UIA ACADEMIC FORUM

INSTITUTO UNIVERSITÁRIO DE LISBOA

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‘NAVIGATING POWER: HOW NGOS SHAPE THE RULES OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE’

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Presentation Agenda

I. Historical Evolution

- How did NGOs become actors in international economic governance?

II. Empirical Case Studies

- What evidence exists that NGOs have influenced outcomes?

III. Mechanisms of Influence

- How do NGOs influence outcomes when they possess neither sovereignty nor formal decision-making authority?

IV. Limits of NGO influence.

V. Conclusion

I. THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

Late 19th Century – Early Internationalism

Civil society activism:

- International labour movements
- Cooperative movements
- Campaigns for labour standards
- Early transnational advocacy networks
- Peace Movements
- Advocacy for Women’s rights and suffrage

Examples:

- International Federation of Trade Unions (1901)
- International Cooperative Alliance (1895)
- International Peace Bureau (1891; Henri La Fontaine President 1895-1913)
- International Council of Women (1888)

The focus was primarily:

- labour conditions
- workers' rights
- Promotion of peace
- Women’s rights and suffrage

The United Nations Era

1945–1980

Key development:

The UN Charter formally recognized NGOs through ECOSOC consultative status.

Civil society participation expanded into:

- development
- human rights
- social policy
- economic reconstruction

However:

Economic governance remained largely technocratic and state-centred.

The Bretton Woods institutions remained relatively insulated from NGO influence.

Globalization and the NGO Boom

1980s–Present - This is the crucial turning point

Four developments transformed NGO involvement:

1. Globalization
2. Growing influence of IMF and World Bank
3. Expansion of WTO and trade negotiations
4. Environmental activism

NGOs responded by focusing on:

- debt relief
- trade justice
- sustainable development
- transparency
- corporate accountability

This period produced major campaigns such as:

- Jubilee 2000
- Access to Medicines
- MAI campaign
- Publish What You Pay
- Climate Justice Movement

UNION OF INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS
UNION DES ASSOCIATIONS INTERNATIONALES

III. EMPIRICAL CASE STUDIES

Examples of NGO impact on global policy:

- Doha Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health
- Extractive Industries (oil, gas, mining) Transparency Initiative
- Debt Relief Frameworks
- UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- Collapse of the OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI)
- Climate–Trade–Sustainability

Doha Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health

- NGOs framed access to medicines framed as a public health & development concern.
- They built coalitions and organised international campaigns to raise awareness.
- Alliances between Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam, and Health Action International (HAI), and others, shifted the focus from intellectual property rights to prioritising access to medicines.
- This was particularly important during the HIV/AIDS crisis in developing countries.
- Their actions prompted the WTO to address the impact of patents on public health.

Influence on EITI Adoption

Extractive Industries
Transparency Initiative

- NGOs played a vital role in promoting the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative to increase resource extraction accountability.
- NGOS acted as critical advocates, overseers, and technical advisors, particularly through the global coalition "Publish What You Pay" (PWYP).

Debt Relief Frameworks

- NGO advocacy improved global debt relief frameworks to support economic sustainability for developing countries.
- Through sustained advocacy, research, and public campaigns, NGOs influenced the creation of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and Enhanced HIPC).
- Post-Covid, the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI)
- NGOs contributed to ongoing discussions around climate-debt swaps.

NGOs – Shaping SDGs

Civil society organizations influenced the defining the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through:

- Advocacy
- Raising awareness
- Provision of grassroots expertise

NGOs assist in achieving its objectives as:

- implementers
- policy advocates
- overseers.

II. MECHANISMS OF INFLUENCE

Through what mechanisms do NGOs influence international economic decision-making?

