

27 THE GLOBAL RISE OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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THE WORLD IS AWASH IN NONGOVERNMENTAL organizations (NGOs). In 1989, economist Kenneth Boulding (1989:244) observed that the rise of the NGO “is perhaps one of the most spectacular developments of the twentieth century, although it has happened so quickly that it is seldom noticed.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Harvard historian Akira Iriye, who wrote that to ignore the NGO is to “misread the history of the twentieth-century world” (Iriye 1999:424). Greeted with much fanfare in the 1990s, NGOs were often seen as “magic bullets” or “favored children” of international development. In the years since, the excitement has tempered (Edwards and Hulme 1996; Werker and Ahmed 2008); nevertheless, NGOs have become such a fixed part of social and political life in much of the world that to question their purpose or longevity seems absurd.

The pervasiveness of the NGO is reflected in their sheer numbers, which are staggering, even though precise figures remain elusive. A 2014 analysis by the Central Bureau of Investigation estimated that more than two million NGOs were operating in India alone.¹ Up to ten thousand NGOs have reportedly been active in Haiti in recent years, leading to its reputation as a “republic of NGOs” (Katz 2013). The Moroccan Ministry of Interior reports more than 130,000 civil society organizations currently in operation (or, for those counting, roughly one for every 270 people; USAID 2016). Between 80 and 90 percent of villages in Bangladesh are home to at least one NGO (Gauri and Galef 2005; Rahman 2006), which seems plausible given that more than 250,000 are registered with the Bangladesh Department of Social Services and other governmental agencies (USAID 2016). And at the global level, the Union of International Associations lists more than seventy-five thousand active and dormant international nongovernmental nonprofit and voluntary organizations. These include both well-known organizations, like Amnesty International and Oxfam, as well as hundreds of professional associations, such as Belgium’s International Federation of Landscape Architects (Union of International Associations 2019). As a point of comparison, the United Nations estimated that there were roughly eighty thousand multinational corporations in 2006, suggesting, at least in quantity, a rough one-to-one correspondence with international NGOs (UNCTAD 2007).

What is more, the number of NGOs around the world is expanding. In our previous work (Schofer and Longhofer 2011), we documented crossnational variation and growth

trends of NGOs and other societal organizations. Figure 27.1 shows the global distribution of NGOs. Most are found in the affluent societies of Western Europe and North America, while much fewer organizations are found in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Figure 27.2 illustrates the growth of organizations over the period from 1991 to 2006. Growth occurs essentially everywhere in this period, generally at very high rates. Particularly rapid expansion can be seen in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which makes sense given the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But moderate or high rates of growth can be found elsewhere across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. As Patricia Bromley (Chapter 4, “The Organizational Transformation of Civil Society”) and others have noted, organizational expansion has taken place across countries despite widely varying levels of economic development and severity of local problems.

Similarly, the number of *international* nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) rose dramatically over the much of the twentieth century. They now constitute a primary infrastructure of global civil society (see Figure 27.3; also Boli and Thomas 1999; Kaldor, Moore, and Selchow 2012). Growth may have slowed a bit in recent years (Kaldor, Moore, and Selchow 2012), though John Boli and George Thomas (1999) note substantial lags before newly founded organizations are included in conventional data sources, which makes it hard to fully assess the extent of the change.

The international community has heavily supported the expansion of NGOs at the local level, especially in recent decades. The United Nations first established its Committee on NGOs in 1946 to report to the Economic and Social Council (Otto 1996). Although the UN engaged NGOs directly in some programs, such as refugee assistance, as early as the 1950s, it was not until the 1980s that NGOs became a central focus of the organization. By the 1990s, the UN was spending more than \$2 billion per year on various NGO conferences, as well as training and capacity-building programs (Reimann 2006). Today, more than five thousand NGOs hold formal consultative status with the UN.² Rapid growth of NGOs can be found in many sectors, including environment (Longhofer and Schofer 2010), education (Bromley, Schofer, and Longhofer 2018), and human security (Murdie 2014), among others.

The growth of NGOs is often assumed to yield widespread benefits. Its champions herald the role of NGOs in expanding democratic governance, alleviating poverty, and delivering key services when states are unable or unwilling to do so (Brass 2016; Bratton 1989; Fowler 1991). As a result, much of the discussion of NGOs is explicitly normative and, at times, even triumphalist. Proselytizers sing the virtues of local organizations as vehicles for empowering vulnerable populations and contributing to collective goods, from building wells and providing microloans to performing critical advocacy and watchdog roles in the wider political system. Similarly, Amanda Murdie (2014) describes how much of the literature in international relations assumes that international NGOs embody a set of “shared values” and “moral authority” to advocate on behalf of citizens under repressive regimes and others seeking justice (Risse 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Yet NGOs have their critics. Their effects on development and other outcomes are often impeded by their dependence on donors, technocratic approaches, and weak ties to local constituencies or stakeholders; in some cases, the activities of NGOs may perpetuate inequalities or make them worse (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Campbell 2003; Mosse and Lewis 2005).

