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How Successful Transnational Non-governmental Organizations Set Themselves up for Failure on the Ground

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Summary. — This paper examines transnational non-governmental organization (TNGO) influence on global, national, or local policy arenas, as well as how a TNGO's actions in one arena might aid or encumber its effectiveness in another. It expands Steinberg's spheres of influence framework (2001, 2003) to create a new capacity typology. Through examining Conservation International's work in Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea, this paper demonstrates the "paradox of global capacity": a phenomenon where a TNGO prioritizes certain capacities that paradoxically grant it access to work at the local level while impeding its efforts to create lasting change there.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The current policy landscape is teeming with examples of transnational non-governmental organizations (TNGOs) influencing policy on the global, national, and local scales. The International Rescue Committee works with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) on a global basis to raise awareness and prioritize humanitarian crises. On the local level, the TNGO acts in over 40 countries as an implementing agency for UNHCR and to execute its own mission of restoring safety, dignity, and hope to millions of refugees (International Rescue Committee, 2012; UNHCR, 2012). Save the Children International is known for its advocacy work on behalf of children. Its reports have influenced the way United Nations (UN) agencies operate (Bellamy, 2002), and have helped domestic authorities and governments create implementation plans for children's rights (Palestinian National Authority, 2010).

The increasing influence of TNGOs is not without controversy. The Gates Foundation, with 3 billion US dollars in annual contributions to its initiatives on global health, development, and US education (Kaufman, 2011), has weathered complaints that its sheer size has dominated the area of malaria research such that it "risks stifling a diversity of views among scientists and wiping out the (World Health Organization's) policy-making function (McNeil, 2008)" and that its voice on US Schools drowns out those with opposing views (Kaufman, 2011).

Both the scholarly and practitioner literatures on transnational non-governmental organizations map a growing debate on the function, focus, and operationalization of these agencies (Anheier, 2005; Florini, 2000; Herman, Lecy, *et al.*, 2012; Krasner, 2002). Nevertheless, they tend to agree that TNGOs are self-governing, non-state, not-for-profit organizations whose missions focus beyond state boundaries to address a wide range of issues in the service of the public benefit (Anheier, 2005; Risse-Kappen, 1995; Salamon, Anheier, *et al.*, 1999). No TNGO operates in a vacuum. They constantly create and renegotiate relationships with government agencies, for-profit firms, other local and transnational NGOs, and communities, as part of a network¹ of actors working in an issue area. While many typologies of NGOs create a

distinction between advocacy NGOs (which participate in lobbying, agenda-setting, norms diffusion) and service delivery or operational NGOs (which implement policy on the ground), a growing number of definitions acknowledge that many NGOs perform both functions (Nalinakumari & MacLean, 2005; Yaziji & Doh, 2009). Like Oxfam, Medecins Sin Frontières, and the World Wildlife Fund (Yaziji & Doh, 2009) the above examples demonstrate both the constant network interaction TNGOs engage in, as well as how these organizations can be successful at influencing policy at multiple scales. This paper sheds new light on how the growing number of multifunction and multi-sphere TNGOs operates.

The facility TNGOs enjoy over issue areas follows the four paths of non-domestic policy influence (*in italics*) offered by Bernstein and Cashore (2000). TNGOs *use the global market* to influence policy by mobilizing boycotts, creating letter-writing campaigns, and certifying and creating demand for certain products (Auld, Balboa, *et al.*, 2009). They *influence international rules and regulations* through lobbying government representatives, direct participation in policy-making fora, or by using their capacity to populate government delegations, which negotiate international rules (Charnovitz, 1997; Gunter, 2004). They *change international normative discourse* through media campaigns and by generating research on their issues (Myers, Mittermeier, *et al.*, 2000; Porter &

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Brown, 1996). In addition to success in these three areas, transnational NGOs are also able to acquire access to the fourth path of non-domestic policy influence: *direct infiltration of the domestic policy-making process*, where TNGOs establish both ends and means to attain policy output (Cashore & Howlett, 2007; Hall, 1993). Through their efforts on the first three paths, TNGOs obtain access to local policy arenas and expand their impact beyond mere influence to create and implement policy (Balboa, 2009). However, as transnational NGOs move from the global to local policy arenas, we see intense criticism of their failure to create lasting, meaningful, and appropriate change on the ground. TNGO practitioner literature struggles with creating linkages and translations between the domestic or global macro policy arena and the local or micro spheres (Evaluation Office UNDP, 2002; Hunter, 2009; Salmen & Kane, 2006; Ubels, van Klinken, et al., 2010). It seems that these organizations function well in global arenas—skillfully influencing domestic policy goals to align with their missions, but fall short when they become street-level bureaucrats,² designing the tools and means to implement the policies they recommend.³ Even more puzzling: despite the abundance of scholarly literature, best practices, and the TNGO staff's own convictions that interventions on the local level must be context-specific to be effective, TNGOs still have difficulty creating context-specific interventions. Why?

