Researching INGOs: Innovations in Data Collection and Methods of Analysis

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1 We thank Joannie Tremblay-Boire for her excellent feedback on a first draft.
Introduction

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are increasingly visible actors in global affairs and have gained much attention in scholarly and policy circles. Although scholars and the general public are today more aware of NGOs and their transnational activities, progress in studying these actors is hampered by several issues, including definitional challenges, the absence of a comprehensive global tracking mechanism, problems of accessing and sharing reliable data about INGO activities, biases about the nature of INGOs, and disciplinary barriers limiting collaborative research.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight contemporary debates related to the study of INGs as global actors and identify some key methods and data challenges. The goal is to contribute to an ongoing conversation among like-minded researchers that have individually and collectively identified key challenges and offered solutions in their own work. We hope to showcase some best practices emerging in recent years towards the goal of developing a progressive research program for INGO studies.

In the next section, we begin with the basic question of ‘why study INGs?’ In answering this question, we highlight in particular the significant opportunities in this area for linking academic research closely with the policy world as well as student demands focused on the role of NGOs. Subsequently, we offer an overview of the state of the art in studying NGOs in International Relations (IR) and Global Affairs. We review the frequency of INGO-related content in major IR journals and discuss the content of those contributions as a way of assessing current perceptions about these actors in the field of IR. We then describe key challenges of studying INGs and summarize some of the promising scholarship emerging in recent years.
Why study INGOs?

Before launching into a presentation of how INGOs are being studied today, we argue that answering the question of ‘why study INGOs?’ is an important and non-trivial matter. We claim that understanding some of the motives of recent inquiries into the role of INGOs matters greatly for understanding the limits of such research output. First, we would argue that studying NGOs or ‘civil society’ was particularly fashionable for some time in the 1990s, but such fads offer a weak basis for a sustained research program. This initial spike in interest in the field of International Relations and elsewhere certainly had much to do with the end of the Cold War and the expectations associated with the transnational nature of NGO activism as a form of peaceful social change (Lipschutz 1992; Brysk 1993; Wapner 1995; Kriesberg 1997; Price 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Clark 2001). But neither this optimistic view of NGOs and transnational movements nor the subsequent challenges to it (Anderson 2000; Cooley and Ron 2002; Price 2003; Bob 2005; Tarrow 2005) necessarily contributed to establishing a more sustained research agenda about this type of activism. Much of the debate about the role and significance of international NGOs in global affairs has been driven by assumptions about how they are ‘not like’ or ‘just like’ other actors in global affairs (e.g., states or multinationals) which often leads scholarship to follow and defend certain assumptions about INGOs, and the claim that they matter, rather than necessarily advance knowledge about them.

Second, we argue that the choice of ‘studying INGOs’ and their influence often drives the research inquiry. If we study INGOs only to show how they matter or are principled (or not) then this may bias the research. While there are many reasons to make INGOs central to a research program, we rarely see an explicit effort to fully account for why a focus on the role of this particular type of agency is warranted.
One can debate the different motives individual scholars may have when they decide to focus on INGOs, and if they differ from the motivations of those researching security or international political economy. Our main goal here is to establish a consensus about a set of objectives that are likely to contribute to a cumulative and thriving collective research agenda. The three main reasons we highlight here focus on the desire to contribute to the broader scholarly enterprise while increasing the methodological and theoretical depth of scholarship (1), the opportunities for an engagement with practitioners and policy makers (2), and the ability to strengthen educational opportunities for undergraduate and graduate studies (3). First, studying INGOs is in our view a preeminently collective effort. Multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives greatly enhance research efforts, for example when anthropological views of NGO activities on the ground complement the more trans-contextual view privileged in political science (Merry 2006). Not-for-profit studies is an established field in Public Administration, but its accumulated knowledge about how nonprofits work rarely informs studies in international relations which focus their main attention at INGO impact abroad. We find established and thriving research agendas on NGOs in many disciplines, including anthropology, public administration, political science, geography, sociology, economics, or law. By choosing INGOs as a common framework of inquiry, such collaborations across disciplines are encouraged and more likely to gain traction and deliver compelling empirical results. But such collaborations also face major hurdles represented by disciplinary boundaries which can be particularly punishing for graduate students and junior faculty.

