Book Review

George E. Mitchell, Hans Peter Schmitz and Tosca Bruno-van Vijfeijken. 2020.
Between Power and Irrelevance: The Future of Transnational NGOs. Oxford University Press, 349 pp.

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Between Power and Irrelevance is a well-researched work based on numerous interviews and published sources. Its focus, Transnational NGOs (TNGOs), allows the authors somewhat more perspective than the commonly used term International (INGOs). The book is well written, although sometimes overly dense and repetitive in its discussions of the challenges faced by Transnational NGOs.

As a consultant for many of the TNGOs described in the book, I specialized on partnerships with indigenous NGOs and was initially critical of the book's sometimes fleeting treatment of North-South NGO relationships. On reflection, however, I had to remind myself that the reviewers task is not to propose an alternate book, but, rather, to assess the book as it stands. That said, my review of some of the chapters reflects this overarching concern.

The first chapter, Confrontation, juxtaposes the increasing complexity and scope of global environmental, socio-economic and political challenges with the organizational challenges faced by TNGOs.

Many challenges, such as the shift from charity to sustainable development, have existed for decades. Indeed, an earlier book published over 20 years ago, focused on the larger universe of global change actors, including TNGOs.¹ It showed that the most successful coalitions for global change were those that bridged sectoral boundaries between business, governments and civil society. The authors of this book acknowledge that, but do not focus on other transnational actors like corporations, social enterprises and digital platforms. Still, those working for TNGOs will appreciate the focus and advice in *Between Power and Irrelevance*.

¹ David L. Cooperrider and Jane E. Dutton, *Organizational Dimensions of Global Change*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, 1999.

The initial discussion of the advocacy capacities of TNGOs highlights Amnesty International's difficulties with trying to establish regional offices, but does not explore their relationships with indigenous human rights and democratization NGOs.²

In the second chapter, called *Soul*, the authors point out that TNGOs inevitably confront internal challenges about their identity (or "soul"). Their organizational culture focuses on trustworthiness and, therefore, on low overhead and financial probity. This can obscure the issue of impact. Regulatory change, new institutional forms, internal governance reforms, and large scale collective action are all needed to restore and strengthen trust and legitimacy. The authors also point out that carefully chosen North-North partnerships with donor advisor groups such as Give Well or Global Giving could help steer TNGOs towards impact.

Another opportunity for enhancing impact lies in finding local CSO partners who can function effectively in adverse political environments. In Tajikistan, for example, one local intermediary NGO, Jahon, has been teaching local police and prison staffs about international human rights laws and standards, although such training would have been and remains impossible at the national level.³

Jahon is not alone, however. On a broader scale, Intermediary NGOs, sometimes called Grassroots Support Organizations, are widespread in many countries, and the quality of their relationships with community-based groups is crucial to both sustainable development as well as democratization.⁴

In later chapters the authors are conscious about the problem of Northern dominance of boards and international headquarters, but in this chapter they use the phrase "capacity building" This is a common, but unfortunate description that often sounds like filling an empty water tank with knowledge from the developed world. Strangely, the authors do not discuss the need to explore local capacities and knowledge that could add value and strengthen two-way relationships with local civil society.

This approach could also address another theme of this chapter, the unreflective tendency for an organization to mirror its own culture instead of seeking innovation and creativity.⁵

² In Tajikistan alone, not a friendly climate for either democracy or civil society, I was able to interview 29 democratization NGOs in 2006. Fisher, Julie. *Importing Democracy: The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan and Argentina*, Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 2013, p. 124.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 136–137.

⁴ An NGO network run by the *Asociacion Civil Centro Nueva Tierra* works with community organizations in six provinces in Argentina on educational advocacy and "deepening democracy." Fisher, 2013, pp. 225–226.

⁵ Also called "isomorphism" in the literature on nonprofit organizations.

The third chapter, called Strategy and the fourth, called Power, focus on TNGO advocacy in global issues campaigns, which sometimes leads to a neglect of advocacy at the local level. The authors ascribe TNGO success to three factors:

- 1) Insight (Amartya Sen's ability to link famine to political instability)
- 2) Up-front research into side effects and complexities, revealed, after the fact, by Greenpeace's inadequate understanding of the complexities of global recycling
- 3) Selecting the right venues for action. Thus, for example, the land mines treaty only gained adherents when it was moved from the official UN Conference of Disarmament into the Ottawa Process to ban land mines.

The authors also acknowledge the need to "level the playing field" between Northern and Southern NGOs, and also argue that TNGOs should conduct research to reveal the most effective group of global advocacy partners.

