



## Original Article

# Nongovernmental Organizations and Influence on Global Public Policy

Cecilia Tortajada\*

### Abstract

*Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were once considered as altruistic groups which aim was to impartially influence public policy with no vested interests. Nevertheless, this perception has changed. They are increasingly perceived as groups that prioritize their own ideologies or that respond to the interests of their donors, patrons, and members rather than to those of the groups they represent. This article discusses the politics of NGOs in the present changing globalized world as agents concerned with social and environmental change as much as with their own causes. It argues that numerous NGOs are as much a part of national and international politics as any other interest group and that their practices and activities are not always in the search of a good society or the common good.*

**Key words:** nongovernmental organizations, donors, global public policy, governance, dams

### 1. Introduction

World politics and international development have undergone a radical transformation mostly because of increasing globalization. A unique characteristic of this transformation is the increasing number and type of stakeholders organized into interest groups or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Their influence on public policy at local, national, and global levels and in nearly every aspect of policy-making and international relations has made them dominant actors in the development arena (Lewis 2003).

In this global association revolution, NGOs have gained prominent positions in negotiations, especially in advocacy activities for human rights, peace, and the environment. They have also played leading roles in delivering disaster relief, humanitarian aid, and development assistance. While they are known for questioning the effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy of governments and the private sector alike, many NGOs have also been questioned on their own effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy.

Many NGOs are as much a part of national and international politics as any other interest group, and their practices and activities are not always in the service of a ‘good society’ as discussed by Trent of the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa (Trent 2013). Their accountability and transparency have been increasingly questioned, mostly in cases where they have falsely claimed to represent the poorest and most deprived, mainly for fund-raising purposes (Kaldor 2003).

\* Institute of Water Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, Singapore; email <cecilia.tortajada@gmail.com>

This article discusses the roles NGOs play as agents concerned with social and environmental causes as well as with their own causes irrespective of social and environmental needs. It presents two examples of activism where national and international mobilization has led to policy changes in national and inter-governmental institutions, both positively and negatively. I will use case studies from my area of expertise, water management.

While general conclusions cannot be drawn, I suggest that it is necessary for the NGO sector not only to acknowledge but to address its own weaknesses to become relevant once again in national, regional, and global policy dialogues.

## 2. Funding and Effectiveness

Traditionally, NGOs have collaborated with state and nonstate actors; more recently, the latter increasingly include multinational corporations (Boström & Tamm Hallström 2010). The extent of collaboration between the different parties has varied according to the type of initiative, the availability of human and financial resources, and the potential benefits that can be achieved (McLoughlin 2011), including financial benefits. To a great extent, collaboration has also depended on agendas, self-interests, and ideologies (Söderbaum 2000).

NGOs impact civil society in numerous ways. Nevertheless, evaluations of the programs and projects they implement are rare. Evaluations are normally limited to the analysis of *perceived* effects at the local level and do not often focus on development outcomes or outputs, generally because of lack of reliable data. It is very hard to obtain reliable data on social development indices at small geographical scales. Even when such information has been collected, it is not always disclosed.

One of the few evaluations carried out was based on the Indices of Social Development database (<http://www.indsocdev.org/>) of the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam. This database includes 200 indicators focusing on civic activism (use of media and protest behavior), clubs and associations (membership in local voluntary associations), intergroup cohesion

(discrimination, ethnic and sectarian tensions), interpersonal safety and trust (perceptions and incidence of crime and personal transgressions), gender equality (gender discrimination in home, work, and public life), and inclusion of minorities (discrimination against vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, or lower-caste groups). The indices are based on 25 data sources for 193 countries, over the period from 1990 to 2010. They are updated as new data become available.

A study commissioned by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands 2012) that uses extensively the ISD database, explored the relationships among development aid, civil society, and development outcomes. The authors argue that donor aid has an ambivalent relation with civil society development: it has improved civic action and club membership, but effects on poverty alleviation have been modest at best. The work on social cohesion is considered weak because not all NGO groups receive equal support, because project implementation has been found to be poor, and because numerous projects have not reached rural or urban low-income areas.

In another evaluation, Dreher et al. (2012) of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (2012) analyzed the allocation of aid by Swedish NGOs, the related impacts in terms of poverty alleviation, and their efficiency compared with government programs. The authors are skeptical as to whether NGOs are able to outperform the government when it comes to allocation across recipients. This is important because the amount of aid by NGOs from donor countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee is very large. In 2013 alone, it represented \$15 billion in assistance.

