Critical Dialogue

Help or Harm: The Human Security Effects of International NGOs. By Amanda Murdie. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. 320p. $60.00.
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— Carew Boulding, *University of Colorado*

Amanda Murdie's new book takes on the difficult and important question of whether international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) are actually doing more harm than good in their global efforts to promote development and human rights. Murdie focuses on the impact that INGOs have on human security, defined as freedom from want and freedom from fear. Until now, the literature on NGOs has followed a common path in academic research on new global issues: first wildly optimistic, then crushingly negative. Murdie's book is a welcome step further—a clear-eyed, thoughtful, empirical investigation of the measureable effects of international NGO activity on human well-being around the world. Murdie gently points out that many scholars yearn to love NGOs; we are disappointed if they fail to live up to our expectations. Murdie does not fall into this trap. Instead, her analysis allows the data to speak for themselves, showing evidence that INGOs generally tend to do more good than harm, but that important factors make their success more or less likely, including support from the international system, support from the domestic community, working in a country with a government relatively free from corruption, and a domestic society relatively free to engage with NGOs.

This book makes several important contributions to our understanding about the impact of NGOs in developing countries. First, it is the first large-scale effort to empirically evaluate the impact of NGOs on people's lives in developing countries. This is a challenging task—and the data available are not perfect, as Murdie is careful to note—but it is nonetheless an important descriptive and empirical effort, especially given the wildly divergent claims about the benefits and perils of NGO activities. This book offers a satisfying answer to the question of whether international NGOs do more harm than good, and NGO workers, scholars, and advocates the world over should breathe a collective sigh of relief that the answer is, "usually not." Murdie's analysis is rigorous and creative, and is an example of how to make the most out of limited data without overstepping.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, this book lays out the important factors which condition the effectiveness of NGOs in different issue areas. Murdie distinguishes between service and advocacy INGOs, both in her game theoretic set up of hypotheses and in the empirical sections. By starting with a game theoretic model, Murdie lays out clear, logically consistent hypotheses about the conditions under which INGOs are most likely to have the impact they seek. Service provision organizations have the greatest impact (measured as access to clean water—a very compelling basic measure of "freedom from want") when INGOs work in countries without serious problems of state corruption, where organizations are willing to signal their commitment to best practices through voluntary accountability programs, and where the international community is involved in and committed to providing resources. Interestingly, INGOs also have the greatest impact when it is easier for domestic populations to work with organizations, either because of the density of urbanization or because of having the freedom to associate. Finally, development INGOs are most likely to improve service provision in countries where there is close alignment between the goals of the organization and the goals of the community.

Human rights issues and organizations are different. In this case, the issue area matters a great deal for the effectiveness of advocacy. For some issues, like physical integrity rights, INGOs have made great strides. In other areas, like women's rights, change is less obvious. INGOs also tend to have more success in countries that are more vulnerable to pressure from internal and external forces. Similarly, INGOs tend to have the most success on advocacy issues when there are more INGOs sending signals of their commitment to domestic or international audiences, when the costs of information are low (freedom of association is high), or when the support of the international community is increasing. Interestingly, the international community is more likely to support advocacy INGOs where there are fewer domestically oriented INGOs working.

This last point speaks to one of the great strengths of this book: the willingness to tackle some of the thornier nuances of NGO activity. For example, Murdie points

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out that INGOs are often caught between multiple and conflicting interests, mainly between international donors on one hand and domestic audiences on the other. This is a great point, and one that is explored more explicitly in Peter Gourevitch, David Lake, and Janice Gross Stein's edited book, *The Credibility of Transnational NGOs: When Virtue is Not Enough* (2012), but in very few other publications. Additionally, Murdie starts her analysis by relaxing the assumption that all INGOs are principled, instead setting up both her formal model and her hypotheses around the idea that some organizations are more principled than others. Recognizing that different organizations are beholden to different audiences and constituents opens the door for understanding the pressures these organizations face and the strategies they take to overcome them. It is high time that the scholarly literature on NGOs advances a more nuanced view of their motivations, strengths, and weaknesses, and abandons the assumption that NGOs are all benevolent. This book is a welcome step in that direction.

