

INTERNATIONAL NGOS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: CONTRIBUTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND CONTROVERSIES

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Received 15th June 2025; Accepted 18th July 2025; Published online 22nd August 2025

Abstract

Under the influence of globalization, private companies such as Tesla are becoming increasingly capable of damaging the Earth's ecosystem and human civilization. Despite generating substantial market capital, their operational processes and outcomes are contributing to escalating conflicts between humans, nature, and society globally (Pattison 2021; Rodway 2022; Cota 2023). The professionalism and transnational nature of international NGOs have established them as exclusive organizations that promote and address transnational problems within a neoliberal framework. The purpose of this essay is to examine the roles, contributions, and limitations of international NGOs in the context of global civil society. The first part of the essay provides a general definition of international NGOs and civil society, followed by a discussion of the differences between the two entities. The second part highlights the contributions and limitations of international NGOs through real-world examples and critically analyzes their impact under globalization on various issues.

Keywords: NGO, INGO, Globalization, Social Issues, Civil Society, Tesla.

INTRODUCTION

While driving your Tesla, often seen as a symbol of high moral standing, have you ever considered whether it is truly a green vehicle as claimed in its advertisements? Electric cars are perceived as an ideal green alternative to gasoline vehicles because they produce no direct emissions. Many governments, including those in the HKSAR, China, and Europe, offer subsidy policies to promote electric vehicles (EPD HKSAR 2018; European Commission 2023; Nikkei Asia 2023). Benefiting from the marketing promotions of electric vehicle brands, sales and market coverage of these vehicles have surged in recent years. However, the production process of electric vehicle batteries involves mining rare-earth elements such as lithium, cobalt, and nickel. This mining often results in significant environmental damage, including deforestation, soil erosion, and water contamination, as well as the employment of child labor (Climate Portal 2022; Rodway 2022; Broom 2019). Given this situation, the mining process is energy-intensive and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Although electric vehicles themselves do not produce greenhouse gases, the electricity generated by power plants often does so on a large scale. Furthermore, the disposal of electric vehicle batteries presents another environmental challenge. While batteries can be recycled, the recycling process is complex and costly. Hirschlag (2022) and Wade (2016) reported that used batteries often end up in landfills, leading to toxic chemicals leaking into soil and groundwater. In light of these facts, raising awareness about these environmental issues is likely to reduce electric vehicle sales. Overall, the objective of electric vehicle companies is to maximize their strengths while avoiding any negative aspects in their marketing narratives. This explains why negative information about their operations is rarely disclosed. At the corporate governance level, many of the issues arising during manufacturing occur in foreign countries, where the host

country's laws may not apply to these electric vehicle companies. Moreover, these companies may intentionally establish production plants in developing nations to evade strict environmental regulations that exist in their home countries. Therefore, the most effective approach to address this global problem is through civil society to raise public awareness, alongside relevant international NGOs advocating for transnational governments to formulate appropriate policies (Crawford 2022).

Civil Society Transforms from Local to Global

Before discussing the term "global civil society," it is essential to define "civil society." Within society, there exist organizations known as political societies, which are established to control or manage political power. For instance, political parties and parliaments are examples of political societies. In contrast, civil society serves as an umbrella term encompassing various voluntary citizen organizations that operate independently of government and business institutions. It represents a realm of consent and free will, whereas political society embodies coercion, violence, and intervention. In other words, civil society encompasses diverse private or civil institutions that formulate and disseminate ideologies.

Figure 1 illustrates examples of organizations within civil society, including churches, schools, news organizations, cultural and academic groups, trade unions, and political parties (Dolšak *et al.*, 2022; Hutter and O'Mahony 2004).

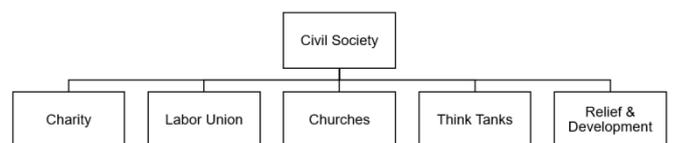


Figure 1. Examples of organizations under Civil Society

These organizations fulfill various roles within civil society, including providing services, advocating for social change, promoting citizen participation, and supporting social

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movements. Gramsci (1994) and Habermas (1962) refer to the social sector as "civil society" to distinguish it from the public and private sectors. This distinction forms the ideological basis of the contemporary concept of the "three sectors." Consequently, entities encompassed by civil society are often referred to as the "third domain," "the third sector," or the "nonprofit sector." Nonprofit organizations are the primary contributors to civil society, just as public departments are the main contributors to the public sector and companies are the primary contributors to the private sector. The non-governmental and nonprofit sectors are characterized by their role in "supplementing or complementing" the shortcomings of the market and government, commonly referred to as "market failures." Thus, NGOs are also labeled as the "third sector" (Najam 2000), as illustrated in Figure 2.

