1 *Introduction*

On December 26, 2004, a major earthquake struck off the west coast of northern Sumatra, Indonesia. Within an hour of the initial quake, a tsunami with waves up to 100 feet hit communities along the Indian Ocean, causing massive devastation in countries including Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and India. The Asian Tsunami, as it came to be known, is widely considered to be the worst natural disaster of the twenty-first century so far, leaving more than 225,000 dead and at least 1.7 million people displaced.[1]

Individual donations for tsunami relief and reconstruction broke all previous records.[2] The general public contributed a record $5.5 billion, or about 40 percent of all international funding.[3] The American public was the largest national source of individual donations, with an estimated 25 percent of US households making donations totaling at least $2.8 billion in the two years following the tsunami.[4] These private donations surpassed the over $900 million in aid provided by the US government, the largest state donor.[5]

International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) played a central role in the unprecedented Asian Tsunami relief effort. INGOs received the majority of private donations and were responsible for implementing around a quarter of all government commitments.[6] American INGOs were particularly well funded given

[1] Goff and Dudley (2021).
[2] Cosgrave (2007).
[3] Flint and Goyder (2006, 22). Individual donors typically provide about 15 percent of the total resources for natural disaster relief and reconstruction.
[4] Philanthropy News Digest, "Americans Donated More Than $3 Billion to Tsunami Relief Efforts, Study Finds," 2006. Available at https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/americans-donated-more-than-3-billion-to-tsunami-relief-efforts-study-finds (last accessed September 30, 2024).
[5] Inderfurth, Febrycky, and Cohen (2005).
[6] Flint and Goyder (2006, 8).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

the generosity of the US public and government, both of which prefer to channel their funds to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) headquartered in the United States rather than those based abroad.[7] As a result of their significant funds, INGOs' operational role was substantial. For example, the World Bank estimated that INGOs financed 42 percent of reconstruction and development projects in Indonesia, the hardest hit country.[8]

The Asian Tsunami stands out in comparison to other natural disasters precisely because it involved more INGOs than ever before. They were the biggest component of the "second tsunami" of aid organizations in the region,[9] and observers noted that "the flood of INGOs created a congestion of humanitarian space."[10] By one count, there were over 400 groups active in Indonesia,[11] whereas before the disaster, only a handful of INGOs were present in the hardest hit areas.[12] American INGOs were especially numerous. By one count there were 202 INGOs that received private donations for the tsunami[13]; of these, at least 155 were American INGOs.[14] Of the top ten INGOs receiving private funding for tsunami relief and reconstruction, six were headquartered in the United States.[15]

There are many reasons to think that the Asian Tsunami response should have been a huge success. A report from the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (a multiagency learning and accountability initiative of the humanitarian sector) described it as "the most generous and immediately funded humanitarian response in history"[16]; it was perhaps the only instance of an adequately funded relief effort following a major natural disaster. The event was covered by the media to an unprecedented extent, dominating new outlets for weeks and keeping public attention (and donations) focused on the crisis.[17] It drew high-level

[7] Flint and Goyder (2006, 17); Kerlin (2013).
[8] Inderfurth, Febrycky, and Cohen (2005).
[9] Cosgrave (2007, 16).
[10] Bennett et al. (2006, 11).
[11] Jayasuriya and McCawley (2010, 14).
[12] Canny (2005).
[13] Flint and Goyder (2006, 22).
[14] Inderfurth, Febrycky, and Cohen (2005).
[15] See Flint and Goyder (2006, 26). Note that the authors consolidate all the Oxfam national offices into one organization, including Oxfam USA.
[16] Flint and Goyder (2006, 19).
[17] Brown and Minty (2008, 13).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

political attention, including the appointment of former US President Bill Clinton as the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery. And, as mentioned earlier, the scale of the crisis drew many humanitarian INGOs to areas of the world that had been previously neglected by global audiences.

But while we might expect that more INGOs would produce better results – especially in the context of ample funding – the final analysis indicates that the relief effort was disappointing. The Tsunami Evaluation Committee concluded, "the international response to the tsunami disaster helped the affected people and reduced their suffering … however, overall the studies conclude that the response did not achieve the potential offered by the generous funding."[18] It went on to say:

> One area where there was a clear lack of proportional response to needs in the tsunami response was the number of agencies. Organisations [sic] poured into the affected areas … While the number of agencies sometimes resulted in better levels of service for the beneficiaries, it also led to duplication and waste … Proliferation consumed local resources as communities tried to sort out the competing agencies.[19]

Other sources concurred with this assessment about the negative consequences of a crowded organizational environment. The international president of Médecins San Frontières at the time stated, "To a certain extent, the presence of so many helping bodies, each of which needed administrative support [from local people] slowed down the deployment of aid."[20] In a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in 2005, a staff member similarly reported that there was a significant amount of money available for projects and ample implementing partners but "access was delayed by … poor coordination between the various ministries, donors countries, and NGOs."[21]

Much of this criticism was directed pointedly toward the sheer number of INGOs and their resulting competitiveness with one another. As this book will show, the number of INGOs – globally and in