The authors' discussion of legitimacy in chapter 5 (called Legitimacy) is a strength of the book, because it draws together interesting but often neglected dimensions of the topic.

Take, for example, challenges from below, as when Haitian activists demanded more than service delivery after the earthquake and got it. Ironically, when Oxfam tried to respond by disclosing staff misconduct, the accusations against them only increased. The conflict mediation skills needed to respond to such quandaries include the ability to bring together the essential actors, study the problem together, and broker a solution.

The authors are most effective in recommending "learning cultures" as a way for TNGOs to move from their fixation on trustworthiness towards a focus on impact. They are appropriately skeptical about using international rating organizations such as the Global Standard for CSO Accountability to foster internal learning, because those evaluations are written by outside experts. At the same time, however, they fail to explore how TNGOs could find their own local research partners. In South Africa, for example, NGOs housed at universities support student research, particularly on gender and human rights.⁶ By increasing partnerships with local researchers and asking the who, what and where questions, TNGOs could enhance their own learning cultures.

Chapter 6, entitled Digital, is the most innovative chapter in the book because it explores the potential for finding out what donors want as well as what they think. The authors demonstrate that the Internet can help create "leaderful" (i.e. not led by one or more top-down leaders) organizations that are less hierarchical. My former employer, The Kettering Foundation has done a great deal of research on "leaderful" communities and I was pleased that the authors applied the term to

⁶ Fisher, 2013, pp. 63, 79.

TNGOs. The “value added” by supporters is tied to what the authors describe as the unexpected convergence between online conversations and practical ideas that can actually be implemented.

The authors point out that online activism does not necessarily change current organizational cultures or practices. Greenpeace allows their supporters to organize online without staff leadership, but has not yet succeeded in mobilizing skills to implement their ideas.

The authors also highlight the crucial importance of cross fertilization between online and offline activism. They recommend solicitation of supporter stories and the need to match content to varied platforms as “conveners and facilitators” of supporter-led activism, TNGOs also need to deal with online threats, and there may be tools for this in the wider literature devoted to the Internet.

Chapter 7, Measurement explores the need to move from output (how many people attended a class?) to impact (what did people do after they left the class?) in field evaluations. The authors still focus, however, on “measurable” or quantitative indicators.

Assessing impact often requires qualitative indicators as well. If, for example, 15 women in a village in Peru have started microenterprises through a revolving loan fund provided by a TNGO, and 13 of them have started attending and speaking up in village council meetings for the first time, then microenterprise profits only provides a partial evaluation measure. Also necessary are interviews that might illuminate why running a business can lead to community activism. Unexpected spinoffs, not planned for, are often the most powerful impact indicators.

In a nod to qualitative evaluation, the authors consider an excellent tool for understanding unexpected impacts. Specifically, they argue that the credibility of the “counterfactual scenario” is largely what determines the validity of an evaluation. Thus, had the Peruvian women in my example not been part of the microenterprise project, it is unlikely they would have attended the village meetings. A different kind of qualitative evaluation would be “sensemaking” through such indicators as resilience, encouragement of action, and preservation and use of data, even if it seems obsolete.⁷

The need for “open-ended inquiry” in TNGOs is unquestionable, but “standardization of project indicators” sounds to this reviewer like a recipe for rigidity at the field level. The authors acknowledge that standardization requires deep country experience, but do not acknowledge that it is often local partners on the ground who impart this experience.

7 Karl E. Weick, “Sensemaking as a Dimension of Global Change,” in Cooperrider and Dutton, pp. 39–56.

The PACT case study in this chapter illuminates how impact can be measured by program area. PACT's Natural Resource Management program area, for example, used the number of hectares of ecosystems under improved community management.

In other cases, evaluations were not continued, even though initial results were positive. This was the case with Mercy Corps, even though their "security program" provided 3.2 million people with better access to water and health services.

The discussion of OXFAM in chapter 8 (Governance) centers on the "need to be agile" with affiliates, particularly Southern ones, during crises such as the Arab Spring. Oxfam's Tunisian affiliates were particularly important, and Tunisia was, after all, the only country in the region that did not revert to authoritarianism. But this is not only true for crises. The authors highlight the need for "deeper roots in local civil societies...[including] national social movements, trade unions and churches", which seems to include grassroots organizing without mentioning Grassroots Support Organizations.