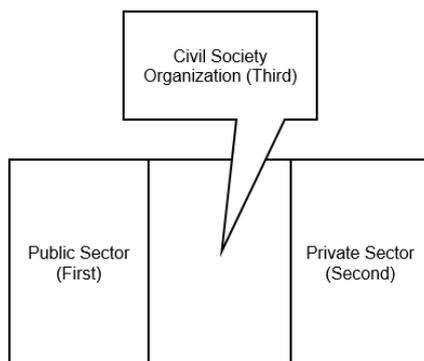


Figure 2. Position of Civil Society Organization between public and private sector

Types of civil society can be further distinguished into different categories, according to Hutter and O'Mahony (2004):

Civil society organization (CSO) is broad and inclusive of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charities, trusts, foundations, advocacy groups, and national and international non-state associations which are all particular types of organization within civil society.

Admittedly, the concept of "civil society" became increasingly prominent after the 1990s. The number of civil society organizations grew rapidly, particularly following the end of the Cold War (Gordenker and Weiss 1996). Since the concept of civil society is based on the trichotomy of the public, private, and third sectors, the third sector or civil society has gained widespread acceptance among scholars globally. Regarding the effect of globalization on civil society, Scholte (1999) stated that globalization has created a "global civil society" characterized by five key features: independence from governments, diverse institutions and norms, an emphasis on civility and respect, the potential for conflicts, and an awareness of global issues. John Keane (2003) later added that global civil society is defined by its "cosmopolitanism," which highlights the importance of global citizenship and the need for a shared sense of responsibility for the world as a whole. Similarly, Gordenker and Weiss (1996) argue that the rise of international NGOs can be attributed to three main factors: the end of the Cold War, the impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) that have made local issues more global, and the growth of private donations and state funding, which contribute to the expansion of international NGOs. Hansmann (1987) suggests that the emergence of the nonprofit sector largely stems from market failure.

Consequently, international non-governmental organizations are indeed part of civil society, but their scope typically crosses national boundaries and addresses various global issues, such as human rights, environmental protection, public health, education, and social justice. They may represent specific interest groups on the international stage and influence the development of global policies and norms (Marchetti 2016). Compared to local NGOs, the work of international NGOs is more transnational and requires greater resources and expertise (Figure 3).

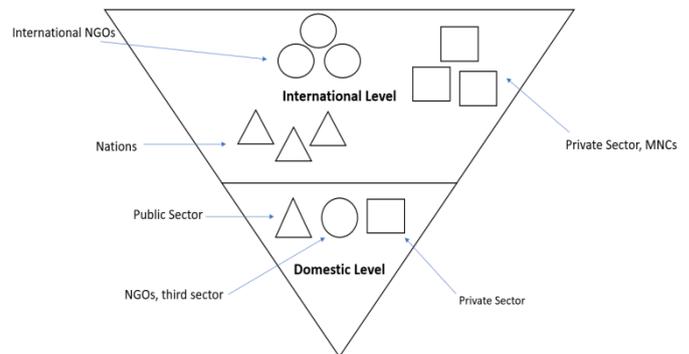


Figure 3. NGOs and INGOs in the dimension of domestic and international

Scholars (Weimer & Vining, 2017) argue that market failure is caused by a lack of buyers in the market, monopolistic practices by sellers, and various external issues. Generally speaking, government intervention may resolve these problems. However, if the government is incapable or dysfunctional, international NGOs serve as a viable alternative to address these failures (Dolšak *et al.*, 2022).