In this paper, I suggest that this failure of TNGOs to implement their missions on the ground stems from a “paradox of global capacity” for TNGOs. That is, not only do they lack specific kinds of capacity, but they set themselves up for failure by prioritizing certain global capacities that paradoxically grant them access to work at the local level while impeding their efforts to create lasting change there. It is not the case that transnational NGOs lack capacity completely. These organizations have an abundance of certain types of capacity, which is why they can become such powerful players on the global level, masterfully maneuvering through the first three paths of influence. Since the global capacities demonstrated in the first three paths help TNGOs gain access to the local sphere, they ultimately prioritize global capacities, taking focus away from the local and bridging capacities necessary to successfully maneuver at national and local policy levels. Their de-prioritization of local and bridging capacities, reduces their ability to create context-specific interventions and sets them up for failure. This paper demonstrates the paradox of global capacity for TNGOs, as well as how bridging capacity can be an answer to this paradox. First, I offer a new typology for capacity of TNGOs, building on and refining Steinberg's spheres of influence framework—dividing TNGO capacity into global, national, and local spheres—to create an analytical tool to acknowledge and overcome these capacity shortcomings, as well as articulate each sphere's unique contribution to the TNGO's mission (2001, 2003). I define “bridging capacity” and illustrate how the TNGO's pursuit of global capacity limits its ability to act as a bridge between local and global. Drawing on personal interviews, internal organizational documents and project publications, this paper examines Conservation International's (CI) engagement in Milne Bay (MB), Papua New Guinea (PNG) to illustrate how this prioritization of global over local capacity simultaneously creates a policy niche for TNGOs on the ground while also impeding them from making lasting change. The last section of this paper will raise questions toward building a research agenda for bridging capacity: how it might be built and prioritized by transnational actors across fields of interest.

2. ASSESSING CAPACITY THROUGH A SPHERES OF INFLUENCE FRAMEWORK

The word “capacity” has a wide range of meaning, with different implications depending upon an actor's goals (e.g., managing a store *versus* growing crops in a field *versus* completing a degree); discipline (e.g., state sovereignty in international relations *versus* management's more concrete skills needed for an organization to function *versus* public policy's middle ground of broad categories of capacities detailed with various skills); and also scale or sphere (i.e., global, national, local, organizational, individual) (Fukuda-Parr, Lopes, et al., 2002; Steinberg, 2001). Recent approaches to the concept have worked to balance its complexity with practical learning on how to address capacity. These approaches view capacity as a system- or network-wide phenomenon, with multiple actors working on multiple levels. Within this system, actors have varying values, goals, and power dynamics (Baser & Morgan, 2008; Fowler & Ubels, 2010; Parcell, 2010; Tandom, 2010; Ubels and Fowler, 2010; Visser, 2010; Woodhill, 2010). This paper offers a framework that encompasses the variation of approaches while being practically useful to a broad range of applications. By demonstrating how capacity differs in each sphere of influence, and how these spheres interact with one another, this new framework illuminates how a TNGO's success in the first three paths of non-domestic influence—paths that require global capacities—can impede its success in the fourth path: direct infiltration of the local policy process.

This paper asserts that there are three fundamental types of capacities: political, administrative, and technical. These capacities are required for any organization or group of organizations working on the same issue (i.e., a network) to function and be successful. The more capacities an actor has (be it an individual or an organization), the more power it has to affect change within a network.

- The *political capacity* category examines relations outside of the organization and includes politics in the sense of the contestation of ideas. Within any network, various actors jockey for access, exposure and resources. Political capacities reflect an actor's ability to interact deliberately with others and manage external relationships. It also reflects an understanding of the processes of communication, decision-making and collaboration on a network level. In this category, actors strive to sell their ideas and norms to other actors.
- *Technical capacity* reflects the ability of an individual, organization or network to access information and to do the work of its mission. It is the capacity to understand the scientific, resource, legal and technological status that influences an actor's ability to fulfill its mission on multiple scales.
- *Administrative capacity* addresses the internal management skills needed to function as an individual or organization (e.g., financial reporting, strategic planning). Such skills are necessary for an actor to know and fulfill its strategic niche in the network.

There is considerable overlap and interdependence between these three categories. One capacity is often directly contingent upon the other two. Understanding the legal framework of a network (i.e., political capacity) also affects a TNGO's capacity to manage its finances and contracts (i.e., administrative capacity), which in turn, impacts its ability to raise more funds (i.e., political capacity). An organization's reporting and evaluation capacity can also impact the level of fundraising. Without political and communication capacities, an organization cannot fully understand local resource use, a required

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