6 *The Future of INGOs*

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, created a complex humanitarian emergency on a scale not seen in Europe since World War II. More than 7 million people fled Ukraine, and over 8 million were displaced inside the country.[1] These people urgently needed food, water, housing, and medical treatment, among other things. As the aid flowed in, so too did international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). Beyond providing lifesaving relief, INGOs helped monitor and shame Russia for its war crimes and violations of international law. Yet INGOs faced harsh criticism for not doing enough to solve the crisis in and around Ukraine. Large INGOs found it difficult to spend money quickly and funnel it toward the local actors that were closest to the needy given the rigorous accounting standards they are held to in their home countries. Many domestic-led humanitarian efforts were insufficiently institutionalized to receive this outside funding. Even the hundreds of new formal Ukrainian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were often ill-equipped to receive money from abroad.[2] INGOs' influx into Ukraine raised a host of other concerns, such as distracting focus from other urgent humanitarian issues[3]

[1] Humanitarian Outcomes, "Enabling the Local Response: Emerging Humanitarian Priorities in Ukraine, March–May 2022," June 2022, page 3. Available at www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ukraine_review_2022.pdf (last accessed December 21, 2022).

[2] Jessica Alexander, "Is Ukraine the Next Tipping Point for Humanitarian Aid Reform?" *The New Humanitarian*, July 25, 2022. Available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2022/07/25/Ukraine-aid-reform-local-donors-neutrality (last accessed December 21, 2022).

[3] Corinne Redfern, "How the focus on Ukraine is hurting other humanitarian responses," *The New Humanitarian*, July 7, 2022. Available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/07/07/Ukraine-aid-Russia-invasion-funding-donors (last accessed December 21, 2022).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

and creating such a high demand for local housing that internally displaced Ukrainians struggled to pay their rent.[4] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky criticized INGOs for not doing enough of the right things: "We don't see them struggling to get access to camps where Ukrainians are prisoners of war and where political prisoners are held … Nor do they help us to find Ukrainians who have been deported."[5]

The discourse surrounding INGOs in Ukraine is familiar to anyone who followed the debates surrounding humanitarian aid after the 2004 Asian Tsunami, 2010 Haiti earthquake, or 2011 Syrian civil war.[6] For all the good that these groups have done, they have also been accused of not doing enough, or attempting to do too much, or simply doing the wrong things. The attention to – and criticism of – INGOs is unsurprising given their substantial influence in contemporary global affairs. In the context of a world in which INGOs play such a large and fraught role, this book explores why they make the choices they do. In this chapter, we first review the theory we developed and its contributions. Next, we recap our empirical findings. We then consider how our theoretical framework might be extended to understand dynamics among INGOs headquartered in countries outside the United States and cross-sectoral variation. We also consider growth in other populations of global governance actors – especially for-profit development firms, direct-giving campaigns, and domestic NGOs – and how these actors may be challenging INGOs' dominance. Finally, we consider the study's implications for public and private funders working with INGOs to affect social change.

[4] Humanitarian Outcomes, "Enabling the Local Response: Emerging Humanitarian Priorities in Ukraine, March–May 2022," June 2022, page 10. Available at www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ukraine_review_2022.pdf (last accessed December 21, 2022).

[5] Quoted in SWI, "Red Cross Says It Is Doing All It Can in Ukraine," November 30, 2022. Available at www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/red-cross-says-it-is-doing-all-it-can-in-ukraine/48097332 (last accessed December 22, 2022).

[6] The New Humanitarian Review, "Is Ukraine the Next Tipping Point for Humanitarian Aid Reform?" July 25, 2022. Available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2022/07/25/Ukraine-aid-reform-local-donors-neutrality (last accessed December 21, 2022). See also BouChabke and Haddad (2021).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

6.1 Theory in Brief

Chapter 2 developed a theory about INGOs that explains variation in three important but understudied outcomes – founding, mission scope, and geographic location. Our approach differs from most prior studies on INGOs in that it seeks to explain the choices of INGOs *in general*, without focusing on groups working on a particular issue area (such as the environment or human rights) or those that have a certain tactical orientation (such as advocacy, monitoring, enforcement, or service provision).[7] We also consider organizations of varying sizes and levels of authority. This study therefore departs from the international relations (IR) literature's tendency to focus on leading organizations that are unusually active and influential.[8] Although such a focus can generate great insights, it also has limits; as Julia C. Gray notes, an overemphasis on "successful" organizations in global governance can cause researchers to draw incorrect conclusions about the full population.[9] Our theory starts with the assumption that INGOs are strategic actors that seek to maximize their odds of survival. Drawing on theories of organizational ecology, we posit that population density is a key environmental factor that shapes patterns of cooperation and competition among INGOs and thus their decisions about founding, mission scope, and geographic location. Some density in a population can promote mutual support among organizations. But higher levels of density introduce fierce battles over funding, attention, and other resources that are essential for survival.

This basic insight, we argue, helps us understand INGO leaders' and entrepreneurs' decisions about whether to enter the market, how much to specialize, and where they should work. These choices have important real-world consequences, since INGOs cannot affect state policies, diffuse international norms, or gain authority, for instance, if they do not exist, work on a particular issue, or operate in a certain country. Increases in density initially support foundings of new organizations and operations in new geographic locations, but eventually they deter them. Greater density also encourages organizations to focus

[7] Ours is not the only study to take this more general approach. See, for example, Mitchell, Schmitz, and van Vijfeijken (2020).
[8] Stroup and Wong (2017).
[9] Gray (2020, 34).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

their missions more narrowly in an attempt to identify an approach or location that other organizations have not already claimed. Population density ultimately shapes organizations' likelihood of survival; high levels of density make them more likely to fail.

Of course, our theory cannot explain everything. While organizational ecology identifies the expected form of the relationship between density and foundings, mission specialization, and geographic locations, it cannot predict the inflection point at which a given population becomes "too dense" and competition prevails. Moreover, organizational ecology is sometimes criticized for presenting an overly structural perspective. We do not expect agents to be fully constrained by population dynamics; our case studies clearly illustrate they are not. But we do expect density to have predictable effects on INGOs, and the evidence largely supports our expectations.