That said, I do wonder if the principled nature of an INGO is the most important factor shaping its impact. I should be clear that Murdie's definition of principled is not a casual one—she does not mean whether an organization is generally good or benevolent, but rather that the organization is "motivated by principles of 'shared values' to help a domestic population with what that population wants but is not able to achieve on its own" (p. 74). Instead of assuming shared values, Murdie allows for the possibility that some organizations are more committed to their own ideals, or the ideals of international donors, than to what the domestic community truly wants. Coming from the perspective of comparative politics, I very much like this attention to preference congruence at the local level, but I imagine the reality to be much more complicated than Murdie suggests. Even if, on average, support for a particular issue is high, we know that there can be deep divisions in local communities on even seemingly non-controversial topics. For example, an INGO may want to provide clean water. Survey data may show that access to clean water is the number one priority for most community members. And still, there are questions of who gets the contract to build a water treatment facility, who gets credit for successful completion of the project, who decides where the facility is built, who sets the price or makes a profit. . . these are just some of the many ways local projects can be divisive and politically charged. Clearly, the degree of congruence between what INGOs want and what domestic audiences want is important, but it may not be straightforward.

Finally, as a comparative politics scholar, I am particularly intrigued by the findings about the quality of domestic governance and the ability or willingness of local communities to organize. I am curious how these relationships might evolve over time. Murdie's attention to domestic governmental factors such as control of corruption is to be applauded, but I wonder how INGO activity shapes those factors. Many organizations explicitly work on issues of government transparency and corruption. In some cases, it seems they have had great success, but in others they have provoked a government backlash of restrictions on NGO activities. Murdie's list of conditions is thorough and compelling, and she deserves credit for including factors at many levels of analysis, including the organizations themselves, the communities they work in, the domestic government, and the international actors they interact with. A great next step would be to explore how they interact with each other. How common is the best-case scenario vs. the worst? How many countries have made substantial progress on all these factors? How independent are these factors and how much does INGO activity influence them?

Overall, this is an excellent book that not only answers some very important empirical questions, but also opens to the door for exciting new research. I think the contributions to the international relations literature will be clear, but I highly recommend this book for scholars of comparative politics as well—both as a great example of how to make the most of limited data resources on important and difficult issues, and also because this raises issues that are worth continued investigation and exploration.

Response to Carew Boulding's Review of *Help or Harm: The Human Security Effects of International NGOs*

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— Amanda Murdie

Many thanks to Carew Boulding for her careful and flattering review, and to Jeffrey Isaac for arranging this dialogue. As Boulding and I both point out in our reviews of each other's work, NGO research would benefit from more discussions that cross subfields.

Boulding's review brings up a number of interesting points that I hope will help spur on future research that builds upon both of our reviewed books. First, I agree wholeheartedly with Boulding that we need to further unpack domestic preferences to INGOs. I would also hope that future work unpacks the international community's preferences to INGOs. Understanding that international and domestic community preferences often differ to INGOs is one important step but, as I stated in the conclusion of my book, "there are situations. . .where these actor groups may be bifurcated to the extent that including more communities would be useful" (p. 242). Like Boulding contends, the work of INGOs often include difficult decisions about not only which goods and services to focus on but on who gets the limited goods and services that INGOs can provide. Future work that focuses on how domestic preferences to INGO programs could vary by geography or demographics would be helpful not only for scholars but for the practitioners proposing and carrying out these projects themselves.

Second, I hope that future work follows Boulding's suggestion and examines how government backlash and restrictions on the workings of INGOs influences human security outcomes. Many countries have moved to restrict international funding and curtail the activities of INGOs; this may in fact be due to earlier incongruence between INGOs and domestic preferences. It could also be an effort to limit the successes human rights INGOs have had in constraining government repression. Regimes often cite a few examples of INGO "bad apples" in their justifications for why to restrict the activities of all INGOs in their country. Because all INGOs could thus be negatively affected by the behavior of a few, this rising phenomena of INGO restrictions could be due in part to the nonprincipled INGOs I focus on in my work. By further examining the causes and consequences of restrictions to INGOs in specific countries, scholars may be able to better understand the changing process of INGO-state relations. Future work on this growing trend of government restrictions to INGOs is also necessary to understand any deleterious effects such restrictions could have on human security outcomes, especially in repressive regimes already working to thwart domestic advocacy attempts.