[18] Cosgrave (2007, 3).
[19] Ibid. (16).
[20] Sibbald (2005).
[21] Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, "Tsunami Response: Lessons Learned," 2005. Available at www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-109shrg23942/html/CHRG-109shrg23942.htm (last accessed February 23, 2024).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

the United States – had exploded in the previous decade, creating a large population of organizations with a mission to assist with this type of humanitarian catastrophe. But the arrival of so many INGO staff strained local systems of housing, transportation, and communications, sometimes pitting INGO staff against local beneficiaries for the same services.[22] One source described the actions of INGOs on the ground as "competitive humanitarianism"[23]; the rapid influx of INGOs led to pressure to spend money quickly, resulting in a duplication and a lack of coordination.[24] Unlike many other examples we will describe in this book, the observed competition here was not primarily over financial resources; instead, INGOs active in Asian Tsuanmi relief fought for local resources needed to spend their already-acquired funds. In one poignant example, medical staff from two field hospitals were observed fighting over the same patient.[25] These battles led some organizations to attempt to move outside their core competencies in order to find a less crowded environment, but their inexperience performing new functions further undermined the relief effort.[26]

Doubtlessly, INGOs did much good for Asian Tsunami relief. A large INGO response was both necessary and appropriate to provide support for the large number of affected people. But the dramatic density of INGOs also exceeded the amount of need for or capacity to accept relief in some areas, with negative effects on the resulting service delivery. In sum, this case illustrates why more is not necessarily better.

Related dynamics can be observed in many other areas of INGO activity. Alexander Cooley and James Ron described similar growth in the number of groups working on the issue of refugees: "In 1980, a total of 37 foreign relief agencies operated within one Cambodian refugee camp; in 1995, by contrast, 200 agencies flooded the refugee camps in Goma, the vortex of Hutu–Tutsi devastation in Rwanda."[27] And they also associated this growing density with increased competition that undermines effective service delivery. Similar criticisms

[22] Jayasuriya and McCawley (2010, 14).
[23] Stirrat (2006).
[24] Inderfurth, Febrycky, and Cohen (2005); Thompson (2011).
[25] Schulze (2005) cited in Cosgrave (2007, 17).
[26] Flint and Goyder (2006, 16).
[27] Cooley and Ron (2002, 10).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

of "too many NGOs" have emerged regarding the 425 INGOs working in refugee camps on the Greek island of Lesbos in 2020, where large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers arrive from the Middle East and North Africa via Turkey.[28] The humanitarian response to the 2010 earthquake and 2016 hurricane in Haiti was also criticized for an overabundance of INGOs that lacked coordination.[29]

In the global health sector, some observers argue that "the deluge of INGOs and their expatriate workers over the past decade has fragmented the local health system."[30] Every major meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is accompanied by narratives about how the meetings have grown "too big" as the result of the presence of a proliferating number of INGOs and other civil society observers.[31] A long-time practitioner in civil society and democracy promotion observed that the issue area's INGO landscape "suffers from a diffuse and fractured organizational setup that results in too little strategic thinking and too much micromanagement."[32] On the country level, the NGO sector (including both domestic and international groups) has been described as proliferating, crowded, and even saturated in places such as Kenya, Guatemala, and Bangladesh.[33] A Tunisian civil society leader described her country as overrun by INGOs after the 2011 revolution there, saying, "I think it's a

[28] Madeline Speed, "Aid Workers Face Growing Hostility on Lesbos," *Al Jazeera*, February 15, 2020. Available at www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/15/aid-workers-face-growing-hostility-on-lesbos (last accessed July 23, 2023). Helen Nianias, "Refugees in Lesbos: Are There Too Many NGOs on the Island?" *The Guardian*, January 5, 2016. Available at www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/jan/05/refugees-in-lesbos-are-there-too-many-ngos-on-the-island (last accessed July 23, 2023).

[29] For example, Kristoff and Panarelli (2010).

[30] Barber and Bowie (2008).

[31] For example, see Bob Berwyn, "Has the UN Climate Change Conference Gotten Too Big to Work?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2022. Available at https://thebulletin.org/2022/12/has-the-un-climate-change-conference-gotten-too-big-to-work/ (last accessed July 23, 2023). Michael Jacobs, "Circuses Have Evolved and So Must UN Climate Summits," *Climate Home News*, 2022. Available at www.climatechangenews.com/2023/02/05/circuses-have-evolved-and-so-must-un-climate-summits/ (last accessed July 23, 2023).

[32] Melia (2006, 123).

[33] See Brass (2012) on Kenya, Beck (2014, 152) on Guatemala, and Haque (2002) on Bangladesh. We further discuss this issue in Chapter 5.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

dictatorship of INGOs. Is Tunisia just another cake that international organizations are trying to share the pieces of?"[34]

Practitioners have noticed this increased density in the INGO population. One development leader explained to us, "There are two really heavy books in the world: that is the Bible and the directory of NGOs. And the directory of NGOs is probably bigger than the Bible ... you will be hard pressed to find something that isn't covered already."[35] And many leaders have connected rising density to growing competition. As one executive at a large humanitarian INGO told us, "There has been a proliferation of NGOs ... it's increased the number of sharks circling a much smaller pool."[36] Another relief practitioner advised would-be founders to be aware "you are entering a crowded space that is right now not sustainable."[37] But despite the salience of rising density and competition to those working at INGOs, scholars have neither sufficiently documented these important developments nor theorized their impact. This book takes up those tasks.

We demonstrate how population density and competition influence the strategies of INGO leaders and entrepreneurs. Our approach provides an explanation for three important but puzzling trends (elaborated in Section 1.2), with an emphasis on American INGOs since the end of the Cold War. First, fewer INGOs are being created, even though unmet needs remain substantial and available resources are steady if not increasing. Second, INGOs are becoming narrower in their missions, even though global issues are arguably becoming more complex and interconnected. And third, INGOs are increasingly dispersing their activities globally, avoiding "crowded" areas, even though concentrating efforts in areas of acute need may be more efficient or just.

