Transnational NGOs: A Cross-Sectoral Analysis of Leadership Perspectives

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While the activities of transnational NGOs are today regular subject of academic study, our understanding of their basic workings and motives remains limited. Scholarship has often been focused on individual case studies of prominent organizations and successful campaigns within specific sectors, a bias limiting the generalizability of claims. Much of the research also takes place within particular disciplinary traditions and rarely capitalizes on the strength of an interdisciplinary approach. In addressing these limitations, this interview study surveyed a sample of leaders—mostly presidents and CEOs—from 152 TNGOs registered in the United States and selected on the basis of size, sector and fiscal health. Leaders were asked about their views on questions of governance, effectiveness, accountability, networking, and leadership. We find that perceptions captured in this interview study are frequently at considerable variance with the academic literature.

Keywords: non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnationalism, civil society, leadership, mixed-method, elite interviews

Background[2]

Transnational non-governmental organizations (TNGOs) are increasingly visible actors in global affairs, prompting rapidly expanding academic research across many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. While non-state actors have always played an important role (Halliday 2001), their numbers and visibility have markedly increased in recent decades. The

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[2] Our core dataset is available by request at: maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan_tngo.aspx.

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 (UIA) 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, Kerlin and Thanasombat identify for the year 2003 a total of 5,600 international not-for-profits with a combined budget of about $17.7bn (Kerlin and Thanasombat 2006).

Transnational NGOs have not only grown in number and capacity, but also with regard to their political influence. The number of NGOs with consultative status at the United Nations increased from a few dozen in 1945 to 3,289 in September 2009 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2009). 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). An expanding literature describes how transnational NGOs shape global governance and influence domestic social and political change (Batliwala and Brown 2006; Glasius 2006; Joachim 2007; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Koslinski and Reis 2009; Price 1998; Risse et al. 1999). The increasing relevance of transnational activism has created much debate about the legitimacy and proper role of civil society actors projecting their influence across national borders. While an initial wave of scholarship primarily focused on the potential of a ‘global civil society’ to advance human rights, environmental protection, conflict resolution and sustainable development, more critical views of transnational activism are today well represented in the literature. Such views challenge the legitimacy and accountability of TNGOs (Anderson 2000; Collingwood and Logister 2005), question the alleged democratizing influence of ‘global civil society’ (Jaeger 2007), point toward harmful effects and limits of transnational activism (Carpenter 2007; Fisher 1997; Kennedy 2004; Mendelson and Glenn 2002; Schmitz 2006) and identify TNGOs with new forms of Western hegemony (Bob 2005; Chandhoke 2005). Beyond these important debates about the appropriate role of activist organizations, the vast majority of scholars agree that TNGOs, for better or worse, constitute a growing force in contemporary global politics.

Although academics and the general public are today more aware of TNGO activity, our understanding of how TNGO leaders understand their roles in global affairs remains limited in three important ways. First, no large scale systematic studies exist that examine how TNGO leaders define the challenges they confront in carrying out their missions, interacting with states and international institutions, governing their organizations, raising funds to support their activities, responding to accountability pressures, evaluating impact and other issues. Individual or small-N case studies of TNGOs abound, often compiled into anthologies focused on deriving general lessons from a limited number of observations (e.g., Lewis and Wallace 2000; Lindenberg and Bryant 2001; Risse and Ropp 1999; Seckinelgin 2002). Indeed, most studies of TNGOs focus on a specific sector (e.g., human rights or the environment), a single organization or issue campaign (Glasius 2006; Hopgood 2006; Khagram 2004; Price 1998). As such, many of the literature's generalizations are based on narrow subsets of TNGOs relying disproportionately on the experiences of organizations considered successful or prominent.

Second, most NGO research is 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 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 only captures a small section of the complex realities confronting TNGOs and their leaders. Since relatively few scholars reach across conventional boundaries to inform their own research, many studies about TNGOs fail to harness the explanatory power offered by interdisciplinary perspectives.

Third, rarely do studies of transnational NGOs link an analysis of leadership perspectives to organizational characteristics and questions about their effectiveness, accountability, and collaborative behavior. Although such analyses are more common in the domestic not-for-profit literature, organizations with a specific transnational focus remain on the margins of this academic research. The dearth of appropriate data for large-N studies limits our basic descriptive understanding of TNGOs, in particular regarding their role as agents of global change and the significant variation across different sectors and types of TNGOs. Little is understood about the links between leadership characteristics and organizational attributes, for example, such as whether leaders’ understandings of effectiveness or accountability relate to organizational qualities such as size, governance structure, or fiscal health. Moreover, only by exploring how TNGO leaders themselves define and understand such complex constructs as effectiveness or accountability can researchers begin to gage the possible gaps between the ideals and realities of transnational activism.