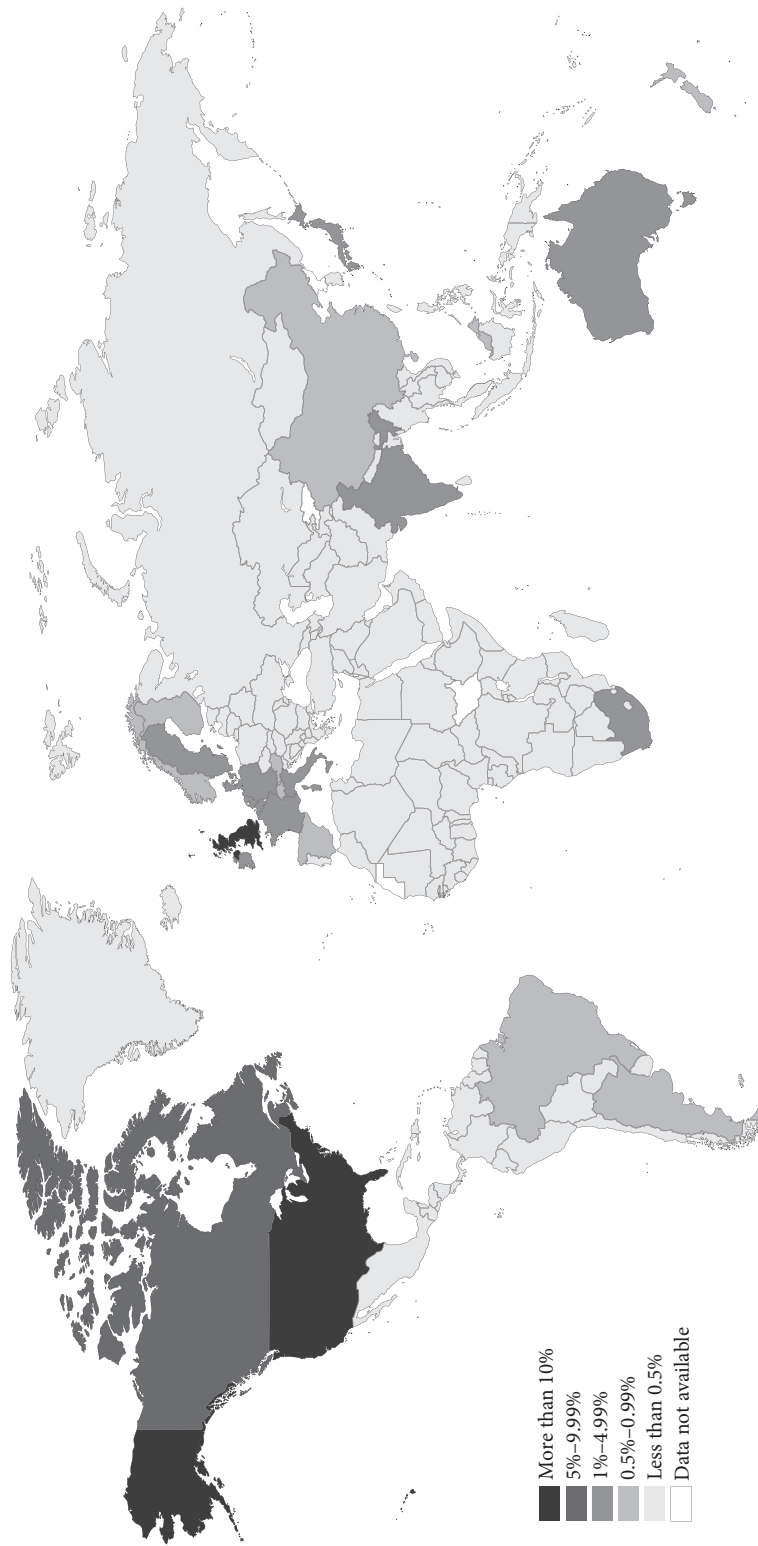


Figure 27.1 Percentage of NGOs, 2006

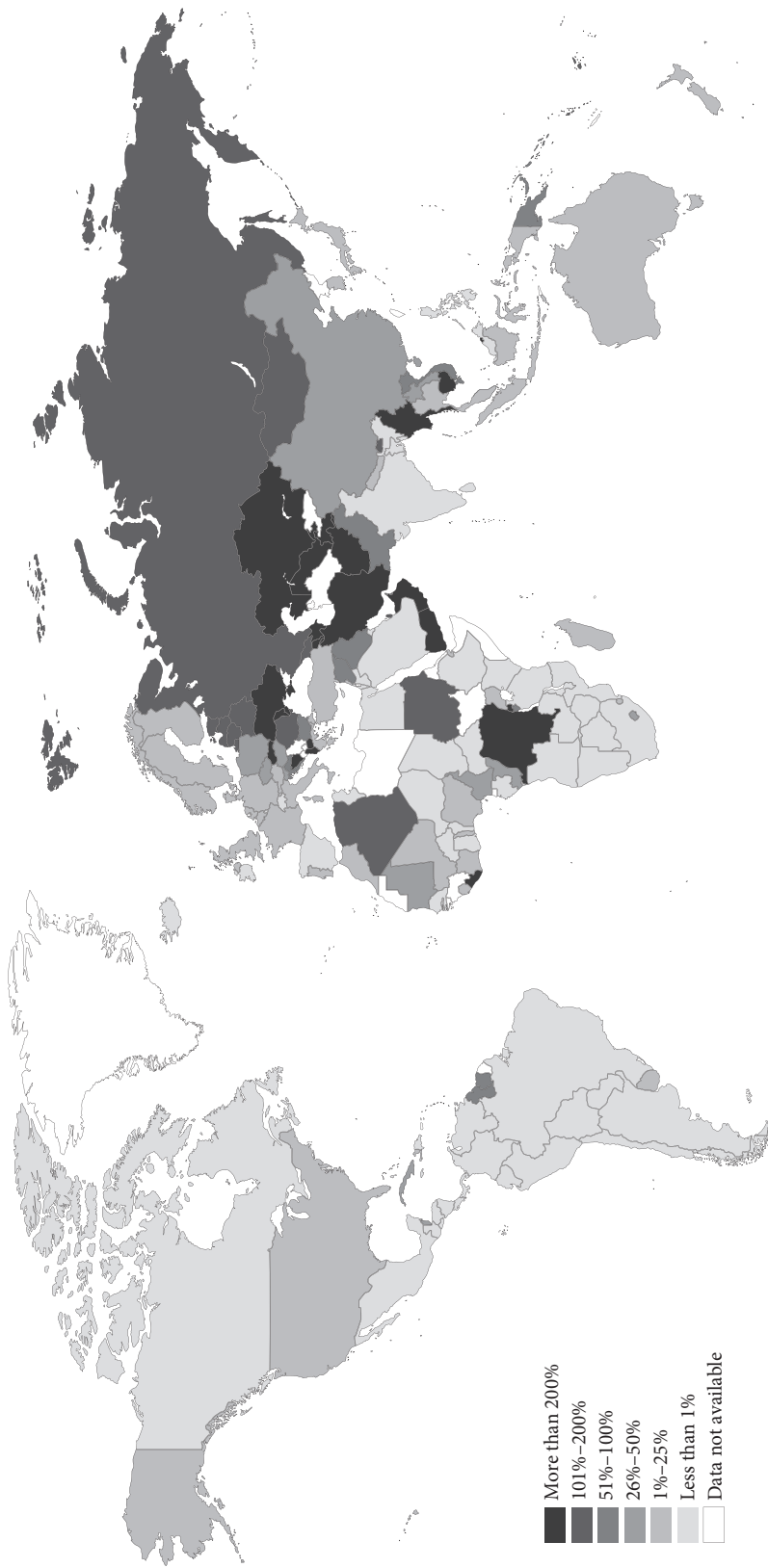


Figure 27.2 Percentage change in NGO density (per 100,000 people), 2006

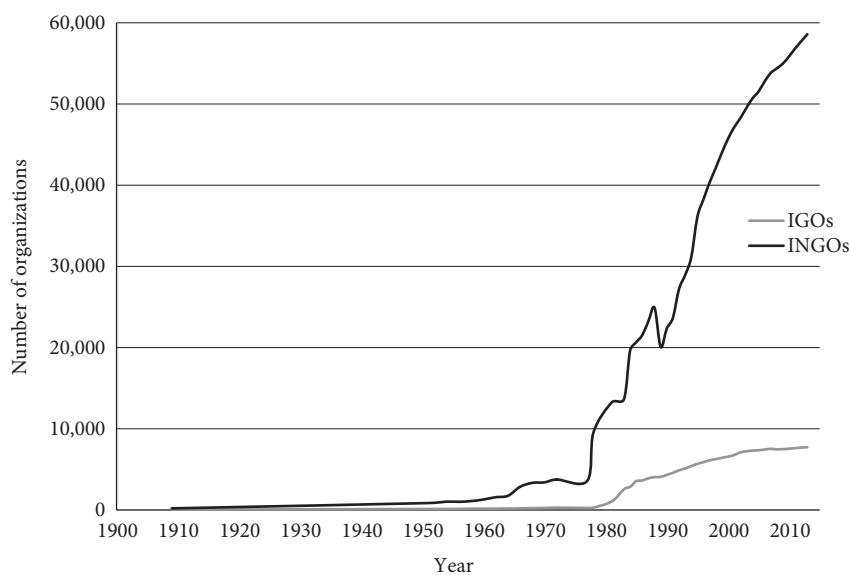


Figure 27.3 Number of organizations in the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, 1909–2011
 Source: Union of International Associations 2013, <https://uia.org/yearbook>

In this chapter, we set aside the normative question of whether NGOs have fulfilled their promises. Instead, we focus on a more fundamental question: How can we explain the emergence and expansion of the NGO as a dominant model for organizing social activity? The issue gets less attention than one might expect, perhaps because, for proponents of NGOs, their existence requires little explanation: NGOs arise because they are beneficial. Scholarly attention consequently shifts toward the question of why there aren't more NGOs, given the pressing needs of communities around the globe.

We examine a broader range of possible explanations for the growth of NGOs by viewing them as *organizations* embedded in global culture, as Sarah Stroup (2012), Susan Cotts Watkins, Ann Swidler, and Thomas Hannan (2012), and others have done. We suggest that the laudatory voices in the academic and policy literatures are emblematic of broader liberal ideologies that have become entrenched in the contemporary international community and that have propelled the rapid expansion of NGOs. However, recent global events should cause us to reconsider whether the growth of NGOs will continue indefinitely, or whether current populist and nationalist attacks on liberal ideologies may signal the decline of these organizations (See Dupuy and Prakash, Chapter 28, "Global Backlash Against Foreign Funding to Domestic Nongovernmental Organizations"). Put simply, if the past century was indeed the "Century of NGOs" described by Akira Iriye (1999), what does the present one hold?

