revolution" strains of wheat and rice. India had become self-sufficient in all cereal production by 1974 and eventually multiplied its wheat production six-fold.<sup>9</sup> The specter of recurrent famine disappeared from the Indian subcontinent as a consequence of the work of Borlaug and his colleagues.

Borlaug's achievement grew out of his personal commitment to feed the hungry and his technical expertise. His persona fused the authority of science and humanitarianism, both of which reside "above politics." Because he had no political agenda, his innovations could be more acceptable to political actors. At the same time, however, the Green Revolution both depended upon political support and profoundly transformed the context of politics on the subcontinent. The high-yield wheat and rice required new farming techniques and greater use of chemical fertilizer and herbicides, the distribution, finance, and implementation of which, in turn, demanded governmental action on a large scale reaching into the hinterland. The Indian civil service was well placed, relative to many other newly independent countries, to effectively implement such an ambitious bureaucratic program.

The political consequences of this success have been enormously far-reaching, if rarely remarked upon. Had India continued to be plagued by recurrent famine until today, its internal stability would have been severely and chronically shaken, and its relations with outside powers would have been supplicant rather than assertive. India's bold leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, its military buildup and effectiveness in wars with several neighbors including China, its playing off the superpowers from a position of strength

during the Cold War, its economic and technological achievements in the 1990s, and its credible appeal for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council—all of these would be almost inconceivable for a country unable to feed its own population.

The irony is that Borlaug's narrow, apolitical concerns for crop science and feeding the hungry transformed the internal and external politics of the second most populous country in the world. His avowed goal to create a tightly circumscribed effect instead generated the broadest possible scope of influence. Borlaug deserves to be called an NGO Titan because his actions shaped nations and fortified governments.

Yet Borlaug did not work alone, either scientifically or organizationally. His research center in Mexico City had been established in the 1940s by the Rockefeller Foundation, which sent him to India and Pakistan in the 1960s to promote the wheat strains he had developed. More broadly, the Green Revolution as a global phenomenon can be traced to the initiative of the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, which together established a loose, global network of similar nonprofit agricultural research centers, cultivated additional funding for them from the World Bank and major governments, educated a generation of agricultural scientists from throughout the developing world to understand the technical innovations, and directly promoted the high-yield seeds.<sup>10</sup> The vast growth in agricultural productivity to which the Green Revolution made a crucial contribution means that "Despite a doubling of world population since 1960, the food supply per head for the world has increased, calories by 13%, protein by 8%, and both by even greater margins in the developing countries as a whole."<sup>11</sup>

The executives and program officers of major foundations are anonymous NGO Titans, who project no public persona, but can dramatically shape the ideas, institutions, and even the physical sustenance of nations and governments. Borlaug learned this anew in 1984, when he came out of retirement to team with Ryoichi Sasakawa of Japan and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter to promote high-yield agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations now opposed bringing the Green Revolution to Africa, under the influence of environmental activists who believed that the chemical inputs would destroy the fragile ecology. For a time, the three veteran NGO Titans found themselves outside the Ford and Rockefeller consensus, and therefore without donors beyond Sasakawa's own Peace Foundation. A *modus vivendi* was reached when



the environmentalists ascendant in the Foundations were convinced by Borlaug and others that higher crop yields would help Africa protect its remaining forests.<sup>12</sup>

NGOs can profoundly shape ideas, institutions, and practices on a global scale even when they claim to pursue only a narrow, circumscribed agenda. The key protagonists of the Green Revolution in Asia were NGO Titans like Borlaug, whose persona projected a global moral compass. Ironically, he used the apolitical authority of science and humanitarianism to promote a profound economic and political revolution in the subcontinent.

A global moral compass is an essential tool in Your NGO Starter Kit, but it also reveals something about NGO research. The top-down power of NGOs based in the global north to shape societies in the global south is no less real when development theory emphasizes the opposite, bottom-up relationship—the power of the “grassroots NGOs” and “transnational civil society” in the south. Such discourse about empowering global civil society often originates precisely with the foundation managers, think-tank intellectuals, and northern NGO leaders who are empowering themselves to reshape the south.<sup>13</sup> The discourse masks the real flow of power. This is why the conventional distinction between international NGOs and grassroots NGOs is misleading: the distinction prejudices the flow of power, which should be a matter for empirical investigation. This distinction may be accepted uncritically by researchers who want to promote a particular NGO project, but should not be followed by scholars who want to reveal the politics of NGOs.

### MODULAR TECHNIQUE

The second component of Your NGO Starter Kit, a *modular technique*, is a set of practices (such as writing letters, organizing street protests, boycotting products, “adopting” a child, conducting environmental assessments, or running conflict resolution seminars) that an NGO can bring to bear to alleviate the unmet needs or unprotected rights of its target population. The practice must be easily replicable in diverse and far-flung settings; that is, readily portable or modular.<sup>14</sup> A modular technique is essential to Your NGO Starter Kit because it allows a central organization to coordinate worldwide activities and presents an acceptable face of the NGO to partners in many different countries. The efficacy of an NGO practice to influence the target issue should be self-evident, or as close to it as possible, in the eyes of

observers. Why? Because debate about the efficacy of NGO technique disrupts the impact of its normative and symbolic appeal. This is why a “short causal chain” between the problem and its proposed solution is so highly recommended for effective NGO advocacy.<sup>15</sup>

The role of causal claims is more obvious here than anywhere else in conventional NGO practice. Building on the claim that the issue-area can be circumscribed from the social context, the NGO must also assert that its modular technique will create only the intended consequences and no others. In short, the modular technique implicitly claims *magic bullet causality*. This claim relies on some combination of the technical expertise of NGO professionals and their good intentions. The precise mix between the two varies widely. Alex de Waal decries the misleading “citadel of expertise” that disaster relief practitioners build around their various specialties to create an aura of technocratic efficacy and a rationale for ignoring the local context.<sup>16</sup> But technique is not enough to assure the accuracy of the global gunfighter’s magic bullet; he or she must also have the pure intention that the bullet will strike the heart of the villain (the global problem) and not hit innocent bystanders. That is why much literature by and about NGO activists portrays them as moral heroes. The force of their good intentions must be combined with the power of their technical mastery to hold the observer’s gaze on the gunfighter and distract attention from the actual path of the bullet. Much of NGO discourse about modular technique, therefore, is on the order of normative claims designed to elicit admiration and to deflect critical thinking about the veiled claim of magic bullet causality.