Cross-Sectoral Leadership Perspectives

The transnational NGO study was designed to overcome the three shortcomings we identified. Leaders from 152 TNGOs registered in the United States and spanning five major sectors of transnational activism were interviewed using a protocol informed by six disciplinary perspectives that included questions designed for both exploratory (inductive) and confirmatory (deductive) modes of inquiry. Transnational NGO leaders—mostly presidents and CEOs—were asked questions about governance, goals and strategies, accountability, effectiveness, communications, collaboration, and leadership. Looking across five sectors of transnational activism, we find significant gaps between the academic literature and the leadership perceptions captured by this interview study. Those gaps lead to a host of compelling new research questions likely to advance our understanding of how transnational non-state actors fit into larger questions of global governance.

In the following, we will first introduce the interview study, its methodology, and the datasets we generated. In the second main part, we will describe some initial findings.

Sampling and Respondents

A transnational NGO is defined as an organization that has activities in several countries (1), pursues clearly articulated goals (2), has not-for-profit 501(c)(3) status in the United States (3), and solicits and receives funding voluntarily from private individuals and other donors (4). The Charity Navigator (CN) database (www.charitynavigator.org) was chosen for sampling because its website categorizes organizations by sector, provides ratings on their fiscal health, and offers additional information (e.g., size and mission) facilitating a proportionate, stratified sampling. The 152 leaders interviewed for the study were selected from a population of US-registered international not-for-profits rated by CN in 2005. Charity Navigator's ratings are based on financial information derived from US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Forms 990. The two major components of the ratings are financial efficiency, which measures overhead or non-program spending in relation to program spending, and organizational capacity, which assesses the organization's financial stability defined in terms of revenue growth and cash reserves.[3] The ratings are adjusted for sector and other considerations.

We randomly sampled organizations based on three stratification criteria. The strata were defined by five sectoral, three budget (size) and four financial health classifications derived from Charity Navigator information.[4] We were able to complete 123 interviews with leaders from the original sample and added 29 replacements, which were randomly drawn from the remaining population. The overall response rate was 68 percent. [5] Along all measures, the final sample of 152 unique cases remain representative of the population of transnational not-for-profits in the Charity Navigator database. Table 1 indicates the close match between the sample and the population according to the strata variables.[6]

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[3] Many not-for-profits have adapted in creative ways to the enhanced focus on overhead spending imposed by external watchdogs. However, since we compiled the sample shortly after the creation of Charity Navigator, we do not expect widespread manipulation of such financial information in order to achieve higher ratings.

[4] The original population contained 35 duplicates that were cross-listed in the database by sector. The sampling procedure drew a proportionate stratified random sample of 182 (177 organizations plus 5 duplicates) from a population of 334 (299 organizations plus 35 duplicates). However, the basis for duplication in the original database was effectively random.

[5] The response rate of 68 per cent is calculated as the number of successful interviews from the original sample divided by the number of cases in the original sample or 123/182=0.69.

[6] While our sampling strategy ensured representativeness within the organizations covered by Charity Navigator, we cannot claim that our sample is necessarily representative of all transnational NGOs based in the United States. Any bias of the CN database in 2005 would have been reproduced in our sample. It is also important to note that this sample is not representative of transnational NGOs on a global scale.

Table 1. Sampling with Replacements

	Population		Sample	
	%	**N**	**%**	**n**
Environment	15%	49	14%	22
Human Rights	14%	48	14%	21
Humanitarian Relief	21%	69	21%	32
Sustainable Development	42%	141	42%	64
Conflict Resolution	8%	27	9%	13
Total		334		152
Small	40%	132	37%	56
Medium	40%	135	42%	64
Large	20%	67	21%	32
Total		334		152
Low Efficiency/Low Capacity	12%	40	14%	22
Low Efficiency/High Capacity	11%	38	9%	13
High Efficiency/Low Capacity	27%	90	23%	35
High Efficiency/High Capacity	50%	166	54%	82
Total		334		152

In the final sample, 81 percent of respondents were the CEOs, presidents or executive directors of their organizations, 12 percent were vice presidents, and only 7 percent were below the level of vice-president, ensuring the data reflect high level leadership perspectives.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol used in this project was the result of interaction among a team of researchers who were interested in applying their various theoretical perspectives to the study of

TNGOs and leaders of TNGOs. The interdisciplinary team of researchers was interested in TNGOs as transnational actors, members of social movements, interest groups, members of epistemic communities, not-for-profits, and organizations generally. They proposed that the interview be structured around three broad themes: (1) TNGOs as organizations, (2) leaders' perspectives of their organizations and (3) the transnational character of TNGOs.