Second, even large INGOs are still comparatively small compared to many MNCs or states and scholars have failed to take advantage of the relatively easy access to these types of actors. Access is further facilitated because of the large number of INGOs existing as well as a
general perception that academic research can play an important role in complementing and challenging what many NGOs do. But academic research can also lead to disillusionment among practitioners, not only because it fails to address issues they deal with on a daily basis, but also because researchers may simply spend too little time explaining why the results of a survey or interview may ultimately be important to them as an organization (and not just to the researcher’s career) or the sector overall.²

While relationships between researchers and NGO practitioners are by no means easy to establish or conflict-free, establishing INGO research (centers) is crucial to building more sustained linkages between academics and practitioners. Such linkages are often necessary in order to get access to data, but they also serve as ways of generating research questions and distributing research results for greater impact. Of course, there is a serious tension between making research more relevant to practitioners and getting published in top disciplinary journals.³ For example, IR scholarship has explored why certain issues rise on the global agenda or if human rights activism has any positive impact, none of which would be a top concern for INGO leaders. Beyond scoring points in narrow academic debates involving a few dozen readers of journal articles and even less attending the typical ISA/APSA panel, there is little evidence of a larger impact of the research on INGOs performed in IR (or elsewhere).

Third, many students not only want to often ‘make a difference’ and see working for (or creating their own) NGOs as a prime opportunity to do so, but employment opportunities in that sector have increased markedly in the past decades and are likely to continue to increase in the

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² These issues may be more pronounced in smaller organizations with limited resources to respond to research requests. But, in general, researchers should ensure that they report back results of their study in a timely fashion.
³ Thanks to Joannie Tremblay-Boire for raising these important issues. IR scholars are encouraged to write ‘about’ their subjects, not engage in a more meaningful or lasting way. With their tenure requirements and other incentives, academic disciplines actively discourage such engagement which is particularly problematic for graduate students and junior scholars.
future. While well-established programs in nonprofit management and studies exist and cover some of this ground, a more established and interdisciplinary research agenda on INGOs is crucial to improve both undergraduate and graduate education in this area. On the ‘demand side’ a similar trend is visible: With the expansion of the INGO sector, the need for better-trained new hires is a frequently voiced concern by their leadership. Only a few INGOs are large enough to sustain in-house training programs, which create opportunities for universities to create more specialized programs. While many nonprofit programs are well established across the United States, they tend to be largely domestic in focus, which does not offer sufficient coverage of the unique challenges faced by transnational organizations working across borders.

The ‘why study INGOs?’ question raises serious issues about the relevance of academic research to addressing real-world problems. While obviously not all research should be designed to solve whatever problems INGOs face in their operations, many of these organizations do not have the resources of states or MNCs and can greatly benefit from collaborating with researchers. But disciplinary boundaries and narrow incentives reinforced by tenure requirements or journal editors create powerful roadblocks for researchers interested in developing more compelling research based on multidisciplinary or practitioner-oriented perspectives. This does not mean that aspiring researchers should use these structural limits as easy excuses for weak research, but that they should answer the ‘why’ question in a systematic fashion, including identifying a compelling research program and asking in what ways this research may be improved through engaging systematically with practitioners.

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4 Some these claims are based on the experiences of the TNGO Initiative which regularly engages with leaders of the sector and seeks to bring together scholarship, practitioner engagement, and education from the mission of the TNGO Initiative based at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University (www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/tngo/About/).

5 In 2008, 1.9 per cent of nonprofits based on the U.S. were classified as ‘international and foreign affairs’ in focus. Their revenue of about 31 billion represented 2.2 percent of the entire nonprofit revenue of 1.44 trillion (Wing et al. 2010: 4).
Mapping the study of INGOs in International Relations

Our analysis of the INGO content of top journals in International Relations over the last decade reveals some interesting trends in both placement and temporal clustering. We use the results from the 2008 Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) study by Richard Jordan, Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney to identify top journals in IR. The selection of peer-reviewed journals is based on international averages of responses to questions 42 (“List the four journals in IR that publish articles with the greatest influence on the way IR scholars think about international relations.”) and 43 (“List the four journals that publish the best research in your area of expertise.”). We rely on the TRIP rankings rather than Impact Factor to avoid debates about methodology and ranking by measure of impact factor. The journals on the TRIP list include all of the top ranked general IR journals by impact factor (2001-2008), but exclude specialized journals such as Biosecurity/Bioterrorism, the Journal of Common Market Studies, or the American Journal of International Law, where it would be unlikely to find INGO research in the first place.

Articles on INGOs were found via database searches of titles and abstracts, confirmed by scanning the titles and abstracts for each volume of each journal for the past decade (2001-11). The keywords used were “INGO(s)”, “NGO(s)”, “non-governmental organization(s)”, “nongovernmental organization(s)”, “transnational advocacy network”, and any large INGO (e.g., Amnesty International). Since journals vary with regard to the number of volumes and articles per volume, we used an average across several volumes to calculate the total number of articles published by each journal in the ten-year period examined (2001-2011).