Definition of INGOs and its roles, contribution and limitations

Hansmann (1980) identifies the primary role of NGOs as compensating for market failures. He suggests that market failure occurs when the public and private sectors are unable or unwilling to provide specific services or products, with environmental protection and social welfare serving as examples in this category. Furthermore, he later argues that when there is information or power asymmetry between public service providers and consumers, it may also lead to contract failure (Hansmann 1981):

Contract failure—that is, situations in which, owing either to the nature of the service in question or to the circumstances under which it is produced and consumed, ordinary contractual devices in themselves do not provide consumers with adequate means for policing the performance of producers. In such situations, the nonprofit form offers consumers the protection of another, broader "contract" - namely, the organization's commitment, through its nonprofit charter, to devote all of its income to the services it was formed to provide (p.506).

In this context, international NGOs can provide better protection because they do not seek to maximize profits. From the perspective of globalization, the likelihood of market failure is heightened due to the externalization of costs by international or multinational enterprises and the information asymmetry between producers and consumers. Dolsak *et al.*, (2022) suggest that non-governmental and nonprofit organizations are crucial policy actors, as they compensate for

government failures and address the shortcomings of both the market and government. The flexibility and dynamism of nonprofits can effectively mitigate the deficiencies of government when it falters. Lehnardt (2005) and Marchetti (2016) emphasize that the international and nonprofit nature of NGOs plays a significant role in promoting issues and setting agendas at the national level, encompassing human rights, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria, as well as humanitarian aid. Conversely, Najam (2000) argues that tension between the government and non-governmental organizations is necessary. He further developed the 4C concept (cooperation, confrontation, complementarity, and cooptation) to understand the relationships between government and international NGOs, based on their differing goals and strategies.

Although Clark (1991) believes that NGOs have three options in dealing with states:

They can oppose the state, complement it, or reform it – but they cannot ignore it.

Non-governmental and nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in addressing market and government failures, as well as in social buffering and coordination. Traditionally, international NGOs have primarily contributed to disaster relief, poverty alleviation, and humanitarian assistance. However, these tasks can only be effectively carried out in cooperation with local governments. Indeed, the decisions and actions of NGOs are often restricted by local authorities. Although they possess certain political and social influence, NGOs can only exert their impact "outside the system" and cannot directly influence the formulation and implementation of regulations. This limitation is significant. Furthermore, the contributions of NGOs have their constraints and cannot address the root causes of issues or prevent their development. For example, during the Russia-Georgia war, NGO humanitarian assistance was unable to tackle or eliminate the underlying causes of the conflict, nor could it prevent its continuation (Shrivastava *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, international NGOs have occasionally been embroiled in scandals. Instances of staff negligence, dereliction of duty, unethical behavior, or illegal actions have been reported. For example, BBC News (2018) reported on Oxfam's sex scandal in Haiti in 2018, which was subsequently covered up following an internal inquiry. In 2014, The Guardian reported Greenpeace's misappropriation of public funds without the consent of senior management, resulting in financial losses of €3.8 million (Oltermann 2014). These incidents underscore significant issues within INGOs regarding governance, transparency, and accountability, leading to failures at both organizational and individual levels (Dolsak *et al.*, 2022). In the early 1970s, Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, commissioned the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) to study and compare the environmental impact of various packaging options. After considering all aspects of the issues related to packaging materials, production, and waste disposal, SRI concluded that polystyrene was more environmentally friendly than paper. This conclusion was based on the fact that food wrapping papers and cardboard boxes were waxed, making them non-recyclable at that time. By comparing the raw materials, manufacturing processes, transportation, and disposal between polystyrene and paper, the research indicated that polystyrene had a distinct advantage

over paper. Consequently, SRI concluded that polystyrene was the preferred option, leading to the creation of the "clamshell" packaging (WRI 1995). However, environmentalists from Greenpeace argue that the manufacturing of polystyrene releases a toxic gas that damages the ozone layer. This prompted campaigns such as the "McToxic" and "McPuff," as well as the formation of groups like "Kids Against Polystyrene" (MsSpotlight 1987; thedieline 2020). The clamshell packaging became a symbol of environmental irresponsibility. Although McDonald's pressured its polystyrene suppliers to alter the production process to reduce the release of ozone-depleting gases, environmental groups challenged McDonald's narrative effectively. As a result, McDonald's ultimately withdrew the clamshell packaging and replaced it with waxed, non-recyclable wrapping paper (The Economist 2019; NY Times 1990). Debates often arose over whether these campaigns were designed to raise public awareness or if they were genuinely aimed at helping the environment, as organizations claimed. In addition to agency failure, Dolsak *et al.*, (2021) point out issues such as NGOization failure, representation failure, and cooperation failure, which can be seen as rent-seeking problems. Researchers (Shrivastava *et al.*, 2017) have found evidence of NGOs with Western backgrounds funding anti-government troops and assisting them in establishing regimes during the color revolutions in the Arab world. Furthermore, Shrivastava and others revealed that the International Refugee Office was involved in intentionally and systematically creating African refugees, and they also found that this organization was secretly assisting the CIA in using immigrants to undermine European Union and Russia's oil pipeline cooperation (Shrivastava *et al.*, 2017).