By examining the core strategies of INGO leaders who are operating in the dense and competitive world of contemporary international nonprofits, this book reflects on what developments among INGOs mean for the future of world politics. We are arguably at a turning point for

[34] Interview, Tunisian civil society leader, in person, May 14, 2012. Quoted in Bush (2015, 201).
[35] Interview, Paul Bode, Vice President for Global Operations, ChildFund International, July 16, 2021, on Zoom.
[36] Focus group conducted via Zoom, October 13, 2022.
[37] Interview with executive at American relief INGO, October 8, 2021, by Zoom.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

INGOs' strategic choices. As one INGO executive an American peace and security organization explained to us:

> I think we're past peak NGO … the moment of NGOs was the post-Cold War moment into the 2000s and the 2010s. That's a moment that isn't going away, but … I think it was a product of the post-Cold War order and as that order fades, so does … the role of the NGO as international service provider. [The INGO] necessarily needs to redefine itself.[38]

Our book explores what happens "past peak NGO": How INGOs define themselves in this new era and what the implications are for world politics.

1.1 The Conventional Wisdom and Its Limits

International nongovernmental organizations have nonprofit status in their countries of origin and work in at least one additional country. There are three common ways of thinking about INGOs.

The first and most simplistic view is that they are "do-gooders" and forces for positive change in the world. The idea that INGOs are virtuous actors is a baseline expectation for many audiences and an important foundation for INGOs' authority, yet few scholarly studies adopt this approach uncritically.[39] Certainly, findings from classic studies such as Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders* reinforce the image of INGOs contributing to a better world. As their book describes, during the twentieth century, INGOs became key actors within new transnational advocacy networks that promoted policy change on issues related to the environment, human rights, and women's rights.[40] Despite the growing prominence of politically conservative INGOs in world politics,[41] scholars commonly associate INGOs with the rise of liberal international norms.[42] For instance, INGOs convinced states to adopt the 1997 Ottawa Convention and the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty.[43] INGOs have served as

[38] Focus group conducted via Zoom, October 13, 2022.
[39] Gourevitch and Lake (2012).
[40] Keck and Sikkink (1998); Busby (2010).
[41] Bob (2012); Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024b).
[42] Finnemore and Sikkink (1998); Reimann (2006).
[43] Price (1998).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

election monitors and human rights reporters, defining – and in some cases enforcing – international norms around these issues and creating a host of new rankings and ratings of states' performance.[44] They have gained access and influence within the UN and other intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and have helped inform their staffs and shape the global policy agenda.[45] And they directly contribute to the "governing" of many global issue areas.[46]

Second, the more critical revisionist view of INGOs often faults them for sacrificing their principles in the pursuit of more self-interested concerns. According to this perspective, INGOs are more akin to for-profit firms than principled activists.[47] It suggests that INGOs are ineffective – or less effective than they could be – because they focus on the countries, issues, or approaches that are likely to help them acquire resources and survive in the short term. The marketplace for INGOs is competitive, but given how difficult it is for funders to evaluate INGO effectiveness in complex global issues, it does not necessarily select INGOs for good performance. Thus, INGOs may not be as successful as we would hope.[48] For example, competitive pressures undermined the collective action necessary for INGOs to protest the misuse of refugee aid in the Democratic Republic of Congo and spurred social movements in Nigeria and Mexico to reframe their grievances to match foreign INGO preferences.[49] The same characteristics that help large INGOs like Conservation International build their global reputations and attract substantial grant funding can also draw them away from local partners and needs.[50]

Whereas the revisionist view accepts that INGOs seek to do good and faults them for falling short, the third (even more critical) perspective questions their *intentions*. This view takes issue with the power dynamics common in INGO work. US and European governments have increasingly used INGOs to implement their foreign policies and

[44] Hyde (2011); Kelley (2012); Cooley (2015); Kelley and Simmons (2019); Jurkovich (2020).
[45] Tallberg et al. (2013); Johnson (2016); Tallberg et al. (2018); Dörfler and Heinzel (2023).
[46] Avant, Finnemore, and Sell (2010).
[47] Prakash and Gugerty (2010).
[48] Mitchell, Schmitz, and van Vijfeijken (2020).
[49] Cooley and Ron (2002); Bob (2005).
[50] Balboa (2018).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

project power.[51] For some analysts, the relationship between Western states and INGOs is an asset, but for others, it is a liability that undermines performance.[52] Moreover, most INGOs are headquartered in the Global North (see Section 1.3), although there are important exceptions such as the influential international development INGO BRAC that is headquartered in Bangladesh. This pattern fosters deep inequalities within transnational INGO networks: organizations based in the Global North typically have significantly more influence and resources than their counterparts in the Global South.[53] Many INGOs profess a commitment to global justice as part of their missions but replicate global hierarchies in practice, which creates a paradox that some have termed the "white savior industrial complex" and that increasingly challenges INGOs' legitimacy.[54] To address this paradox, some INGOs from the Global North have reorganized themselves. For instance, Amnesty International has become more decentralized since 2011 and has moved some staff from its London headquarters to regional offices in the Global South.[55] These trends are part of a broader push toward localization in foreign aid, humanitarianism, and other domains (discussed in detail in Chapter 6).