The authors clearly understand that centralizing and standardizing TNGO business practices may deafen them to voices from the South. TNGOs, they say, exhibit "morally indefensible" tendencies to link accountability to large donors, to continue locating central headquarters in the North, and to base board appointments on financial support. They propose staff and board swaps, even though tough choices "can be hampered by listening to everyone's views". Susan Appe's (2018) research indicates that careful, more impactful and perhaps narrower investment in collaboration with Southern partners could address these issues and lower costs, although it might require a degree of outside support.⁸

In chapter 9 (Leadership) the authors illustrate why the tradeoffs between management/business and internal democratization can be so difficult for TNGOS. Most important – the willingness to fail is still "incompatible with most organizational cultures" which are constrained by public relations discussions.

According to the authors, the underlying explanation for this focus on public relations is that TNGO leaders have a fear of rocking the boat. Yet when confronted by this findings TNGO leaders express disbelief. Collaborations with social entrepreneurs and digital platforms such as Change.org, which can introduce them to different organizational cultures, are different. Ironically, the challenge of researching and finding collaborators may flounder from the same habits of mind that collaborations are designed to address.

⁸ Susan Appe, "Directions in a Post-aid World? South-South Development Cooperation and CSOs in Latin America," *Voluntas*, April 2018, pp. 271–283.

An important unanswered question relating to this chapter is whether there has been a decline in the strong ethical commitment of TNGO leaders, as identified by Lindenberg and Bryant in 2001.⁹

In the tenth chapter, called Collaboration, the authors divide partnerships into ties by sector – with governments, businesses or civil society organizations. Business ties are motivated by the need to diversify revenue and acquire new specializations. Government collaboration can be a precondition for scaling up creative programs. The authors add, however, that civil society partnerships can have operational challenges. In this context it would be useful if the authors had examined a second step – handovers to partners as an indicator of impact.

The authors also point out that budgets distort civil society collaborations, especially when Southern NGOs are cast as recipients, and they also point out the importance of “regular scanning of the environment for possible partners.” To this discussion, Popplewell (2018) has added the need to identify “at risk” partners, particularly in the human rights field.¹⁰ These challenges, as well as the need for eventual exit strategies, all point to the need for institutional mapping and, as the authors say, using team meetings to scan the external environment and identify new actors.¹¹ This could also include North-North NGO collaborations.

In Mergers and Acquisitions (Chapter 11) the authors note that there is no institutional marketplace for TNGO mergers and acquisitions. Mergers and acquisitions between TNGOs are therefore more likely to result from financial crises than from strategic decisions. Attempted mergers are often organized too late to confront these financial emergencies, and planned mergers can instead result in acquisitions. This was the case with Save the Children, which first merged with and then acquired Merlin, another child-centered TNGO. PLAN acquired CEDPA after identifying mutual fundraising, geographic and programmatic synergies. The success of the takeover was based on sufficient planning time and “solid” programming, despite a lack of funding. Not clear, however, is what happened to CEDPA’s population program because the authors do not provide a description of programmatic intersection, perhaps the most important result of any merger or acquisition.

⁹ Marc Lindenberg and Coralie Bryant, *Going Global: Transforming Relief and Development NGOs*. Bloomfield, CT: 2001. p. 33.

¹⁰ Rowan Popplewell, “Civil Society, Legitimacy and Political Space: Why Some Organizations are More Vulnerable to Restrictions than others in Violent and Divided Contexts”, *Voluntas* (2018), 402.

¹¹ On exit strategies, see Rachel Hayman and Sarah Lewis, *INTRAC’s Experience of Working with International NGOs on Aid Withdrawal and Exit Strategies from 2011 to 2016*, *Voluntas*, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2018, pp. 361–372.

Because big contributions can steer TNGOs away from social change, in chapter 12 (Change) the authors recommend alternative philanthropic vehicles such as the Emerson Collective and the Omidyar Network. They also believe that programming, facilitation, and research can address social change by empowering others. Greenpeace, for example, has increased regional and local office research, while Amnesty International has focused on partnerships with strong national and regional organizations. Because research and evaluation add to the cost of overhead, partnerships with local universities, especially those that host SNGOs, could also contribute to resolving these dilemmas.

In his Afterword, Barney Talleck describes the overriding theme of the book as “forms and norms constraints.” Some “forms” constraints, such as midterm reviews, or “soaking up costs in unproductive areas,” can be addressed without major management changes or attention to organizational culture.

More difficult, Talleck notes, are normative challenges like “unintentional neo-colonialism”, especially when “knowledge and technical transfer” is at stake. Like the authors, however, Talleck fails to mention that knowledge must move and grow in both directions.

Talleck’s final message to TNGOs is, however, on target and forms a strong summary of the book’s message. He urges them to

- 1) keep their souls
- 2) assess their roles
- 3) stop equating size with impact
- 4) reduce heavy superstructure