



The anachronistic category of non-government organisations: Moving from normative to empirical-based definitions for identifying organized interest groups in forest policymaking

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ABSTRACT

NGOs take many shapes and forms, operating at various governing scales and levels. As a categorical form, NGOs often emerged as benevolent philanthropists or as antagonistic actors. Relative to governments, NGOs are envisioned to fill a void of unmet public services, exposing shortcomings, or in extreme cases, gain notoriety by applying aggressive campaigns in confrontational ways. However, more recent manifestations of NGOs are maneuvering political strategies in more elegant and reflexive ways that do not always match their more classical categorizations. Notwithstanding the proliferation of literature indicating the evolving role of NGOs, the theorizing of existing definitions and the usage of NGO as a category in the scientific literature remain anachronistic, recalling a particular imaginary of a rather simplistic idea. Indeed, as a category of analysis, the academic literature and associated political commentary refer to NGOs in normative terms that invoke benevolent, independent, and non-profit agents striving for common goals to foster societal betterment. We argue that such normative definitions of NGOs no longer reflect the empirics, and indeed obscure the overall role that such actors perform. By more closely examining NGO activities and the strategies they employ to achieve political goals, we argue that NGOs, like other interest groups, are highly political actors that pursue self-interests in ways that we might not otherwise recognize.

1. Introduction

The portfolios and roles of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in environmental/forest policymaking has gained increasing prominence in recent years, resulting in more diverse positions taking on more focal influence in the past few decades (Mustalahti et al., 2017; Satyal, 2018; Hasyim et al., 2020). Although many NGOs initially emerged to provide counterweights to governments or to point out their deficiencies, NGOs have increasingly taken on these more diverse roles in the form of including policy advisor, researcher, consultant, and even policy executor in some cases (Ayana et al., 2018).

The growing body of scientific literature has begun to capture the phenomenon of NGOs' evolving roles. Nevertheless, the existing definitions and frameworks available to theorize and conceptualize NGOs through the lens of these evolving processes, have not evolved accordingly. Classical definitions in the scholarly literature continue to be employed, which describe the features and roles of NGOs as stagnates

(Opoku-Mensah, 2008), distinguishing them only from government institutions, political parties, or business groups (Baur and Schmitz, 2012). We observed the application and continued reuse of this explicit definition through a particular scientific research tradition (e.g. Bratton, 1989; Salamon and Anheier, 1992; Sinaga, 1993; Vakil, 1997; Lang, 2000; Martens, 2002; Laestadius et al., 2014; Slavíková et al., 2017; Brass et al., 2018). In each of these manifestations, NGOs continue to be described in normative terms with the following features: *formal, private, non-profit oriented, voluntary, autonomous or independent from other parties, funded by external donors, run by professional staff or members, and pursuing common goals to foster development*. Such descriptions are yet to systematically articulate or incorporate dynamics unfolding in praxis, obscuring the key elements of diverse interests, roles, and activities of NGOs.

This short contribution discusses a more strategic approach for articulating these elements, characterizing the many manifestations that current NGOs are currently involved in, and what they do. As a short

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science critique piece, we thus set out to trigger more detailed frameworks that can capture the often-overlooked factors listed below. Meanwhile, our review emerges from a strategic literature and document analysis (Rahayu et al., 2019), enhanced with empirical observations and practical experience. In this commentary, we thus raise several questions regarding the roles and activities of NGOs, comparing and contrasting what NGOs formally promise to perform, with the actual activities they undertake. We conclude by proposing a more contextualized definition of NGOs, one that more closely reflects contemporary trends, and discuss the implications for forest policy analysis going forward.

2. Serving public goals or pursuing self-interests?

Many NGOs have long been envisaged as philanthropists focusing on public service delivery or promoting a noble principle; showing little interest in the particulars of the policy atmosphere (Banks and Hulme, 2012). In the current literature, NGOs continue to be regarded in the same light, through descriptors as ‘non-profit’ and ‘striving for common goals’. More often than not, this discursive idea invokes the ‘likely angel’ (Sinaga, 1993), the ‘honest broker’ (White, 1999), or the “prophet” (Bryant, 2002); that live by their ideals (Jepson, 2005) to deliver ‘a thriving civil society’ (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 6). As opposed to governments, NGOs are thus often viewed as an agent of development. As a result, NGOs also enjoy a privileged status as the representation of civil societies, speaking out about social injustices, advocating for human rights, and working to alleviate poverty. In addition, NGOs have increasingly gained social and political recognition of being the voice of, and safeguards for nature (Jepson, 2005).

