

CHAPTER 4

Non-state actors

The term ‘non-state actors’ denotes organizations or even individual people that operate independently of states and that possess considerable power that may sometimes even compete with that of states. It is a relatively new term for an ancient phenomenon. Think of banking families, the elite societies of aristocracy, international trading companies, the networks of monasteries, and organized crime organizations. These kinds of organizations have been operating for centuries all around the world. Since the second half of the 20th century, however, the number and diversity of non-state actors that are active globally has grown exponentially.

International non-state actors are organizations or individuals that a) are largely or entirely autonomous from central government control, b) originate from civil society, market economy, or from political impulses beyond state control, and c) operate as, or participate in networks which extend across the boundaries of at least two or more states.

There are different types of international non-state actors. Well-known are the organizations set up by people from various civil societies, like Amnesty International, Green Peace, or the Red Cross. Such non-state actors are commonly called ‘non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs) and often combine working locally, nationally, and globally at the same time. NGOs based on motivations of faith – often referred to as ‘faith-based organizations’ (FBOs) – form a special type of NGO. Other examples of non-state actors that operate on a global scale are commercial corporations and criminal and terrorist organizations. Some even argue that certain individual billionaires who are acting internationally, whether as entrepreneurs or as benefactors, can be considered non-state actors. The same may be said of individuals with great charisma, like the Pope and the Dalai Lama, or people like Ghandi or Mandela. One might describe these people and organizations as civil society on a global scale.

Non-governmental organizations (or NGOs) are organizations set up by civil society and operate independently from the state. NGOs that are motivated by faith are also called **faith-based organizations** (or FBOs). Some NGOs work only locally or nationally, others also globally.

Impact

The impact that today's international non-state actors have on the world depends on the type of their activities:

Humanitarian causes

Organizations that focus on humanitarian causes, like human rights, development, ecological wellbeing, anti-racism, and the like, have their greatest impact by **raising awareness** in the general public and state governments. In some instances, this has been successful: human rights have become part of international politics and national laws, the United Nations has set development goals, and climate change has become part of the international political agenda, to name a few examples. That is quite an achievement. The non-state actors have been able to make many states and large segments of the general public aware of these situations and, sometimes, prompted them to undertake action.

Some NGOs focus on **conflict resolution**. The impact of these activities seems to be limited, however, as it is usually the states that play leading roles in finalizing the resolution of a conflict. Still, in the processes leading up to these conflict resolutions, it is often individuals who have the greatest impact, although their work is mostly unseen by the outside world. The abolition of apartheid in South Africa in 1991, for instance, or the Oslo accords of 1993 between Palestine and Israel, or the Good Friday agreement in 1998 between the United Kingdom and the IRA, were the result of years of quiet, patient work by individuals, often aided by outsiders that acted as mediators and go-betweens. The states were the ultimate peacemakers in these conflicts, but they could not have done so without the help of these (mostly individual) non-state actors.

Impact of Faith-Based Organizations

A 2022 study shows that the 'faith-aligned impact' of FBOs in terms of world finance is quite significant: approximately US\$ 5 trillion. The breakdown is as follows: Islamic capital (\$ 4 trillion), Dharmic capital (\$ 300 billion), Christian capital (\$ 260 billion), Jewish capital (\$ 160 billion). However, these numbers relate to finances, which does not necessarily cover all humanitarian or development related activities of FBOs.

(Oxford Faith-Aligned Impact Finance Report, 2022)

Business and technology

The impact of international businesses is significant: they produce and provide what people need and want, ranging from electronics, energy, foodstuffs and pharmaceuticals to cars and tobacco. This production, however, is increasingly

being questioned for its many downsides, in particular the negative impact on global health, consumerism, and climate change. To address these problems, it is argued that not only the producers but also the consumers need to make adjustments to, respectively, their production processes and lifestyles (see chapters 'Sustainable development' and 'Resources and Climate').

Non-state actors are also often responsible for the development of technology. The latest examples of such technology that have had an enormous impact globally are the internet, mobile phones, social media, space travel technology and Artificial Intelligence. However, the development of these technologies depends on the business environment in which they work that includes an educated work force, infrastructure, economic stability, and legal security. Such an environment is usually provided or at least guaranteed by the state. In other words, the non-states actors are the decisive factor in making this technological impact, but they cannot do so without the help of states. Similarly, once technological inventions have been made, it is the state that regulates their use.

Private international business impact

In his Space X program, private entrepreneur Elon Musk has developed space transport technologies that for the first time have become profitable. Elon Musk also owns hundreds of satellites that his organization has launched and controls. In 2022, he granted the Ukraine access to these satellites so that it could maintain communications during the war with Russia.

Private entrepreneur Bill Gates made his fortune as co-founder of the software company Microsoft and now has one of the largest charity funds in the world (with a capital of \$75 billion in 2023) that focuses on education, poverty reduction and healthcare.