http://irtheoryandpractice.wm.edu/projects/trip/Final_Trip_Report_2009.pdf. The 2011 international study (by James D. Long, Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney) will be available shortly and we will revise our results based on any changes.
Table 1. Frequency count: INGO content, top IR journals, 2001-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Vols. (Art. per vol)</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IO</td>
<td>4 (6)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>IS</td>
<td>4 (5)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISQ</td>
<td>4 (12.5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APSR</td>
<td>4 (10.5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Politics</td>
<td>4 (4.5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCR</td>
<td>6 (6.5)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*International Organization* and *International Studies Quarterly* (ranked 1 and 3) have published the most INGO related articles (9 and 10 articles respectively, or 3.75% and 2% of all articles published). In each case, the publications on INGOs cluster towards the end of the decade, with peaks in 2008/9. The *American Political Science Review* and *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (ranked 4 and 6) published the fewest articles on INGOs (1 and 2 articles respectively, or 0.2% and 0.5%). While *IO* and *ISQ* have increasingly featured quantitative analysis, most of the articles on INGOs published within these journals have used qualitative methods, paralleling our assessment of the dominant methods in INGO studies today. The strong quantitative-bias (perceived or actual) of *APSR* and *JCR* and corresponding lack of INGO publications match our expectations.

Articles on INGOs in the top journals generally concerned the humanitarian or human rights activities of the NGO sector, including humanitarian assistance, election monitoring, and women’s and children’s rights (Mendelson 2001; Cooley and Ron 2002; Lischer 2003; Joachim 2003; Ron et al. 2005; Sundstrom 2005; Carpenter 2007a, 2007b; Hafner-Burton 2008; Kelley

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7 Riley Morin contributed to the frequency count of INGO-related articles in IR journals.
The mechanisms of INGO influence in IR generally involved service provision, information provision, networking, or norm creation/normative framing (Risse 2000; Rutherford 2000; Joachim 2003; Reimann 2006; Carpenter 2007a, 2007b; Collins 2007; Montoya 2008; Kelley 2008; Franklin 2008; Kelley 2009), with some attempts to evaluate the relative use of alternative mechanisms (Sell and Prakash 2004). A minority of the articles used a rationalist/materialist frame as opposed to a normative frame (Dai 2002; Cooley and Ron 2002; Sell and Prakash 2004; Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; von Stein 2008) and these appeared more commonly in *International Security* or the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. A few articles engaged the more general question of INGOs as a category of actors impact on the larger international system, including questions of accountability, power relations, and the growth of a global civil society (Price 2003; Grant and Keohane 2005; Sending and Neumann 2006; Reimann 2006; Shepherd 2008). Of the 29 articles in top journals, only 12 use quantitative analysis of datasets of any size, as opposed to case studies of particular INGOs operating in particular places reinforcing our belief that INGO literature to date has had a qualitative bias and disciplinary (and other boundaries) have inhibited accumulation and exchange of knowledge across issues, organization types, and theoretical frames. We examine possible reasons for this bias in the next section.8

**Methodological and data challenges: State of the art of INGO research**

There are multiple challenges to establishing a progressive research agenda on the role of NGOs in global affairs. We focus here on three main issues: defining and delimiting INGOs (1),

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8 We recognize that there are more specialized journals covering nonprofits domestically and internationally, including INGOs. These include *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (NVSQ)* and *Voluntas*. Journals in disciplines such as sociology or public administration also regularly carry INGO-related articles. *World Development* also stands out as a significant venue for rigorous INGO studies.
disciplinary boundaries and their tendency to create/sustain selection biases (2), and methodological challenges as well as difficulties associated with accessing and collecting data (3). We argue that individual scholarship has contributed in many ways to progress on each of these issues, but we also hold that creating a more deliberate conversation among a community of INGO scholars\(^9\) adds important value by facilitating broader debate on best practices and the innovation of new techniques as well as by diffusing those practices among scholars interested in the role of INGOs in global affairs.

Definitions and numbers

The Union of International Associations (UIA) claims that the number of international NGOs increased from less than 200 in 1909 to more than 20,000 in 2005 (Union of International Associations 2005), with much of the growth occurring since the 1970s. Salamon et al. concluded in a 2003 study of 35 countries that civil society organizations represented a $1.7 trillion industry (about 5 per cent of the combined economies). In the United States, nonprofits employ today ten per cent of the workforce, just behind marketing and retail. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), the total number of internationally-oriented NGOs\(^10\) based in the United States increased from 1,812 in 1989 to 3,548 in 1998, 5,600 in 2003, and 6,790 in 2008. This growth outpaced other nonprofit sectors, where the number of organizations less than doubled over the same time period (Lecy 2012).\(^11\) The revenue of this sector also increased more sharply than the nonprofit sector overall, from 9.7 billion (1998) to

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\(^9\) Cristina Balboa set up a virtual community of INGO scholars at http://ingoscholars.ning.com/.

\(^10\) The category used by NCCS is titled ‘international and foreign affairs.’