What Is an NGO?

The term *NGO* carries multiple meanings. First, *NGO* can be used very generally, as a near-synonym for the "third sector" that encompasses nonprofit organizations,

membership associations, civil society organizations, and advocacy groups that are part of neither the state nor a for-profit firm. Thus, NGOs are a subset of a much broader civil society that encompasses all extrastate organizations, from “business organizations to unions to book clubs to dance companies to congregations” (Kallman and Clark 2016:37).

Alternatively, *NGO* can refer more specifically to donor-funded international development or humanitarian organizations working in the Global South. For example, Eric Werker and Faisal Z. Ahmed (2008:74) borrow from the World Bank’s Operational Directive 14.70 to define NGOs as “private organizations ‘characterized primarily by humanitarian or cooperative, rather than commercial objectives . . . that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development’ in developing countries.” Similarly, Jennifer Brass and her colleagues (2018) characterize an NGO as “any nonprofit, non-governmental organization that works in the development, humanitarian, advocacy, or civil society sector.” This line of thinking often (though not always) distinguishes NGOs from related organizational forms, such as community-based organizations (CBOs), which may have greater local participation and work to the benefit of their own members rather than other external parties.

Finally, some definitions of the term *NGO* blur the distinction between international and domestic organizations, whereas others refer exclusively to domestic ones. Development and humanitarian circles, for instance, routinely use it to denote organizations that operate in several countries or are broadly transnational in scope. In other contexts, for instance among scholars interested in disentangling transnational and domestic civil society, a distinction is made between NGOs and INGOs that separates organizations that are international in scope or membership from those that have purely domestic or local members and stakeholders.

In this chapter, we are interested in the general expansion that is occurring across many types of organizations that get classified as NGOs, and our arguments transcend fine distinctions (e.g., between NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs). Consequently, we use the term *nongovernmental organization* broadly to indicate any nonstate, nonprofit organization formed for the purpose of pursuing collective goals, such as—but not limited to—those related to humanitarian assistance and broad-based development. Like the nonprofits described in the introduction to this volume, NGOs are formal, voluntary, nondistributive, and typically tax-exempt entities (in most legal contexts) that operate at multiple levels, ranging from local, community-based development organizations to large, professionalized international NGOs (see Powell, Chapter 1, “What Is the Nonprofit Sector?”). We will use the term *INGO* when referring specifically to NGOs that function transnationally.

What Is the NGO Boom?

Speaking broadly, the NGO boom is the widespread establishment of new organizations that could—by one or another definition—be labeled NGOs. The boom reflects a historical moment of global enthusiasm for many kinds of voluntary, civic, and nonprofit organizing. But we suggest that the NGO boom involves a more profound change. It is the emergence of a truly global category and organizational template for structuring nonprofit, voluntary, and civic organizing. The NGO reimagines these activities as part of a global field,

rendering them more consistent across societies and facilitating global coordination. It is an abstract and universalizing concept and technology that provides a grammar for organizing private activities within the international system. Just as the emergence of nation was linked to the imagined community of modern states and citizens, the rise of the NGO is part and parcel of an imagined global community of states and private action.

We are increasingly accustomed to a common global frame of reference for describing and coordinating nonprofit, voluntaristic, and charitable activities. Anyone anywhere can create an NGO with or for anyone anywhere (though this is often true more in theory than in practice) (e.g., Schnable 2015). It is easy to forget how heterogeneous such activities can be. Historically, nonprofit, civic, and charitable activities were extremely diverse, reflecting distinct national, political, organizational, cultural, and legal contexts. Indeed, nonprofit sectors were organized so differently that it has taken decades of work to figure out how to compare them systematically (see Anheier, Lang, and Toepler, Chapter 30, “Comparative Nonprofit Sector Research”).

The NGO boom does not erase this earlier plurality of national and local organizational forms, but it overlays older structures and sometimes reshapes them. For instance, older entities such as missionary schools or traditional farm cooperatives have often reconstituted themselves as NGOs in recent years. Brass (2016) describes the dramatic growth of NGOs in Kenya, many of which remain or grew out of the precolonial self-help *harambee* groups as well as colonial-era missionary institutions. Nor is the NGO the first or only globalized category or form. International religious orders, for example, propelled missionary organizations in earlier centuries. And the nonprofit form and related legal frameworks spread to many countries in the twentieth century. However, the NGO is *essentially* universalistic in its conception, linked to fantasies of seamless worldwide coordination and representation. Its rise in the 1980s and 1990s represents a significant step toward globalization of activities that formerly manifested themselves in a variety of local forms.

Explaining the Global NGO Boom

To understand the growth of NGOs, we begin with a range of conventional arguments from sociology and political science that speak to societal variation of civic, voluntary, and nonprofit organizations. Then we focus on the rise of the NGO as a dominant global paradigm for organizing.

Classic work on civil society viewed societal organizations as the product of modernization and political development (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963). It assumed that many functional benefits arose from collective organizing. Schools would be enhanced by active parent organizations to do fund-raising; communities would benefit from development organizations that produced essential collective goods like wells; local political organizations would contribute to effective representation; and so on. So the real question is: which people have the capacity to organize effectively and reap these gains? The empirical answer was that people with resources, education, and skills tend to be most involved in civic life and voluntary organizations (e.g., Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995).