Our approach challenges some conventional wisdom about INGOs. Population density is usually thought to drive competition; thus increases in density might be expected to uniformly deter foundings or nongovernmental efforts in a given location.[10] Instead, we argue that at low levels of density, increases in density can sometimes attract more organizations to the cause or a location. Contrary to other expectations in the literature, our perspective likewise suggests that *demand* for INGOs – measured, for instance, as media or policy attention to an issue or the extent of available resources – does not necessarily encourage INGO activity. Instead, INGOs are often more responsive to the overall conditions of their population, such as how dense or concentrated it is. Our theory also helps make sense of previous disagreements in the IR literature about the extent of competition and cooperation among INGOs. Whereas some studies emphasize how principled activists work together to effect change, others highlight how ferociously these groups fight over issue turf, media attention, and funding. Our insight is that each of these tendencies – toward competition or cooperation – may dominate at particular points in an INGO population's life cycle. When density is low, there is a greater tendency for INGOs to support each other and more scope for organizations to work successfully on a broad mission. Initial population growth can even encourage more foundings. But when density is high, these

[10] Cooley and Ron (2002).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

behaviors are less likely, since INGOs find it more difficult to secure resources and there is more competition between them. Some organizations are crowded out of certain segments of the market or key geographic locations, while others are not founded in the first place.

6.2 Summary of the Findings

Chapters 3–5 test the observable implications of our theory and find strong support for it across multiple outcomes. In Chapter 3, we identify a curvilinear relationship between population density and foundings of American INGOs; as expected, increases in density are initially associated with more foundings but eventually lead to fewer foundings. Qualitative evidence from INGOs engaged in fostering of international civil society and democracy supports our interpretation that initially new organizations behave cooperatively with each other and encourage foundings, but organizations later discourage new entries and compete more for resources.

Chapter 4 explores the relationship between density and INGO mission specialism. In denser populations, we find that organizations are more likely to adopt specialist mission statements. When a population is highly concentrated, INGOs are also more likely to be specialized. Qualitative evidence drawn from the population of humanitarian INGOs supports our assertion that in a dense organizational population, there are limited opportunities for new generalist INGOs since the resource environment is so competitive. However, the environment can still support specialist organizations that pursue programmatic and geographic niches.

In Chapter 5, we examine where American INGOs choose to work. Similar to Chapter 3, we identify a curvilinear relationship between population density and our outcome of interest: Increases in density at first attract more American INGOs to work in a country, but further increases in density discourage them from setting up operations. We conduct a case study of international conservation and find that many American INGOs believe opening offices and conducting activities in a country that either has no (or very few) INGOs or is very saturated with them will be unsustainable.

We believe our multi-method approach offers significant advantages in investigating our research topic. On the one hand, the quantitative

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

data on INGOs' behaviors drawn from tax records and an INGO roster helps identify broad trends across a wide variety of organizations. Although the analysis is necessarily limited in temporal and geographic scope (as it focuses on American INGOs after the end of the Cold War), it nevertheless generates significant insights given the comprehensiveness of the data within our study period and the importance of our country of focus for INGO politics. On the other hand, the qualitative data on INGOs' behaviors does a much better job of exploring our hypothesized causal mechanisms. Our case studies were designed to understand the processes that drive INGO decision-making, which the correlational evidence from the quantitative analysis cannot do as effectively. The socially generated focus group data complements our interviews and survey evidence, which are drawn from the same population but collected at the individual level.

6.3 The Future of INGOs

From certain vantage points, the future of INGOs looks bleak. Michael Edwards, who formerly held senior positions at Oxfam and Save the Children, is a prominent critic of INGOs. In 2016, he provocatively asked, "Too small to influence economics, too bureaucratic to be social movements, banned from politics, and removed from the societies they're trying to change, where do NGOs go next?"[11] Given the present (perceived) challenges, the same people who would have once founded or gone to work for an INGO to address an unmet social need may now be turning to other forms of action in private industry, digital advocacy, or elsewhere. Or they may no longer be taking action at all.

6.3.1 Views from the Trenches

Our survey of leaders at US-headquartered INGOs suggests Michael Edwards is not alone in his criticisms. Only 35 percent of our respondents reported that they thought their organization had been "very effective" at achieving its mission, and just 13 percent characterized the joint efforts of all organizations working in their issue area as

[11] Michael Edwards, "What's To Be Done with Oxfam?" *openDemocracy*, August 1, 2016. Available at www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/what-s-to-be-done-with-oxfam/ (last accessed July 13, 2022).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

"very effective." While 30 percent of the practitioners surveyed view their own organization as "very innovative," only 4 percent think that about their sector as a whole. Although respondents had a more favorable view of their own INGOs than of INGO activity more generally, in both cases they were fairly pessimistic. Pessimism about American INGOs is rooted in practitioners' perceptions of density. When asked whether they would advise someone to start a new INGO in a hypothetical scenario that randomized variables of interest, having "a lot" of existing organizations instead of a "few" decreased the likelihood that they would recommend founding a new organization by 34 percent.[12] Density had by far the largest effect of any variable considered in our hypothetical scenario. For example, "a lot" of funding instead of "a little" increased support for founding by around 25 percent, while "a lot" of media attention increased it by around 11 percent. We also asked individuals to rank the most important considerations in decisions about whether to found a new INGO. The list of possible considerations included the number of organizations already working in the issue area, the quantity of media attention in the issue area, the extent to which the sector is economically concentrated, the degree of competition among organizations in the issue area, the amount of funding available in the issue area, and the volatility of the US political environment. Nearly half (42 percent) of respondents ranked density as the most important factor, compared to 27 percent for funding and 17 percent for media attention, the next most important factors.