\(^11\) The NCCS recorded a 59% increase of 501c(3) nonprofits (public charities only) in the United States between 1999 and 2009, from about 632,000 to about 1.06 million in 2009. The revenue of the nonprofit sector almost doubled in a decade (from 765 billion in 1998 to 1.44 trillion in 2008), and dropped slightly as a result of the global financial crisis (Wing/Roeger/Pollak 2010).
31.9 billion (2008). While 1.9 percent of all nonprofits in the U.S. fall into this international category, they collectively received 2.9 per cent of all charitable contributions in 2009 (Wing et al. 2010: 6).

While the overall growth rate may be impressive, it is important to recognize the inherent instability experienced by organizations in this sector, especially newcomers. Between 1989 and 2007, the addition of a total of 4,688 organizations in the United States (from 1,812 to 6,500) occurred with 7,068 new entries and 2,380 organizations ceasing operations (Lecy 2012). Studies on international nonprofits have shown widespread financial difficulties (Kerlin and Thanasombat 2006) as well as decreasing grant sizes forcing organizations to spend more time on grant acquisition. In the development sector, “the increase in total ODA has come about by adding many small new projects rather than by scaling up what works” (Kharas 2009: 8). In addition, the international nonprofit sector in the United States is also characterized by extreme inequality. Lecy finds that “80 per cent of the funds that pass through the international subsector are controlled by three percent of the organizations, with the top one percent garnering 60 per cent of total funds” (Lecy 2012: 2).

All these issues notwithstanding, international NGOs have not only grown in number and capacity, but also with regard to their global presence. The World Bank reports that projects with some degree of ‘civil society’ involvement increased from six percent in the late 1980s to over 70 percent in 2006 (Werker and Ahmed 2008). The number of NGOs with consultative status at the United Nations increased from 41 in 1946 to about 700 in 1992. During this time period of 46 years, on average, slightly more than 14 organizations were added annually. Since 1992, this

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12 The revenue of the nonprofit sector almost doubled in a decade (from 765 billion in 1998 to 1.44 trillion in 2008), and dropped slightly to 1.41 trillion in 2009 as a result of the global financial crisis (Wing/Roeger/Pollak 2010).
13 During the same time period, the number of private foundations with 501c(3) status rose from 78,000 to over 120,000 (http://nccsdataweb.urban.org/PubApps/profile1.php).
rate has increased tenfold to an average of 150 organizations annually and by September 2011 3,536 NGOs had consultative status at the United Nations (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2011).

Many have concluded from this sharp rise in the number and networking activities of INGOs that these organizations are becoming more powerful and/or likely to alter in significant ways decisions and outcomes in global affairs. But most of the organizations at the center of scholarly inquiries (Greenpeace, Amnesty International, CARE, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines) are not particularly representative of the overall population of NGOs working across borders. In the field of International Relations (and elsewhere), a very particular subset frequently studied includes organizations that are exceedingly large and rich (1), engage exclusively in advocacy (2), and tend to be based in the Global North (3). This choice may well be defensible based on relevance and scholarly interests, but we claim that scholars’ research efforts would greatly benefit from understanding better basic perimeters of the INGO population, including measures of size, sectoral distribution, organizational structures, financial inequality across organizations, or funding sources.

Definitions. A key issue preceding any count of the organizations in a sector is how to define what is an INGO (Martens 2002; Willetts 2002; Vakil 1997). NGOs are commonly defined by what they are not, non-profit, non-state, and non-governmental, producing a residual category of formal organizations which are only loosely related. To be judged ‘international,’ NGOs need only have members or contributions from three countries or more. The assumption is that if NGOs are dependent upon, and thus responsive to, individuals and resources from more than one country, they cannot be too closely tied to the agenda of only one state. Many definitions of NGO, including the UIA and UN, also include a democratic requirement, in that leadership
structures or the composition of important decision-making bodies, must operate or form according to democratic principles. But any of these requirements are open to interpretation and debate among scholars.

In particular, these definitional challenges have likely also contributed to the absence of an agency reliably tracking NGOs across different sectors as well as at the global level. Various international organizations with an interest in this sector (e.g., the UN, the EU, or UIA) use very broad and different definitions\(^\text{14}\) and depend on self-identification and self-reporting to collect important data on budgets, missions, structure, networking, and activities of NGOs. These sources provide little more than the sense that the sector has been growing at a significant rate in the past two decades. While we know from some studies that NGOs are formed and die with high frequency (Bloodgood 2011b; Lecy 2010), crucial and reliable information about the sector does not exist yet at the global level.

