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Theorizing the relationship between NGOs and the state in medical humanitarian development projects

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ABSTRACT

Social scientists have fiercely debated the relationship between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the state in NGO-led development projects. However, this research often carries an implicit, and often explicit, anti-state bias, suggesting that when NGOs collaborate with states, they cease to be a progressive force. This literature thus fails to recognize the state as a complex, heterogeneous, and fragmented entity. In particular, the unique political context within which an NGO operates is likely to influence how it carries out its work. In this article, we ask: how do NGOs work and build relationships with different types of states and – of particular relevance to practitioners – what kinds of relationship building lead to more successful development outcomes on the ground? Drawing on 29 in-depth interviews with members of Partners in Health and Oxfam America conducted between September 2010 and February 2014, we argue that NGOs and their medical humanitarian projects are more likely to succeed when they adjust how they interact with different types of states through processes of interest harmonization and negotiation. We offer a theoretical model for understanding how these processes occur across organizational fields. Specifically, we utilize field overlap theory to illuminate how successful outcomes depend on NGOs' ability to leverage resources – alliances and networks; political, financial, and cultural resources; and frames – across state and non-state fields. By identifying how NGOs can increase the likelihood of project success, our research should be of interest to activists, practitioners, and scholars.

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1. Introduction

Activists, practitioners, and social scientists have fiercely debated the relationship between NGOs and the state in NGO-led development projects. In his important review of the field written almost two decades ago, Fisher (1997) illuminated how NGOs have generally been categorized either as instrumental and apolitical tools for development in an era of neoliberalism (Biggs and Neams, 1996; Edwards and Hulme, 1996), or as alternatives to governmental power capable of transforming the state (Friedmann, 1992; Lind, 1992). However, Fisher (1997: 446) warned scholars not to ignore or downplay the political roles of NGOs. James Ferguson (1990) also reminded us that NGOs can become part of the “anti-politics machine of development.” A growing body of work has examined the political role of NGOs, some of which carries an implicit, and often explicit, anti-state bias, suggesting

that when NGOs collaborate with the state, they cease to be a progressive force (Bebbington, 2005; Foley and Edwards, 1996; Lipset, 1994). Other work criticizes NGOs for usurping the state's role in providing crucial services for its citizens in developing countries, which can have substantial political, economic, and social consequences (Brass, 2012; Hall and Lamont, 2013; Leonard and Straus, 2003; Manji and O'Coill, 2002; see Watkins et al., 2012 for a review).

Fisher also recognized that, although the “NGO field is a heterogeneous one ... the state, too, needs to be acknowledged as a complex, heterogeneous, and often fragmented actor” (Fisher, 1997: 452). To that end, we argue that the unique political context within which an NGO operates is likely to influence the degree to which the state supports a development project and, consequently, how the NGO carries out its work (see, e.g., P. Evans, 2010; Spires, 2011). We nevertheless lack a framework that appropriately reflects the tug-of-war of power and interests between states and NGOs across political contexts. Furthermore, our current understanding of the state-NGO relationship is limited by a lack of empirical data on the role of the state in NGO-led development projects across political settings. We therefore ask: how do NGOs work and build

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relationships with different types of states and, of particular relevance to practitioners, what kinds of relationship building lead to more successful outcomes on the ground?

Drawing on 29 in-depth interviews with members of two international relief organizations engaged in medical humanitarian projects worldwide, we argue that NGOs are more likely to succeed when they adjust how they interact with different types of states through processes of interest harmonization and negotiation. We offer a theoretical model for understanding how these processes occur across organizational fields. Specifically, we utilize field overlap theory to illuminate how successful outcomes depend on NGOs' ability to leverage resources – alliances and networks; political, financial, and cultural resources; and frames – across state and non-state fields. Successful NGOs vary how they relate to different state apparatuses by adjusting how they use leverage across fields. Our theoretical approach thus foregrounds critical issues of agency (i.e., “the efficacy of human action” or “the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts” (Sewell, 1992: 2–18)) and strategy (i.e., “the targeting, timing, and tactics through which [actors] mobilize and deploy resources (Ganz, 2000: 1005)).

