The Role of the 'Global South' in the Origins and Transformation of International Non-Governmental Organizations

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Work in progress. Feedback warmly invited. Please send it to tom.davies@city.ac.uk.

ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the often overlooked role of the ‘Global South’ in the origins of modern international non-governmental organizations, as well as in transforming the structures of these organizations in more recent years. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section looks at how, when modern international non-governmental organizations emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ideas from what is now termed the ‘Global South’ were crucial in stimulating the development of these organizations. The second part of the paper looks at the more recent transformation of international non-governmental organizations towards more networked and horizontal structures in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, showing again the crucial role of the ‘Global South’ in the origins of these transformations.
Introduction

In the two and a half decades since the Cold War came to an end, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have become a significant object of study in international relations. A substantial body of literature has been produced exploring a wide range of aspects of INGOs in world politics, such as their service and advocacy roles, influence, legitimacy, and contributions to global civil society and democracy.¹ There remain, however, many aspects of the conventional wisdom on INGOs that are open to question. For instance, despite their extensive history over many centuries,² it is commonly argued that NGOs are “‘new” forces in international politics’ or ‘largely a product of 20th-century politics’.³

In this paper, it is key aspects of the conventional wisdom on the role of what is now termed the ‘Global South’ in the origins and transformation of INGOs that are called into question. Amongst the most common claims with respect to these organizations is that they are ‘basically Western in origin’.⁴ It is also common to portray the relationship between INGOs and populations of the ‘Global South’ in unidirectional terms, with the latter cast as ‘passive recipients of Northern charity’.⁵ As this paper will show, if one takes a closer look at the historical evolution of INGOs, common assumptions such as these need to be

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¹ For a survey of this literature, see Thomas Davies, Hans Peter Schmitz, et al, ‘Transnational and multi-national/international associations,’ in Robert A. Stebbins, Jürgen Grötz, and David Horton Smith (eds), Palgrave Research Handbook on Volunteering and Nonprofit Associations (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).
reconsidered. There is more to the role of the Global South in the history of INGOs than the traditional focus on how missionaries and imperialists in the North made the South the object of their attention, and on how Northern INGOs established new institutions in the South.

This paper will commence by exploring the evolution of INGOs in the period from the late eighteenth century through to the nineteenth century. It is at this time that ‘modern’ INGOs – more diverse, specialist and more commonly secular than their predecessors – may be said to have developed.6 Three commonly overlooked contributions to this development of the region now referred to as the ‘Global South’ will be explored: dissemination of ideas, organizational precedents, and new associations. In highlighting these contributions, this paper will shed new light on what Hobson has termed ‘the Eastern origins of Western civilization’.7 The subsequent section will explore the more recent transformations that have taken place among INGOs since the mid-twentieth century, with a particular focus on how looser, networked and more horizontal organizational forms were pioneered in this region and were to be influential among ‘Northern’ INGOs.

The objective of this paper is not to deny that many of the world’s most powerful INGOs are based in the ‘Global North’ and have significant roots in the Western context. Nor does this paper aim to deny the very considerable challenges that arise from the North-South asymmetries that exist among INGOs. However, it does aim to challenge the idea that the history of INGOs can be understood exclusively in terms of Western roots, and it also aims to reveal how

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6 On this, see Davies, *NGOs*, chapter one.
the ‘Global South’ has played an active rather than simply a passive role in the emergence and transformation of INGOs. The approach taken in this paper is qualitative and historical, and due consideration needs to be given to the limitations of historical resources on INGOs, the records of which are often far less extensively available than those of governmental actors.\(^8\)

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify what is being referred to in this paper by INGOs and the ‘Global South’. This paper adopts an expansive definition of an INGO following UN practice as consisting of a non-violent non-criminal non-profit international organization not set up by intergovernmental agreement; their activities may involve nearly any sector of human activity, and they are not limited to the development sector.\(^9\) For the purposes of this paper, the ‘Global South’ is defined as a geographical region rather than a unitary actor, the boundaries of which are disputed but which for the purposes of this paper broadly follow the 1980 Brandt Line, with China, the Middle East and North Africa included in the ‘South’.\(^{10}\) In discussing the role of activities in the Global South in the origins and transformation of INGOs, this paper is referring to the role of activities in one or more places within this geographical area, excluding the activities in this area of institutions of primarily external (i.e. ‘Northern’) origin.