As Boulding's review makes clear, research on NGOs is having to "make the most out of the limited data" we have. Her review offers some great ideas for data projects that would be useful for the field and could help NGO scholars coming from both comparative politics and international relations. In particular, I would think that future public opinion work on the preferences of domestic populations to INGOs and INGO projects would be very useful. Future data collection on what government officials, both in donor countries and in developing countries, think of INGOs could also be extremely valuable to the larger literature. Ideally, these data efforts would need to be longitudinal so that we can understand whether, when, and how preferences to INGOs change and what affect, if any, these changes have on the likelihood of human security improvements and political participation.

NGOs, Political Protest, and Civil Society. By Carew Boulding. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 232p. $110.00.

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— Amanda Murdie, *University of Missouri.*

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are proliferating. How do they affect political participation in developing democracies? In *NGOs, Political Protest, and Civil Society,* Carew Boulding masterfully argues that NGOs, even those organizations without a specific political agenda, can heighten political participation in new democracies. In developing democracies with high quality electoral institutions, NGOs are likely to increase voter turnout. As the quality of electoral institutions decline, NGOs play a role in increasing political protest. Challenging canonical arguments by Samuel P. Huntington (*Political Order in Changing Societies,* 1968) about the dangerous nature of civil society in developing countries, Boulding sees NGOs as not encouraging or increasing antidemocratic attitudes in most states, even if contentious political behavior is heightened as a result of NGO involvement. However, unlike the more dominant view of civil society as the panacea for democracy promotion (e.g., see Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work,* 1994), Boulding also stresses how important the preexisting democratic institutions are in conditioning the effects of NGOs in developing states. In short, NGO involvement in a country can have powerful effects on political participation; the nature of these effects are conditional on the quality of electoral institutions within the state where the NGO is operating.

In a variety of academic disciplines and fields in political science, scholars have long examined the growth and effects of NGOs (e.g, see Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, 1998; John Boli and George M. Thomas, eds., *Constructing World Culture,* 1999; Hildy Teegen, Jonathan P. Doh, and Sushil Vachani, "The importance of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in global governance and value creation: An international business research agenda," *Journal of International Business Studies* 35 [November 2004] 463–48). Boulding's work is unique in this area in many regards. First, Boulding focuses on the intentional and perhaps unintentional ways that NGOs active in a variety of issue areas can influence political participation. Regardless of whether the organization is "providing health care, educational services, or community organizing" (p. 34), NGOs provide resources and social capital through their involvement in a state that can increase association and ultimately influence political participation. Most work in this area, including my own, has not focused on nonpolitical NGOs or the ways in which NGOs can influence outcomes outside of their specific issue area. By focusing on a wider array of NGOs and concretely outlining the mechanisms through which this diverse group of NGOs could influence political participation, Boulding's study presents new causal mechanisms through which NGOs could influence the political environment where they work.

Second, Boulding's book draws special attention to the pre-existing institutions within new democracies and how the influence of NGOs on specific types of political participation (i.e., political protest versus voting) is contingent to these institutions. Much work within political science on NGOs draws heavily on scholarship within international relations. Boulding's work is unique in its combination of insights from international relations on NGOs with literature on the quality of democracy, civil society, and mobilization from comparative politics. The comparative literature helps give this study richness in its portrayal of how NGOs influence individuals and how NGOs are similar to and different from other voluntary organizations. It draws specific attention to the pre-existing democratic institutions and the trust individuals have in these institutions; often these structures have been in place for far longer than an individual NGO has been involved in a state.

Third, Boulding's work is exemplary in its adept use of multiple methods and multiple levels of analysis in providing empirical tests of the implications of her argument. Some qualitative NGO studies in the past have been criticized for only selecting cases where NGOs have been successful at bringing about improvement in human rights and democratization (e.g., see Thomas Risse, "Transnational Actors and World Politics" in Thomas Risse, Walter Carlsenaes, and Beth Simmons, eds, *The Handbook of International Relations*, 2002). And some quantitative studies have been criticized for their lack of nuance and limited attention to the processes through which NGOs influence behavior and political outcomes (e.g., see Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and James Ron. "Seeing double." *World Politics* 61[April 2009]: 360–401). Boulding's empirical strategy is unique in that it incorporates the best of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the examination of NGOs and their role in political participation. Boulding's empirical chapters cover (a) subnational-level survey data on protest, voter turnout, and NGOs in Bolivia; (b) individual survey data both within and outside of Latin America; and (c) more detailed qualitative on-the-ground knowledge of Latin America, specifically Bolivia. Large scale data on NGOs is incredibly difficult to come by and Boulding's book should be praised for its ability to "go to battle" with the data that is available, even if it isn't what we would ideally want. Boulding does a wonderful job outlining the potential shortcomings of each of the approaches she uses. In its entirety, the empirical chapters do a fabulous job testing the central implications of her theory.