## 3. Agendas, Self-interest, and Ideologies

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) governments consider that NGOs can make important contributions to poverty alleviation, but there is research that argues otherwise. Not much is known about how NGO aid is spent or how helpful it actually

is in the long term (Adelman 2003). Because NGOs are smaller than governments, they are presumed to be more efficient, to be more flexible in decision-making, to have lower service delivery costs, and to be better at working closely with poor populations and encouraging their direct participation. But these perceived advantages in reaching those for whom aid is intended have increasingly been disputed with reference to donor motives, government influence, organizational limitations, and internal agendas (Fruttero & Gauri 2005). Examples of these concerns are discussed in the article.

Government-funded NGOs often face disincentives and constraints that are contrary to properly targeted aid, such as compliance with a specific country's aid policies, with priorities varying over time and across donors. Aid to NGOs with a focus on poverty alleviation may also be undermined by increasing pressure from co-financing governments to demonstrate project-related poverty impacts or by forcing them to adopt a target-driven rather than a process-driven approach. According to a study commissioned by the Steering Committee for the Evaluation of the Netherlands' Co-financing Program, increased governmental intervention in Dutch-co-financed NGO projects in the Andes raised concerns among partner NGOs. They were worried that they could lose funding if they were not able to demonstrate immediate project-related poverty impacts (Bebbington 2005). This may mean that NGOs could be anxious for their own survival rather than for the poor populations they were supposed to help.

From the viewpoints of some donors, the NGO sector has a number of important deficiencies: limited size, scope, and impact; loose structure, often with limited accountability to beneficiaries; inadequate attention to the ultra-poor; undue influence from donors' interests, which may not reflect the priorities of the poor; strategies and measures ineffective in building institutional capacity and self-reliance among the poor; insufficient attention to monitoring and evaluation; weak planning and management capacity; lack of broad social and economic perspective; and inadequate technical, professional, and managerial skills.

Large NGOs are often considered bureaucratic at the operational level and also too dependent on sponsors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012). High administrative costs have also been of concern; many times, they take up more than half of the organization's net income. A few have become almost as extensive and as powerful as the national government. An example is the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) (<http://www.brac.net/?view=page>).

There are examples where actions of grass-root NGOs on natural resources management, particularly water resources, have been largely driven by donor's interests. The objectives have been to promote specific agendas that often match with their own ideologies, rather than based on the needs of socially backward communities. The main problem has been that such ideologies are often nurtured by poor knowledge on the sciences involved and have not always considered how effective they are at the larger societal level (Kumar 2010).

#### **4. Public Participation for the Common Good or for Self-promotion?**

NGOs are considered to have smaller bureaucratic apparatus than governments, more efficient decision-making processes and ability to adapt relatively quickly to changing situations through strategic alliances. The expectation is that these attributes would allow them to play multiple roles in society, such as providing alternative forms of leadership to governments and becoming catalysts with triggering effects and mobilizers and opinion makers in society (Cooper et al. 2002). A main problem has been, however, that decision-making has not always been transparent or based on broad participation and many times, self-interests have led the NGOs to impose their views over the rest of the stakeholders', manipulating participatory processes and conveniently forgetting the cause they were supposed to defend. In doing so, the opportunity to stimulate change or play leading roles in policy dialogues is lost, with consequent damage to the credibility of the sector and, most important, to the cause itself (Söderbaum & Tortajada 2011).

Some examples of activism, where participatory processes and decision-making have been manipulated to suit the agendas of certain parties, relate to the fight against large dams. The Sardar Sarovar Project, on the Narmada River in India, and the World Bank and IUCN-supported World Commission on Dams (WCD) are two examples that have been discussed extensively elsewhere (Edwards & Hulme 1996; Patel 2001; Patel & Mehta 2011).