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\(^{10}\) For a depiction, see Marcin Wojciech Solarz, \textit{The Language of Global Development: A Misleading Geography} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 130. There are numerous problems with the Brandt Line, and with all existing definitions of the ‘Global South’ – too many to be considered in depth here. It is nevertheless a useful shorthand for meeting the objectives of this paper.
The ‘Global South’ and the Origins of INGOs

Many INGOs, such as religious orders and missionary societies, have histories spanning numerous centuries, some dating to before the emergence of a recognizable international society of states.¹¹ This includes not only the Roman Catholic and Protestant religious institutions well known in the Western literature, but also ‘Eastern’ institutions including the Church of the East and Sufi tariqahs such as Naqshbandiyyah.¹²

A significant change, however, took place between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as ancient forms of INGO such as these were increasingly surpassed by new organizations that were more diverse, specialized and secular in nature, encompassing a wide range of issue-areas including anti-slavery, peace, republicanism, and humanitarianism.¹³ Many of these organizations were based in what is now termed the ‘Global North’, and developments in this region such as the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment were vital to this change, but activities in the region now known as the ‘Global South’ were also highly significant.

One of the key features in the development of the new transnational associationalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the interchange of ideas between different world regions. Two examples may serve to illustrate this, which may be drawn from two key fields in which the formation of modern INGOs was particularly widespread: republicanism and humanitarianism.

¹¹ Davies, NGOs, chapter one.
¹³ A survey is provided in Davies, NGOs, figure three in chapter one.
Amongst the most common transnational associations of the late eighteenth century were those formed to promote the popular aim of republican government, such as the Universal Confederation of the Friends of Truth and the Society of Women Friends of Truth. To date, this wave of activity has largely been understood in terms of developments within what is now known as the ‘Global North’, with the exception of the role of the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804. However, there were also important influences from the Islamic world. Amongst the revolutionary literature of the era, for example, was a Republican Koran, and transnational republicans such as John Oswald drew inspiration from their perception that ‘the moment that the tyrant begins to lay a heavy hand upon the many, the Mussulmans run instantly to arms’.

The influence of ideas and practices from beyond the region now known as the Global North can further be seen in the developing transnational humanitarian associations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Amongst the earliest of the modern transnational humanitarian associations were lifesaving societies such as the International Shipwreck Society established in 1835. This organization came close to achieving its ambitious objective to become ‘a society embracing every part of the globe’, establishing national branches in China, Mexico, Morocco, the Ottoman Empire, and the USA, as well as multiple European countries by the late 1830s. It was one of many NGOs

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15 Joseph-Alexandre-Victor d’Hupay, Alcoran républicain, ou Institutions fondamentales du gouvernement populaire ou légitime, pour l'administration, l'éducation, le mariage et la religion (Fuveau: Généralif, 1795).
dedicated to rescuing the shipwrecked and drowning that were established in the region now known as the Global North from the 1760s.\footnote{For coverage of some of these, see Amanda Bowie Moniz, ‘Labours in the Cause of Humanity in Every Part of the Globe': Transatlantic Philanthropic Collaboration and the Cosmopolitan Ideal, 1760-1815 (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008); and Luke Antony Francis Davison, Raising Up Humanity: A Cultural History of Resuscitation and the Royal Humane Society of London, 1774-1808 (PhD dissertation, University of York, 2001). These works neglect the precedents from beyond the Western context.}

Often overlooked in existing accounts is the importance of precedents from beyond the Western context in the evolution of lifesaving societies.\footnote{A key exception is Clayton Evans, Rescue at Sea: An International History of Lifesaving, Coastal Rescue Craft and Organisations (London: Conway Maritime Press, 2003).}

Amongst the principal objectives of the expanding array of lifesaving NGOs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was dissemination of what in Europe were newly learned techniques of resuscitating the apparently dead from drowning. Many of these had been developed in China, and were brought by traders to Europe, where by the eighteenth century they were being taught in medical higher education.\footnote{Evans, Rescue at Sea, p. 18.}