INGO staffers also think environmental factors strongly influence international nonprofits' performance. In the same scenario described earlier, we asked respondents how effective they thought a hypothetical new INGO would be under different, randomly assigned conditions. They expected a new organization to be 33 percent less likely to be effective if "a lot" of organizations were already working on an

[12] This scenario was part of a forced-choice conjoint experiment. Although conjoint experiments typically involve hypothetical scenarios, they have been shown to generate choices that are quite close to real-life decisions. We report the average marginal component effects in the main text, which estimate the impact of a given attribute in the scenario (e.g., density) while averaging over the distribution of the other attributes (e.g., funding or media attention). See Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014) and Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto (2015).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

issue compared to a scenario with only a "few" organizations. Having "some" organizations was perceived as decreasing effectiveness by about 12 percent. Respondents generally believed the same factors support founding and organizational effectiveness. Such a similarity is to be expected insofar as INGO entrepreneurs are motivated – for both normative and instrumental reasons – to create new organizations in circumstances where such organizations are most likely to attract funding and supporters.

This evidence sheds light on why criticisms of INGOs seem to be growing. INGO populations have become significantly denser over time, and American INGO leaders tend to perceive dense organizational populations as significantly less effective, all else equal. As such, we can infer that INGO staffers are more likely to *worry* about organizational effectiveness today than they might have in the past. Whether INGO populations are in fact *becoming* less effective is unclear. However, since density is generally increasing over time, INGO leaders and potential future entrepreneurs seem to be more skeptical of their fields' potential to effectively solve contemporary problems, whether through advocacy, service delivery, monitoring, enforcement, or all of these. These dynamics may help explain why individuals like Michael Edwards are increasingly vocal about INGOs' flaws, as well as the changes in INGO behavior we documented in Chapters 3–5.

6.3.2 *Density and Other Global Governance Actors*

Density and saturation in the American INGO sector may also contribute to the emergence and growth of new types of organizational populations. Building on insights from organizational ecology, Kenneth W. Abbott, Jessica F. Green, and Robert O. Keohane argue that stagnation in one organizational population in IR can provide an opportunity for another population to emerge.[13] They maintain that while a crowded environment currently constrains growth in inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), private transnational regulatory organizations like the Verified Carbon Standard – which certifies carbon emissions reductions – are expanding their role in global governance. Such private regulatory organizations are more flexible than

[13] Abbott, Green, and Keohane (2016).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

IGOs and have lower entry costs, which enables them to occupy favorable niches and attract different resources.

Given the recent stagnation in INGO foundings in the United States and many other countries, it is reasonable to wonder if new organizational forms will emerge in the coming decades to challenge INGOs' dominance as the main nonstate advocates, enforcers, monitors, and service providers in world politics. In fact, whereas 44 percent of the American INGO leaders in our survey indicated they would consider founding an NGO in the future, even more (51 percent) indicated they would consider founding another type of organization. More than three-quarters of the respondents thought other types of organizations can perform at least as well as NGOs. In this section, we describe three organizational populations that may challenge the dominance of American INGOs – for-profit development firms, direct-giving campaigns, and domestic NGOs outside the United States.

For-profit Development Firms

For-profit development firms are major players in foreign aid delivery in the United States. In 2020, 19 percent of US bilateral overseas aid was channeled through them vs. 22 percent through domestic and international NGOs;[14] the remainder was channeled directly to states and via IGOs. Firms and INGOs thus provide roughly equivalent services to the US government in terms of foreign aid delivery, and the former may increasingly be outcompeting the latter.

For example, the for-profit American firm Chemonics was founded in 1975 as a subsidiary of an international agribusiness enterprise. It is active on issues that overlap with American INGOs, ranging from development to global health to humanitarianism. It began receiving huge contracts starting in the 2000s for reconstruction work in Afghanistan, providing relief after the Haiti earthquake, and supply chain programs to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS.[15] Although its work has been subject to significant criticism,[16] Chemonics was the US

[14] Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "United States," in Development Cooperation Profiles 2020. Available at https://doi.org/10.1787/45472e20-en (last accessed June 6, 2023).

[15] Chemonics, "Our Projects." Available at https://chemonics.com/projects/ (last accessed June 6, 2023).

[16] In Afghanistan, see Office of the Inspector General, "Audit of USAID/Afghanistan's Human Resources and Logistical Support Program,"

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

Agency for International Development's (USAID's) largest contractor in 2020.[17]

The for-profit development industry has flourished over the past twenty years in response to the US government's increased reliance on aid contracting.[18] Contracts are relatively attractive to for-profit organizations because, unlike grants or cooperative agreements (which are the alternative mechanisms preferred by many INGOs), they allow "profit" in the form of fixed fees in addition to overhead. Yet contracts involve more government control and thus less discretion on the part of the recipient organization, which is unappealing to many INGOs that want flexibility and autonomy in pursuing their social change goals. Firms arguably also have advantages over nonprofit organizations when competing for contracts. Because firms typically *only* take contracts on which they can charge a fixed fee and overhead,[19] they usually have more resources available for project administration and "proposal capture." Nonprofits that engage in both contract and grant work often have fewer resources available for these purposes, making it harder – but clearly not impossible – for them to win these large awards.

Two notes of caution are warranted here. First, the extent to which for-profit firms constitute challengers to INGOs in service provision varies according to how much the sector relies on government funding. The health sector depends heavily on such funding, and is considered the most easily "contractable" sector of INGO activity.[20] The environmental conservation sector (which, as discussed in Chapter 5, is less dependent on government funding than many other American INGO populations) has had much more limited firm involvement. Second, nonprofits cooperate *and* compete with firms, and quite often serve as

March 31, 2010. Available at /https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2018-06/5-306-10-007-p.pdf (last accessed June 6, 2023). In Haiti, see Jake Johnston and Alexander Main, "Breaking Open the Black Box: Increasing Aid Transparency and Accountability in Haiti," Center for Economic and Policy Research, April 2013. Available at www.cepr.net/documents/publications/haiti-aid-accountability-2013-04.pdf (last accessed June 6, 2023).

17 Devex, "Top USAID Contractors in 2020," June 4, 2021. Available at www.devex.com/news/top-usaid-contractors-in-2020-who-received-covid-19-funding-99088 (last accessed June 6, 2023).