In the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project, in the mid-1980s, a local–international NGO alliance led by the local group ARCH-Vahini in Gujarat was established to secure a proper resettlement and rehabilitation policy for the tribal people that would be affected by the project, including land entitlements. ARCH-Vahini lobbied the World Bank for several years to ensure that the government of Gujarat produced an equitable resettlement and rehabilitation policy, which was finally announced in 1987 and which was unprecedented in India. However, in 1988, Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a grassroots organization in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, took a ‘no dam’ position opposing the project on economic, social, and environmental grounds. Contrary to ARCH-Vahini, who looked after the interests of tribal people, this group imposed its own agenda. It focused on opposing the project rather than on trying to improve their quality of life. Criticism of the project attracted the attention of national and international NGOs, who joined the movement and who fought with one-sided information, some of them unaware of the local situation (Patel 2001). The NBA movement forgot the needs of the tribal populations and focused on its own interests and visibility. Prizes and recognitions were awarded to NBA leadership by organizations outside of the basin and outside of the country who may not have realized that the project-affected people had become the main casualty of the NBA movement.

The pressure of American NGOs resulted on a hearing on the Sardar Sarovar Project before the Subcommittee on Natural Resources, Agriculture Research, and Environment of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology of the US House of Representatives on

24 October 1989 (U.S. House of Representatives 1990). The subcommittee was concerned with the ‘serious social and environmental issues that surround the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam, part of the Narmada Development Project in India’. Astonishingly for a Congressional Hearing, the witnesses included only three NGO representatives from India, no representative from the government, and certainly none from the project’s affected population. Most surprisingly, the chairman of the Subcommittee considered that these three persons represented ‘the voices of 90,000 people who will be displaced by the Sardar Sarovar project’. The World Bank declined to participate.

The pressure on the World Bank for supporting the construction of the project increased to such an extent that, in June 1991, it had to appoint an independent review commission; this was known as the Morse Commission. The politics of the commission are beyond this analysis. However, its report published in June 1992 was considered to have serious flaws (Morse & Berger 1992). In the words of ARCH-Vahini, the analyses in the report had serious factual errors and had reached conclusions that were not supported by evidence: ‘It resorted to convenient selection of the documents, suppressing other inconvenient ones to establish the conclusion that R&R (resettlement and rehabilitation) was impossible’. The report suggested that the World Bank should withdraw its support for the construction of the dam.

Despite the Morse Commission’s findings, the World Bank continued to support the Sardar Sarovar Project. In response, NGO pressure became immense. In 1993, the Board of the World Bank favoured cancellation, mostly to protect the International Development Association, from which United States was threatening to withhold \$3.7 billion if specific conditions for the project were not met. Knowing that the World Bank would withdraw its support for the construction of the dam, the government of India decided to withdraw the project from the bank. The construction of the project continued with national and mostly state of Gujarat funds.

In 1994, also triggered by the project, some 326 groups and coalitions in 44 countries signed the Manibeli Declaration (International Rivers 1994), which called for a moratorium on World Bank funding for large dams. It resulted in the World Bank reviewing the large dam projects it had supported and which had been completed between 1960 and 1995. The Bank published a short review that states that 74% of the dams are acceptable or potentially acceptable and that the bank should continue supporting the development of large dams provided that they comply strictly with bank guidelines and fully incorporate the lessons of experience (The World Bank 1996).

Almost two decades later, the Sardar Sarovar Project is delivering water to the driest regions of the state even though it is not fully developed yet. In Kachchh, one of the driest regions in Gujarat, with a population of two million according to the 2011 census, water availability and industrial development, promoted after the 2001 earthquake, are providing development opportunities never seen before. The state's Water and Sanitation Management Organization, responsible for providing water supply in the rural areas, is also empowering rural communities to develop, maintain, and operate their own water supply systems. NGO involvement has not been considered necessary so far (Author's interviews, Gujarat, September 2015).

The aforementioned social movements had lasting impacts, both positive and negative. The World Bank improved its resettlement and environmental policies, developed a more open information disclosure policy, and became more open to NGOs' views. In addition, in 1993, the Bank established the Inspection Panel, an independent complaints mechanism for people or communities who may have been adversely affected by a World Bank-funded project. Meanwhile, requirements for lending for dam construction became much more stringent as a larger number of conditions were imposed on projects that included dams. According to Briscoe (who has since passed away), bank lending for hydropower, for example, fell by 90% in the 1990s (Briscoe 2010). This had enormous negative impacts

all over the developing world because during that time, unlike now, the bank was the main funding agency for infrastructure development. Losses were in terms of human development as well as power generation and irrigation benefits.

A response to the continuous confrontations between NGOs and dam developers was the creation of the World Commission on Dams (WCD).