These first two claims are closely linked, and both are essential to Your NGO Starter Kit. First, a global moral compass tells the world that you know what is important in any new operational environment. It says that your conscience, as institutionalized in the NGO, can be trusted to prioritize action on the NGO mandate anywhere. Just as essential, a global moral compass presses the hidden causal claim that a particular issue-area can be isolated or circumscribed from its social and political environment anywhere in the world. Second, when you have a modular technique in Your NGO Starter Kit, you can claim not only that you know what must be done, but also that you know how to do it. For a technique to be truly modular, it must function similarly anywhere in the world regardless of social context. Therefore, a modular technique also presses the hidden causal claim that it will work like a magic bullet to hit the target with no collateral damage.

### THE POLITICS OF A HUNGRY CHILD

At stake in the consideration of hidden causal claims is whether the "issue-area" conceptualized at NGO headquarters, and implanted in the minds of donors, really holds up in the field. When the NGO exports its moral compass and modular technique to many countries, how well do they travel? The standard claims of circumscribed causality and magic bullet causality assert that they travel very well, thank you. In practice, this is often not the case. The account of Borlaug's experience promoting high-yield wheat in South Asia points to one variation in which the NGO succeeds spectacularly in achieving its official, circumscribed goal, but the consequences of success overflow to transform regional society and politics. A second variation is where the NGO fails to achieve its official, primary mission, but nevertheless keeps all its partners reasonably satisfied and sustains the life of the project. Two examples of this second variation can be found in NGO missions to Ethiopia after the 1984 famine.

Film of starving children in northern Ethiopia shocked and moved millions of viewers when it was shown on worldwide television in October 1984.<sup>17</sup> Before these images appeared, the Ethiopian government had curbed news of the famine, and Western donors, particularly the United States, had little desire to abet the Soviet Union's largest ally in Africa to manage its internal problems. The film, shot with government permission in feeding camps run by British NGOs Oxfam and Save the Children, signaled the Ethiopian government's desperation for food aid to stabilize the migrating population, which threatened to overrun its cities. The same film rendered it politically impossible for Western donors to ignore the crisis. Concern was so pervasive that rock musicians launched "USA for Africa" and "Band Aid" to raise funds for the famine. Public opinion demanded Western governmental action. U.S. President Ronald Reagan, in order to justify a major American relief operation that seemed to contradict his determination to make life difficult for communist regimes, proclaimed, "A hungry child knows no politics."

While the statement is true at the human level, the process of moving relief aid from the West to Ethiopia did enmesh hungry children in politics. After the film appeared, the Ethiopian government decided to accept greater Western relief assistance, and Western governments decided to provide that assistance as surplus food. Savvy policymakers on both sides understood the real terms of the transaction: food aid

would keep some Ethiopians alive while bolstering the short-term stability and coercive capacity of the Ethiopian government.

High-level political decisions by donor and recipient governments were not sufficient to make the aid flow, however. Institutional bridges had to be built to span the East-West chasm. And the real terms of the affair had to be obscured to satisfy essential bureaucracies and constituencies. NGOs played essential roles in legitimizing and delivering the aid.

Western donor bureaucracies were paralyzed by a lack of numbers. It was necessary to quantify malnourished people and the required aid tonnage in order to catalyze bureaucratic planning and mobilize political support for aid. However, the donors did not trust the numbers offered by the Ethiopian government's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, whose data and calculation process were never fully explained. A modular technique was needed to generate numbers that would move the donor bureaucracies. The solution was simply to agree on an arbitrary planning number, somewhat below whatever the RRC was seeking, but without gathering any additional data. As cover for such political agreements, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization sponsored "Joint Donor Assessment Missions" in which groups of politicians and bureaucrats traveled to see some hungry people and dry fields, and then negotiated an arbitrary but politically acceptable number.<sup>18</sup>

Another solution was to seek additional data through a proliferation of "famine early warning" schemes. One of the most effective, measured by the power of its data to move donor bureaucracies, relied on precise measurements of the bodies of malnourished children in scattered rural villages. Save the Children Fund UK pioneered this technique of "nutritional surveillance" in Ethiopia. Save the Children Fund nutritionists selected a sample of villages in each region, and then a sample of children in each village, and periodically measured each child's height and upper arm circumference.<sup>19</sup> Analyzed statistically, and arranged in time-series, such data could create a picture of deteriorating nutrition that effectively moved relief bureaucracies in London, Paris, Brussels, and Washington.