18 Berrios (2000); Roberts (2014).

19 Brundt and Casey (2022).

20 Roberts (2014, 1036).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

sub-awardees.[21] Although serving as "subs" has allowed some INGOs to continue to expand in the contracting era, their subsidiary role could constrain their ability to autonomously pursue their missions.

If for-profit development organizations continue to take over the delivery of US foreign assistance from American INGOs, this is likely to have at least two implications for global governance. First, firms tend to concentrate on measurable outputs and service delivery outcomes for which they can obtain contracts, such as the number of vaccines given, textbooks delivered, or recipients served. Of course, INGOs may also focus on these types of goals. Yet, unlike INGOs, firms rarely (if ever) have bigger-picture system-change goals or engage in policy advocacy alongside their service delivery roles. Thus, if firms increasingly replace INGOs, there will be growth in a narrow band of service delivery. While some may see this shift as a positive trend, it jeopardizes the broader political motivation that sparked the development of the INGO sector.

Second, numerous for-profit firms have been investigated for financial impropriety and excessive compensation.[22] Perhaps the most notable was the Academy of Education Development (later, simply AED), which had "65 contracts and grant agreements with USAID worth $640 million" when USAID suspended it in 2010[23] based on "evidence of serious corporate misconduct, mismanagement, and lack of internal controls" in its Pakistan and Afghanistan programs.[24] The organization has since been disbanded. Because firms are not subject to the nondistribution constraint (i.e., they can distribute profits to their employees and other stakeholders), they may be more prone to financial impropriety than nonprofits. Firms may need to be monitored more carefully than nonprofit organizations, which would divert more resources away from programming.

[21] Brundt and Casey (2022).
[22] Roberts (2014, 1038).
[23] Ken Delianian, "U.S. Bans Contractor from Further Aid Programs," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 2010. Available at www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-dec-08-la-fg-pakistan-fraud-charges-20101209-story.html (last accessed July 6, 2023).
[24] USAID Press Office, "USAID Suspends Academy for Educational Development from Receiving New U.S. Government Awards," December 8, 2010. Available at https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/usaid-suspends-academy-educational-development-receiving-new-us (last accessed June 6, 2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

Other for-profit organizations also perform functions that overlap with those of American INGOs. For instance, certified B Corporations (or "B-Corps") seek to combine public benefit with business activity and have grown dramatically since the concept took hold in 2006.[25] Public–private partnerships and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are also increasingly prominent, especially in some issue areas such as climate change.[26] But these new businesses and initiatives may not represent a true challenge to INGOs in the way that for-profit development firms do when they compete for the same government funding. For instance, an in-house CSR program related to the environment does not replace corporate funding for INGOs working on the environment; in some cases, such initiatives can create a demand for INGOs to help with implementation.[27] Nevertheless, these programs could pose additional challenges to INGOs in the future.

Direct-giving Campaigns

Direct-giving campaigns – often Internet enabled through platforms such as Give Directly, GoFundMe, or Kiva – are also gaining popularity as an alternative to INGO-led programming. This shift is part of broader changes in transnational action generated by digital technologies.[28] These platforms can be used to help a Ukrainian family buy basic necessities, donate to support the high school education of a girl in Indonesia, or loan money to a carpenter in Uganda to purchase business supplies, to name just a few examples.

Direct-giving campaigns compete head to head with traditional nonprofits by touting their lower overhead and higher efficiency in supporting charitable activity abroad. For example, GiveDirectly provides data on its website to compare its fundraising efficiency with major INGOs such as Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders.[29]

These organizations take different approaches. GoFundMe is the largest and most flexible fundraising platform; it allows both

[25] See B Lab Global, "Growing the Movement." Available at www.bcorporation.net/en-us/movement/ (last accessed July 23, 2023).
[26] For example, Andonova (2010).
[27] Green (2013).
[28] Hall, Schmitz, and Dedmon (2020); Hall (2022).
[29] Give Directly, "How to Understand GiveDirectly's Financials," November 7, 2022. Available at www.givedirectly.org/financials/ (last accessed June 8, 2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

individuals and nonprofits to create appeals and accept donations. GoFundMe does not vet these appeals, relying on peer-to-peer reputation evaluation, but it has raised $15 billion from over 200 million donations since its founding in 2010.[30] While these campaigns are often organized around international persons or causes, at the time of writing GoFundMe only allows withdrawals from individuals located in nineteen developed countries.[31] GiveDirectly specializes in digital cash transfers to people living in poverty and currently operates in twelve countries. Founded in 2009, it reports delivering over $650 million to more than 1.4 million people.[32] Recipients are identified using poverty data from national surveys, and the transfers are not earmarked for any specific purpose.[33] Kiva allows individuals to make micro-loans to other individuals seeking support for businesses or educational expenses. These loans are vetted by microfinance institutions in the individuals' home countries that serve as "lending partners."[34] Kiva reports having funded over $1.9 billion in loans since its founding in 2005, with a 96 percent repayment rate.[35]

Some nonprofits have embraced the rise of direct giving. INGOs can raise funds for their work on GoFundMe, and some organizations like the International Refugee Committee combine direct cash relief with other kinds of programming.[36] Yet it is not clear that direct giving is more effective than relying on INGOs. Conditional or unconditional cash transfers have been found to have positive effects on outcomes including poverty, school attendance, health and nutrition, as well as household savings and investment, and do not seem to detract from

[30] GoFundMe, "Determining if a Fundraiser is Trustworthy," March 1, 2023. Available at https://support.gofundme.com/hc/en-us/articles/115015913668-Determining-if-a-fundraiser-is-trustworthy (last accessed June 7, 2023).
[31] GoFundMe, "Countries Supported on GoFundMe," March 23, 2023. Available at https://support.gofundme.com/hc/en-us/articles/360001972748-Countries-supported-on-GoFundMe (last accessed June 7, 2023).
[32] GiveDirectly, "About." Available at www.givedirectly.org/about/ (last accessed June 7, 2023).
[33] GiveDirectly, "FAQ." Available at www.givedirectly.org/faq/ (last accessed June 7, 2023).
[34] Kiva, "How Kiva Works." Available at www.kiva.org/about/how (last accessed June 7, 2023).
[35] Kiva, "About Us." Available at www.kiva.org/about (last accessed June 7, 2023).
[36] International Rescue Committee, "Cash Relief." Available at www.rescue.org/topic/cash-relief (last accessed June 7, 2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

work participation or increase fertility rates.[37] But the evidence is inconclusive regarding whether cash transfers are more cost effective than other types of poverty interventions, even though they reduce organizational overhead and administrative costs.[38] Thus, although a narrow comparison of overhead rates would favor direct giving over INGOs, it is unclear whether the rise of direct giving would truly improve aid efficiency overall.