**Numbers.** Definitional differences can also have a significant impact on which organizations are counted. As a prominent example, the ‘world polity’ literature uses one of the most expansive definitions of INGOs, including trade and industrial groups along with standard-setting agencies and groups focused on tourism (Boli and Thomas 1999). This definition is simply too broad to be analytically useful for most researchers and others have offered more narrow definitions. These have highlighted a combination of a number of criteria, including legal status, mission statement, the existence of professional staff, or the abstention from profit-making, violence, and political office (Willetts 2002). And a majority of researchers will face additional categorization challenges, for example, when they might try to distinguish between

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\(^{14}\) The Union of International Associations defines INGOs as formal organizations with international aims and the intention to conduct activities in at least three countries; individual or collective participation, including voting rights, from at least three countries; a permanent headquarters and provisions for continuity of operation; and substantial budgetary contributions from citizens, foundations, or governments from at least three countries.
different advocacy activities, when defining a ‘faith-based’ group, or when trying to establish the extent of international activities particularly by domestic organizations. While we use in this essay the term ‘INGO,’ the vast majority of these groups are not ‘international’ in the sense of having significant representation from a diversity of nations. Instead, they are ‘transnational’ at best, having “regular interactions across national boundaries” (Risse-Kappen 1995a: 3) and the majority originates in the Global North (Fox 1987). Furthermore, these regular interactions may be limited to solely neighboring countries, or a particular region. While any decision about how to define INGOs is highly context-specific and driven by the research interest at hand, these differences require more attention, in particular when scholars care about the effectiveness and accountability of INGOs. These problems are visible when faced with ‘briefcase’ NGOs (Goddard and Assad 2006), tax scams by corporations, and ‘front’ NGOs representing corporate interests. Even without an element of suspected fraud, organizations such as professional and trade associations, labor unions, and think tanks sometimes fit very awkwardly into the category INGO.

**Networks and hybrids.** Two other issues further complicate the challenge of establishing a positive definition for a residual category such as ‘non-governmental/not-for-profit’ organization. First, much of the literature on the power of NGOs in global affairs has focused less on individual organizations and more on the networks they build (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Lecy et al. 2010). Selecting a network as the level of analysis often creates additional challenges in terms of tracking activities and contributions by individuals and organizations, which reinforces our general point that clearly distinguishing different types of actors in a network is a necessary task. Networks differ dramatically in terms of their formalization, and not all members may agree on which organizations are in or out. There are also an increasing
number of NGO associations those collaboration and influence remains poorly understood (Gugerty and Buffardi 2009). Second, research on domestic service delivery increasingly traces the emergence of “hybrid organizational structures with mixed public, nonprofit, and for-profit characteristics” (Smith 2010: 219). Today, this may still be less relevant for transnational NGOs than domestic organizations, but it certainly challenges the traditional boundaries between commercial, governmental, and not-for-profit sectors. Having a sense of what defines and distinguishes INGOs entering into such hybrid arrangements is crucial to the research enterprise, in particular, when trying to assess the risks of weaker partners to be co-opted (Baur and Schmitz 2011).

Questions:

- Do we need a positive definition of INGOs? What entails a minimum standard in defining INGOs overall or in a given sector?
- Some scholars (and certainly most students) collapse INGOs and IGOs into one category, often based on their alleged non-state character and frequently similar goals. Others move in the opposite direction by focusing only on a specific sub-sector (e.g., human rights, environment). How can these claims based of very different INGO samples be reconciled and integrated into a cumulative research agenda?
- Is it possible to standardize other definitions to support more cumulative research efforts (examples: ‘advocacy’ focuses exclusively on efforts to change international/domestic policies; ‘Oxfam is a confederation,’ etc.)?
- Is it feasible/desirable to establish more discriminating labels for INGOs with very different structural features (i.e. limit the term ‘transnational’ to those with significant cross-border interactions, or ‘international’ to those with significant governance participation from different nations)?
- How should a research agenda solely focused on INGOs relate to efforts designed to better understand all types of cross-border non-state agency (NGOs, MNCs, transnational violent groups)? For example, network analysis can be used across different types of non-state actors and other collectivities. How can an INGO-focused research agenda contribute to strengthening such cross-agent studies?

Data, measurements, and disciplinary boundaries

The INGO research field faces a number of challenges caused by limited data availability and the persistence of disciplinary boundaries. These challenges are particularly problematic
because academics under their usual publishing pressures have little time or incentives to contribute to more collectively sustained solutions. First, tenure and publishing careers continue to be framed in narrow disciplinary terms, thus actively discouraging scholars from challenging the conventional wisdom in any fundamental ways. For example, it would be risky for someone in IR to primarily focus on the internal workings of an INGO and expect to get such a study published in a top disciplinary journal. Second, data availability problems are very common for those interested in any type of non-state activism. For the quantitatively inclined, fewer datasets capturing NGO activities exist, while for those working qualitatively, there isn’t even a common ground on basic questions regarding research conduct or quality. For example, while many researchers regularly interview NGO staff for their projects, there are no established procedures of quality control or sharing as a precondition for accumulating knowledge collectively. These two issues create often a dysfunctional feedback loop: Disciplinary boundaries deter collaboration that would produce better quality research about INGOs, while limited data availability pushes (individual) scholars to lower the overall risk of a project by sticking with familiar, narrow disciplinary debates.