That Chinese ideas and practices were significant to the founders of early transnational humanitarian societies is evident in the documentation of the International Shipwreck Society. For instance, one of this organization’s founders, Sidney Smith, was reported at the time to have ‘always thought that the Chinese had preceded other peoples in the establishment of means of saving the shipwrecked’.\footnote{Jose Ribeiro dos Santos and Jose-Feliciano de Castilho Barreto, Traité du Consulat, vol. 2 (Hamburg: Langhoff, 1839), p. 460.} Moreover, when in 1836 he reported to the French King that the organization now ‘embraced the whole world’, he also paid tribute to the inspirational work of Chinese emperor Qianlong in pioneering provision of aid to
the shipwrecked.\textsuperscript{23} He stated ‘we must pay tribute to the memory of the Chinese Emperor Qianlong, who was the first to demand through imperial ordinance (about a century ago), the duties of humanity, imposed on officials on the coasts, with respect to the unfortunate shipwrecked.’\textsuperscript{24}

Despite common perceptions to the contrary, the earliest lifesaving NGOs were not European, but Chinese. The oldest for which records survive is the Zhenjiang Lifesaving Society, the museum of which may still be visited to this day. According to the Association’s official history, ‘In the 41\textsuperscript{st} year (1702) or 42\textsuperscript{nd} (1703) year of Emperor Kangxi of Qing Dynasty, 15 (or 18) persons including Jiang Yuanding and other persons of Jingkou raised funds to establish Jingkou Lifesaving Association at Xijin Ferry. They drew up the rules such as giving award to the lifesaver, helping the drowning persons in difficulty, and giving burial service to the drowned persons. They wouldn’t receive the government fund and donated to run the Association by themselves. This undertaking of lifesaving for the public good was kept active for about 200 years and was appreciated a lot by the common mass.’\textsuperscript{25} In Europe, by contrast, it was not until 1767 that the first analogous institution was established, the Amsterdam Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Drowned, which also aimed to reward rescuers and to assist the drowning, as did subsequent

\textsuperscript{23} Journal de la Société Générale des Naufrages et de l’Union des Nations, 1(2), February 1836, pp. 37, 42.
organizations modeled on it such as the Humane Society and the International Shipwreck Society.  

Although many of the subsequent INGOs established during the transition from ancient to modern organizations in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries were based primarily in Western Europe and North America, there were also significant associations of non-Western origin that were established. Mumbai-born Dadabhai Naoroji, for instance, established in 1866 the East India Association ‘consisting of Indians as well as Englishmen’ and advocating ‘independent and disinterested advocacy and promotion by all legitimate means of the interests and welfare of India generally’. A further organization of Indian origin, the Ramabai Association set up by Pandita Ramabai in 1887, aimed to provide refuge for child widows through transnational action. In Latin America, scientific collaboration among ‘native scientists in the Southern Cone states’ resulted in a series of Latin American Scientific Congresses from 1898. These are just a few examples among others.

**The ‘Global South’ and the Transformation of INGOs**

The ‘Global South’ was not only influential in the early history of modern INGOs, but has also played a vital role in their transformation more recently. It should be noted that there are significant continuities between the role of the region

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31 For more, see Davies, *NGOs*, chapter one.
now referred to as the Global South in the early development of NGOs with its role in the present day. For instance, NGOs in the ‘South’ remain a very significant source of ideas subsequently influential among NGOs in the ‘North’. A key example in recent years has been microcredit and microfinance, now undertaken by NGOs within the Global North as well as in the Global South.\(^{32}\) However, we can also identify transformed organizational forms with origins in the Global South.

INGOs in the Global South are increasingly challenging traditional models of INGO evolution. In the development sector, for instance, the traditional model of INGO evolution might be interpreted as an INGO headquartered in the Global North expanding its reach through the establishment of field offices in the Global South.\(^{33}\) However, the reverse model of organizational expansion can be seen if we take a look at BRAC’s evolution: an institution originating in the Global South (in this case Bangladesh), which expands its operations to include affiliate offices in the Global North (in this case in the UK and USA in 2006, plus BRAC International foundation in the Netherlands in 2009).\(^{34}\)

A traditional, hierarchically organized structure was characteristic of the principal INGOs that were established in Europe and North America from the nineteenth century onwards.\(^{35}\) If we turn to the evolution of INGOs more recently, however, pioneering forms of organization have been developed in the Global South. A key feature of some of the most significant NGOs of the Global


\(^{34}\) BRAC, ‘Who We Are: Evolution’, http://www.brac.net/content/who-we-are-evolution, last accessed 23 December 2014.