Domestic NGOs Outside the United States

Domestic NGOs based outside the United States may also challenge the dominance of American INGOs. Domestic NGOs (i.e., those without international operations) already perform similar functions to INGOs in terms of advocacy, service provision, monitoring, and enforcement in many issue areas. As David Carroll, director of the Democracy Promotion at the Carter Center, put it with respect to election monitoring, "In the democracy promotion community we are increasingly aware that the future is domestic observation – it has to be, and everybody knows that."[39] Although INGOs like the Carter Center have advantages (e.g., possibly greater authority with international audiences and better fundraising potential in their headquarter countries), they also have limitations (e.g., possibly weaker authority with domestic audiences who may fear foreign interference or more limited local knowledge).[40]

Some leading American INGOs and their funders are trying to hasten the transfer of resources from INGOs to domestic NGOs. For example, in 2022, USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced that the agency would seek to direct 25 percent of its aid to local organizations, up from an estimated 6 percent.[41] Some analysts have expressed skepticism about USAID's localization initiative, noting

[37] Bastagli et al. (2018).
[38] Brian Lucas, "Financing and Cost-effectiveness of Cash Transfer Schemes," August 2010. Available at https://gsdrc.org/publications/financing-and-cost-effectiveness-of-cash-transfer-schemes/ (last accessed June 7, 2023. See also Evans and Popova (2016).
[39] Bjornlund et al. (2014, 274).
[40] Bush and Prather (2018).
[41] USAID, "Local Capacity Strengthening Policy," October 17, 2022. Available at www.usaid.gov/policy/local-capacity-strengthening (last accessed June 7, 2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

that this shift has been attempted before and that localization is a "buzzword" that may not imply concrete changes.[42] Some see echoes of the disappointing 2016 "Grand Bargain" negotiated between states, IGOs, INGOs, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent societies to enhance local input into how humanitarian aid is delivered. A group of INGOs including ActionAid, CARE, Oxfam, and Save the Children has been quite critical of the implementation of this initiative, writing, "there is nothing grand about the progress that's been made."[43]

American INGOs – and Global North INGOs more broadly – carefully navigate this space by supporting and empowering their overseas partners without imperiling their own survival. The goal behind localization initiatives is to ensure that local actors have ownership of advocacy, service provision, monitoring, and enforcement in their own countries and can be equitably engaged in externally funded programming. To achieve this goal, funders must address several impediments to locally led development. For instance, structural and social barriers limit local NGOs' access to international aid for service provision; overcoming them will require both increasing the capacity of local organizations and shifting how aid is administered. Although domestic NGOs may instead focus on domestic fundraising, the pool of resources from which they can draw is often much smaller than the pool of international funding. Capacity constraints also significantly limit local NGOs' abilities as monitors and enforcers. These groups must also confront constraints on their ability to generate and publish politically usable information in environments that are not democratic.[44]

If successful despite such challenges, localization would influence the nature of global governance in at least three ways. First, by empowering non-US organizations, it would require Americans to relinquish

[42] Amruta Byatnal, "Samantha Power Takes Localization Global," *Devex*, December 14, 2022. Available at www.devex.com/news/samantha-power-takes-localization-global-104646 (last accessed June 7, 2023). See also Khoury and Scott (2024) on the challenges of truly localizing.

[43] Oxfam International, Care International, Save the Children, et al., "Joint Agency position on the Future of the Grand Bargain," May 25, 2021. Available at https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-05/Updated_25%20May_Final%20Position%2C%20Joint%20Agency_Future%20of%20the%20GB.pdf (last accessed July 5, 2023).

[44] Swedlund (2013).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

some control over international giving and programming. Second, at present, there is significant cross-national variation in the nature and depth of domestic NGOs that could serve as local partners or replacements.[45] An emphasis on localization might unwittingly channel resources (both material and nonmaterial) from the Global North toward places where local organizations resemble American INGOs, leaving out some of the poorest and most vulnerable in the process. And third, if the localization agenda takes hold, it remains an open question whether the dynamics we identify in this book – decreased foundings, increased specialization, and organizations spreading out – might eventually apply within some national NGO populations that are currently less competitive.

The Strength of the Challenge

Alternative organizational forms seem to pose the greatest challenge to American INGOs in their role as service providers based on the preceding review; their roles as advocates, monitors, and enforcers are safer, at least for now. It may be that, despite the challenges INGOs face in dense population environments, their advantages in terms of legitimacy make them more difficult to displace when it comes to advocacy, monitoring, and enforcement. This is a hypothesis that can be tested in future research.

In the domains of advocacy, monitoring, and enforcement, the response to INGOs' (perceived) failings may be more likely to involve attempts to reform existing INGOs or create new types of INGOs, despite the density of the population. While Chapter 4 documented how mission specialization is a response to population density, other forms of niche seeking are also possible.[46] For example, around 80 percent of the annual budget of BRAC – a leading international development INGO – comes from social enterprises.[47] If INGOs can fundraise through social enterprises, they may be able to distinguish themselves from other groups that rely on more traditional forms

[45] For example, Salamon and Anheier (1998).
[46] Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2019).
[47] Kim Jonker, "In the Black with BRAC," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2009. Available at https://ssir.org/articles/entry/in_the_black_with_brac (last accessed July 3, 2023). On organizational ecology and social enterprises, see also Searing, Lecy, and Andersson (2016).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

of finance. The growth of Internet-enabled campaign groups like Change.org, MoveOn, or Avaaz may mark the emergence of a new organizational model in which advocacy is less staff driven and more member driven, which could address some past failures of INGOs.[48]

6.4 Directions for Future Research

The theory we developed in this book sheds light on patterns of American INGO foundings, specialization, and geography. Since the datasets we used in this book are freely accessible, other researchers can use them as a starting point for additional inquiries.[49] Our book's theory has the potential to illuminate other topics about INGOs. We briefly sketch three promising directions to extend our study.