Interaction with TNGO leaders in several retreat settings helped to flesh out the more specific questions to be asked. A draft protocol was pre-tested on 15 leaders. The protocol was further revised to reflect the feedback that was received during pre-tests. The interview protocol was deliberately designed with open-ended questions as a result of these pretests and the knowledge that we would miss important perceptions and insights were we to force responses. The final protocol contained questions about governance, goals and strategies, transnationalism, effectiveness, accountability, communications, collaboration and leadership.[7]

Interview Process

Interviews were conducted in person at leaders' preferred locations, usually their offices. We were able to secure a high response rate because we offered to travel to meet with respondents and went to great lengths in accommodating their demanding schedules. Meeting with the leaders in person and in a setting in which they felt comfortable also provided interviewers with contextual information about the leader and the TNGO. A number of leaders spontaneously offered interviewers tours of their facilities and access to other key staff, for example. Moreover, meeting in person allowed for the exchange of informational material concerning the TNGOs. Although a large number of the TNGOs interviewed were located in the New York City-Boston-Washington, DC region, interviews were conducted in all parts of the United States.

[7] The full protocol is available online at: www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan_tngo.aspx.

The official written requests for interviews asked for 90 minute time slots. Most respondents initially committed to between 30 and 60 minutes. However, the actual interviews lasted much longer as respondents became comfortable and reflective about issues they rarely had an opportunity to discuss in detail. Interviews averaged 82.5 minutes; the shortest was 32 minutes and the longest was 153 minutes. Interviewers ultimately collected a total of approximately 209 hours of digital recording (12,537 minutes). All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The recorded interviews were professionally transcribed for subsequent coding using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Some 28 interviews (18%) were completed in the summer of 2006 by 12 graduate students with prior experience working in TNGOs or with experience in elite interviewing. Prior to interviewing, these students were asked to complete an online human subjects training course offered through the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (www.citiprogram.org). They underwent extensive training in an interview setting in order to improve their comfort with the protocol, practicing with both peers and faculty. The majority of the interviews in the first phase were conducted in the Washington, DC area. In phase two, the interview process was streamlined after we realized how much time it took to arrange and conduct the interviews across the country. From October 2006 to April 2008, the remaining 124 interviews (82%) were conducted by two of the already trained students (who now had experience using the protocol and had both worked in the not-for-profit sector), the project administrator (an experienced former TNGO practitioner), and one faculty member (with extensive elite interviewing experience).

Face-to-face interviews present specific challenges, including (1) reactivity as a result of distorting effects due to the interview situation, (2) interviewer bias or the clouding of responses with personal opinions or preconceptions of the interviewer, and (3) respondent bias in the form of giving answers driven by perceived expectations, faulty recall, or a desire to withhold relevant information (Padgett 2008). We dealt with these issues first by assuring participants full anonymity both when soliciting their participation in the study and before we began the interview. Second, we matched interviewers with respondents to foster rapport and encouraged interviewers to adhere to the structure of the protocol as strictly as possible. Interviewers were also asked to complete debriefing forms at the end of each interview in which they assessed respondent candor and other issues that could conceivably have affected the quality of the data collected. Where available, data from these debriefing forms show that 86% (51) of respondents were perceived as very candid, 14% (8) to have evinced occasional lack of candor, and none to have displayed prolonged lack of candor. Instances of occasional lack of candor involved hesitation at discussing issues that were currently confidential within the organization such as succession planning, delayed recall, the impact of a leader's age on the pace of the interview, and telephone and staff interruptions. In no instance was occasional lack of candor judged to warrant discarding data.

Coding and Structure of Datasets

The principal investigators selected the ATLAS.ti computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (http://www.atlasti.com) because it is capable of organizing and quantifying large amounts of qualitative information. ATLAS.ti is not an automated content analyses program, but an organizational environment that assists researchers in uncovering categories in textual material as well as in systematically coding such material. This software also facilitates collaboration among coders. In what follows, we describe how the software was used to create both a qualitative and a quantitative dataset.[8]

The transcripts were preprocessed before coding. A project document with a unique identifier was created for each interview. These documents were prefaced by preliminary information collected for the sampling process described above as well as demographic information about the organization whose leader was being interviewed. Debriefing notes containing information from the interviewers were appended to the transcripts. The documents were coded by a team of five graduate students who worked with the principal investigators (PIs) in developing the coding scheme and in performing the coding. The ATLAS.ti software facilitates moving through the interviews by type of question and ascertaining the range of responses that have been given to each question. Once the range of responses was established, the coders went back and applied codes for interviewees' responses. Table 2 describes the variables organized along the sections of the interview protocol. The intent throughout was to develop variables to indicate the presence of specific responses.[9]

The ATLAS.ti software allows the coder to highlight a particular 'quotation' and match it to a specific code which can later be transformed into a variable for quantitative analysis. Such a tagging process allowed for the generation of qualitative and quantitative datasets based on four main types of variables: qualitative highlights (to facilitate qualitative analysis), categorical variables (where the categories are mutually exclusive), frequency count variables (where the categories are not mutually exclusive), and variables involving interviewer or coder inferences.

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[8] For an online introduction to using Atlas.ti (and other qualitative software), see various primers posted at *Online QDA. Learning Qualitative data Analysis on the Web* (at: onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/index.php). See also the CAQDAS Networking Project at the University of Surrey (caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk).

[9] The complete codebook can be found at: www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan_tngo.aspx.