These classic arguments largely focused on explaining individual variation in organizational participation, but their logic has been extended to explain aggregate societal differences and change over time. Economic development, for instance, brings affluence

and leisure time, which are key resources for civic involvement and the establishment of organizations. Modernization and political development also bring mass schooling, which provides critical skills for participation in civil society. According to these theories, the spread of NGOs is therefore a consequence of national economic development trajectories.

A second set of arguments, more focused on understanding comparative variations than historical expansion, argues that national political institutions, laws, and norms shape political participation and societal organizing (e.g., Fourcade and Schofer 2016; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; see Anheier, Lang, and Toepler, Chapter 30, “Comparative Nonprofit Sector Research,” for a more extensive treatment). For instance, democratic political institutions allow for organizations to influence political decision making and institutionalize societal norms of participation, which support civic involvement and nongovernmental organizing (e.g., Kerrissey and Schofer 2018). Other structural features create different results. For instance, corporatist governance arrangements are associated with increased societal organizing, while state bureaucratic centralization is associated with less (Fourcade and Schofer 2016). And national legal frameworks and tax laws may create incentives for the creation of nonprofit organizations (Anheier, Lang, and Toepler, Chapter 30, “Comparative Nonprofit Sector Research”). These arguments mostly concern comparative variations in civic organization and NGOs, but some address trends in organization expansion. For instance, if NGOs flourish in democratic societies, then the global NGO boom can be explained in terms of the third wave of democratization.

A central point of contention in these debates is the role of the modern state. American political conservatives have generally cast the state as an enemy of civil society: for them, a large and presumably overbearing state crowds out voluntary organizing (e.g., Joyce and Shambra 1996). Only by cutting back the state can private associations flourish. By contrast, political sociologists are more likely to see the state as a source of support for civil society, for example through social policy that relies on private service providers. The latter argument seems rather obvious when one takes a comparative and historical view. The twentieth century saw huge growth in national states as well as civil organizations and NGOs. Also, the large states of the world—such as the welfare states of Scandinavia—coexist with very high numbers of domestic organizations (see Figure 27.1). The expansion of the state spurs brings new domains and public undertakings into the civic sphere, legitimating the formation of and providing resources directly to NGOs in the pursuit of shared public problems (Schofer and Longhofer 2011:540; Skocpol 2003; Tarrow 1998). For example, most environmental NGOs in the United States emerged *after* the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and related legal frameworks (Hironaka 2014; Longhofer and Schofer 2010).

This role of the state also comes up in discussions of development NGOs in the Global South. A common narrative casts the emergence of NGOs as a demand-side response to the state’s failure to promote economic and societal development (e.g., Hansmann 1987; Weisbrod, 1977, 1978). Early economic development efforts, sponsored by international development agencies and donor countries, were largely state-led. According to this account, decades of failed development projects prompted both citizens and international donors to seek alternatives to corrupt and inefficient states (Salamon 1994). Consequently, NGOs

exploded onto the scene in the 1980s in what scholars have characterized as a paradigm shift from state-centered to privately led development (Brass 2016; Kamat 2004). We do not disagree that such a transformation took place, but we would question whether state failure, which has occurred frequently throughout history, is a sufficient explanation. And we would note again that NGOs also proliferate in many countries with robust and effective states.

Conventional perspectives emphasize local or national-level factors and struggle to explain the rapid growth of NGOs that has occurred across a range of countries since the 1980s. We offer an alternative account, which treats this growth as a global phenomenon.

The NGO in Liberal World Society

Our explanation for the overall expansion of NGOs draws on sociological neo-institutionalism, world society theory, and parallel streams of research in international relations. These approaches attend to global and normative dimensions of contemporary organizing. We maintain that liberal ideologies that extol the importance of private organizing have become central in global discourse and are now fully institutionalized in the policies of international organizations and development banks. The diffusion of these ideas propels the spread of the NGO and related organizational forms on a global scale. It also suggests that modern NGOs are elements of a global organizational field (Meyer and Scott 1983; Fligstein and McAdam 2015), which helps make sense of them—and their flaws.

Sociological neoinstitutionalism explains social life as the consequence of cultural models and understandings that become institutionalized in custom or governance. Classic work argues that organizational structures reflect their environment, which may include rules and regulatory structures but also shared cultural myths and ideologies. One often-noticed consequence of this phenomenon is that organizations are surprisingly uniform in their formal structure (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Several lines of argument from the neo-institutional literature are relevant for our purposes here.

Institutionalized Models of Organization: Institutionalized cultural frameworks shape the underlying grammar of organizing in a society (Jepperson and Meyer 1991; Jepperson 2002; Bromley and Meyer 2016). Organizational forms such as the membership association, labor union, or craft guild are not natural but reflect historically specific assumptions. Societies in which liberal ideologies and institutions take hold—such as Anglo countries—tend to organize around private associations like NGOs (Jepperson 2002).

Hyper-Organization: Liberal ideologies involve a culture of empowered actorhood, which leads to increased organizing. We have entered an era of “hyper-organization” (Bromley and Meyer 2016), of which the NGO boom is a primary manifestation.

World Society and Diffusion: Neo-institutional scholars have argued that the international sphere now has global institutions and cultural models of its own, which create isomorphism across nation-states. This approach to globalization, referred to as *world polity theory* or *world society theory* (Meyer et al. 1997), provides useful purchase on the

question of how NGOs multiplied rapidly around the world in a fairly short period of time. These core insights provide the foundation for a general explanation for the NGO boom.