6.4.1 Looking Beyond American INGOs

We tested our general theory about INGOs primarily using evidence on *American* INGOs due to various research design considerations discussed in Chapter 1. As shown in Table 1.1, American INGOs represent 28 percent of the world's INGOs – far more than are headquartered in any other country. As such, studying American INGOs is a valid and important endeavor, and our focus on the post-Cold War period allows us to examine dynamics among numerous American INGO populations during a key period of population change. Figure 1.1 indicates that the drop-off in foundings of new American INGOs is very similar to the decline in foundings of new INGOs in many other countries at this time, including Western European countries that are home to relatively large numbers of INGOs. Thus, there is some prima facie evidence that the trends we have documented and sought to explain with regards to American INGOs might apply to other national populations of INGOs in recent decades.

Yet it remains an open question whether our findings extend to other national settings. Some other national charity regulators provide information on the founding and revenues of NGOs that can be used to replicate and extend our findings from Chapter 3.[50] For example, the

[48] Hall (2022).
[49] The replication files for this book are available at Bush and Hadden (2025b).
[50] Bloodgood, Stroup, and Wong (2023) review data availability in selected countries in the Global Register of Nonprofit Data Sources.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

Charity Commission for England and Wales and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator release information about British NGOs that is similar to what the National Center for Charitable Statistics provides in the United States. These data have not been examined in much depth to our knowledge, even though the United Kingdom is home to the second-largest number of INGOs globally according to the Yearbook of International Organizations (see Table 1.1). However, one study used the government data to identify British international development NGOs, finding that the creation of new groups that spend at least £10,000 annually has slowed since 2009.[51] Other government registries – where they exist, are comprehensive, and are publicly accessible – could be profitably analyzed by researchers.

To build on our analysis in Chapters 4 and 5, researchers could similarly search for information online to identify the missions and geographic locations for other populations of INGOs listed in government registries. In Chapter 5, we also analyzed the American INGOs listed in the Transnational Social Movement Organization Dataset (TSMOD), which is less-comprehensive than government registries but lists the headquarters and geographic locations for a large set of advocacy organizations globally and over time.[52] The TSMOD could be used by other researchers to study the geographic choices of non-American INGOs, such as those headquartered in the UK or France. It would also be feasible to replicate the analysis from Chapter 5 on a sectoral level for some large sectors without restricting by nationality, using finer grained measures of need and resources. For example, an analysis of global conservation INGOs' geographic decisions could consider measures of ecosystem degradation and the prevalence of endangered species along with variables capturing media attention, conservation aid, and INGO density.

Evaluating how the dynamics we study in this book might play out among INGOs headquartered in the Global South is of particular interest. Global South INGO populations are less dense than those in the Global North and may therefore be exhibiting some of the early life-cycle features that we associate with periods of low density in the United States (i.e., greater cooperation among INGOs, and thus

[51] Banks and Brockington (2020, 711).
[52] Smith and Wiest (2012); Smith, Plummer, and Hughes (2017); Smith et al. (2019).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

more foundings and less specialization). Despite their smaller numbers, Global South INGOs are gaining more agency in global advocacy.[53] To identify how populations of Global South INGOs are changing, researchers might use national charity regulators' information, as well. Although countries in the Global South may be less likely to maintain this type of information due to more limited capacity, there are some relevant data sources. For example, Kenya maintains a public registry of NGOs operating there.[54] Although this registry lacks information on whether NGOs are domestic or international, as well as many other individual NGO characteristics, researchers may be able to gather such information themselves (e.g., by visiting NGOs' websites). We are aware of similar registries that exist for Bangladesh and Uganda, although they are similarly limited in their reporting of organizational characteristics such as sector and revenue.

We know of no reason ex ante why our theoretical framework for understanding INGO choices would not apply outside the Global North. But Global South settings present two challenges for INGOs that future research should explore. First, the domestic environment in most Global South countries is significantly less resource rich than it is in the Global North, which makes fundraising in INGOs' headquarter countries more difficult. Even BRAC, which is based in Bangladesh and raises funds from social enterprises, relies on funders from the Global North, including IGOs and development agencies like USAID.[55] As such, INGOs in the Global South may not rely as heavily on donors in their home countries as do Global North INGOs, making it potentially less appropriate to define their populations nationally.

In a second challenge, home governments for Global South INGOs are less likely to be democratic and may thus be less cooperative with nonprofits. Although the relationship between NGOs and authoritarianism is complex, Global South countries may be more likely than those in the Global North to perceive INGOs as a threat because such groups represent an organized form of civil society that often (but not always) seeks to advance liberal values.[56] In addition, countries in the

[53] Bloodgood and Pallas (2022).
[54] Brass (2016).
[55] See BRAC, "Annual Report 2021," page 27. Available at www.brac.net/downloads/ar2021/BRAC.pdf (last accessed July 3, 2023).
[56] Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2016); Heiss (2019); Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024b).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

Global South are more likely to be aid recipients than aid donors; thus they are less likely to rely on INGOs to help implement their foreign policy initiatives. For these reasons, INGO population dynamics in the Global South are less likely to depend on state resources and are more likely to be influenced by state repression than is the case for American INGOs.

6.4.2 *Considering Variation Across Issue Areas*

The similarity of our findings across American INGO populations that have very different issue characteristics, sizes, and resource profiles promotes the generalizability of our conclusions. Yet to develop and test a general theory about INGO behavior, we set aside interesting questions about how sectors differ from one another. Future research could extend our approach by examining how (and why) our theory applies differently across various issue areas. We suggest three particularly promising avenues based on variation across issue areas that we identified in the research for this book.