We created two main datasets—one that is qualitative and includes the coded quotations and one that is quantitative and contains the numerical summary of the qualitative information.

Table 2. Types of Variables in Quantitative Dataset

Type of Variable	Categorical/ Mutually Exclusive	Frequency/ Not Mutually Exclusive	Interviewer or Coder Inference
Organizational Information (sector, org. efficiency, org. capacity, size, function, fiscal health, location of headquarters)	All		
Demographic Information (e.g., interviewer ID, coder ID, CEO gender, position, tenure in position, number of full-time employees, number of volunteers, type of members in organization)	Most		Age of Respondent (Interviewer)
Board Characteristics:			
Board Composition		Yes	
Board Member Selection Criteria		Yes	
Organizational Structural Change	Yes		
Organizational Form/Structure	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Board Style (formal/informal)	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Level of Board Engagement (active vs. passive)	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Organizational Goals and Structure:			
Organization's Goals and Strategies		Yes	
Goals Changed in Last 10 Years	Yes		
Drivers of Goal/Strategy Change		Yes	
Obstacles to Goals		Yes	
Organization's Activities	Yes		
Obstacles Facing Organization (Internal vs. External)	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Transnationalism:			
Respondent's Rating of Transnationalism	Yes		
Impact of Transnationalism		Yes	
Effectiveness:			
Definition of Effectiveness		Yes	
Respondent's Assessment of Own Organization's Effectiveness	Yes		
Respondent's Assessment of Own Organization's Reputation	Yes		
Orientation of Respondent's Definition & Perception of Effectiveness (results vs. process)	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Respondent's Time Frame for Effectiveness (short vs. long-term)	Yes		Yes (Coder)

Type of Variable (con't.)	Categorical/ Mutually Exclusive	Frequency/ Not Mutually Exclusive	Interviewer or Coder Inference
Accountability:			
Definition of Accountability Includes		Yes	
Accountable to Whom or What		Yes	
Implementing Accountability Involves		Yes	
Benefits of Accountability		Yes	
Obstacles to Accountability		Yes	
Respondent's Level of Satisfaction Regarding Accountability	Yes		
Source of Accountability Pressures Acting on Organization			Yes (Coder)
Respondent's Level of Entrpreneurship regarding	Yes		
Accountability & Effectiveness			Yes (Coder)
	Yes		
Communication:			
Mediated Communication		Yes	
Face-to-Face Communication		Yes	
Mediated Communication with Field		Yes	
Face-to-Face Communication with Field		Yes	
Obstacles & Challenges to Communication		Yes	
Respondent's Personal Style of Communication within Organization	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Communication Flows in Organization Overall	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Collaboration:			
Type of Organizations Collaborate with		Yes	
Collaboration Structures		Yes	
Benefits of Partnerships or Network Collaborations		Yes	
Obstacles to Partnerships or Network Collaborations		Yes	
Affect toward Collaboration with Other NGOs	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Affect toward Collaborations with For-Profit & Governmental Entities	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Leadership:			
Skills Needed to Lead NGO		Yes	
Skill Acquisition Inside Organization		Yes	
Reason for Internal Training		Yes	
Focus of External Skill Acquisition	Yes		
Advancement Opportunities	Yes		
Qualities of Good Leader		Yes	
Desired Training for Leaders like Yourself		Yes	
Interest in Leadership Training	Yes		Yes (Coder)
Interviewer Comments:			
Respondent's Candor	Yes		Yes (Interviewer)