The appearance of hard, technical data, the professional expertise radiating from nutritionists, and the symbolism of emaciated children's bodies all combined to give these data a powerful political impact. The almost complete absence of a scientific basis for the meaning of the information did nothing to reduce its effectiveness in facilitating the movement of food aid to Ethiopia. Many of the nutritionists involved

in the practice knew that they could neither predict nor warn of anything significant using such "anthropometric" assessments, and that the narrow, technical scope of the methodology guaranteed that they would never understand the causes of malnutrition. Two disillusioned NGO practitioners later complained:

We have been seduced by anthropometry, which is easy to measure, easy to manipulate and can be easily taken out of context to mean just about anything! This has stunted our analytical skills, and created a strait-jacketed approach to famine relief; high rates of malnutrition equal famine equal food distribution.<sup>20</sup>

For NGO politics, however, the technical blinders worn by NGO nutritionists in Ethiopia during the 1980s were absolutely essential for their modular technique to be accepted by the Ethiopian RRC. The government that encouraged foreign NGOs to measure its children's bodies did not allow NGOs to survey adults for their views on the causes of their hunger. Anthropometry worked as a kind of NGO wild card—maintaining the appearance of technical efficacy while becoming what powerful patrons wanted it to be. Anthropometry fitted well with the government's official theory that hunger was caused by drought and soil erosion. Alternate theories—supported by overwhelming evidence after the end of the civil war in 1991—attributed famine to the government's coercive agricultural policies and its counterinsurgency violence against the rural civilian population.<sup>21</sup> In reality, the government itself caused the famine through massive and various forms of violence against its own people.

To stay in Ethiopia—and continue to play a role in keeping the food flowing to some hungry Ethiopians—international NGOs had to carefully avoid drawing conclusions about the causes of famine that diverged from theories acceptable to the government. To play it safe, they remained strictly confined to the relief and development issue-area. Venturing beyond acceptable issue boundaries, particularly in the direction of framing the problem in human rights terms, would and did result in the government's termination of NGO operations and expulsion of expatriate staff.<sup>22</sup>

Ethiopian children—whose bodies were measured to create the numbers to bring the food—were indeed enmeshed in a political process of deception and persuasion. If they did not know politics, politics knew them. The modular technique of nutritional surveillance

in Ethiopia concealed the nature of the nutrition problem in order to satisfy partners and preserve the project.

Was this an isolated case of fictitious causal claims by NGOs? During the same period, 1985 to 1991, international donors channeled an enormous quantity of surplus food to Ethiopia for the largest food-for-work program in Africa. In projects arranged by the Ethiopian government through its official peasant organizations, international NGOs paid peasants with food and supervised their labor to plant millions of trees and construct 1.5 million kilometers of soil terraces and bunds. The goal of all this was to prevent soil erosion, which prevailing theories identified as a major cause of the famine. Erosion, according to conventional development theories, was caused largely by the peasants themselves—their aggressive population increase, their misguided tree-felling which had deforested large areas over the previous century, and their irrational attachment to traditional farming practices.<sup>23</sup>

If the peasants were the problem, then it made no sense to consult them, and it made perfect sense to use international food aid to bribe them and Stalinist agricultural policies to coerce them to do the right thing in their own long-term interest. The donors, NGOs, and Ethiopian government could all claim that they were not merely feeding people, they were also working to prevent the next famine.

Subsequent research suggests that this prevailing "environmental policy narrative" was wrong on all its major causal claims. Famine was caused by coercive agricultural policies, not erosion. The historical rate of erosion and deforestation had been grossly exaggerated. Peasants possessed extensive knowledge of techniques to conserve soil and promote tree growth. And the food-for-work projects created little benefit, while aggravating environmental damage and reducing agricultural productivity. Allan Hoben summarizes the dismal results of the environmental reclamation program in Ethiopia:

Today, in retrospect, it is clear that much of this effort was wasted or counterproductive. The long- and short-term soil conservation benefits of the structures and trees are uncertain. The most rigorous research conducted to date shows that under most conditions terracing has lowered agricultural production instead of raising it as had been anticipated ... Farmers have been unwilling to construct or maintain structures without food-for-work or coercion, and many of the structures have fallen into disrepair. Most community wood-lots have been harvested or destroyed. Hillside closures had mixed results. Where they were built best, they tended to

reduce household income from livestock, to cause environmental damage by concentrating livestock on the remaining pasture, and to harbour wild animals and pests.<sup>24</sup>

Not only the causal theories, but the issue-area designations themselves were profoundly misleading. At best, a simple relief program masqueraded as environmental reclamation. At worst, the relief and environmental paradigms together prevented a more appropriate human rights analysis and response.

For Your NGO Starter Kit, two lessons are clear. First, successful NGO operations must please the powerful partners, while it is optional whether they adhere to principles and serve the beneficiaries. Second, when the partners and the principles conflict, the most sophisticated way to finesse the clash is through adopting causal theories, for whatever modular technique is available, that support the claims of circumscribed and magic bullet causality. These two causal claims work together to oversimplify and obscure the complex politics that is always imbedded in NGOs and their transnational networks.

For NGO scholarship, the lesson is that research confined within issue-area boundaries will legitimate the NGO program, because such research will overlook the most important politics of the situation. If your NGO has only a hammer, promote causal theories that portray the world as full of nails and try not to pay too close attention to what is actually getting pounded. Encouraging research on "unpounded nails" will make it easier to ignore social and political realities that look nothing like a hammer or a nail.

So far, Your NGO Starter Kit includes a global moral compass, exemplified by NGO Titans, and a modular technique, illustrated by the politics of a hungry child. Two more normative claims are needed to complete Your NGO Starter Kit: you must justify your transnational activity by claiming the authority of a *secular sanction* from global norms "above" governments, and the authority of a *representative claim* to speak for the people from "below" governments. This ability to claim authority from both above and below governments is your most powerful normative tool. As usual, these normative claims contain hidden claims about political causality.

### SECULAR SANCTION

A *secular sanction* is an essential component of Your NGO Starter Kit because NGOs exercise considerable power across national borders.