In the IR field, scholars have only more recently begun to address these questions in a more systematic manner. While non-state actors or NGOs have been on the IR research agenda since the 1970s, the early research efforts tended to derive their importance primarily from how they were different from states (principled, transnational, etc.), but generally made little effort to define INGOs on their own terms. In this view, NGOs are important and relevant because they are part of a transformation of the international system driven by interdependence and globalization (Skjelsbaek 1971; Boli and Thomas 1999). But this rather general view offers little
guidance in establishing a more refined research agenda that tries to establish the conditions under which these types of actors, emerge, thrive, die, and succeed or fail in reaching their goals.

Although Keohane/Nye and others had included NGOs as part of their broad transnational research agenda established in the early 1970s (Keohane and Nye 1971; Skjelsbaek 1971; Kriesberg 1972), they played a relatively minor role in supporting the underlying logic of increasing interdependence as an alternative organizing principle to anarchy. NGOs reappeared as international actors in their own right with the rise of constructivism and the window of opportunity presented by the end of the Cold War (Orenstein and Schmitz 2006). While innovation is underway (as reflected in this workshop), individual or small-N case studies of INGOs remain dominant, often compiled into anthologies focused on deriving general lessons from a limited number of observations (e.g., Risse-Kappen 1995b; Risse and Ropp 1999; Florini 1999; Lewis and Wallace 2000; Lindenberg and Bryant 2001; Josselin and Wallace 2001; Seckinelgin 2002; Glasius 2002). Indeed, most studies of INGOs focus on a specific sector (e.g., human rights), a single case (e.g., Greenpeace or Amnesty International), or a single issue campaign (e.g., banning landmines). As such, many of the literature’s generalizations are based on narrow subsets of INGOs relying disproportionately on the experiences of organizations considered successful or prominent.

Most NGO research continues to be confined to a particular discipline or sub-discipline, such as international relations, public administration, or sociology. Advances in our collective understanding of organized transnational activism have been limited by the persistence of disciplinary divides and segmented, thus hard to find, research programs. This fragmentation is expressed in the separate debates about TNGOs that have emerged in the literatures on social movements, not-for-profit management, lobbying and interest group behavior, advocacy
networks, and epistemic communities. As illustrations of such discipline-driven research, consider publications engaging primarily with Keck and Sikkink’s *Activists Beyond Borders* in the field of international relations, the transnational social movements literature in sociology (Smith 1997 O'Brien, 2000 #1921), the epistemic community literature (Haas 1992), or the efforts to extend the domestic not-for-profit literature to transnational organizations (Salamon and Anheier 1998). By privileging a particular theoretical perspective, each of these literatures tends to capture an important, but often small section of the complex realities confronting INGOs and their stakeholders.

There obviously is nothing wrong with a case study or small-N approach to studying INGOs and these types of studies will continue to be highly influential in the future. However, any study – quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method – would stand a greater chance of being recognized for its quality, if we addressed collectively some of the specific challenges associated with the adverse effects of disciplinary boundaries and limited data availability. For example, it should be in the interest of all to share best practices about how to record, transcribe, (possibly anonymize), and share the results of interviews\(^\text{15}\) as a way of increasing trust in results, improving graduate training, and providing data to those starting out in this field.

Table 2 offers an overview of places where scholars have looked for, and created, data relevant to understanding how INGOs work and under what conditions they reach their goals. The early IR literature has focused attention mostly on the outputs of NGOs, while exploring what goes on inside of NGOs remains still largely the domain of the field of nonprofit studies. While IR scholars have yet to draw effectively on studies that explain NGO behavior based on internal factors, the field of nonprofit studies (especially in the United States) is dominated by a

\(^{15}\) It should be recognized that there are important exceptions to this rule, including research into highly sensitive human rights or political issues.
focus on domestic organizations. Studying INGOs thus is a unique field that can not only draw on both disciplines, but would also make unique contributions to each field by addressing some of their respective limitations.

Table 2. Relevant data and information about INGOs and their networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Information about what INGOs/networks do</th>
<th>Information about the nature of INGOs/networks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Output (strategies)</td>
<td>Outcome (mobilization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Country/case</td>
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<tr>
<td>Network</td>
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Focus on what INGOs do. A majority of studies published over the past decade in major IR journals never opens the ‘black box’ of INGOs, but focuses on collecting data about the effects of their activities (Heyse 2011). Some of the challenges here have already been discussed above, for example in the context of questions such as ‘which organizations count?’ and ‘how do I determine the universe of organizations/activities included?’ In the absence of any comprehensive global or regional efforts to track INGOs and their activities, scholars face substantial limitations or have to spend a lot of time and resources in creating such data sets.