Established in 1998, the WCD was created in response to the increasing controversies over large dams in many parts of the world. It was intended to bring together stakeholders with different (often opposing) views of the dam debate, carry out a global consultation on the topic, and develop a framework for the planning of water and energy projects while protecting affected populations from negative impacts. Instead, it became mostly a stage where activist groups pursued their own objectives, claiming to promote public participation but in fact looking after their own visibility. After a consultation process that was considered by many countries as a flaw, in November 2000, the Commission launched a report with its findings and recommendations. It included a series of guidelines that described how to assess options and plan and implement dam projects to meet the Commission's criteria.

NGOs strongly supported the report and the guidelines. However, they also acknowledged a process of manipulation 'in which governments (most of them democratically elected) are sidelined, as are the intergovernmental cooperatives (such as the World Bank) (Briscoe 2010, p. 406)'. As mentioned by the then US-based International Rivers Network,

anti-dam activists saw the WCD as a means to further the aims of the international movement against dams.... The WCD was a mere [continuation] of the anti-dam movement by other means (McCully 2001).

In the midst of this confusion, the World Bank recognized that compliance with the guidelines would make it impossible for the Bank (or anyone else) to ever finance another dam. The Bank announced that it would not comply with the guidelines but would continue with the

implementation of its operational policies. The rationale was that the policies of the Bank are set by the Board of Governors, who represent member countries, and that it was not possible to cede the responsibility for setting Bank policies to a commission.

During the launch of the WCD report, President Mandela of South Africa reminded the international community of the importance of focusing not on dams but on development for poverty alleviation—a fact that seemed to have been forgotten in the ideological fight for power. The WCD disbanded with the publication of the report in 2000. Its principles and guidelines have been extensively debated but are not mandatory for any project.

In the twenty-first century, the debate on large dams has become less polarized. Strongly supported by its India and China executive directors, infrastructure development has returned to front and center for the World Bank, as shown in its Water Resources Sector Strategy (The World Bank 2004). This has also been the case for most development agencies—another indication that the global development situation has changed and that power has shifted from West to East.

Valid concerns over the social and environmental impacts and the political consequences of large projects have resulted in most countries adopting more open processes of dam construction. Planning and implementation of compensation have improved in numerous cases, and many NGOs no longer insist on no dam construction in every case, although NGO-led development is still questioned (Gyawali 2013). Most importantly, in most places in the world, populations in both urban and rural areas are better informed and more aware of their rights and thus more likely to demand more transparent processes (Yasuda 2015).

## **5. Lessons Learned and Relevance at Present: A Culture of Evaluation**

The lessons that can be learned here are many. One is that public participation is valuable in its own right but that by itself it will not lead to more effective policy-making. For a participatory process to be meaningful, it must be a

means to an end, the end being establishing a platform where different parties can share their views, concerns, and values and come to a common understanding on how to proceed with whatever process they are engaged in, even when views are different and conflicting. Participatory processes have the potential to trigger multiple gains for both governments and society, and NGOs can become important sources of knowledge, information, and mobilization rather than obstacles to governing and not forces that impose their own views.

A unique strategy, although a distinct challenge, for efficient decision-making processes that render results and hopefully more effective policy development, is the promotion of a culture of evaluation, not only among government and private-sector groups but also in NGOs. It is well known that public institutions, especially in the developing world, are reluctant to have their performance evaluated, especially by third parties. This also applies to the non-governmental sector. While the public sector is accountable to the voters, and the private sector to the shareholders, NGOs in many cases are not accountable even to their constituency.

The international community is increasingly demanding that decisions are made in transparent processes, where the performance of all parties, including governments, private-sector organizations, and NGOs, is publicly evaluated. It is increasingly expected that there will be opportunities to voice concerns, that these will be honestly considered, and that this will result in improved quality of life.

Public participation can take many forms. While it may be pursued to obtain support and avoid mistrust, confrontation, or potential disputes, processes are not always transparent, and this can compromise the perceived legitimacy of governance in policy development. In the end, evolutionary processes of institution building are defined in new forms of consultation, decision-making, implementation, and correction that can become permanent with time.

The mounting economic, social, and environmental challenges the world is facing and has to resolve require growing multi-stakeholder participation and collaboration.

No single group, be it the government, the private sector, NGOs, academia, or philanthropy, is equipped to address these interdependent issues on its own. Institutional competence thus relies on increasing collaboration, and the NGO sector is far from having the ability, or the credibility, to represent civil society as a whole in decision-making processes for policy development. This requires more willingness for collaboration.

