Chapter 11

NGOs, Civil Society, and Global Governance in the Era of Sustainability and Consolidation: A Taxonomy of Value

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a robust and reliable reference framework on the ecosystem of NGOs and Civil Society for literature review in scholarly contributions and publications. Furthermore, we seek to clarify the position and scope of NGOs within the third sector and civil society. We position NGOs on the sphere of political influence where they negotiate agendas, form coalitions with local and international partners, mobilize constituencies for policy change, and ultimately engage in all stages of the policy process. Finally, we discuss their increased role as key players in times of severe financial constraints. Two voids are identified: the absence of a protective policy framework that can shield NGOs from economic contraction consequences, and the void in evaluation frameworks that can measure their quality of performance.

INTRODUCTION

In the years of the global economic crisis NGOs have moved beyond their origins as charity businesses and expanded into an increasingly diverse range of activities. They are more influential, more powerful, and more innovative than ever before, investing in social enterprise, academic expertise, sustainable models and strategic ways to address urgent development crises around the world, enhancing their impact and producing measurable results.

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A critical view of the NGO operational framework highlights concerns about their dependence from political interests and engagement with underlying agendas. The need for accountability is pressing as no credible regulatory framework is in place to evaluate NGOs’ performance and impact on the populations they serve. Globalization and the increasing easiness with which issues transcend national borders can transform operational and participative challenges to opportunities for NGOs to raise their significance through successful planning and governance structures.

THE RISE AND EVOLUTION

International NGOs go as back as the early 19th century, the anti-slavery movement and the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1932. Through the Article 71 of Chapter 10 of the United Nations Charter, NGOs were officially recognized and appointed as participating organizations with a distinctive consultative role that differentiates them from governments or member states. The term INGO was first defined in resolution 288 of ECOSOC in February 1950 as “any international organization that is not founded by an international treaty”.

The fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, coupled with the rise of globalization in the 20th century and the disruption in the delicate balance between the welfare state and the classical liberalist model of the western countries—in total favor of the latter—amply demonstrated the gap between the minimized standards of living provided by free economies and the actual needs of the weaker strata within populations. NGOs were assigned the vital role of counterbalancing this trend, emphasizing humanitarian issues and sustainable development, struggling to keep societal interests into sharp focus. The World Social Forum, a rival convention to the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, is a striking example of an alternative move to compensate for the unilateral attribution of primacy to capitalist interests.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s conservative governments in Britain, America, and other countries, reduced the roles of government in direct service provision in alignment with the privatization of public sector. By funding NGOs, governments were able to avoid service provision and direct, regulate and overlook their strategy and performance. Governments obtained a “social approval” through their collaboration with NGOs, promotion and use of volunteerism, and contributed significantly in their growth through channeled funding over the last two decades (Kim, 2010).

In the years following economic recession the shrinking space for NGOs becomes a global phenomenon that is only getting worse. Restrictive laws as well as formal and informal tactics on civil society are introduced by democratic and non-democratic governments.

The EU has developed and gradually improved an effective range of policy tools to push back against restrictions on civil society across the world and protect activists at risk. Notwithstanding this, the EU needs to sharpen its ‘shrinking space’ strategy. Precise policy changes to contemplate to this end include advocacy of strategic guidelines that help make the EU’s responses more proactive; improved tackling of the broad structural elements of the shrinking space; balance between political and development approaches; and more inclusive alliances against new restrictions on civil society.

The dramatic growth of the nongovernmental sector in the 1990s is attributed to three forces. First, governments are radically cutting back welfare budgets leaving the private nonprofit sector to take action. Second, international nonprofits have become increasingly instrumental and reliable sources for implementation and sustenance of major social interventions. Third, countries that have recently emerged