First, Chapter 3 shows that in each of the four populations we studied in depth, density has an inverted u-shaped relationship with INGO foundings (see Figure 3.4). But the total density of each sector varies: Conservation is the smallest sector and humanitarianism is by far the largest. Future work might consider why some sectors of INGO activity become smaller or larger than others. Organizational ecology suggests that the answer may be due to differences in resources and the "carrying capacity" of the population.[57] Yet the conservation population has attracted more total resources than the much larger civil society and democracy population (see Figure 3.5) and has become more concentrated.[58] Why do INGO populations develop differently? The answer may lie in issue characteristics, such as the extent to which various types of INGOs benefit from economies of scale, or other historical factors related to population development.

Second, Chapter 4 identifies mission specialization as one way in which founders attempt to find a niche in crowded and concentrated environments. We measure mission specialization in terms of programmatic scope and geographic scope, and identify a similar proportion of

[57] Hannan and Freeman (1977).
[58] See also Hadden and Bush (2021).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

specialists in each of the four issue areas we study (see Figure 4.1). Future scholars might explore why specialization occurs on certain additional dimensions.[59] For example, there is ample differentiation in faith-based vs. non-faith-based organizations among humanitarian INGOs, but less differentiation on this dimension among conservation and civil society and democracy INGOs even though both issues are plausibly relevant to religious communities. This type of variation might be examined by considering issue areas' resource profiles or how these issues are socially constructed and practiced.[60]

Third, Chapter 5 establishes how INGOs try to avoid crowded national environments by shifting their activities to countries that have less competition. Geographic niche finding has encouraged American INGOs to spread out across the globe over time (see Figure 1.2). Future researchers might consider how well this dynamic describes issues that are characterized by short- vs. longer-term time horizons. For example, in Chapter 5, we speculate that humanitarian INGOs are less able to engage in geographic niche finding than those in the global health and civil society and democracy populations because the former's problem structure requires them to respond to urgent crises, wherever they are located. Humanitarian organizations may have shorter-term time horizons than groups in other sectors, making it harder to adjust their strategy to changes in country-level density. This demand is not simply an "objective" feature of humanitarianism; rather, it reflects a core principle of the field. Further explorations of what type of time horizons prevail in different issue areas and how they affect INGO behavior will be fruitful.

6.4.3 Studying the Impact of INGOs

This book implicitly explores how the strategies INGOs pursue in competitive and dense environments influence global governance outcomes. Theoretically, high levels of density could have both positive and negative consequences for INGO effectiveness, defined either in terms of goal attainment or in terms of internal organizational

[59] On tactical differentiation among environmental INGOs, see Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2019).
[60] On the latter, see Barnett (2018).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

processes.[61] As discussed previously, increased density and the ensuing competition can generate incentives that lead to organizations' dysfunction, creating a "resource scramble" in which sectors perform less effectively than they otherwise could or should.[62] Density can also have negative consequences *not* directly caused by competition. For example, Jennifer Hadden demonstrates how increased density in the climate change movement after 2008 made coordination tasks more difficult, causing INGOs to work at cross purposes during campaigns.[63]

But the competition introduced by increased density might also improve goal attainment and internal processes. Whereas some practitioners dislike competition, funders may appreciate that it helps weed out less effective strategies and organizations. For example, Cristina Balboa highlights how increased competition for funding causes organizations to streamline their staff and limit their overhead, which could enhance programming efficiency.[64] Yet she also discusses how these financial pressures make it harder for INGOs to incorporate ideas from their local partners, undermining their efforts to design contextually appropriate programs.

It is exceedingly difficult to measure INGO effectiveness at the population level. As scholars of IGOs know well, it is hard to agree on common performance indicators for global governance institutions, and even more challenging to causally identify the effect of IGOs on the agreed-upon indicators.[65] The same issues carry over to studying INGOs. And if it is challenging to identify the effects of individual actors in global governance, it is even more difficult to aggregate those effects to quantify population-level effectiveness.

Two main challenges are relevant to evaluating INGO populations' effectiveness. First, many important advocacy, service provision, monitoring, and enforcement outcomes that are essential for assessing INGOs' goal attainment are hard to measure and quantify. Foundational concepts like "women's empowerment," "democracy," or even

[61] Mitchell (2012, 325–326) reviews the debate on how to conceptualize effectiveness.
[62] Cooley and Ron (2002).
[63] Hadden (2015).
[64] Balboa (2014).
[65] Gutner and Thompson (2010).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

"development" capture contested, nuanced, and contextually specific components that make developing cross-national measures difficult (and for some, even inappropriate).[66] Second, and compounding this measurement difficulty, is the fact that we would want to examine INGO performance across multiple populations that vary in their density and concentration. Developing comparable measures across issue areas as diverse as conservation, civil society and democracy, global health, and humanitarianism is a daunting task. Although several studies have examined how INGOs influence the outcomes of particular campaigns,[67] they do not necessarily indicate the work of an entire INGO population.

Given these challenges, and despite the benefits of examining variation across issue areas, our performance measures may need to be population or even campaign or program specific. Theoretically, we note that many analyses expect the number of INGOs to be linearly related to the likelihood of success.[68] Our analysis suggests a nonlinear relationship may be more likely.

Finally, it is an open question whether better coordination might temper some of the potentially negative consequences of higher density. INGOs often coordinate with one another through sector or theme-specific coalitions, such as InterAction (an alliance of humanitarian INGOs) or the Climate Action Network. Some American INGOs are embedded in international networks of INGOs of the same "brand," such as Oxfam or Friends of the Earth. Yet such coalition work is challenging and certainly not a guarantee of harmonious working relations even where it exists.[69]

Returning to the book's opening example of the Asian Tsunami, the case illustrates three reasons why better inter-INGO coordination might be challenging to achieve in crowded organizational environments. First, as detailed in Chapter 1, the rapid proliferation of groups post-Tsunami increased the diversity and sheer number of groups present on the ground. This density made coordination among different INGOs more difficult in terms of programmatic harmonization and more costly in terms of staff time. The United Nations responded

[66] Broome and Quirk (2015, 821).
[67] For example, Keck and Sikkink (1998); Price (1998).
[68] For example, Murdie and Hicks (2013).
[69] For example, Doherty and Doyle (2013); Hadden (2015).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

by adding even more coordination meetings, which were increasingly inefficient and poorly attended.[70] While coordination is doubtlessly beneficial, it becomes more costly as the number of INGOs increases (as it has across American INGO sectors, as shown in Chapter 3), often leading organizations to perceive trade-offs between coordinating with other INGOs and implementing their own programs.