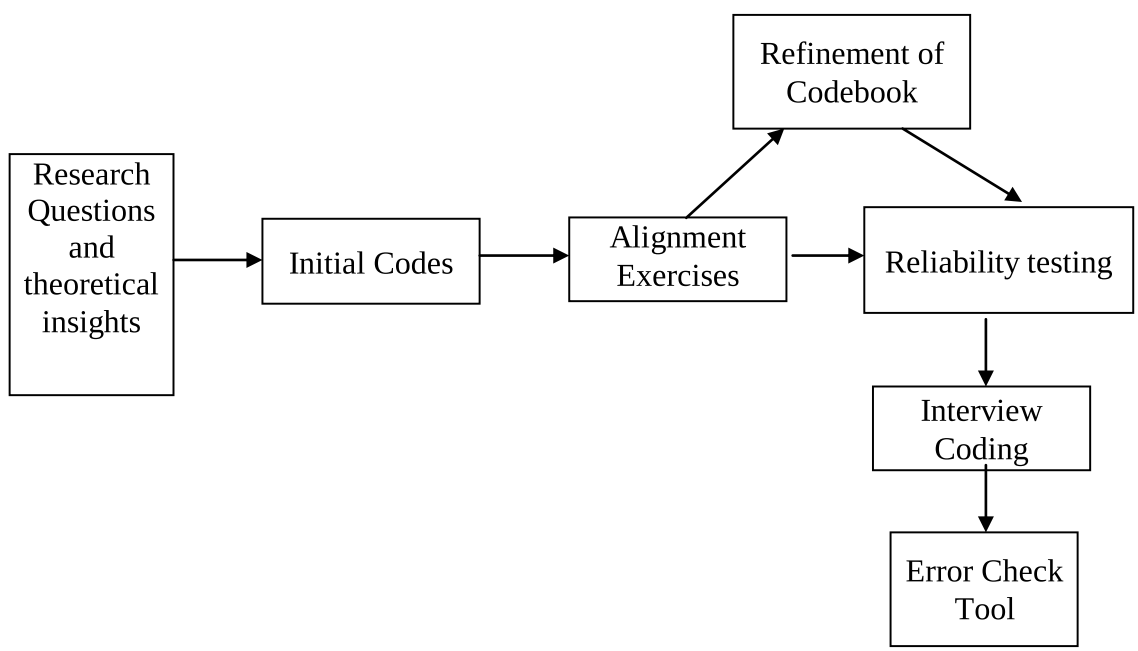
Consider some examples of the categorical, frequency, and inferential variables. Categorical variables involve mutually exclusive categories, for example, the respondents' ratings of the degrees to which their organizations are transnational (categorized as low, medium, or high). The frequency variables represent answers to questions where the respondent could offer more than one response such as, for instance, in their understanding of accountability where they could mention financial, contractual, and reputational dimensions in any combination. In such a case, answers are not mutually exclusive with each observed response being coded as present. The inferential variables capture latent content interpreted by coders. For example, taking the interview as a whole, how did the coder assess the respondent's overall attitude towards a particular question or topic? Or take, for example, the respondents' overall affect toward collaboration with other NGOs; was it generally negative, neutral, or positive, or was there insufficient content to code it?

Intercoder Agreement

We engaged in a number of techniques to insure that the coders agreed with one another in their coding choices given the same evidence. One such method was to include in the codebook a variety of different types of examples intended to clarify the meaning of various codes. Contentious codes were defined through a continuous process in which virtually every code was exhaustively discussed by the entire coding group and its meaning fixed by consensus. At least one PI was present during each of these alignment meetings and in nearly all cases explicitly approved any significant definitional modifications.

We quickly learned that conventional ways of determining intercoder agreement were inappropriate because they compare codes applied to identical units of text. With the ATLAS.ti software, however, units of text (quotations) are delimited at the discretion of individual coders. Intercoder reliability scores must be calculated at the level of the interview rather than at the level of the quotation because the particular quotations selected by the coders can differ. Intercoder agreement activities analyzed how coders delimited quotations as well as their coding choices.

Figure 1. Open-ended interview coding and alignment



The process of achieving satisfactory intercoder agreement required the development of a system for creating, refining and reliably applying qualitative codes to the interview transcripts. This system is summarized in figure 1. Initial coding exercises were designed to familiarize coders with the codebook, to discover miscellaneous problems or errors in the codebook, and to identify points of intercoder disagreement. After the completion of several coding exercises designed to orient the coders, they participated in three intercoder reliability tests on three different out-of-sample interviews. The first interview was coded by each coder independently, the second was coded by a dyad and triad of divergent coders, and the third test was again completed by each coder independently. After each test, the results were systematically compared and discussed.

As a result of these coding exercises and alignment discussions, we developed an error-checking tool intended to catch potential errors. Coders were required to use the error-checking tool and to make any corrections before submitting their coded interviews for inclusion in the master database. The tool checked for errors of omission and logical contradictions.

The procedures just described were intended to increase intercoder agreement. To measure the degree of such agreement, ten in-sample interviews were each coded twice by separate coders. Intercoder agreement scores were calculated for each of the ten pairs of coders and then averaged. The overall weighted intercoder agreement score was 0.80, indicating strong agreement on a scale from zero to one.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized around the major themes of ‘goals and strategies,’ ‘effectiveness,’ ‘accountability,’ ‘collaboration,’ and ‘leadership.’ As explained earlier, interview questions were generated based on contemporary research and inductive analysis with the aim of comparing those academic perspectives with the leadership responses. At the most general level, we find a consistent gap between the academic literature and the perceptions captured by this interview study. This gap may be due to the limitations of prior research which often generalizes findings from single case studies or analyses confined to a particular sector or disciplinary perspective. But the interviews are also useful in identifying areas where TNGO leaders have not yet adopted more contemporary practices advanced in the academic literature. This is particularly apparent regarding questions of accountability and legitimacy. We will begin our discussion of research findings with the most basic question of what transnational NGOs actually do. More in-depth versions of each subsequent section have been written up in article form by various members of the research team.

Goals and Strategies

With regard to the basic question of what transnational NGOs actually *do*, our study is the first to move beyond the prevalent functional dichotomies. From the interviews we derive inductively how leaders describe what their organizations seek to accomplish. We find that most organizations provide traditional charitable services, primarily supplementing, rather than transforming, existing sociopolitical structures. In contrast, the academic literature tends to focus much greater attention on a relatively small segment of organizations whose high-profile activities are aimed at causing fundamental social change.