Five main mechanisms can be identified that can be exemplified by the case studies:

1. Norm entrepreneurship
2. Transparency governance
3. Coalition-building and mobilization
4. Participatory agenda-setting
5. Agenda disruption

Five Mechanisms of NGO Influence in Global Economic Governance

Mechanism	Case
Norm Entrepreneurship	TRIPS & Public Health
Transparency Governance	EITI
Coalition-Building	Debt Relief
Participatory Agenda-Setting	SDGs
Agenda Disruption	OECD MAI

TRIPS and Public Health

Mechanism: Norm Entrepreneurship

This is probably the most important concept.

What is a norm entrepreneur?

The concept comes from constructivist scholars:

***A norm entrepreneur is an actor that seeks to change how an issue is understood*.**

In other words:

They do not necessarily change the rules directly.

They change the ideas and values that shape the rules.

What happened with TRIPS?

In the 1990s, the debate was framed largely as:

"How can we protect intellectual property rights?"

The dominant assumption was:

Stronger patents encourage innovation; stronger patents benefit society.

NGOs fundamentally reframed the debate.

They argued:

The issue is not patents; the issue is access to medicines and the right to health.

That was a profound change:

The debate shifted from:

Intellectual Property to Public Health

Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)

Mechanism: Transparency Governance

This is a different mechanism:

NGOs did not try to change values.

Instead, they tried to **change information flows**.

Their basic argument was:

Citizens have the right to know what governments receive from oil, gas and mining companies.

The innovation was transparency.

Instead of arguing:

"Don't extract resources“

they argued:

“If extraction occurs, citizens should know how revenues are managed.”

In the EITI case, NGOs acted as architects **of transparency governance**, promoting accountability through disclosure rather than through direct regulation.

Debt Relief

Mechanism: Coalition-Building and Mobilization

The Jubilee 2000 campaign is perhaps one of the most successful examples of transnational advocacy.

Here

- NGOs:
- churches
- development organizations
- academics
- celebrities

formed a very broad coalition.

The key innovation was linking economic debt with moral responsibility

Debt relief campaigns illustrate how **NGOs can aggregate diverse actors into transnational coalitions** capable of generating political pressure on governments and international financial institutions.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Mechanism: Participatory Agenda-Setting

This case differs from TRIPS and EITI.

The goal was not to oppose governments.

Instead, **NGOs became partners**.

The SDG process was significantly more participatory than the earlier Millennium Development Goals.

Thousands of NGOs participated through consultations.

The SDGs demonstrate the increasing institutionalization of **civil society participation in global governance through consultative and agenda-setting processes.**

OECD Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI)

Mechanism: Agenda Disruption

This is a fascinating case because NGOs did not change a negotiation: they stopped it.

The MAI negotiations were initially conducted with relatively little public attention.

NGOs exposed the draft text and transformed a technical investment treaty into a political controversy.

The issue became not merely investment protection but democratic accountability.

The MAI campaign illustrates the capacity of NGOs to disrupt policy agendas by **transforming technical negotiations into matters of public concern**

IV. LIMITS OF NGO INFLUENCE.

NGOs Are Not Always Successful

Constraints include:

- Unequal representation - Does expertise create new inequalities?
- Dependence on donor funding - Are Northern NGOs overrepresented?
- Competition among NGOs – fragmentation and reduced collaboration
- Questions of accountability – How accountable are they?
- State resistance
- Corporate counter-lobbying

Final Comment

The history of the UIA itself reminds us that transnational associations are not a recent phenomenon. What has changed is not the presence of international civil society in important public spheres, but its growing ability to influence areas once regarded as the exclusive domain of states, such as trade, finance, investment, climate and development policies.

Conclusion

- The evidence suggests that NGOs rarely exercise direct decision-making authority.
- Their influence is generally indirect, operating through seeking to change ideas and values, agenda-setting, norm creation, expertise provision, coalition-building, and public mobilization.
- Yet these mechanisms have enabled civil society actors to become significant participants in global economic governance.
- Understanding how this influence is exercised remains an important area of research for scholars of international organizations and global governance.