Some of the harshest criticisms of INGOs have come from within the organizations themselves. When he was Secretary General of CIVICUS (a civil society INGO headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa since 2002), Danny Sriskandarajah wrote in 2016 that it is "becoming increasingly clear that their organisational [sic] model needs to undergo radical transformation to keep pace with changing needs, new technologies, and a shifting global landscape."[56] The results of our large-scale survey of INGO leaders in 2019 (described in more

[51] Sending and Neumann (2006).
[52] Edwards and Hulme (2018).
[53] Hughes et al. (2018); Cheng et al. (2021).
[54] Teju Cole, "The White Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012. Available at www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/ (last accessed October 2, 2023).
[55] Samuel Oakford, "VICE News Talks Human Rights with Salil Shetty, the Head of Amnesty International," *Vice.com*, September 29, 2014. Available at www.vice.com/en/article/ev77n7/vice-news-talks-human-rights-with-salil-shetty-the-head-of-amnesty-international (last accessed January 6, 2023).
[56] Danny Sriskandarajah, "Five Things International NGOs Are Blamed For," *Trust.org*, June 13, 2016. Available at https://news.trust.org/item/20160613131744-uctfe/ (last accessed February 7, 2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

detail in Section 1.3) suggest a meaningful minority agree: 13 percent of respondents said they thought INGOs working in their sector were ineffective, and 35 percent thought their sector was not innovative.

A challenge for debates about whether INGOs are primarily principled or pragmatic actors is that most organizations clearly exhibit both traits. Some scholars have explicitly acknowledged this duality.[57] Yet it remains unclear why some INGOs' actions seem to be more heavily dominated by competitive strategies than others, and what the consequences are. There are also many things that we simply do not know about INGOs. Whereas the international relations (IR) literature has sought to understand how INGOs shape politics and policy, and which organizations gain legitimacy and influence, many necessary prior questions about INGOs' decision-making remain both unasked and unanswered. Under what conditions do entrepreneurs create new INGOs? How do they choose where and on what to work? Our book explores these questions.

1.2 Recent Trends

To motivate this focus, we consider three important developments that pertain to INGOs since the end of the Cold War. These trends relate to INGO foundings, mission breadth, and geographic location. Previous IR scholarship on INGOs and global governance more generally has not adequately theorized – or even documented – these developments. This omission partially stems from the temporal focus of many canonical studies like *Activists Beyond Borders*, which examined INGOs in the 1980s and early 1990s, or even earlier. Our work updates these accounts by documenting and explaining later developments during the post-Cold War and particularly the post-9/11 period.[58] These years since the end of the Cold War have been characterized by an explosion of transnational advocacy, the opening up of international institutions to nonstate actors, and Western states' increased reliance on NGOs to implement their foreign policy initiatives.[59]

[57] See the review essay by Stroup and Wong (2016).
[58] See also Bloodgood and Pallas (2022) for a thoughtful consideration of more recent developments.
[59] Tarrow (2005); Tallberg et al. (2013); Dietrich (2021).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

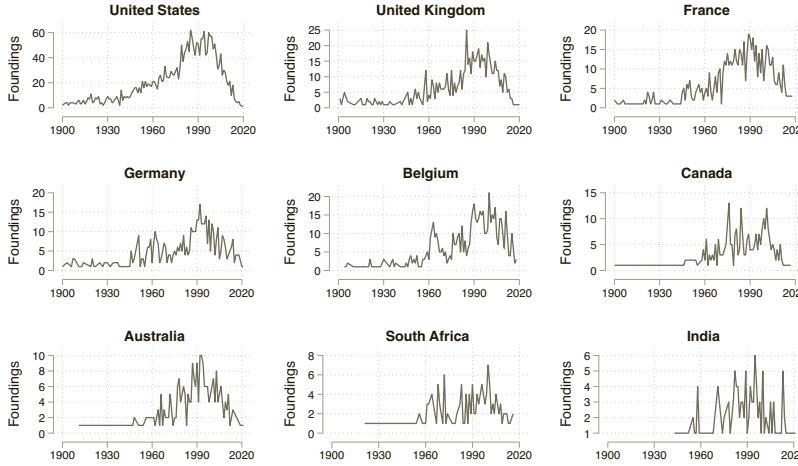


Figure 1.1 Number of INGO foundings, 1900–2022
Notes: These countries have among the most INGOs globally (see Table 1.1). The sources are the YIO (2023 electronic edition) and WINGO (Lall, 2023). The YIO appears to combine INGOs headquartered in both West and East Germany during the Cold War into the present-day "Germany" category.

The first development is the decline in INGO growth rates (Figure 1.1).[60] The figure highlights countries that are among the top twenty headquarters in terms of the total number of INGOs and includes countries from both the Global North and Global South. The data comes from the Yearbook of International Organizations (YIO), the most comprehensive data source on INGOs around the world.[61]

Figure 1.1 indicates that the INGO sector is no longer a growth industry in the countries that are home to the most INGOs. Whereas studies on the sector from the 1990s and early 2000s documented the

[60] For this figure and all others in this book, we use the graphic schemes developed by Bischof (2017).