They channel foreign funding, hire local educated people, select beneficiaries and intervene in their lives, and spread ideas about desirable social arrangements. NGOs need a response to the question, "By what authority do you do this?" Part of the standard NGO answer is to cite global norms that exist somewhere "above" governments; indeed, above politics itself.

Ironically, the norms said to exist above governments are most often statements and agreements made by governments themselves, speaking collectively through intergovernmental organizations. The prototype and model for secular sanctions authorizing widespread NGO action must be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, passed as a simple resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948.<sup>25</sup> Since World War II, whenever governmental representatives gather in groups, they tend to make grand proclamations and promises, casting governments as the engines of progress in every field. Of all these documents, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is perhaps the one that has made the most progressive difference in people's lives.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the model of a secular sanction at work. It began as an intergovernmental statement of global norms, largely ignored by many governments at home, and then slowly stimulated the mobilization of a global NGO movement to "enforce" and "implement" those norms.<sup>26</sup> This model has been recapitulated, and greatly accelerated, in many new issue-areas. For some issues, NGOs themselves have promoted creation of new international treaty instruments to be signed and ratified by governments, as in the recent treaties on the Rights of the Child, Land Mines, and the new International Criminal Court. On many other issues, government representatives gather in enormous world summit conferences (with NGOs lobbying on the side) to negotiate a joint statement that the NGOs can then enforce. Such statements have no legal binding force, but nevertheless exert strong policy influence. This pattern became extremely prominent during the 1990s with the Rio Earth Summit (1992), the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993), the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994), and the Beijing Conference on Women (1995).

All these strategies and issue-areas utilized a similar political symbolism, which is captured by the vertical metaphor of global norms residing above and being enforced and implemented on governments below. Behind the moral claim of secular sanction there is a hidden causal claim that the norms themselves produce a top-

down *enforcement causality* that influences governments to “comply” with the global norms. International norms are efficacious, the claim asserts, producing consistent results when invoked by NGOs.

In the vertical metaphors of previous millennia, a God or gods in the heavens stood above law and government to legitimize and ultimately judge them. The common faith of the twentieth century invested instead in secular promises of material progress through politics and technology. All the major twentieth-century political movements—fascism, communism, democratic capitalism, and Third World nationalism—worshipped at different altars within the same temple of secular material progress. Twentieth-century notions of global authority—whether implemented by the League of Nations, the United Nations, or NGO networks—were made of similar secular stuff.

The claim of NGO enforcement causality attempts to persuade by analogy to domestic politics. NGOs, portrayed as enforcing and implementing global norms, are cast as the global analogs to domestic police, judges, and administrative bureaucrats in a rule-of-law democracy. Within this analogy, international treaties, UN General Assembly declarations, and global summit statements are the equivalent of laws passed by world legislative bodies.

A moment's reflection calls into question this claim of enforcement causality. First, unlike police, judges, and bureaucrats in a government under rule-of-law, NGOs are self-appointed rather than elected or appointed by higher officials. In addition, while NGOs may hold other actors to account, they themselves are relatively unaccountable to either procedural rules or outside actors. Third, unlike government enforcement agencies, NGO networks are inherently fragmented in their coverage and inconsistent in the application of norms. Finally, in most cases the “global norms” that NGOs enforce have been generated by groups of governments, many of which are themselves not accountable to their own citizens through elections or the rule of law.

The anti-globalization movement of the 1990s provides a good example of the linkages between the claims of secular sanction and enforcement causality inherent in NGO action.

#### DANCE OF THE RIVAL GLOBALIZERS

NGOs took on a significant new role in the late 1990s as leaders of anti-globalization campaigns and protests. “Globalization” is a complex

phenomenon, but at the core it is simply the accelerating movement across national borders of goods, services, money, information, and people. International business corporations are the chief protagonists and beneficiaries of globalization, but their way is paved by agreements among governments negotiated through multilateral economic institutions. Before the movement shifted in 2003 to protesting the American-led war in Iraq, it had mainly targeted such international institutions as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>27</sup> Campaigns by NGO networks upset U.S. Senate ratification of the Convention on Biodiversity in 1994, and also sabotaged negotiations toward a Multilateral Agreement on Investment within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1998.<sup>28</sup> A new wave of sometimes violent street protests drew massive media attention when the “Battle of Seattle” disrupted a WTO meeting in November 1999. Similar protests have greeted subsequent meetings in Prague, Melbourne, Gothenburg, and Quebec.

Such spectacles all appear to follow a common choreography of political theater. In the opening scene, limousines deliver officials to a world-class hotel while protestors vie for their attention. In the second scene, nonviolent protestors and rioters are engaged by police on the street, while inside the meeting officials laud the good intentions of the demonstrators and promise to address their concerns. In the final scene, the international institution redoubles its efforts to co-opt the protest movement by offering NGOs a combination of funding and institutional access to decision-making within the organization.

The tactic of street protest attracts a gaggle of invited and uninvited guests, including anarchists and opportunists whose violence is decried by other activists. In addition, there is an element of new political culture as young people express alienation from the impersonal forces of globalization. Nevertheless, the protests are not fundamentally a spontaneous flowering of a grassroots social movement. The Battle in Seattle was carefully organized for a year prior to the meeting by Global Trade Watch, an NGO linked to Ralph Nader's Public Citizen, and NGO partners in 25 other countries.<sup>29</sup> Behind all the protests aimed at multilateral economic institutions are conventional NGO campaigns pursuing instrumental policy goals such as Third World debt reduction, greenhouse gas limitation, increased funding to fight AIDS, and reforming the WTO.