\(^{35}\) For numerous examples, see Davies, \textit{NGOs}, passim.
South for more than thirty years has been an emphasis on grassroots and networked structures. This is evident, for instance, in the aims of the Third World Network established at a conference in Malaysia in 1984 at which was noted ‘the emergence of people’s movements and organisations in the Third World which have adopted alternative patterns of development that are based on the fulfillment of self-determined basic needs’. The Third World Network was founded in light of the conference’s emphasis on ‘the need for the establishment of a network among NGOs in Third World countries ... to coordinate and consolidate cooperation among development groups in the South as well as the North, so that there would be South-South, South-North and North-South exchange’.36

Since the end of the Cold War, transnational mobilization in the Global South has frequently emphasized the importance of not only of networked but of horizontal forms of mobilization and the bringing together of diverse perspectives. The best-known example is the World Social Forum, the founding principles of which stressed its role as ‘a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context that, in a decentralized fashion, interrelates organizations and movements’ in relation to which ‘no-one ... will be authorized ... to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants’.37

The considerable problems that have been raised in relation to many South-based NGOs (SNGOs) should not be overlooked. Issues such as donor dependency, penetration by hierarchical Northern NGOs (NNGOs), and close

relations with government, corporate and other actors are significant.\textsuperscript{38} Nevertheless, forms of organization developed in the Global South have had considerable impact not only within this region but on the INGO sector in general. It is a transformation that has been increasingly picked up in the Western media. In March 2014, for example, *The Guardian* reported that ‘international NGOs are migrating south, expatriate placements are becoming rarer and some national operations in the global north are being shut down altogether’; and noted the development in the Global North of ‘networked NGOs’ typically involving ‘decentralisation of management and a shift from headquarters in the global north to a back office in the north and operational divisions moving south’, partly driven by shifting donor priorities by which funding is increasingly directed to institutions based in the South rather than in the North.\textsuperscript{39} An example of an INGO restructured on these ‘networked NGO’ lines is EveryChild, whose CEO Anna Feuchtwang stated: ‘Like many other [INGOs] we have a hierarchical structure with strategic decisions taken in the UK, approved by a board of British trustees which are then implemented through liaison offices overseas who deliver programmes. When we asked ourselves what we thought our most effective contribution to change might be we realised that our structure was upside down’; so, according to *The Guardian*, ‘EveryChild’s next step was to effectively wind down its programmes and any attempt to direct operations from its historical base in London’, relaunching ‘at the start of 2014 virtually


unrecognisable, now a founder member of a growing international alliance.' As Lewis and Kanji have argued, ‘older distinctions between NNGOs and SNGOs may increasingly become less clear-cut than they were’.

**Conclusion**

Whether in the early history of modern INGOs or in recent transformations in these institutions, the region now referred to as the Global South has played a greatly more significant role than traditionally attributed to it. In the early years of modern INGOs, ideas and institutional precedents in the region now referred to as the Global South were of crucial importance. More recently, the region has been central to driving forward alternative ways of organizing these institutions in less hierarchical approaches than the traditional Northern model.

In the light of the developments considered in this paper, the traditional hegemonic account of the history of NGOs as emanating from the Global North needs to be rethought. For too long constructions of the evolution of world history and of modern political actors have emphasized assumed ‘Western’ roots. As this paper has shown, there is far more to the history of INGOs than such a perspective would lead one to expect. Moreover, the role of the Global South in the history of NGOs is not simply one of passivity in response to developments and actors in the Global North as traditionally perceived: instead, actors in the Global South have played an important role in shaping both the early and recent history of modern INGOs.

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40 Smedley, ‘Shifting sands’.
The material in this paper should not lead one to overlook the vitally important economic asymmetries between North and South, but it does suggest that consideration of the role of INGOs in addressing (and causing) them needs to be considered in the light of the Southern agency indicated in this paper rather than the passivity that is commonly assumed. The implications for addressing global inequalities in the context of the transforming INGO structures identified in this paper need to be given serious attention. Issues such as the consequences of the ‘Southern turn’ in donor funding and the potential vulnerabilities of decentralized structures need to be addressed.