Field theory, an important framework in organizational sociology (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), has been used to explain the emergence of transnational networks for the development and implementation of cooperative public health policy across borders (see Collins-Dogrul, 2012) and for labor rights advocacy (see Kay, 2011b). We suggest that it also offers an analytically powerful tool for understanding state-NGO relationships. Evans and Kay's (2008) concept of the architecture of field overlap and its concomitant mechanisms – alliance brokerage, resource brokerage, and frame adaptation – is particularly useful because it illuminates how actors can leverage resources across fields to create social and organizational change. They define a field as a “local social order of actors who take one another into account as they carry out interrelated activities and *that is characterized by an orienting principle or goal*” (Evans and Kay, 2008: 973; see also Fligstein, 2001; McAdam and Scott, 2005; emphasis in original). We extend their theory by pushing beyond their single social movement case (of environmental and labor organizations that leveraged across fields to change the parameters of trade policy during the NAFTA negotiations) to examine how field overlap creates unique opportunities for NGOs to effectively negotiate and harmonize their interests with the state. We argue that overlap between state and non-state fields provides NGOs with pressure

points that can be leveraged to overcome states' reluctance to support development projects.

Table 1 summarizes our theoretical model of how field overlap creates unique opportunities for NGOs to effectively negotiate and harmonize their interests with the state. We argue that NGOs and their development projects are more likely to succeed when they harmonize their interests and negotiate with different types of states by effectively leveraging resources across state and non-state fields. The first resource – alliances/networks – allows NGOs to gain access to, increase their legitimacy with, and/or influence the decision-making calculus of the state by brokering valuable alliances across fields. The value of alliance brokerage depends upon the quality and number of connections between both fields. Examples include, but are not limited to, an NGO providing the state with access to an expert or epistemic community, to a funding network, or to a community organization and its supporters.

The second resource is financial, political, or cultural resources that states can find valuable. Resources can include money, technology/information, connection to an international standard or norm, or political legitimacy. NGOs' ability to engage in resource brokerage depends on how dependent a state is on external resources. NGOs can leverage valued resources to influence a state's willingness to participate in medical humanitarian projects by inducing tradeoffs, buying access, and providing valuable information. Examples of resource brokerage include, but are not limited to, an NGO providing access to a large foundation, an international certification process, new technology, or a multilateral political institution.

The final resource we outline is frames, or the construction of particular ideas, concepts, or strategies. Frames, which hold tremendous discursive power (Snow and Benford, 1992), can be adapted across fields to garner state support and participation for particular projects. The value of this resource depends on the salience of the frame and its underlying concept or idea, the frame's plasticity, and its political resonance. Examples of frame adaptation include, but are not limited to, an NGO pushing to re-conceptualize health care as a human right, outlining the parameters of corporate responsibility, or redefining collective/community property rights. By strategically adapting ascendant frames from a non-state to a state field, an NGO can facilitate the reconceptualization of key political ideas, discursive parameters, and rights paradigms. Adapting frames can also “transform the collective understanding of available political options” (Evans and Kay, 2008).

Table 1
Mechanisms, definitions, and strategies of field overlap in the State-NGO relationship.

Mechanism of field overlap	Definition	Examples of strategies
Alliance brokerage	The ability of actors to broker alliances that can influence how decisions are made across fields. Brokerage can also provide actors with access to a field or increase their legitimacy within it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build relationships with individual politicians at national or local level • Find common ground within national ministries or government agencies • Engage with experts in a non-state field • Cooperate with advocacy, civil rights, and/or civil society organizations • Help build advocacy networks or social movements
Resource brokerage	The extent to which actors can use valued financial, political, and/or cultural resources to gain influence or power in another field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiate with state to elicit funds for project support • Offer outside experts or valuable local experts • Provide new technology/information or access to it
Frame adaptation	The ability of actors to strategically adapt frames in order to facilitate their resonance or adoption in another field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconceptualize political idea or concept • Link two or more issues in a new way • Create new rights discourse • Adjust, expand, or constrain the rhetorical parameters of existing discourse • Transform collective understanding of available political options

See Evans and Kay (2008) for the original discussion of the architecture of field overlap.

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