What do transnational NGOs do? At the most basic level each TNGO obviously does something unique. However, some level of categorization is necessary if generalizations are to be made about TNGOs as a class of actors in global affairs. Among the most widely employed typologies for categorizing what TNGOs do is the functional dichotomy, usually expressed in terms of operational/campaigning or service/advocacy. Our data do not contradict this dichotomy, but do suggest that leaders hold more sophisticated conceptualizations about the roles their organizations play than commonly assumed in the literature. Moreover, the uneven distribution of these conceptualizations offers new insights about the probable systemic impact of TNGOs in world politics generally.

The problem of meaningful classification can be addressed through several strategies. Most typologies are deduced from speculative theories and organizations are classified based on information collected from legal documents, websites or other secondary sources. But it is also possible to classify organizations inductively using primary data obtained directly from organizational leaders. We used the following question contained in the interview protocol to collect answers about what TNGOs do: *In general, what would you say your organization is trying to accomplish?* Eight substantive response categories were developed to capture their open-ended responses. Latent class cluster and discrete factor analyses were performed on the coded data to search for response pattern heterogeneity and typical response patterns were retrieved from the transcripts to facilitate interpretation.

A discrete factor model discovered two underlying dimensions that explain a significant amount of heterogeneity in the data. Leaders tend to either prefer strategies of amelioration or empowerment (the first factor) and to favor either material or ideational modes of engagement (the second factor). These two dichotomous factors yield four types of role conceptualizations, of which we mention two here.[10] About half of leaders believe that their organizations are engaged in material amelioration. This orientation mainly involves traditional service delivery. Only about eight percent of leaders, by contrast, believe that their organizations are engaged in

[10] For additional information on these results see (Mitchell 2010).

ideational empowerment, which involves pursuing broader sociopolitical transformations using tactics that may include naming and shaming. Insofar as these results extend to TNGOs broadly, the data suggest that transnationalist scholarship focuses disproportionately on empirically rare types of organizations. If we compare these results with the academic literature and its frequent emphasis on the transformative power of transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998), we can understand how transformative strategies constitute a highly visible but empirically rare mode of TNGO engagement within a much broader array of more traditional approaches.

Effectiveness

Regarding the issue of NGO effectiveness, contrasting leadership perspectives with academic research reveals that disciplinary boundaries have caused the academic literature to stray from the realities and needs of most NGOs. Scholars have developed abstract frameworks of effectiveness that are often too detached or too complicated to be practical, whereas comparatively little effort has gone to making core program evaluation techniques easy and robust. A prevalence of conceptual works and a lack of empirically based studies have fostered the gap between researchers and practitioners.

The academic literature on NGO effectiveness is fragmented across diverse fields including not-for-profit management in organizational studies, transnational social movements in sociology and program evaluation in economics and policy studies. It also builds from a general literature on organizational effectiveness that spans decades of research in sociology and management studies. Given the breadth of the field, it should not be surprising that scholars have failed to achieve consensus on common definitions and approaches. There is, however, a growing consensus that unifying theories of organizational performance or reductionist metrics are not useful in studying something that is inherently multidimensional (Wing and Hager 2004). More recently, scholars have asserted that organizational effectiveness is socially constructed by actors within given domains (Herman and Renz 1999).

A recent review of the NGO effectiveness literature finds that scholars approach effectiveness in one of three primary ways: as a process of setting and achieving goals through campaigns and programs, as a process of mobilizing resources and finally as a process of establishing legitimacy for actors or campaigns. Each is a valid way to approach the study of effectiveness given contexts and objectives, and the three conceptualizations are in no way mutually exclusive (Lecy et al. 2010). Scholars often fail to explicitly differentiate the unit of analysis when examining effectiveness. The introduction of four domains may help to better orient the literature. These domains include organizational management, program design and implementation, networks and partnerships and responsiveness to the organizational environment.

Data from our study show that practitioners tend to conceptualize organizational effectiveness in one of two ways.[11] Most leaders define effectiveness as outcome accountability and believe that their organizations are effective when they achieve what they promised to achieve and can demonstrate their accomplishments to stakeholders, such as donors. This view of organizational effectiveness, known in the nonprofit management literature as the goal attainment model (Etzioni 1964; Price 1972; Sheehan Jr 1996; Spar and Dail 2002), is seen as problematic by many scholars. Critics claim that each organization simultaneously pursues too large a collection of goals, vague and contradictory, too abstract to operationalize or measure (Mohr 1982). Despite these challenges, the technical literature on program evaluation has made

[11] For additional information on these results see (Mitchell 2010).

great strides in developing techniques to control complexity, offering tractable approaches to measuring progress toward goals. However, nonprofit scholars rarely draw from this literature.