Fundamentally, this is a contest to control the “commanding heights” of international norms, which both sides of the struggle

assume are efficacious for global politics. Many of the NGO organizers view multilateral economic institutions and major governments as fronts for global corporations, together establishing "globalization from above" to benefit a narrow elite. They see their own effort as building a coalition of transnational civil society actors to form a movement of "globalization from below" representing the majority threatened by the elite project.<sup>30</sup>

For the sake of discussion, let us accept the broad critique of real globalization: that it benefits a tiny elite, exacerbates poverty and inequality, and is implemented through anti-democratic processes in multilateral economic institutions. Now let us raise questions that are rarely posed: What is the significance of casting NGOs as the leaders in the resistance to globalization? What are the broader consequences of this strategic choice and the lost opportunities of not pursuing other options?

We know that national governments join the WTO, in part, to tie their own hands in the face of domestic opposition to the more painful adjustments required by globalization, and that negotiations on global and regional trade agreements tend to be conducted in great secrecy. Given these anti-democratic trends, NGO opposition is better than no opposition. But there is a serious question of historical counterfactuals—what are the "roads not taken" in opposition to globalization? The international labor movement, for example, is now well past its historical high point of influence. Labor groups appear as junior partners in the NGO-led coalition. More broadly, casting NGOs as leaders in the credible opposition to globalization means that workers are represented, but not through the International Labor Organization, not in a vigorous alliance of thriving national labor movements, and not in an internationale of socialist or workers' political parties. The poor are represented as well, but not by leftist mass movements, not by their own governments, and not through resurgent religious/national movements, whether nonviolent (Poland's Solidarity) or violent (Islamic Jihad). The history of the suppression and marginalization of these alternatives is long and complex. But it is a matter of immediate observation to acknowledge that installing NGOs in the lead against globalization, rather than any of the alternatives, constitutes an historic "switching point" with profound, if not entirely foreseeable, consequences for the future. As a matter of organizational structure, any of the alternate leadership institutions recited above would be more tightly accountable to a mass constituency than are NGOs.

It seems, therefore, that NGO leadership has the effect of channeling organized and credible resistance against globalization into precisely that political arena where it will be most fragmented and most easily co-opted. If this is the case, how could it happen against the determination and good intentions of the NGO organizers?

This leads to an empirical question, which should not be ignored even though all the evidence is not yet in: To what extent can NGOs against globalization mobilize a broad social and political movement in the future? Global Trade Watch is already organizing local lobbying campaigns in congressional districts across the United States; they have a growing web of international NGO allies and one of their goals is strengthening the International Labor Organization. These initiatives may find some success. Nevertheless, preliminary evidence suggests that NGOs are unlikely to mobilize grassroots constituencies for political action *in the Third World*, where it counts.

In a rare leftist critique of the NGO bloom, James Petras argues that the net effect of NGOs is to disempower the constituencies they claim to serve.<sup>31</sup> NGOs, he argues:

- recruit leaders of social movements, guerrilla groups, and popular organizations into NGO positions where they are more accountable to northern donors than to local constituencies;
- co-opt the language of the left while mystifying the divisions, exploitation, and class struggle within "civil society";
- define acceptable research and marginalize perspectives that highlight class analysis;
- provide "social science intelligence" on politically volatile groups to northern donors;
- legitimize government withdrawal from responsibility for welfare; and
- depoliticize and demobilize poor people's movements.

The final charge is the most serious, because it directly contradicts the NGO claim to empower the poor. Petras reflects on his own experience, suggesting elements of an alternate research agenda on NGO influence among the poor:

Most peasant leaders from Asia and Latin America that I have spoken to complain bitterly of the divisive and elitist role that even the "progressive" NGOs play: they, the NGOs want to subordinate the peasant leaders in their organizations, they want to lead and speak "for" the poor. They do

not accept subordinate roles. Progressive NGOs use peasants and the poor for their research projects, they benefit from the publication—nothing comes back to the movements not even copies of the studies done in their name! Moreover, the peasant leaders ask why the NGOs never risk their neck after their educational seminars? Why do they not study the rich and powerful—why us?<sup>32</sup>

Can NGOs mobilize a broad social and political movement? Or is the real effect of NGO proliferation in the Third World precisely the opposite? In a study of World Bank funding for *poblador* women's groups in urban Chile, Lucy Taylor finds that the popular movement has not been mobilized but demobilized as funding draws leadership energies from protest into self-help activities that legitimize the government's retreat from responsibility for poverty reduction.<sup>33</sup> This demobilization of popular protest movements, even in a political democracy such as Chile where the opportunity to organize and protest is greater than under many authoritarian regimes, may be the most important consequence of NGO proliferation. Yet it directly contradicts explicit NGO mandates and the intentions of many NGO leaders.

From the perspective of Your NGO Starter Kit, it is clear that Third World poverty is a great opportunity for NGO action. From protesting the architects of globalization at World Bank summit meetings to running World Bank-funded projects among the poorest of the poor, the field is wide open. NGOs are making themselves heard "at the table" where global norms are defined, and are making themselves useful "on the ground" implementing those norms among the poor. In addition, they may perform the added service of drawing Third World intellectuals, popular movement activists, and even guerrillas out of such dangerous and disruptive professions and into safer and more promising careers running (foreign-funded) local NGOs and advocating for the poor at international conferences. The essential qualification to be a leader in this process is the willingness to be someone else's wild card—to fudge or finesse certain contradictions within the project.

From the perspective of research on the politics of NGOs, the heavy focus on studies of NGO involvement in defining global norms is misplaced. Norms defined at global conferences in Beijing or Rio, or economic summit meetings in Seattle or Prague, will certainly be cited in NGO project proposals. However, the impact of those projects on the ground is likely to be something other than

advancement of the norms articulated at the summit. The unofficial (intended or unintended) side effects of NGO action will normally be more important than either success or failure in reaching official goals. Therefore, the emphasis of research should be on the real consequences of NGO action in the field.