Boulding's work is a "must read" for any scholar of NGOs or of political participation. For NGO scholars, most of whom work mainly outside of the area of comparative politics, Boulding's work is an excellent example of the traction that can be gained through attention to the domestic structures and characteristics that can potentially condition the effects of NGOs. Although Boulding's work focuses only on countries that have a "minimal level of democracy" (p. 129), one could see future projects that build on this work and focus more concretely on non-democracies. One could potentially argue that the positive take-away of Boulding may be lessened in non-democratic regimes, where pre-existing trust in government is not high and the resources for non-violent mobilization may be somewhat limited. Similarly, future work on political participation could benefit from Boulding's focus on NGOs, as a key component of civil society. Future studies could examine whether the effects of NGOs on political participation varies by NGO home-location (e.g., see Sarah S. Stroup, *Borders among activists: international NGOs in the United States, Britain, and France*. Cornell University Press, 2012). It could be, for example, that organizations from the United States are viewed much differently by individuals in some states than organizations from Sweden or completely domestic organizations; these differences might then limit the ways in which some NGOs are able to facilitate political participation, especially in non-democracies. Further, looking both at new democracies and states with other political regimes, future work could draw upon recent studies on non-violent protest campaigns (e.g., see Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. Columbia University Press, 2011) and examine differences in the type and nature of protests that are affected by NGOs.

In short, Boulding's work should be on the reading list of every NGO scholar and should be the go-to example of how to do multiple methods well in our discipline. Beyond its obvious value for the study of NGOs and civil society, it speaks to perineal debates about the development of new democracies and the importance of high quality domestic electoral institutions. In this post-Arab Spring environment, even the most nonpolitical of NGOs can influence political participation in new democracies; the nature of this influence depends on the domestic structures in place and the population's trust in the extant system. However, as Boulding concludes, this NGO-heightened participation is compatible with democracy. This message deserves attention by both scholars and practitioners interested in democracy promotion.

Response to Amanda Murdie's Review of *NGOs, Political Protest, and Civil Society*

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— Carew Boulding

This dialogue has been a welcome opportunity to think about Amanda Murdie's excellent new book alongside my own. Reading them together settles a number of issues and raises others. First, I think we are thankfully past the stage of questioning whether NGOs (international or domestic) are important for politics. It is clear from her work and from my own that the non-governmental organizations around the world often have a significant impact—both in the ways that advocates would expect and in more political, more complicated, and more controversial ways as well. This is a great starting point for further research.

Second, there are many unanswered questions about how and why NGOs have different effects in different settings that deserve more scholarly attention, but to do so requires better data than we currently have. Murdie is quite kind in her characterization of my struggles to make the most of imperfect data. It is true that large-scale reliable data on non-governmental activities and organizations are scarce, often self-reported, and subject to all kinds of bias. My strategy was to test hypotheses using multiple types of data at different levels of analysis. Since the patterns that emerged were fairly consistent, I felt confidence in my findings that I never would have from any single test. Although this strategy is particularly useful when dealing with data of questionable quality, it is not a bad general strategy for social science research and it appeases the skeptic in me. I wholeheartedly agree with Murdie that this field of research could benefit from better organizational data and better survey data on issues of contact with NGOs and resulting changes in attitudes and behaviors.

I was also struck by how differently Murdie and I carve out the terrain of our analyses: Her work focuses on international NGOs, mine focuses only on democracies; hers focuses on human rights outcomes, mine on how people participate in politics. I think one benefit of reading these books together is it encouraged me to think further about how our findings interact. For example, I would assume, based on my own findings, that most of the organizations Murdie focuses on also have broad impacts on political participation among their domestic constituents. Is this part of why they are generally successful? Or part of why NGOs sometimes run into trouble with less democratic governments? More importantly, how does the influence NGOs have on participation shape how they affect human well-being and security? I don't think the answers are obvious, but they are important and worth pursuing.

Many thanks for the opportunity to engage in this dialogue. I hope that others will follow suit and help us continue pushing this research agenda forward.