Quantitative studies on advocacy NGOs have focused on data describing the output of INGOs, for example measured in number of human rights reports published (Ron et al. 2005) or mentions of such reports in news media (Murdie and Davis 2011) correlated with the human rights situation. By contrast, qualitative studies have often focused on tracing the causal links at the micro level between the activities of INGOs and the responses of repressive governments. In recent years, a large majority of development INGOs have also expanded their advocacy efforts in hopes to strengthen their legitimacy challenged by decades of charges regarding alleged
paternalism and failed aid programs (Uvin 2004). These organizations have mostly chosen ‘human rights’ as a new framework of addressing global poverty and humanitarian issues and a plethora of different rights-based approaches (RBA) are currently applied across the globe by Oxfam, CARE, Save the Children, Actionaid, and other groups (Hickey and Mitlin 2009; Gready 2009). While IR focused attention primarily on traditional human rights NGOs and their role in challenging authoritarianism, this evolution in the strategies of development organizations highlights the importance of those actors for understanding social and political change.

A final point relates to the question of bias in viewing INGOs as ‘agents of change.’ Much of the debate in the discipline has revolved around this point and either explained why the principled activism and transnational networking of these organizations makes them powerful players, or referred to competition, donor influence or other hurdles to argue that INGOs and their networks cannot and do not live up to those expectations. This debate ignores organizational theories and nonprofit studies which have explored for some time a wide range of explanations that explore in what ways the ‘third sector’ is similar to or different from private enterprising, hierarchical bureaucracies, or ‘close cousins’ such as interest groups (Bloodgood 2011a). There is plenty of potential to move beyond the principled/self-interest dichotomy, for example when taking a broader view of why such a sector exists in the first place. To take Wolfgang Seibel’s idea of “successful failure” which asserts that “Western democracies delegate especially puzzling problems to nonprofit institutions” with no expectation that these problems are being solved in the short or medium term (Seibel 1996: 1021; Meyer and Zucker 1989). Studying domestic and (especially) international NGOs has too often been based on ideal assumptions, rather than a more empirical understanding of their operations as efforts to “decouple persistence from performance” (p. 1022). Focusing on the internal structures and
details of organizing requires an interdisciplinary approach that moves from the surface of what INGOs do to studying how these organizations actually function. This may include looking at their peculiar ways of raising money (through board appointments, for example), motivate their staff, or cater to their principals’ interests in inefficiency and ignorance (Seibel).

**Focus on the nature/structure of INGOs/networks.** Data challenges are not unique to studying INGOs, but because not-for-profits are private actors and most are relatively small, scholars have some unique opportunities but also face specific hurdles in accessing and collecting data. On the positive side, NGOs and their staff are likely more interested in working with academics than corporate or governmental actors. But NGOs also want to see a pay-off from engaging with academics, i.e. getting basic access requires being able to articulate a clear rationale for the inquiry as well as some output/feedback that might be useful for the organization. Research centers backed by a school’s name are likely to be more attractive than individual researchers, in particular if NGOs can gain reputational benefits from the collaboration. Working with NGOs as part of a larger academic entity is also helpful when negotiating the degree of access or the usage of research results. At a more basic level, any historical studies of NGOs face much larger hurdles than similar studies on governments. Because NGOs rarely have the means and also are not required to keep extensive records, only a few organizations (including Amnesty International) offer such archival research opportunities. Websites are one possible fallback option, but crucial past records are then quickly lost because of updates. For quantitative data, ICPSR offers one option of sharing INGO-related information.

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16 Certain forms of international charity are a typical example where principals (rich nations and their populations) have an interest in not addressing the problem (global poverty) effectively, since it would entail much more profound changes to the international system. Since donors are disinclined to give up their own position of wealth, they will not ask hard questions about development programs put forward by INGOs and others.
But since qualitative data collection is prominent in the study of INGOs, creating a similar consortium for sharing will be imperative both for improving chances of scholars to break with their work into top journals, but also to facilitate the multidisciplinary or mixed-methods approaches highly relevant to the study of INGOs and their activities.