[61] Union of International Associations (1953–2023). The YIO is also an important source of information on a variety of other organizations including IGOs, foundations, and networks. It has been frequently cited in the literature (e.g., Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Smith and Wiest, 2012; Smith et al., 2019). We acknowledge that it is subject to significant undercounting that may vary across countries. For the United States, we find substantial undercounting relative to US tax data, as discussed further in Bush, Hadden, and Pavlik (2024).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

"explosion" of this organizational form,[62] little has been written to document or explain its decline since then. Given that some of the factors that are thought to have encouraged INGO growth in the late twentieth century remain present – including unmet needs in an interdependent world, IGOs that welcome civil society participation, and governments that want nongovernmental partners to help implement their foreign policies – this trend poses a puzzle for existing theory. The decline in new INGO foundings coexists alongside significant growth in new business foundings; in the United States, for example, the number of new business foundings has grown almost every year since 2015.[63]

In a second development, organizations with narrow missions have dominated recent growth in the INGO sector. We define mission specialists as organizations with missions that have a limited topical focus, geographic orientation, or both.[64] Around 70 percent of global INGOs in 1992 were specialists based on our coding of a sample of organizations from the YIO. By 2022, this figure increased to 80 percent, reflecting the fact that most groups founded after the end of the Cold War were specialists. As Sarah S. Stroup and Wendy H. Wong document, scholarly accounts of INGOs have generally focused on "leading" organizations, which tend to be large generalists that work globally on a range of issues.[65] But as specialists increasingly dominate INGO populations, examining the conditions under which INGO entrepreneurs choose this organizational strategy is equally important.[66]

Finally, INGOs have increasingly spread out to more countries over time, attempting to avoid saturated environments like the ones discussed in our Asian Tsunami example. Figure 1.2 displays the number of American INGOs that reported having organizational members in a given country in 1993 vs. 2013 based on data drawn from the

[62] Boli and Thomas (1997, 177).
[63] "How Many New Businesses Are Started Each Year? New Data Reveals the Answer," *Commerce Institute*. Available at https://shorturl.at/BFMRW (last accessed February 26, 2024).
[64] Chapter 4 discusses how we conceptualize and measure mission breadth and presents additional original data to document trends in mission specialization among American INGOs.
[65] Stroup and Wong (2017).
[66] Schnable (2021).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

Transnational Social Movement Organization Dataset's coding of the YIO.[67] The figure indicates that INGO presence became much denser in Eastern Europe, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa during this period. Past work has evaluated geographic biases in where INGOs choose to engage, taking up questions like which countries are most likely to be "named and shamed" for human rights violations, considering not only countries' human rights practices but also other political and economic characteristics.[68] But our over-time perspective reveals that INGO engagement is increasingly becoming geographically dispersed as INGOs are crowded out of more popular destinations.

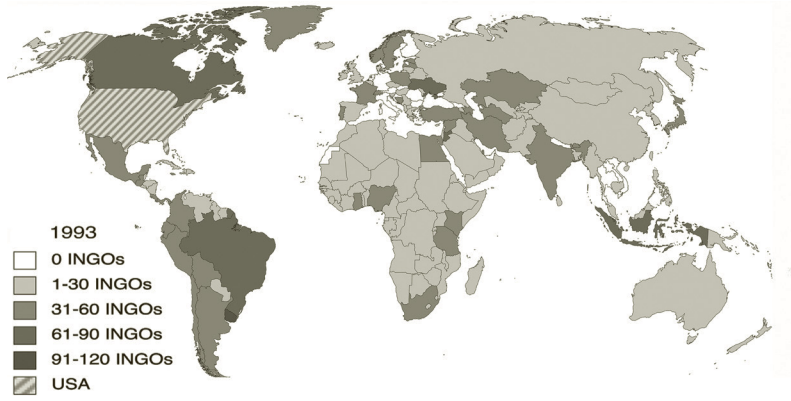
Together, these three trends suggest there have been important changes in how INGOs operate in world politics. Our book will further explore these implications. For example, stagnant population growth may decrease innovation within INGO populations. Specialist organizations may be one avenue for innovation, but their narrow missions may constrain their flexibility and capacity to adapt to changing environments. Geographic dispersion may bring needed programming to underserved audiences, but it could be inappropriate if there is highly concentrated need. We reflect on these issues in the coming chapters.

1.3 Argument and Approach

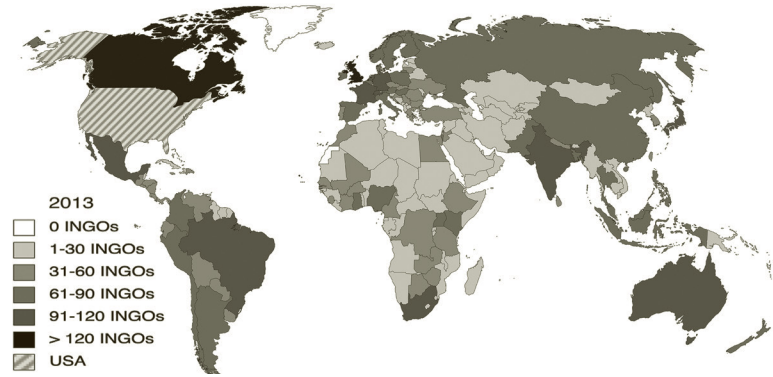
This book develops a theory to explore INGOs' strategic choices. The central concept in our theory is population density. *Density* refers to the number of INGOs within a *population*, which is a group of organizations that share common structures, patterns of activity, and normative orders within a geographic region or regulatory system.[69] These definitions draw on foundational work by sociologists Michael T. Hannan, John Freeman, and Glenn R. Carroll, who pioneered the study of trends within entire populations of organizations, from trade unions to newspapers to breweries.[70] Their approach is known as organizational (or population) ecology.