Crime and terrorism

The global impact of international crime and terrorist organizations is evident, but not easy to measure, also because they are different in nature, with varying interests. International **crime organizations** have financial interests, and since they are active in domains that are considered destructive to society – drugs, prostitution, human trafficking, weapons – the impact of their activities is usually exactly that: destructive to individuals and society. **Terrorist organizations**, on the other hand, pursue political interests. They usually identify themselves as resistance or liberation organizations, and use terrorist means to reach their goals. When they do so internationally – for instance, attacking their enemies in other states, or attacking states that support their enemies – these actions can have a global impact. The first hijackings of airplanes by Palestinians in the early 1970s, for instance, precipitated in a worldwide securitization of airports. In the 1970s, leftist

extremist groups from across the world participated in joint training camps and so became a global menace. And the 2001 attacks by Al Qaeda on the United States led to a global ‘War on Terror’ with invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. It was only after 2001 that terrorism was recognized as a global challenge (see chapter ‘Security’).

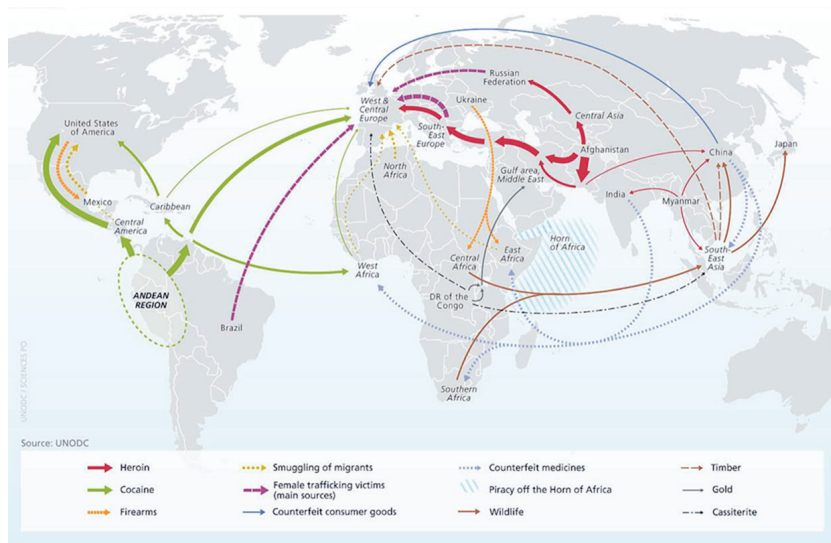


Figure II.4.1 Transnational organized crime

Criticism

Whether non-state actors are a blessing or a curse is debateable. In the case of international terrorist or criminal organizations, the verdict seems clear. In the case of international commercial corporations one can argue that they serve the needs of entire populations (to provide energy, basic materials, foodstuffs, consumer products, or employment) but one may question the means used to achieve these ends. In the past decades, the criticism of such corporations has increased.

Shell in Nigeria

Following a large oil spill in 2008, a group of Nigerians from Bodo, Ogoniland, launched a lawsuit against Shell in 2012. Shell agreed to pay £50 million in compensation after a Dutch court found the company partially liable for the Bodo oil spills. In 2021, a Milan court acquitted Shell for charges of corruption and bribery allegedly totalling \$1.3 billion. In the same year, Shell paid \$112 million as settlement with a Nigerian community over another oil spill.

But the criticism also extends to renowned non-state actors that engage in non-profit activities for humanitarian causes, like Oxfam, Amnesty, Greenpeace, or Feed the Children. The problem with these non-state actors, the critics say, is that they are self-righteous at best and elitist at worst, with little transparency or accountability. The criticism aimed at such altruistic organizations is therefore not aimed at their goals, but at the way these organizations are run: what gives them the authority to decide what needs to be done, and how truly independent are they? These criticisms are reminiscent of the image of the aristocratic elite of the old times – it may very well be that they act in the interest of the common good of the people, but they do so without transparency or accountability.

Criticism of NGOs expressed in mocking acronyms:

- GINGOs: government-controlled NGOs
- MANGOs: male-controlled NGOs
- BINGOs: business-controlled NGOs
- RINGOs: reactionary NGOs
- TINGOs: tribal-controlled NGOs

Further reading

- Nicola Banks, David Hulme, Michael Edwards, “NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?”, *World Development*, Vol. 66, 2015, pp. 707-718
- Ann M. Florini (ed.), *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000
- Femida Handy, Jeffrey L. Brudney, Lucas C.P.M. Meijs (eds.), ‘Faith-Based Organizations in Context’ *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Special edition, Vol.42, No.3, 2013
- Hank Johnston, *What is a Social Movement?* Polity Pr, 2014
- Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2003
- Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2020 (3rd Edition)
- Anita Ramasastry, “Corporate Social Responsibility Versus Business and Human Rights: Bridging the Gap Between Responsibility and Accountability” *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2015, pp. 237-59
- Jackie Smith and Dawn Wiest, *Social Movements in the World-System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation*, Russel Sage Foundation, 2012