At present, globally, interest groups and civil society in general have the possibility of voicing their concerns and interacting through partnerships that go beyond national boundaries with the use of the Internet. The emergence of social media has revolutionized the 'who', 'how', and 'where' of the discussions. This has substantially increased the number and type of actors, although not all discussions are necessarily rich in content. Even if *virtual* stakeholders do not always assume responsibility or accountability for their roles, they are often able to give thrust on specific issues that are of interest to them, on which they may have limited knowledge or even information. Inclusive dialogues have thus become a necessity because of the multiplicity of actors that participate in decision-making and that have gone well beyond the NGO sector. The challenge is how to include multiple and often conflicting or competing interests in the overall policy framework. The value of inclusive dialogues is that decision-making has shifted from being primarily in the hands of governments to include multiple stakeholders and views (Tortajada 2014).

Lenihan (2009) argues that for the public to recognize that it has a critical role to play in policy-making and accept this as a responsibility, a new generation of public processes is needed, which reflect the views of all involved. This equally applies to NGOs and makes it necessary that all parties understand the need for public engagement processes, how they work, and the issues, challenges, and opportunities they pose for governmental and nongovernmental actors. Rethinking public policy processes and the roles different stakeholders play is of fundamental importance to make sure that their involvement is relevant in practical terms.

The problem in public policy is not that there is a lack of ideas or proposals for change coming from the various stakeholders, including NGOs. Instead, many times, efforts are wasted because they are manipulated. In any of these cases, and for practically all stakeholders, effecting change may be difficult because it may be inherently against the interests of individuals and interest groups. The most influential groups tend to be reluctant to change because this threatens the *status quo* from which they benefit. Such groups include not only governments and private-sector groups but also NGOs that can be too self-interested to arrive at collaborative solutions. Like governments and public bodies, NGOs also prioritize their own interests over the common or societal good. As a result, engaging them in dialogue is often carried out with reluctance because their participation many times results in conflicts and delays rather than the formulation of effective and widely accepted solutions.

## 6. Final Thoughts

NGOs have contributed to policy-making on critical issues. However, serious weaknesses have been exposed in the sector in terms of accountability, transparency, and ability to address equity concerns. These have resulted in a growing skepticism in the international community regarding their performance and have shifted the previously favourable global opinion of the NGO sector to a more critical one that questions even their legitimacy. Rather than a 'choice and voice' for the people, NGOs are now often regarded as primarily supportive of themselves and their agenda, along with that of their donors in many occasions. In the end, they seem to be no more than groups of individuals organized for multiple reasons that include human aspirations and self-interests that prevail over the search for the common good. While they remain key players in the development arena globally, they have lost the favourable view once held uncritically by the international community.

It is acknowledged that a large number of NGOs in the developing world are limited in the contributions they can make as they follow

the agendas of the donors they work with and the donors they work for. This can be because they do not have the technical skills to analyze the effectiveness of their programs with respect to intended developmental outcomes, or they do not have the financial independence to pursue their own developmental agenda, or perhaps they are just keen to continue receiving funds. Donors' wisdom has been challenged numerous times for innumerable reasons, but this is not a topic for discussion in this article.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the negative perceptions of the NGO sector will force it to take notice of the accountability and transparency gaps that have often characterized their operations and that this will open the doors for a comprehensive shift toward more transparent and accountable decision-making and policy development processes. On the other hand, there is also the distinct possibility that NGOs will decide to remain as they are, taking advantage of short-term benefits and eventually losing the significant role they have had in widening and expanding the scope of public debate at the global level. If so, the sector will eventually lose its influence on public policy and service delivery, becoming but one more actor unable to engage in transparent public policy for the common good.

For years, governments and private-sector groups, mostly international, have had to justify their decisions and policy choices to a growing number of critical NGOs who claimed to represent the interests of the poor and marginalized, the environment, or gender equality. From their side, NGOs have not had to justify their decisions to anyone. Because the end objective in society should be the common good, it is time for all parties to improve their accountability and transparency, creating the space for norms and developing standards where there have been few. The pressure from NGOs has been so influential that it has resulted in more accountability and transparency in government and private-sector actors, although not necessarily in the NGOs themselves yet. This should be the next step.

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