[67] We rely on data on geographic locations collected from the YIO by Smith et al. (2019); 2013 is the most recent year included in this dataset. We discuss the data in more detail in Chapter 5.
[68] Ron, Ramos, and Rodgers (2005); MacLean et al. (2015).
[69] Hannan and Freeman (1977, 935).
[70] Hannan and Freeman (1987); Hannan and Carroll (1992).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002



(a) 1993



(b) 2013

Figure 1.2 Number of American INGOs with members in a country, 1993 vs. 2013

Notes: The data is drawn from the Transnational Social Movement Organization Dataset, which is based on a bi-yearly coding of the YIO. The number per country reflects whether an American INGO listed in the YIO reported having organizational members in that country.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

We argue that the density of an organizational population determines how cooperative or competitive its member organizations are with each other. When a population is less dense, organizations are more likely to cooperate and work together to build influence or establish programming. But when a population is denser, organizations are more likely to view each other as threats in the fight to secure resources and influence. For many INGOs, the most important resource is often money, but media attention, quality staff, policy influence, autonomy, authority, and other intangibles are also relevant.

We use this theoretical framework to explain the puzzling trends outlined in Section 1.2. High levels of density deter new foundings and dissuade INGOs from working in certain global "hot spots" despite the considerable need. Density-induced competitive pressures ultimately make it more difficult for INGOs to survive. High levels of density affect different types of organizations in different ways. Even in a crowded organizational environment, for example, specialized organizations can find favorable niches by focusing on a unique issue, location, or approach. In all our analysis, we test our density-dependent approach against alternative explanations related to need, media attention, available resources, and civil society restrictions, among others.

Our empirical analysis assesses US-headquartered INGOs in particular depth. Table 1.1 shows the twenty countries with the most INGOs in the YIO, which together host 81 percent of all the INGOs in the YIO. Among the wealthy countries that dominate the landscape, the United States is by far the largest (and oldest) home of INGOs: It is home to 28 percent of all INGOs in the world. American INGOs may therefore be the "canaries in the coal mine" that foreshadow trends that are likely to emerge in other countries in the future as their INGO populations become increasingly dense.[71]

Focusing on American INGOs also strengthens our research design in two ways. First, country characteristics such as the level of democracy and integration into the international system likely shape INGO trends, and different countries have starkly different INGO regulations and resources.[72] By studying the United States, we can hold these

[71] Chapter 6 considers the generalizability of our findings to non-American contexts.

[72] Stroup (2012); Hanegraaff et al. (2015).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

Table 1.1 *Number of INGOs per country, twenty largest countries*

Country	Number of INGOs	% of Global INGOs
United States	3,384	28
United Kingdom	1,083	9
France	775	6
Belgium	691	6
Germany	591	5
Switzerland	432	4
Netherlands	369	3
Canada	365	3
Italy	346	3
Australia	330	3
Spain	240	2
Japan	220	2
South Africa	167	1
India	161	1
Sweden	138	1
Austria	138	1
Norway	102	1
South Korea	101	1
Denmark	98	1
Russia	94	1

Notes: The sources are the YIO (2023 electronic edition) and WINGO (Lall, 2023).

factors constant to examine the effects of population density, although doing so comes at a cost in terms of our ability to draw conclusions about the effects of density in other countries' INGO populations. Second, American INGOs constitute a distinct national market. They are the main recipients of US foreign assistance, and their procurement policy of "buying American" for overseas goods and services only loosened in 2012.[73] American foundations have historically provided most of their international giving to US-based nonprofits;[74] contributions to foreign nonprofits are not tax deductible, which strongly incentivizes individual support for domestically registered nonprofits.

[73] See 22 CFR §228 2012. The largest US Agency for International Development contractors and grantees remain American.
[74] Lawrence and Mukai (2010).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

We test our theory using four types of original data. The first comes from new datasets on INGO creation, missions, and revenues that we constructed using the YIO and tax records and supplement with original coding based on INGOs' materials.[75] Using comprehensive or near-comprehensive data on INGO populations enables us to study real-world organizational outcomes on a larger scale than has previously been possible. Given data limitations, previous approaches to understanding INGOs have generally focused on a single organizational population (e.g., INGOs working in environmental conservation); researchers typically gather comprehensive data themselves or study the more prominent INGOs in that field.[76] Yet digital organizing tools have made it more feasible for INGOs with small staffs and budgets to reach relevant audiences,[77] which makes it especially important to include the full range of organizations in the analysis, which we do to the extent feasible. Our datasets are freely accessible to other researchers who may wish to use them to build on our research.[78]

We use data from the YIO and government registries, supplemented with information collected from the organizations themselves. Government databases offer the most complete coverage, since NGOs are usually required by law to register in them and must report certain financial information (e.g., their total annual revenue). For example, the US Internal Revenue Service requires all nonreligious 501(c)(3)s – the most common kind of US nonprofit organizations – with revenues over $50,000 to file tax returns, and this data is used to create a dataset hosted by the National Center for Charitable Statistics. Since the YIO and government registries offer little information on INGO activities and motivations, we integrate additional data to gain a deeper understanding of these organizations.[79]

[75] On different data sources, see Hadden and Bush (2021, 211–212) and Bloodgood, Stroup, and Wong (2023).
[76] See Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2019) and Stroup and Wong (2017), respectively.
[77] Hall, Schmitz, and Dedmon (2020, 159).
[78] To access the replication files for this book, see Bush and Hadden (2025b). The replication files can be used to reproduce all figures and tables in the book and cover both data processing and data analysis.
[79] The Appendix contains more details about our interview, survey, and focus group methods, including a discussion of the ethical issues that arose with our human subjects research.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