Empirical evidence however, increasingly point to the ways these premises have been broken, that many NGOs have failed to live out their high public expectations, and in turn, calls for an increasing attention to complicating overall NGO legitimacy, transparency, and accountability (Ossewaarde et al., 2008). Seliger (2003) for example, argues that NGOs are no different from other interest groups. Their behavior, both international and domestic NGOs, increasingly mirror ordinary political actors, mobilizing resources to maintain self-sustenance and coordinating their interests under a heterogeneity of other actor interests (Scherer et al., 2014). NGOs, like other political actors, have self-interests which are not always congruent with so-called public interests.

There have been a bulk of scientific literature in recent years about NGOs acting in their own self-interests, such as driven by the accumulation of profits (Nurrochmat et al., 2014) repurposing for fundraising goals or imposing certain values and norms (Fatem et al., 2018), pursuing high political positions (Götz, 2008), and using the organization to promote individual personal careers (Weber and Christophersen, 2002). Despite not specifically referring to NGOs, Krott (2005: 69) instead identifies this process through the notion of associations, arguing that such associations represent the interests of their members to lobby politicians. Echoing this premise, we more explicitly make the connection by considering NGOs as such an interest group. For example, forestry is often a conflict-laden policy arena, in which actors tend to disguise their true interests with more normative statements of intent (Krott, 1990). In this sense, ‘serving the common goals’ might be used by NGOs intentionally to camouflage their true interests to gain legitimacy from the public. In fact, this strategy is regularly employed by other political actors, such as government institutions, which promote a normative concept of morality to stand for specific goals they want to advocate (Oppenheim, 1987). We thus argue here that NGOs, like other policy actors, potentially have self-organizational interests which are not always congruent with public interests.

3. What is the ‘non,’ when teaming up with government?

Although the previous section highlighted the philanthropic NGO,

in other forms, NGOs also emerged as an antagonistic actor, gaining notoriety for their aggressive campaigns, and employing confrontational approaches to stop or reverse policies of social inequality or opposing actions that result in negative environmental impacts (Murphy-Gregory, 2018; Paul, 1998; Slavíková et al., 2017). For instance, among the headlines of illegal logging and tropical deforestation, images of NGO-supported rallies calling for boycotts of tropical timber and plantation expansion pose a serious threat to producing countries. This is especially true in the current trade wars of the European Union sourcing palm oil from Indonesia, in which NGOs have long advocated to influence international trade networks. Humphreys (2006) reveals how international NGOs threaten government institutions to seek their ‘own mechanisms’ to promote forest conservation. Keck and Sikkink (1998) has called this the “boomerang” effect, whereby a local actor can communicate with an international network or coalition of NGOs that thereafter pressure national governments to reconsider and change their policies. Even the less antagonistic forms of NGOs that promote forest certification, for example, also attempt to nullify government roles in forest policymaking (Cashore et al., 2004). Such is the strategy that place NGOs in ‘loyal opposition’ to governments. In short, from the benevolent to the outspoken, NGOs align behind the scene in unlikely places with a variety of actors that certainly are firmly positioned within the broader constellation of explicitly policymaking actors.

The ‘non’-prefix, which is presupposed as the defining character of the NGO, highlights a very different reality when viewed from the perspective of interests. The role and relationships of NGOs and governments have become increasingly blurred, in some instances in the form of a direct challenge to some and in strategic alignment with others. In fact, the past few decades have seen the increasingly complex spectrum of the way NGOs operate in achieving their political goals. Although some may begin as a reflection of their idealistic definitional characteristics, many transform and shift away from these classical static models (McGann and Johnstone, 2005). Furthermore, the growing empirical literature has indeed pointed to the occurrence of NGOs becoming co-opted by, affiliated with, or at least working in close cooperation with other policy actors, such as governments and business groups (Bebbington et al., 2013; McGann and Johnstone, 2005; Antlöv et al., 2012; Wu, 2003). For instance, NGOs have increasingly taken on the role of working as intermediaries or as service delivery agents of governments. This is especially true in Indonesia with the recent expansion of social forestry programs and legality verification initiatives in Indonesia (Thin et al., 1998; Maryudi, 2017; Myers et al., 2017; Maryudi and Myers, 2018). In these cases, and elsewhere, NGOs have increasingly taken on a central role in translating policy and preparing documentation for implementation across stages of policymaking that include agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Ariti et al., 2018).