Institutionalized Models of Organization in the Liberal Era

The post-1945 period was marked by the ascendance of liberalism, as manifested in increased faith in markets, individualism, democratization, and expansive globalism. The reasons why are beyond the scope of this chapter, but this shift was in no small part due to the emergence of a liberal power—the United States—as both a principal architect of postwar international institutions and an exemplar that was widely emulated (Meyer et al. 1997; Hironaka 2017). Post-World War II liberalism was consequential in two ways. First, liberalism brought a distinctive grammar of organizing, which differs markedly from other types like continental statism and corporatism (Jepperson and Meyer 1991). In liberal models of governance, political authority ultimately lies in empowered individuals who participate in society directly or via mediating associations, rather than in a bureaucratic state or “functional” collectivities such as labor and the business sector (Jepperson 2002; Jepperson and Meyer 1991). The propensity for people to behave as “actors” is not a natural feature of modern individuals; rather, it reflects particular institutionalized cultural understandings and imperatives that prevail in the contemporary world (Meyer 2010). As liberal norms became central in postwar global culture, INGOs grew rapidly in the international sphere, turning a previously state-centric world polity into an organizationally diverse world society (Boli and Thomas 1999; Cole 2017).

Second, the postwar era brought rapid expansion of international institutions. These were concerned not just with conventional international issues of trade and security but also with broader liberal visions of social progress. These institutions became involved with education, development, and, later, environmentalism and human rights. This period was typified by waves of global diffusion, as newly independent regimes around the globe rapidly conformed to dominant international policy models (Meyer et al. 1997).

Some predicted that the rapidly growing states of this period would crowd out private association, but the result was quite the opposite: nongovernmental organizing surged. As states extended their purview to new domains—ever more aspects of the economy, health and sanitation, environment—citizen and industry organizations followed. For instance, the number of environmental NGOs increased after states began to regulate environmental problems, not before (Longhofer and Schofer 2010). This pattern can be understood in terms of conventional political opportunities and incentives. Environmental impact assessment legislation, for example, created important new opportunities for citizen influence via lawsuits. In addition, international and state attention to new issues had an important legitimating effect. They constructed environmental issues as social problems, which spurred organizing (Hironaka 2014; Schofer and Longhofer 2011).

Hyper-Organization: The Neoliberal Era in World Society

The liberalism that flourished in the international community intensified following the demise of Soviet communism, liberalism’s main ideological competitor in the postwar era. With the United States as the sole superpower and dominant economy, midcentury “embedded liberalism” gave way to neoliberalism (Ruggie 1998). The international devel-

opment regime, previously focused on large state-centric development projects, shifted as extreme liberal ideology provided a new vocabulary for development planning (Hwang 2006). Individuals would now serve as the engines of development in a decentralized fashion, coordinated by markets and civil society.

Parallel trends of rationalized organizing occurred across many sectors, a process that Patricia Bromley and John W. Meyer call hyper-organization (Bromley and Meyer 2016). Traditional forms like universities, family businesses, and charities were transformed into rationalized, formal, and greatly expanded organizational actors managed by MBA-wielding personnel (e.g., Hwang and Powell 2009).

Especially after the 2008 global financial crisis, the 1990s-era faith in the magic of markets and private organization seems naïve. It would almost be quaint if not for the many destructive policy legacies that ensued, such as the World Bank's "structural adjustment" programs. It is hard to overstate the enthusiasm for neoliberal ideas about private action as a source of democratic progress that gripped this period. Much as economists helped carry liberal market ideologies around the world, scholars such as Robert Putnam touted a romanticized vision of community involvement. Such ideas were taken up by major organizations like the UN and the World Bank as well as national elites, establishing private organizing as a solution to a wide range of social and political concerns (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Schofer and Longhofer 2011).

In short, the NGO emerged as the panacea for pressing global problems, such as poverty and sustainable development (Schofer and Longhofer 2011). Murdie (2014) describes this process as the emergence of new pro-NGO norms in the international community. Thus, throughout the 1990s, we see key international organizations, such as the UN and the World Bank, championing and funding voluntary organizations and NGOs. For example, as early as 1981, the World Bank began developing guidelines for working with NGOs in its projects. Its aim was both to fill in gaps created by state and market failures and to increase public participation in World Bank-financed activities (Shihata 1992). Today, nearly 90 percent of World Bank-financed projects involve the participation of NGOs in some capacity (World Bank 2018). Similarly, USAID supports NGOs through programs like its Democracy, Human Rights and Governance initiative, which supported sixty Sri Lankan organizations in the months leading to the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections. Roughly 20 percent of official development assistance from the OECD flows to or through NGOs (OECD Development Assistance Committee 2015). In 2005, only 0.10 percent and 0.68 percent of Canadian and Irish aid, respectively, was channeled through NGOs; in 2012, the respective shares were 18.68 percent and 38.64 percent.

This increased emphasis creates tremendous pressure across the globe to organize as an NGO. First of all, the material incentives are huge. Many types of funding explicitly require NGO status. Local religious missions and community groups now routinely incorporate themselves as formal NGOs to obtain backing. What is more, the NGO is now the primary vehicle for stakeholder participation in international venues, such as the UN. The increasing dominance of the form means that people will think to organize in terms of NGOs by default—it is now just "the way things are done." Not only does this produce a profusion of NGOs, but we will suggest that there are second-order effects

as nonprofit, civic, and charitable organizations come to be organized around common global models and templates.