Much of the early IR literature on INGOs focused attention on the small sector of advocacy-oriented human rights or environmental organizations. Since much of this research emphasized the pros and cons of ‘naming and shaming’ strategies, the organizations behind this type of activism remained largely unexplored. Organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch were largely viewed as carriers for certain principles without further inquiry into internal factors driving behavior. Critics of this early argument for the influence of principled activism pointed subsequently to their Northern bias (Bob 2005), their media- and revenue-driven approach (Ron et al. 2005), and their role as gatekeepers for issue definition and promotion (Carpenter 2007b). But apart from a few in-depth studies (Watson 2004; Hopgood 2006) of individual organizations or the sector overall (Schmitz et al. 2011), understanding how national environments shape activism (Stroup 2012) or opening the ‘black box’ of INGOs (Wong 2012; Heyse 2011; Lindenberg and Bryant 2001) remains still rare.

Much of the research on the internal structures and decision-making (Brown et al. 2012), the role of leadership, on what constitutes ‘effectiveness’ (Lecy et al. 2011), or the significance of resources shaping the not-for-profit sector takes place in (sub-) disciplines outside of IR and these insights should be more effectively mobilized in interdisciplinary research focused on INGOs. The same applies to research focused on the level of ‘networks’ which could mobilize existing methods of social network analysis (Hafner-Burton et al. 2009; Kahler 2009; Ward et al. 2011), provided better data on INGO networking is available.
Questions:

- When does the ‘INGO’ offer the most appropriate level of analysis? When should we use networks instead?
- What responsibilities do scholars have when accessing data provided/facilitated by NGOs (at headquarters or in the field)?
- Should scholars aim to make positive ‘real-world’ contributions to NGO effectiveness and accountability?
- Are ‘proxy measures’ really measuring up in terms of appropriately describing DV or IV?
- How relevant are organizational theories explaining for-profit organizations or public bureaucracies? Are INGOs more insulated from competition and oversight?

Questions about INGOs: Change and power

Initial research on INGOs largely concerned their relative power and contributions to International Relations, as compared to states. Much of this work (at least within political science) came from research challenging the dominance of realism. Thus, it is not surprising that the challenge became to show that INGOs mattered and how they exerted an independent influence on IR or the international system (Brysk 1993; Clark 1995; Wapner 1995; Price 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998). The on-going battle to establish the fact that INGOs mattered, and that their study within IR was an important enterprise, may have stalled important theoretical and methodological developments necessary to address questions of when, how, and why they matter. Efforts to surmount claims (largely from realists) that INGOs were at best peripheral to mainstream IR, also encouraged overly general and overly universal claims about the extent of their influence.

The next generation of INGO scholarship has turned to qualifying and nuancing claims about INGO influence, attempting to delineate areas where INGOs might matter the most, and critique earlier claims of universality, including assertions that INGOs’ activities and influence
were relatively easy to organize or universally good (Anderson 2000; Cooley and Ron 2002; Price 2003; Bob 2005; Tarrow 2005; Carpenter 2007b). We argue that while more nuanced research about INGOs’ motivations and influence is an important contribution to a developing body of knowledge, research can and should now be turned to ‘why’ questions concerning the formation, organization, interaction, and operation of INGOs. These lines of research could produce powerful claims about the mechanisms that drive INGOs and their roles in issues and structures of IR. Furthermore, this research is likely to produce better practical and policy advice. For example, recent research regarding INGO moves within networks can help individual organizations manage the cooperation and conflict issues they confront, or play network ties to their strategic advantage, to produce more effective advocacy campaigns (Hertel 2006; Carpenter 2011). Research using a collective action framework can help explain when INGOs are likely to form in the first place (Prakash and Gugerty 2010).

We see two promising areas of research development emerging from this project in the near term, drawing on collaborations over data collection and methodological techniques. The first is internal power dynamics, within and between individual INGOs and within and between networks. New interview data on the internal workings of INGOs, as well as new methods of collecting hard-to-get data on networks, including IssueCrawler, allow a shift in focus from power relations between state and non-state to relations within INGOs and arrangements of private authority. Power struggles within INGO networks may impede INGO collaboration, even as shared conflicts with states might encourage this (Jordan and Van Tuijl 2000; Hertel 2006).

Second, questions of change, both INGOs’ ability to change the international system and changes within INGOs as they have grown and spread, have received insufficient attention. How and why do INGOs adopt new organizational forms, merge, or decide to engage in networks and
partnerships (Lecy et al. 2010)? When are INGOs progressive forces for social change and economic justice, and when have INGOs reproduced and reinforced existing institutions and power structures? While some have commented on this question (Büthe 2004; Bob 2005; Nelson and Dorsey 2008; Joachim 2007; Swidler 2009; Avant et al. 2010), new data on INGOs over time makes further study possible (Bloodgood 2011a; Murdie and Davis 2011; Murdie and Davis). Scholars have for decades pointed out that funding requirements undermine any independent role many INGOs may aspire to (Fox 1987; Cooley and Ron 2002; Ossewaarde et al. 2008), but we have yet to identify reliable factors enabling or restricting the abilities of INGOs to affect social and political change in important ways.

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