4. Independent of whom?

In many cases, NGOs are often perceived or proclaim themselves as independent from other entities, distancing themselves from political standpoints. Central to this notion is that they must establish their credibility and legitimacy of representing a specific constituency or idea. With impartiality and neutrality, they are expected to work more effectively and be more flexible in delivering services to society. As described in the previous two sections, the increasing boundedness of NGOs to broader political processes and interests also distinctly affects their independence. Indeed, NGOs are less and less likely to be described as local spontaneous outfits that embody their grassroots ideals, due to the changing political economy of the role of NGOs. Our interactions with NGOs across our work indicate an increasing difficulty to remain solvent without broader alliances. Funding streams for project works often require upfront financing and sophisticated accounting systems to be able to survive. Amidst this scaling up of management

among NGOs also affects their overall independence to be more flexible in reacting to local needs. The smaller NGOs that remain are often beholden to networks of joint-ventures or heavily guided through administering interventions by parent organizations.

As a result, more and more NGOs exhibit decreasing autonomy. They are heavily influenced by other entities, notably donors or at least some trickle down of the new arrangements imposed by international counterparts. The local smaller NGOs express that they have increasingly become entrepreneurial entities, having to be more opportunistic to access funding and financial aid in order to survive. Many NGOs have now to work under the close monitoring and controls by donor agencies and must comply with certain conditionalities (Wallace, 2004). They are pressurized to produce certain outcomes/ outputs, and work for an extension of donors. As a result, almost all the local NGOs we come in contact with introduce creative accounting systems that allow them to do the mission of their work through the more project-oriented requirements imposed by the project model (see also Li, 2016 in the project system in Indonesia). These processes are not only true in terms of financial support, but over time also touches upon the very organizational fabric, programmatic approaches, and their ideologies, which in turn shape political views and positions (Barber and Bowie, 2008). Though these factors have long been true, they are increasingly becoming the new normal, breaking the fundamental perception of NGOs as an independent entity representing society-interests.

5. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the rich empirical studies on NGOs and their role in policy-making processes, the notion of the NGO by policy scholars is still characterized under the normative-classical model, a definition that considers the NGO as a not-for-profit institutional pillar of independence, one which consists of agents striving for common goals that foster development and progress. Despite the contrary evidence, many NGOs also conveniently hide behind these simplistic and essentialized claims. We are continuing to witness an immense transition and fragmentation of NGOs in terms of their roles and strategies for pursuing specific policy agendas. Some NGOs have themselves escaped the classical classifications and are increasingly of being regarded as, and regarding themselves, as “mutant” organizations occupying multiple spaces and functions (Bryant, 2002). Surely the small grassroots NGO working in confined rural areas as compared to multinational outfits that function more like powerful management consultants. We thus view the timely need to shift away from the normative and idealistic conceptualization of the NGO to define distinctive new ways for thinking about them. The empirical-based definitions can be formulated in various ways, to reflect the contexts, aims and focus of specific scientific studies. In this commentary, we thus argue that NGOs, like other institutions having ordinary interests, can be defined as political actors that organize and pursue self-interests in their actions and conduct.

To reiterate, by no means are we saying that these changes are not being captured by empirical studies. We have to this point cited plentiful studies that effectively and powerfully highlight such changes. Rather we seek to point out the limited upstream conceptualizations that help us to think about the NGOs. Instead of the normative and blanket definitions that no longer seem to keep various organizations under the same umbrella we have highlight the imperative for reviewing, adjusting, and adapting empirical studies to build timely theorization among future studies, particularly in the often contentious and contradictory phenomenon unfolding in forest policy studies. Fruitful and critical forest policy analysis goes beyond the normative, and strongly encourages the use of solid empirical evidence, including in the development of definition and conceptual frames.

We close by offering some broad ideas for approaching future typologies and frameworks. Much of our literature tradition falls under two broader theoretical camps, which guide us in cross-disciplinary typologies for moving forward. The first is in the area of examining

NGOs as consisting of actors, powers, and interests, those that negotiate, control, withhold and mobilize all power sources available to them (Krott et al., 2014; Sahide et al., 2018). The other research traditions come from a broader genealogy of research examining power relations, namely those that engage with the material and discursive, embodied through concepts of powers of access and exclusion (Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Hall et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2017; Susanti et al., 2018; Pratama, 2019). Nevertheless, we encourage typologies to expand into multi-disciplinary territory, engaging on concepts such as the politics of scale, the interlinkages of networks, and more. Even in writing this paper we found difficulty in categorizing the activist and the benevolent NGO, the aggressor, the facilitator, or the quiet philanthrope. Indeed, given the advances in the literature on the empirics of the NGOs, theorizing about the scale and ways of thinking about such institutional structures and roles of the NGO require that the theoretical and frameworks evolve in concert.

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