A smaller number of TNGO leaders conceptualize organizational effectiveness as overhead minimization. They believe that their organizations are effective when they maximize program spending relative to other expenses, and are comparatively more content to measure inputs and outputs rather than outcomes. While financial ratios are often taken as proxies for organizational goal attainment, any such empirical relationships have not been established. The view that organizational effectiveness involves overhead minimization may become more isolated as even the major watchdog agencies are increasingly renouncing the use of overhead measures as indicators of organizational effectiveness.[12]

Accountability

Perceptions that the transnational NGO sector suffers a “legitimacy deficit” have been growing (Collingwood and Logister 2005) and the legitimacy and accountability of transnational NGOs has recently become a major concern both among academics and practitioners (Ebrahim and Weisband 2007). Reasons for this enhanced focus on accountability are frequently contradictory and include increased pressures from donors and rating agencies such as Charity Navigator to meet externally established performance indicators (Edwards 2008) as well as pressures to increase ‘downward’ accountability by giving substantial powers of input to those who transnational NGOs seek to help. Transnational NGOs are also particularly vulnerable to accountability pressures because of their claims to be driven by ‘principles’ and their frequent use of ‘shaming’ strategies to hold others accountable.

[12] See the joint statement by major NGO rating agencies, titled “The Worst (and Best) Way to Pick A Charity This Year Experts explain that overhead ratios and executive salaries are a red herring,” released on December 1, 2009.

As a result of these pressures over the past decade, several initiatives have emerged within and across sectors of transnational activism to develop standards designed to increase transparency and accountability.[13] Our interviews offer a remarkable contrast to the recent debates on accountability. First, TNGO leaders are generally satisfied with the accountability of their own organization. Second, leaders exhibit awareness of more complex understandings of accountability advanced in the academic literature, but they have rarely actively implemented such new accountability strategies. TNGO leaders express a rather traditional understanding of accountability focused on donors (to whom accountable?) and financial management (how accountable?) despite widely diffused critiques of the dominant 'upward' accountability model oriented towards donors (Slim 2002). We find little evidence that new understandings of "accountability as learning" (Ebrahim 2003) or 'downward' accountability have much practical relevance for TNGO leaders. There is only limited evidence for the emergence of a broader adoption of other, more stakeholder-driven dimensions of accountability.[14]

Collaboration (networking and partnerships)[15]

Scholars studying transnational actors in general and NGOs in particular frequently emphasize that 'networking' plays a significant role in amplifying the voice of individual organizations and the non-governmental sector overall (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Based on shared norms and aided by improved and low cost communication technologies, transnational NGOs have learned to transcend national borders and throw their collective voices behind specific causes. Some scholars of transnational activism have also taken a more critical view of these networking

[13] Such initiatives include the Global Accountability Report (GAR, oneworldtrust.org), the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP, hapinternational.org), the Sphere Project (sphereproject.org) and the INGO Accountability Charter (ingoaccountabilitycharter.org).
[14] For additional information on these results, see (Raggo et al. 2010).
[15] For additional information on these results, see (Abou Assi et al. 2010).

efforts and have particularly focused on inequality within networks, especially across the North-South divide (Jordan and Van Tuijl 2000).

While *networks* have become an increasingly popular metaphor across many social science disciplines, systematic studies of such collaborative arrangements using social network analysis remain rare (Hafner-Burton et al. 2009). If networks play a significant role in explaining the impact of transnational NGOs, scholars need to move towards developing research designs capable of capturing differences regarding the content of network ties, their degree of formalization and reciprocity, or the frequency of interactions. While our interview study does not offer such information, it captures the leadership perspectives about the advantages and disadvantages of collaborative arrangements sustained by transnational NGOs. We find that TNGO leaders distinguish between two basic types of collaboration – networks and partnerships. For both types, we find that leaders associate different attributes regarding their purpose (content of ties), the form of coordination, the frequency of interactions, the degree of reciprocity, and the results of collaboration. A network connotes an informal relationship or a loose affiliation of individuals or organizations sharing primarily information. Partnerships are formalized, usually based on a binding or contractual relationship. Networks are primarily associated with information-sharing, while partnerships focus on the implementation of joined programs and goals. TNGO leaders identify a possible lack of commitment and waste of resources as the main limitations associated with networks, while the primary challenges in partnerships are unequal power relations and other forms of inequality (e.g., attribution of outcomes).

The distinction between networks and partnerships allows us to resolve a basic disagreement in the transnationalist literature. Rather than labeling all types of collaborative arrangements as networks, our distinction highlights that more or less formal external relations allow researchers to develop specific research programs designed to better understand the gains and trade-offs associated with partnerships and networks. Once basic similarities of partnerships and networks are identified, scholars are more likely to develop comparative research designs using network properties (such as centrality, distance, homophily, clustering, or reach) as independent or dependent variables.