Rethinking the Consequences of NGOs

What is the impact of the NGO boom? As we have seen, the proponents of NGOs take it as a matter of faith that they create positive change. They point to exemplars that provide critical services, orchestrate successful development projects, represent the voices of marginalized peoples, and act as effective watchdogs or advocacy groups. This celebration of NGOs is characteristic of the liberal period, in which private actors of all kinds have been charged with pursuing democratic governance and economic development. As the sector swells, the organizations gain authority and legitimacy, thus potentially amplifying their capacity to transform societies in ways beyond mere service delivery. Yet in spite of great hopes attributed to these organizations, one can find many failures. Perhaps not surprisingly, critics observe examples of incompetence, waste, and ineffectiveness. They also suggest that NGOs may be particularistic, unaccountable, or distorted by economic incentives or organizational interests.

Systematic studies of NGO effects are rare. Virtually no research compares the impact of NGOs to that of alternative organizational forms with comparable resources—for instance, how aid projects involving NGOs perform relative to projects involving state agencies or religious groups. The conventional view, which has strong functionalist overtones, sees voluntary associations and NGOs as a source of social capital that enhances democratic participation and produces collective goods. If these claims are true, NGOs should have a variety of observable effects that would be recorded in case studies of development projects, policy evaluation studies, and aggregate studies of developmental and policy outcomes.

And, indeed, that is what research often reports. In a recent systematic review of more than three thousand articles on NGOs and international development, Brass and her colleagues (2018) find that whether NGOs affect development outcomes is the most common research question in the current scholarship. More than half of the empirical studies on NGOs in the health and governance sectors report that when NGOs act as service deliverers or advocacy organizations, they produce a positive outcome. When NGOs act as substitutes or complements to state services, positive outcomes are reported on a range of health issues, including contraceptive use, HIV transmission, vaccine uptakes, legal reforms, and the detection and treatment of cholera, tuberculosis, and cataracts. Similarly, NGOs were effective in persuading the Pakistani government to enforce the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Afsharipour 1999).

However, the authors also note important potential sources of bias in prior research, including bias against reporting null effects and the overlooking of some sectors and geographies. And perhaps more surprising is that nearly half of the published research reports either negative findings or no findings at all, challenging more functional accounts of NGOs. Critical studies of NGOs explore a range of themes and arguments. First and foremost, a large literature chronicles NGO dysfunction and failure. Just as state agencies often find themselves unable to solve complex social problems, NGOs fail in their efforts to generate collective goods or produce social change. The reasons are many and varied.

Planning may be inadequate; project goals may be unrealistic; local stakeholders may not have been sufficiently consulted; resources may fall short; and so on. Beyond general planning and organizational failures, critical analyses point to a series of systemic issues that bedevil the NGO sector (Banks et al. 2015). Specifically, NGOs are private organizations, whose interests may not align fully with the communities they represent. They may become corrupt or vehicles of rent-seeking, rather than truly working for collective benefit (Dill 2009). And, as private organizations, they may lack accountability.

These issues are exacerbated in the international development sector, where NGOs often serve as intermediaries in a larger social system (Swidler and Watkins 2017; Schuller 2009). Rather than responding to local needs, NGO agendas may be shaped by the whims of international donors. One consequence of this disconnect is that internationally funded NGOs focus on results-based projects with very short time horizons, rather than making the kinds of long-term investments needed to effectively resolve entrenched social problems (Swidler and Watkins 2017). For example, Schuller (2012) provides an account of two nongovernmental organizations—Sové Lavi and Famn Tet Ansanm—active in Haiti prior to and during the 2010 earthquake. The effectiveness of both NGOs was shaped largely by the interests of international donors, namely USAID and the European Union, which, in the case of the former, pressured Sové Lavi to promote abstinence-based HIV/AIDS campaigns over its own condom programs during the George W. Bush administration. The relationship between donors and NGOs became more fraught in the aftermath of the earthquake, including the deadly cholera outbreak that brought global attention to the failures of many NGOs and humanitarian agencies.

The world society perspective suggests that NGOs are succeeding as part of a global liberal mythology, structuring a global field of organizing whose participants are linked through shared frameworks. This idea suggests another disconnect observed by critics of NGOs: namely, that NGOs are creatures of a global system and thus may not always be well suited to addressing the concrete needs of local stakeholders. Neo-institutional scholars expect that such systems may produce a great deal of loose coupling (Bromley and Powell 2012). The grandiose plans of international donors and the NGO activities they give rise to may create tension with complex local realities (much like the global development regime, generally; see Ferguson 1990).

However, institutionalized myths can produce real-world consequences, prompting tighter coupling over time or even large-scale social change (e.g., Schofer and Hironaka 2005; Hironaka 2014). As the resources devoted to NGOs grow, they may become more effective. And if donors require NGO participation, then NGOs become a necessary condition for success. Localities unable to mobilize or attract NGOs will lose out on resources and projects. As NGOs become more and more taken for granted, the claims made on their behalf sometimes become self-fulfilling.