The second type of data comes from case studies of the evolution of three influential and distinctive INGO populations – civil society and democracy, environmental conservation, and humanitarianism. The case studies illustrate how density shapes INGOs' choices and impacts in some settings where INGO performance matters the most. We focus on these INGO populations because they are substantively important, emphasized in the previous literature on INGOs, and vary on three theoretically relevant characteristics. First, conservation is a global commons problem, which might foster cooperation between INGOs, whereas civil society and democracy and humanitarianism are issues that primarily benefit people in areas where INGO activities take place. Second, the three sectors have different population characteristics. As we show in Chapter 3, conservation comprises a relatively small number of American INGOs and humanitarianism comprises a relatively large number, with civil society and democracy falling somewhere in between. We might expect cooperation to be more feasible in smaller populations.[80] Finally, the sectors have different resource profiles. Civil society and democracy INGOs rely more on state funding than those in the other two sectors, while humanitarian INGOs are unusually reliant on individual religious donors. Given these differences, if we find evidence of density dependence in all three cases, it will strengthen our causal claims.

Our case studies rely on a common methodology. We draw on a variety of qualitative materials, including published academic research, books and memoirs written by practitioners, published interviews, INGO publications (e.g., annual reports and websites), news sources, and our own interviews. We conducted fifty three interviews for this project and drew on relevant interviews we conducted for previous research projects. The interviews were generally semi-structured and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. We sought to speak with individuals who have worked in a range of organizations, including the largest and most prominent INGOs – such as Amnesty International and Save the Children – as well as a randomly selected sample of smaller organizations, including some groups with no full-time staff members. In many cases, we spoke directly with the INGOs' founders and presidents; it was more difficult to reach such individuals in larger organizations,

[80] Olson (1965).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

but there we still spoke to people in leadership roles (e.g., vice presidents, regional directors) who could shed considerable light on the organizations' strategies.

Our third data source is an original, large-scale survey of leaders at American INGOs. The survey probed attitudes among a larger sample (around 200 respondents) than could be included in our interviews, and its online and anonymous nature helped elicit truthful responses. The survey further enhances the study's internal validity by integrating experimental components designed to identify how density shapes INGO leaders' thinking about the scenarios they face in their work.[81] This is an important asset for our study, since many of the phenomena we are interested in – such as population density and funding – trend over time, making it difficult to engage in causal inference using observational data. By asking survey respondents to consider hypothetical INGO choice scenarios in which population characteristics (as well as other attributes) vary randomly, we can address that inferential problem.

The final type of data we collected comes from four focus groups we conducted with senior INGO practitioners. We included individuals from the issue areas in our case studies as well as other areas to gain a broader perspective. In the focus group discussions, we asked questions to validate our findings from our other forms of analysis that practitioners do indeed perceive themselves to be operating in highly dense environments. Asking participants to reflect on complex questions about INGO density, competition, innovation, and performance in a group setting reduces the cognitive burden on any one individual, which improves the quality of responses by allowing groups to brainstorm and discuss their answers.[82] Since many of these concepts have a meaningful intersubjective component, they are particularly appropriate to study using socially generated data that can register areas of agreement *and* dissent. Thus, the book's research strategy combines the benefits of analyses at different levels and using different methodologies.

[81] On the usefulness of elite surveys in IR, see Dietrich, Hardt, and Swedlund (2021) and Kertzer and Renshon (2022).
[82] Cyr (2019).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

1.4 Contributions

The book's theory and findings make three important contributions. First, we help reconcile and deepen previously conflicting findings in the literature on INGOs, which has often depicted these actors as either sinners or saints. We explain how the extent of density in a given INGO population drives INGO behavior and encourages an emphasis on either cooperation or competition.

Early studies suggested that cooperation among these groups was common and noted how networks of INGOs led to progress on a variety of issues. Later studies emphasized competition between INGOs, linking it to poor performance and negative unintended consequences. We suggest that these different conclusions reflect authors' different temporal perspectives: Earlier studies observed cooperation during periods of lower density while later studies observed competition during periods of greater density. Our mixed-method longitudinal data gives us an unusually complete picture of INGO activity in the populations we study, which helps us test the observable implications of our theory.

To be clear, we are not the first to consider how population density influences INGO behavior. Many studies in a political economy tradition shed light on how INGOs respond strategically to their resource environment.[83] Though these studies offer a potential explanation for the stagnating growth rates and other changes we observe – INGO competition – they cannot explain early periods of development within the INGO sector, when we demonstrate that actors engaged in mutual support and collaboration to expand the resources and legitimacy of the population as a whole. Thus, political economy explanations miss an important component of the population life cycle. In this emphasis, our book joins a broader turn in the study of international organizations to study change over time.[84]

In a second contribution, we develop a rich theory about how density affects organizational outcomes *across* domains of INGO activity. Although there are important exceptions,[85] most previous studies of

[83] Bob (2005); Cooley and Ron (2002); Prakash and Gugerty (2010).
[84] Gray (2018, 2020); Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020, 2021); Debre and Dijkstra (2021).
[85] For example, Stroup and Wong (2017) and Mitchell, Schmitz, and van Vijfeijken (2020).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

INGOs focus on their activities in a single issue area, like human rights or the environment, or a handful of issue areas. Although these studies have generated very valuable insights, they cannot track some of the broader dynamics in INGOs that our more macro-level perspective enables. Our theory's insights could be usefully extended to other forms of organizations that matter for IR scholars interested in global governance, including domestic NGOs, IGOs and their emanations, and transnational regulatory organizations. If these populations are – like populations of INGOs – becoming crowded, then they may be more competitive, which has important implications for the future of global governance.