Leadership

Another focus of our study is dedicated to understanding better in what ways *leadership* matters for the governance and effectiveness of transnational civil society organizations. Our particular approach explores the extent of a 'match' between leadership style and constituent demands as well as needs of the organization and the large environment in which they operate (see: Bass 1990; Fiedler et al. 1976; Fiedler and Garcia 1987; Hermann 2003; Winter 1987). We define leadership style in terms of sensitivity to constraints imposed on the organization and develop an aggregated personality profile for the 152 leaders interviewed for this study.[16]

Our preliminary results show that more than half of leaders in our sample are generally predisposed to work within the system towards goals. They respect the constraints they encounter in governance, and emphasize compromise and consensus-building (57%). A smaller, but still significant number of leaders (43%) show traits associated with challenging constraints. Within the constraint-defying group, about one quarter (24%) show a preference for "working-behind-the-scenes," i.e. challenging constraints not directly. A slightly larger group (30%) are "head-on" challengers of constraints, meaning they openly challenge what they perceive as 'wrong' and are not likely to do so in 'backstage' negotiations. The rest (43%) of the challengers

[16] For a detailed description of the technique see (Hermann 2005); for the Profiler Plus software, see www.socialscienceauthomation.com.

show a capability to choose ("bifurcate") between both strategies depending on the situation. They have potential to be skillful in both direct and indirect influence.

When we break those groups down by sector, we find rather counterintuitive results. Leaders from human rights and conflict resolutions organizations are more likely to work within the system and are less likely to challenge constraints head-on or bifurcate between strategies. This is unexpected since these types of organizations are often portrayed as challenging the status quo, not working within in it. Leaders from humanitarian relief organizations are less likely to work within the system and instead prefer tackling constraints head-on or bifurcating between strategies. This again is surprising since humanitarian relief organizations are not generally considered to be as confrontational as human rights or conflict resolution organizations. It may be that being the first on the scene after disasters requires such leaders to challenge the status quo in a much more fundamental way than even human rights and conflict resolution groups whose expressed purpose is to incite social change and challenge deep-seated practices.

Motivation

This study offers a new perspective on a set of global actors whose activities have gained much attention among scholars and policy makers. In contrast to the often stylized academic debates highlighting the either 'principled' or 'instrumentalist' motives of transnational NGOs, our study suggests that TNGO leaders assume a much more pragmatic orientation. Data also suggest that leaders' organizations can be fruitfully understood as dynamically constrained impact maximizers, which pursue principled goals within the constraints of dynamic fundraising and operational circumstances (Mitchell and Schmitz 2009). Transnational NGO leaders may appear to be alternately guided by either principled or instrumentalist motives, but they are simply responding to external shocks. By applying an inductive leadership perspective to the study of transnational NGOs more can be learned about the guiding motives of organizations than is possible with positivistic approaches that impute motives speculatively based on observed behavior.

Conclusions

The study of TNGOs described here is among the first to collect original and detailed primary data from the leaders of these organizations about their objectives and the challenges they perceive in accomplishing their missions. These data and the resulting datasets reveal how leaders conceptualize many important issues that have remained unexamined by previous studies. The methodological pluralism and multidisciplinary perspectives embodied in the data enable us to address longstanding empirical questions raised in the literature about TNGOs. The dataset also offers opportunities for the formulation of novel research questions heretofore unasked.

Scholars are paying increasing attention to transnational NGOs, their goals and strategies, and their apparent impact. Accumulating knowledge about the role of TNGOs in global affairs has been made more difficult by disciplinary boundaries, the prevalence of small-N case studies, and the lack of research designs capable of revealing linkages between leadership perspectives and organizational characteristics. In this paper, we describe some nascent research programs addressing basic questions of TNGO goals and strategies, effectiveness, accountability, collaboration, and leadership. This work contributes to a baseline understanding of leadership perspectives on key issues faced by organizations advancing causes across borders.

We diagnose a basic gap between much of the academic literature on these actors and the perspectives espoused by the leaders of organizations. Unlike the scholarly emphasis on the possible transformative power of transnational activism, the majority of TNGO leaders have more traditional orientations. With regard to questions of effectiveness, we find that the academic literature has overemphasized conceptual efforts and has become far removed from the pragmatic concerns of TNGO leaders. The opposite is true with regard to questions of accountability and legitimacy. Here, TNGO leaders remain relatively unaware of more recent special initiatives and academic efforts to change understandings of legitimacy away from a focus on financial management and donors to a broader conceptualization involving greater 'downward' accountability. The interviews reveal that collaboration in networks or other forms of cooperation create both opportunities and challenges for organizations. While the academic literature tends to be much more optimistic about the empowering character of building transnational networks, leaders express a much more complex picture of various forms of collaboration, ranging from narrow and focused partnerships to broader networks. Finally, our initial exploration of leadership traits as expressed in the interviews led to counterintuitive results and new puzzles for additional research. In contrast to our initial expectations, leadership traits associated with a willingness to challenge the status quo are more prevalent among humanitarian relief organizations and less so among human rights and conflict resolution organizations whose primary objective is fundamental social change. Such results offer interesting 'food for thought' and are likely to generate new research agendas further advancing our understandings of the opportunities and limitations associated with the transnational activism of non-governmental organizations.

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