The key point is that the NGO boom isn't just an increase in numbers of organizations but a structuring of organizations in a common global field with shared ideas and organizational templates. This shift facilitates many kinds of international coordination. A world of NGOs is a world in which international organizations can more easily organize with local stakeholders, while local groups can form international networks with each other and link up to governance structures (e.g., via consultative status). NGOs tend to think of

themselves as part of such a global field. For instance, they routinely adopt strategies and forms from their counterparts in other localities. Again, the contrast is to the historically heterogeneous and sometimes incommensurable domestic nonprofit and civil society sectors, which involve diverse organizational forms and models.

Thus the impact of globally sponsored and globally legitimated NGOs comes from their mediating role, which allows them to link global and local. In the extreme case, NGOs reflect world society “on the ground”; that is, they carry international organizational models, cultural frames, and discourses into national contexts. For instance, countries rife with local NGOs can connect with international institutions and obtain development aid and financing more easily (Bromley et al. 2018). Whether this is good or bad may be in the eye of the beholder. Those who envision NGOs as a vehicle for “authentic” grassroots or indigenous mobilization may be disappointed. The NGO sector tends to be guided by global ideologies, which may not correspond to those of indigenous communities and their understandings of success. The NGOs that thrive in the current world environment are more “glocal” than local: rationalized, professionalized, and organized in terms of globally recognized themes and technologies (Robertson 1992). However, the increased funneling of resources and attention into NGOs working with the environment, human rights, and development—as part of the liberal world society—may seem preferable to some alternative ideological programs, which we discuss shortly.

It is also possible that while the consequences of the NGO boom have been diffuse, they have also been transformative. In our previous work on the origins of voluntary associations, we proposed that organizational expansion produces distinct typologies of civil society writ large (Schofer and Longhofer 2011). We classified Sweden, for example, as a classic type of civil society with an NGO sector that is highly educated, democratic, and diverse. Thus, we see all kinds of NGOs active in Sweden, such as industry associations, recreational clubs, and advocacy organizations. In contrast, other civil societies are more state-driven, such as Korea (which has a high proportion of industry associations). Many others are development-centric and (we argue) largely exogenous. Tanzania, for instance, has many associations devoted to development agendas in areas like public health (especially HIV/AIDS), women’s rights, and sustainable development. Finally, we recognized that the NGO boom did not happen everywhere and some civil societies are still repressed with a sparse number of associations generally, and especially few addressing social and political advocacy.

NGOs in a Post-Liberal Global Order?

The global liberal order has come under increased criticism and attack in the past decade (Guillén 2018). The specific reasons are still being debated, but scholars suggest that the 2008 global financial crisis fractured neoliberal fantasies regarding the miraculous benefits of markets and financialization. And economic and political strains produced by global trade and economic integration may have contributed to the resurgence of far-right and nationalist parties. Democracy and press freedom have begun to decline, and explicitly illiberal regimes are on the rise (Freedom House 2018).

According to the conventional standpoint, there is no obvious reason that the international order would have much of an effect on NGOs. To the extent that NGOs are

mainly about addressing local needs and concerns, their fate should be independent of global turmoil. If anything, the recent changes in the global system may generate greater organizing, as communities step up to fill the gaping voids left by postcrisis austerity across Europe and elsewhere.

By contrast, we suggest that recent attacks on liberalism have important implications for the NGO boom. NGOs are an offshoot of the liberal international order. If the neoliberal ideologies underlying NGOs are attacked and lose legitimacy, the logic of organizing is undercut and criticisms of NGOs may take on greater force (Bromley, Schofer, and Longhofer forthcoming). For instance, in a world of resurgent nationalism and antiglobalism, international and even domestic NGOs may be reimagined as a threat to national sovereignty.

Indeed, we see evidence of this (see Dupuy and Prakash, Chapter 28, “Global Backlash Against Foreign Funding to Domestic Nongovernmental Organizations”). Illiberal leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán have attacked some NGOs as part of Western efforts to undermine national sovereignty. A number of states have become more vocal in their criticisms of NGOs as potentially illegitimate actors in local politics. And these criticisms have resulted in new policy initiatives to restrict NGO activities in a number of countries—from Azerbaijan to Equatorial Guinea to Vietnam (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2016; Bromley, Schofer, and Longhofer forthcoming; Schofer, Meyer, and Lerch 2018). More recently, in the United States, prominent NGOs like the Natural Resources Defense Council and InterAction are facing increasing pressure to register as foreign agents.³

Scholars perennially announce the decline of civil society. A common fear is the atomizing effects of modernity or technology (e.g., Putnam 2000). Others worry about various sources of corruption: parochial self-interest, the political economy of donors, or the machinations of powerful interests or elites. We suggest that NGOs may come under attack from a different source: illiberal movements and regimes. To the extent that these grow and challenge the existing international order—or fracture it, like Brexit—we expect greater rhetorical, legal, or even physical attacks on NGOs. The age of liberalism is certainly not over: the core international institutions of the world, such as the United Nations, continue to sustain liberal ideologies and support NGOs. Illiberal populist and nationalist movements remain sporadic and have not coalesced into a coherent alternative to the existing global order. Thus, it is premature to make apocalyptic predictions. But the era of unbounded and unchallenged faith in NGOs may have already passed. NGOs may continue to expand but likely at slower rates. With the ascent of populist and nationalist mobilizations that challenge international institutions, it becomes easier to foresee a world with fewer NGOs.