### REPRESENTATIVE CLAIM

The final element of Your NGO Starter Kit is a *representative claim*, to complement authority from above governments with authority from below. Your NGO must plausibly claim to speak for the people (or species) at the grassroots, or to somehow serve or empower them. Your global moral compass, combined with a secular sanction derived from global norms, already tells you what the people at the grassroots really need and want (which is a big help in speaking for them). These deductive approaches must be integrated with some tactic that gives your NGO a plausible bond with the people you claim to represent. The bond may take the form of providing some direct service to the people, or collecting information about abuses of the people.

Like the other three elements of Your NGO Starter Kit, the representative claim also conceals a causal claim, in this case a claim of *empowerment causality*. According to this claim, the NGO acts, not for itself, but to express the power of the grassroots against the elites, or to empower the grassroots. The NGO offers itself to donors and partners as a surrogate for their dealing directly with the people at the grassroots. "By empowering us, you are really giving power to the people," the NGO claims. There are thousands of variations on this theme, across all issue-areas, but all successful NGOs must sound the theme.

The NGO representative claim carries profound political implications. Whatever the NGO's impact on a target population of beneficiaries, the NGO claim to represent a constituency inserts itself into a political context in which other actors seek to speak for and empower (or disempower) the same constituency. The NGO representative claim inevitably impacts the representative claims of other actors.

The NGO is a wild card, and a potentially dangerous one, in the eyes of local political actors. This insight leads to one of the few reliable verities about the effects of inserting international NGOs into Third World situations. Those other actors—governments, legal and illegal opposition groups, and interested foreign actors—will attempt



to influence any NGO whose representative claim is influencing them. Typically, other actors will attempt to capture, channel, or neutralize the power of NGO representative claims. These are the terms of the contingent political contest to be fought within and around each international NGO.

To observe the political contest surrounding NGO representative claims, there is no better setting than Egypt, a society with several millennia of transnational experience.

### VANGUARD ARAB CIVIL SOCIETY

Egyptian civil society is so lively because it lies between so many other societies.<sup>34</sup> In the words of a travel brochure, Egypt is the gateway to many worlds. Geographically, it borders Israel, controls the Suez Canal through which Persian Gulf oil reaches Europe and North America, and hosts some of the most fascinating archeological sites and coral reefs in the world. Militarily, Egypt has fought four wars with Israel, became the first Arab country to make peace with Israel in the 1979 Camp David Accords mediated by U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and has since received about a billion dollars a year in American military aid. After the 1991 Gulf War, in which a small Egyptian force joined the coalition to fight against Iraq, Egypt emerged as the militarily strongest Arab state.

Egypt is a gateway to all the other societies it engages. Gaining access through the gateway requires establishing relationships with the right people and bringing something to trade. You can get anything you want (oil through the Canal, a swim in the Red Sea, peace with Israel, Egyptian Arabs fighting Iraqi Arabs), but there is a bargaining process and it takes time. Economists, thinking one-dimensionally, call this "rent-seeking behavior." For Egyptians—heirs to 5,000 years' experience living on a narrow strip of land along the River Nile—such bargaining and negotiation are the high civilization of everyday life.

Culturally and socially, Egypt is at the same time secular Arab (with a large Christian minority), Muslim, African, and Mediterranean. It has colonial links (and resentments) vis-à-vis Turkey, France, and, most recently and palpably, Britain. Egyptian society both receives and sends powerful influences in relation to all these transnational societies. Links with American society, with significant roots from the early twentieth century, have greatly expanded since 1980. Many of those mutual societal influences are structured through NGOs,

and increasingly so in recent years. Here is the politics: the multiple transnational influences, often mediated through NGOs, bargain and contend with one another within Egyptian civil society. The representative claims and latent agendas of these NGOs merge and clash in complex ways.

Egyptian civil society, in spite of the many restrictions and obstacles it imposes, is the largest, freest, most pluralistic, and most open to foreign involvement in the entire Arab world, and much of the Muslim and African worlds as well. For these reasons Egypt is widely regarded as, in effect, the *vanguard Arab civil society*, where practices and fashions can be established and then diffused to other Arab societies. If you have a social, cultural, or political project you want to advance in the Arab world, you have to be in Egypt.

Since the 1952 revolution, Egypt has been ruled by a succession of authoritarian governments under an ideology of secular Arab nationalism.<sup>35</sup> In this context, much political opposition is displaced from formal political institutions and seeks other means of expression, including underground Islamic militancy and Western-style human rights advocacy.<sup>36</sup> Both tendencies view the current government as corrupt, ineffective, and elitist. Yet they have been unable to join forces because significant sectors of each view the other as an even worse alternative than the current secular authoritarian option. Significantly, both Islamists and human rights advocates operate through NGOs.

It is here that Egyptian civil society produces some surprising politics. Most scholarship assumes that welfare and service-oriented NGOs tend to be politically benign or supportive of governmental legitimacy, while advocacy NGOs tend to challenge government legitimacy and produce social change. This distinction is used to organize research, so that most scholars study either welfare NGOs or advocacy NGOs, but not both together. The distinction is confounded by realities in Egypt, where welfare NGOs can threaten to overthrow a government, while strong advocacy NGOs can reinforce governmental legitimacy in surprising ways.

The most numerous Egyptian NGOs are Islamic welfare societies or associations, which originated in the nineteenth century and have adapted with the evolution of modern Egypt. Linked with a mosque, each society offers social services that may include schooling, skill training, day care, youth activities, and medical care. Islamic welfare associations are found in rural and urban areas, and vary greatly in size and range of services.