Second, inter-INGO coordination is a particular issue for small INGOs because it does not scale with organization size – organizations with smaller staffs are much more burdened. As a result, in Indonesia after the Asian Tsunami, only around 10–40 of the more than 250 INGOs present attended coordination meetings.[71] Most of the organizations engaged in coordination meetings were large, generalist groups, even though smaller, specialist groups represented around 35 percent of resources for project implementation. The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, a large-scale learning effort across dozens of agencies, cited the limited involvement of such groups as a major barrier to inter-INGO coordination.[72] Thus, in a world where small, specialist organizations are proliferating (as shown in Chapter 4), coordination may become even harder.

Third, INGOs always have complicated incentives when it comes to cooperation. On the one hand, the dangers of poor coordination can be very real. As the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition wrote of that case, "humanitarian space can become saturated with contenders, and poor performance of just one agency can compromise the effectiveness of all the others."[73] On the other hand, INGOs greatly value their autonomy and vary in the extent to which they are willing to adjust to other actors. As demonstrated by the Asian Tsunami case, INGOs can fiercely compete with one another, sometimes jealously guarding access to key resources and even beneficiaries. INGOs need to stake out niches in competitive environments (as shown in Chapters 4 and 5), which also made it difficult to establish consensus on joint advocacy positions in the Asian Tsunami.[74] In the world of growing INGO competition we document in this book, it is reasonable to think that

[70] Bennett et al. (2006, 37).
[71] Ibid. (37).
[72] Ibid. (49).
[73] Ibid. (23).
[74] Ibid. (73).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

"coordination" may often take the form of information sharing about already planned activities, more than a true harmonization of actions.

While the Asian Tsunami vividly illustrates the problems around INGO coordination, we suspect that these same dynamics likely apply beyond the humanitarian sector. Although implementing deeper forms of coordination is hard to envision in the crowded and competitive populations at present, future analyses might explore variation in coordination – and its implications for effectiveness – through studies of other issues and sectors.

6.5 Implications for Funders

Overall, the evidence presented in this book suggests that INGOs may be in a relatively weak position from which to overcome competitive pressures through their own coordination. Rather than banding together to respond to the changing geopolitical atmosphere, even INGOs with compatible social change goals in many cases still perceive each other as rivals in the current crowded market for funding, media attention, policy influence, staff, volunteers, partnerships, and more.

How should those in positions of power who interact with INGOs – including individual donors, private philanthropies, corporations, and government agencies – respond to the rise in density and competition within INGO populations? Funders and policymakers wishing to support advocacy, service provision, monitoring, and enforcement through INGOs in the twenty-first century should be prepared to alter their own policies and to provide more support to help these organizations overcome the attendant challenges of crowded organizational environments and the global political barriers that increasingly stand in their way.

Donors must be careful not to miss the forest for the trees in their interactions with INGOs. Our analysis shows that the population of American INGOs that can work on many important issues cannot be expected to grow much further, absent a large-scale shift in resources or political opportunity structure. Rather than focusing on head-to-head comparisons of INGOs based on narrow metrics, INGO funders should develop policies and performance metrics that encourage the coordination of efforts within highly dense and mature INGO populations. Coordination and cooperation can be encouraged through

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

networking events and requirements that INGOs submit joint applications for grants, as well as resources for the small INGOs that may be especially burdened by coordination mandates. Adopting a "collective impact" approach, which refers to when "a group of important actors from different sectors [commit] to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem at scale," may be valuable.[75] Donors should likewise recognize that INGOs may avoid working in geographic locations with substantial unmet needs in favor of areas that they perceive as less crowded and competitive; donor-driven mandates to cooperate may help to alleviate this problem.

We also observe increasing specialization. This trend may make it more difficult for INGOs to achieve the large-scale successes that some funders would like to see. Although specialization often increases efficiency, it also introduces rigidity and a narrowness of purpose that is ill-suited to tackling broad-based issues like climate change. Thus, funders may need to provide seed funding to explicitly promote cooperation between specialists and generalists across sectors in order to build programming ideas that reflect the kind of solutions they seek.

Finally, since new INGOs are being founded at a lower rate in the United States and many other countries, certain new forms of innovation are likely missing from fields that are increasingly bureaucratized and professionalized. Those with the power and resources to shape INGOs going forward should encourage both the creation of new organizations with good ideas and risk taking by existing organizations to scale productive innovations.

6.6 Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, many once small INGO populations have evolved into crowded and economically powerful fields. Long-time practitioners have experienced rising population density and its consequences for their organizations' decisions. This book documents these trends from their perspectives as well as through analysis of tax records, INGO registries, and other data sources.

In this book, we argue that population density powerfully shapes INGO strategies. Rising density has changed how leaders and

[75] Spark Policy Institute and ORS Impact (2018, 16).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007

entrepreneurs conceive of new groups, what purposes they might have, and where they decide to work. Investigating the impact of these changed environmental conditions is an important task for scholars who seek to understand why INGOs do what they do – and ultimately, how they perform.

There are many urgent global issues and many unmet needs. Ongoing crises related to conflict, climate change, democratic backsliding, natural disasters, and public health are likely to continue, if not accelerate. Despite challenges and challengers, INGOs are likely to remain central players in global governance. Thus, developing policies and approaches that recognize and respond to the competitive realities of INGO populations in the twenty-first century should be a central goal of funders and policymakers who seek to support their work in the years to come.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:40:14, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.007