Finally, the population dynamics we identify should shape how IR scholars study the effects of INGOs on service provision and policy change. This topic has been a rich area of research within the literature on INGOs. For example, the number of health INGOs per capita has been found to be positively associated with government spending on health.[86] Likewise, countries with more INGOs are more likely to adopt national human rights institutions and be shamed for their human rights abuses.[87] Our perspective suggests that the true effect of INGOs may well be nonlinear. Because adding INGOs to an already dense population increases competition, the presence of more INGOs may not always lead to better services or more policy change. From a policy perspective, encouraging coordination among existing INGOs – as opposed to simply increasing their number – may be an important intervention to improve the performance of mature and highly dense populations.

1.5 Plan of the Book

In Chapter 2, we present our theory of how population density affects INGOs. We begin by describing how they address market failures and government failures, and how changing international norms lend them legitimacy as an organizational form. Next, we develop a theoretical framework that assumes INGOs seek to survive, both to make progress in achieving their objectives and as an end in itself. Given INGOs' preference for survival, we then consider how their leaders

[86] Murdie and Hicks (2013).
[87] Meernik et al. (2012); Kim (2013).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

make important decisions in environments that are increasingly dense with other INGOs. We elucidate how density affects three decisions – whether to create a new organization, how specialized to make that organization's mission, and where to work globally.

Chapter 3 addresses the relationship between population density and INGO foundings. Using detailed data on American INGO foundings, we show that increases in density were initially associated with the founding of new INGOs, as these organizations helped each other survive and contributed to the legitimacy of the overall population. Eventually, however, increases in density began to deter new foundings, as the competition for scarce resources discouraged would-be INGO entrepreneurs. These relationships hold when we control for other variables that might be expected to encourage INGO foundings, such as pure resource availability and the amount of attention already devoted to an INGO's issue area. We also draw on a qualitative case study of INGO foundings within the civil society and democracy population to illustrate how density shapes INGO entrepreneurs' views about when is a good time to found a new organization. Finally, in this chapter, we analyze INGO deaths, showing that INGOs are less likely to survive in dense populations. Although an INGO's death might indicate that the organization has fulfilled its mission and is no longer needed, it much more commonly indicates that it has not been able to successfully navigate its resource environment.

Chapter 4 explores how population density shapes INGOs' missions. We distinguish between INGOs that are generalists and specialists in their missions, and find that only about 20 percent of American INGOs are generalists.[88] This pattern is surprising in light of previous IR research on IGOs, which has documented a tendency toward generalism and expansion. Indeed, generalist INGOs have the most authority and influence in world politics; they act as gatekeepers and secure the bulk of the available resources within their issue area. They also have greater flexibility than specialists to respond to shocks to the political or resource environment. Yet it is much more difficult for generalist INGOs to survive in a dense population because they must compete with each other for the market "middle." By contrast,

[88] This figure is similar to the proportion of generalists among *global* (i.e., not just American) INGOs as of 2022 noted earlier.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

specialist organizations can more easily find niches for their work even in crowded conditions. As our theory anticipates, density and concentration predict the likelihood that an organization will specialize. In the largest population of American INGOs, those that work on humanitarianism, our case study reveals that there are still opportunities for new specialist INGOs but that the environment is much more competitive for generalists. Organizations that pursue niche missions can still survive in an environment that remains dominated by large, generalist organizations like CARE and Médicins San Frontières.

In Chapter 5, we demonstrate that density also affects organizations' choices about where to work globally. Conventional wisdom suggests that INGOs might flock to countries that have the greatest need, a welcoming political environment, and available resources to support their work. We advance a different perspective: When INGO density increases in a country, it initially attracts INGOs and then eventually discourages them. Our analysis of American INGOs' global activities support our claims. It draws on two data sources: (1) an original dataset that contains detailed information on contemporary organizations' activities at a snapshot in time (2020) and (2) an existing dataset of their activities with less detailed information but better temporal coverage of the post-Cold War period (1993–2013). Drawing on our qualitative research, this chapter also establishes that our argument does a good job of explaining how environmental conservation INGOs decide where to open offices and conduct their activities.

Chapter 6 concludes by discussing our findings' implications for the future of transnational social action. As we write this book, many INGO and aid practitioners are actively debating the future of the INGO, considering issues such as whether INGOs are still capable of addressing contemporary global problems and whether a movement toward localization might be more appropriate. As debates about the efficacy and legitimacy of INGOs continue, our conclusion asks: Will other actors – such as local NGOs, for-profit firms, or direct giving campaigns – eventually replace this organizational form? While there are indeed signs of this type of transition, we believe INGOs are here to stay. Going forward, continued (and, in some cases, increasing) population density will play an important role in shaping INGOs' actions and performance. We suggest areas for future research on transnational advocacy and global governance, in particular by looking in

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002

more depth at non-American INGOs, examining variation across the issue areas on which INGOs work, and exploring INGO effectiveness. We also offer suggestions for individuals and funders seeking to productively engage with INGOs to promote innovation, spur coordination, and better address global challenges.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 05:19:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009557351.002