Local groups of the Muslim Brothers, or other more radical Islamist movements willing to employ violence, have established themselves as behind-the-scenes partners with a mosque and Islamic welfare association. In these cases, the association articulates into the public sphere a muted form of the representative claim of the Islamic political movement. In addition, the political Islamists may use the mosque and welfare association to provide jobs for activists, to recruit new members, and as a meeting place.

Indeed, even those Islamic welfare associations that are not directly linked with an Islamist political movement can reinforce the latter's cause and legitimacy. The motto of the Muslim Brothers, "Islam is the Solution," is verified in the eyes of much of the public whenever they observe an explicitly Islamic institution outperforming the secular government. The message is simple and embedded in the very existence and identity of the association. It does not have to be made explicit to be understood by the public in clear terms: *If we Islamists can operate this welfare society and treat you with honesty, competence, and compassion, then we can run the government better than the corrupt, inept, irresponsible leaders now in power.*

This scenario, in which Islamic welfare associations indirectly legitimize political Islamists, unfolded in an intense and unexpected fashion on October 12, 1992 when a devastating earthquake struck Cairo leaving hundreds dead and thousands homeless. The swift, competent response of the Islamic welfare societies to the immediate needs of earthquake victims so outshone the official government response that it became an immediate threat to the representative claim of the government.<sup>37</sup> The slogan "Islam is the Solution," became suddenly more believable in light of the evidence at hand. Paradoxically, the representative claim inherent in Islamic welfare associations—as *nonpolitical* NGOs—was amplified to the point that it loudly proclaimed the Islamist political challenge to the government's own claim to represent and serve the people.

Sensing their new legitimacy after the 1992 earthquake, some militant Islamist groups launched a new wave of violence which would continue through much of the 1990s. The role of foreign funding behind the welfare associations and militants was murky, but the government responded by issuing Emergency Law Decree 4 precisely to curtail such funding. The government accurately perceived that some Islamic welfare associations were wild cards through which certain domestic and foreign actors were seeking access to political

power in Egypt. The government moved energetically to capture and neutralize that wild card.

In this case, the service activities of welfare NGOs challenged the government with the kind of political punch that most scholars assume to be associated only with "advocacy" NGOs. On the other side of the coin, Egypt also produces conditions under which even strong rights advocacy NGOs may serve the interests of the government at the same time as challenging them.

The human rights movement is one of the most independent and competent sectors of Egyptian civil society. Its leading activists are cosmopolitan in experience, politically savvy, intellectually sophisticated, and highly professional in their investigative and legal tactics.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the number of human rights NGOs, though still small, has been growing steadily since 1990. Nevertheless, their influence on government policy has been slight, whether in ameliorating specific human rights abuses or in promoting democratization.

Why does the government of Egypt permit the existence of human rights NGOs if they challenge its legitimacy? Doing so serves a cluster of subtle but cumulatively significant governmental interests. First, by permitting human rights NGOs to function in a quasi-legal fashion the government can cite their existence in response to foreign critics of their human rights record. Second, allowing them to function openly, rather than to work in secrecy underground, facilitates government intelligence and security surveillance of NGO activities. Third, by permitting the number of human rights NGOs to expand, the government ensures that a growing number of sophisticated activists with international connections are occupied in activities with manageable political impact. Fourth, it should not be forgotten that even human rights NGOs draw welcome foreign funding into the Egyptian economy. Finally, their existence indirectly demonstrates the superiority and sophistication of Egyptian civil society in comparison with other Arab societies, and confirms the image of Egypt as the vanguard of Arab civil societies. By these various subtle causal paths, strong advocacy NGOs can serve government interests even while challenging government policies and legitimacy.

A leading interpretation of "transnational advocacy networks" theorizes that local NGOs can influence their own government through a "boomerang" effect by which an international network of NGOs and governments punish the government with criticism using information and normative frames supplied by the local NGOs.<sup>39</sup> In

Egypt, human rights NGOs have on occasion thrown the boomerang, but the Egyptian government has been adept at manipulating the NGOs themselves in order to pull back their international partners in what might be termed a "bungee cord effect." Political power can flow in many different ways through NGOs, and which way it will flow is a matter of contingent political contention. The value and effect of a wild card is variable and unpredictable.

In mid-August 1998, two Coptic Christian men were murdered in the village of El Kosheh in rural, northern Egypt. Because the village was majority Christian, the police (who were Muslim) decided they needed a Christian suspect. They feared that accusing a Muslim would foment religious conflict, but their own actions had precisely that effect. Using investigative tactics standard throughout Egypt, the police began arresting people and torturing them for information—but they detained only Christians since they were seeking a Christian perpetrator. The local Coptic Orthodox bishop, whose protest to regional security authorities had been rebuffed, finally contacted human rights NGOs in Cairo on September 10.

A leading national human rights NGO, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR), sent an investigator and published a report at the end of September. The EOHR report emphasized brutal police tactics and the violation of individual citizens' rights, without painting a picture of collective religious conflict.<sup>40</sup> However, the Egyptian Center for Human Rights and National Unity—without conducting an investigation—immediately faxed international news offices and expatriate Coptic organizations. Some of the latter trumpeted the religious persecution angle, and a particularly inflammatory article in the British *Sunday Telegraph* angered Egyptian government leaders.<sup>41</sup>

Due to a lack of coordination, two Egyptian NGOs had thrown contradictory transnational "boomerangs," one framed in terms of individual citizens' rights and the other in terms of collective religious persecution. The government reacted largely against the second, asserting in the state-controlled press that there is no persecution of Christians and no police torture in Egypt.<sup>42</sup> In November a newspaper with close ties to the government orchestrated a smear campaign against the Secretary General of EOHR, Hafez Abu Saeda, who was detained for six days in December. Although formal charges were never filed, the government told reporters that he was accused of accepting foreign funding without official approval.<sup>43</sup>

The specter of imprisonment hung over Abu Saeda for more than a year, and the whole affair chilled the human rights and broader NGO communities in Egypt.<sup>44</sup> Allies of the human rights cause in Egypt and abroad were forced into a defensive posture, helping core NGOs to hold their positions rather than launching bold new criticisms of other human rights violations.<sup>45</sup> The issue of torture in El Kosheh receded to the background of debate among activists and pundits in Cairo and foreign capitals. The net effect of the arrest of Abu Saeda was to reverse the "boomerang effect" and create a "bungee cord effect" which pulled back the broader criticism of the government by the transnational advocacy network.