Conclusion

In this essay, we have explored how globalization has exacerbated environmental and regional conflicts. While international NGOs play a pivotal role in addressing these issues, the examination of my findings raises questions about whether some NGOs are using their nonprofit identity for profit-making purposes. The case of McDonald's illustrates how environmental groups were influenced by heuristic thinking, promoting misinformation for their own interests. Additionally, reports from The Guardian (2016, 2017) and Peters (2013) highlight concerns about the disparity in salaries, with foreign staff earning more than local staff in international NGOs, raising questions about their true motives. Ultimately, as Rittel (1973) defined "wicked problems," these social issues are complex and interconnected, making them difficult, if not impossible, to solve (Figure 4).

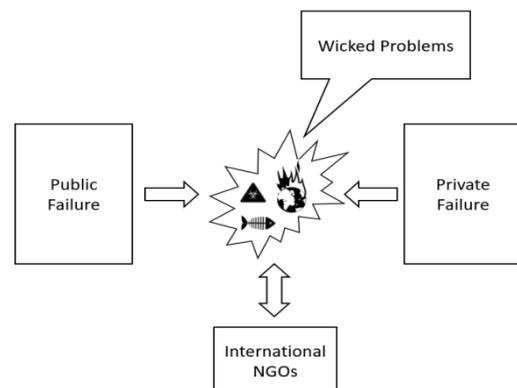


Figure 4. Wicked problem caused between public and private failure

He further explains that these problems are impossible to solve, yet we must engage with them. The objective is not to exacerbate the issue but to keep it within a manageable scope. Ideally, new problems may arise in the future to replace the current ones (Rittel 1973). Moyo (2009) reveals that economic growth can be undermined by foreign aid, providing extensive evidence of corruption and mismanagement involving NGOs and recipient countries. She suggests that aid from NGOs may actually perpetuate poverty, and in worse cases, could lead to civil war. Among these "non-state actors," the role and functions of NGOs are undoubtedly the most controversial. They advocate for democracy and freedom in the name of public welfare and human rights, but are they humanitarian rescuers or agents of Western interests? Citing findings from Shrivastava *et al.*, (2017), critics question whether international NGOs practice "Western values and national interests" or "universal values and people's well-being."

Former U.S. President George Bush implied in a public speech after the 9/11 attacks that some international NGOs operate as fronts for terrorist organizations:

We fully understand that certain NGOs serve as fronts, as funding mechanisms, for terrorist organizations (Engel 2001).

My main argument in this essay is that international NGOs have specific ideological and political stances. Through their movements and campaigns, they propagate these ideologies in developing countries. By using liberty and equality as a pretext, they smuggle anti-traditional ideologies, such as LGBTQ+ rights and the MeToo movement, to achieve their goals of influence, often aligned with national interests (Figure 5).

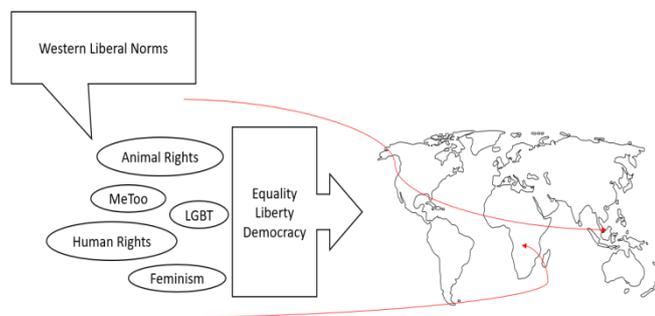


Figure 5. Camouflage the anti-traditional ideologies by liberty shelter

In short, while the missions and campaigns of international NGOs have courted controversy, they are undeniably pivotal in international civil society. They promote the moral values of global civil society, global democracy, and global social movements.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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