Ignoring the recommendation of the EOHR to hold the police accountable for torture in El Kosheh, the government conducted a belated investigation, never made the results public, and filed no charges against the police. Tragically, on January 2, 2000, the village was beset by precisely the kind of sectarian violence that the government said could never happen, yet had desperately sought to avoid. At the end of that day, 23 people were dead, including 20 Christians.<sup>46</sup>

To keep the international human rights network in a defensive posture, the Egyptian government harasses at least one prominent activist at all times. Three months after Hafez Abu Saeda was cleared, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, director of the Ibn Khaldun Center and promoter of democracy, was arrested and charged with accepting unauthorized funds from the European Union. In May 2001 he was found guilty and sentenced to seven years' hard labor. After a retrial and significant international pressure, Ibrahim was cleared of all charges in March 2003. Yet since his acquittal he has been targeted by a campaign of character assassination in the government-controlled press.<sup>47</sup>

The structure of relations between Egypt and other countries, Western and Arab, is such that Egyptian human rights NGOs can be made to act as a bungee cord, pulling and holding back their transnational network partners from criticizing the government, rather than as wielders of a boomerang that comes around to strike the government through the transnational network. At stake for international partners in the human rights network is not only the future of Egypt's human rights movement, but also the ramifications for the broader Arab world. Events in Egypt—the vanguard Arab civil society—reverberate far beyond its borders.

International advocates of democracy, human rights, or even Islamic theocracy, as well as powerful governments including the

United States, Britain, France, and Saudi Arabia, all want to influence Egyptian civil society. They all seek NGO allies in Egypt, provide funding, and export visions and models. They attach their own latent agendas to the representative claims of different NGOs. The stakes for Egyptian civil society have only increased since President George W. Bush announced in 2003 that democratizing the Arab world was a major goal of American foreign policy.

The broad lesson is that the real consequences of NGO action are determined less by the external distinction between advocacy and service NGOs, and more by local struggles to capture, deploy against others, or neutralize the political impact of NGO operations, whatever they may be. Since both welfare and advocacy NGOs make representative claims, it should not be surprising that the claims of either type may clash or merge with governmental representative claims under different conditions.

To sum up, Your NGO Starter Kit includes four normative claims, to which you should draw as much attention as possible. Unavoidably, each normative claim comes with a somewhat awkward causal claim about how the world works. Your *global moral compass* asserts your confidence to make moral and practical judgments anywhere in the world, but it depends on the veiled claim of *circumscribed causality*—that the causality of both the problem and the NGO solution can reliably be isolated from local social and political contexts. Your *modular technique* is a set of practices that your NGO can bring to bear anywhere in the world to create a self-evidently positive impact on the problem, but it depends on the veiled claim of *magic bullet causality*—that the technique will influence only the problem at which it is aimed. Your NGO's *secular sanction* invokes the moral authority of global norms above governments to justify action, but relies on the hidden claim of *enforcement causality*—that global norms create consistent results everywhere (rather than contingent wild card results that depend on local politics). Finally, your *representative claim* casts your NGO as acting "for the people" with moral authority originating below governments. However, this relies upon another, often unspoken, claim of *empowerment causality*—that NGOs actually mobilize the power of those they claim to represent.

For the sake of getting your new NGO off the ground, remember that NGO causal claims can rarely withstand serious scrutiny. The most effective means to prevent researchers from exposing the messy variations in NGO impacts is to frame their research in terms of the conventional premises of the NGO world. The analytical

distinction between international and grassroots NGOs often obscures the influence of the international foundations and donors. The distinctions between issue-areas hide the inadvertent side effects of NGO action on local politics and society. The distinction between advocacy and service NGOs can distract attention from the political uses to which other actors can put NGOs. Whenever possible, send scholars to listen to governments and NGOs moralizing at global conferences (in Rio, Beijing, Vienna, or Copenhagen, etc.), but do not encourage them to do field research on the actual effects of NGO operations.

But what is really going on under these layers of misleading claims and illusory research premises? What are NGOs really doing and with what effects? As already discussed, the first two causal claims (circumscribed and magic bullet causality) serve to hide the *politics* of NGOs and networks. In addition, the second pair of causal claims (enforcement and empowerment causality) generate an illusion of general, uniform progress that conceals the remarkable *particularity* of each local situation, and often obscures the genius of singular NGO responses in the particular historical moment.

To understand NGOs in world politics requires a new theoretical approach to illuminate both the politics and the particularity of NGO action.

Table 1.1 Your NGO Starter Kit

Explicit Normative Claim	Global moral compass	Modular technique	Secular sanction	Representative claim
Implicit Causal Claim	Circumscribed causality	Magic bullet causality	Enforcement causality	Empowerment causality
Illusory Research Premise	Distinction between international and grassroots NGOs	Distinction between issue-areas	Focus on global norms created in treaties and international conferences	Distinction between advocacy and service NGOs