Between Power and Irrelevance: The Future of Transnational NGOs

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Between Power and Irrelevance: The Future of Transnational NGOs (TNGOs) is a distillation of nearly two decades of insights from three founding members of the TNGO Initiative at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. The TNGO Initiative's research efforts (e.g., Hermann et al., 2012) have benefited many TNGO researchers including myself (e.g., Tran, 2020), many of whose findings are reflected in this book. The book also features an Afterword by Barney Tallack, former director of strategy at Oxfam International.

The book's central argument is that TNGOs, especially the traditional TNGOs based in the Western world, need to change radically in order to remain relevant in the future, but their ability to change is severely constrained by the TNGO sector's "forms and norms" (i.e., "the institutional and normative architecture in which TNGOs are embedded") (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 9). The context for understanding this argument is presented in the first part of the book, from Chapter 1 to Chapter 5. These chapters begin by explaining that TNGOs need to change because their external environment is changing. Three major external trends are discussed, including geopolitical shifts like the rise of non-Western powers, growing demands for accountability and responsiveness, and the emergence of competing actors and solutions such as social enterprises and digital platforms. In other words, the favorable economic, political, social, and technological conditions that allowed TNGOs to become influential actors in global affairs in the past have increasingly faded away, exposing these organizations to mounting criticisms for being "uninvited, unelected, and unaccountable" (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 16). In response to new environmental conditions and legitimacy expectations, many TNGOs have attempted strategic shifts such as by moving from direct service delivery to championing rights and entrepreneurship, from reactive advocacy to proactive campaigning, and from simple interventions to systems thinking. However, such efforts have been seriously hindered by the TNGO sector's legacy institutional and normative architecture. Limited by an archaic charity model that emerged historically as a mechanism for stewarding donor resources and not for fundamental societal transformation, many TNGOs these days suffer from an existential crisis and "a fundamental incongruity between the soul and the body" (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 25).

The second part of the book, from Chapter 6 to Chapter 11, examines the potential of, respectively, modern digital technologies, enhanced evaluation practices, reformed

governance structures, new leadership models, strengthened collaborative efforts, and proactive mergers and acquisitions, as methods for addressing the challenges facing the TNGO sector. Each of these chapters also reveals how the antiquated institutional and normative conventions described earlier in the book may hamper TNGOs' endeavors to transform themselves. For example, traditional demands for minimized overhead spending often inhibit TNGOs from investing in better means of collecting outcome data, while traditional cultures of uniqueness often lead TNGOs away from considering merger and acquisition opportunities.

The final part of the book summarizes and offers some conclusions and commentaries on the main themes of the book. Chapter 12 cautions that some TNGOs, especially those that have become large, professionalized, and financially successful, may find themselves too comfortable with the status quo to proactively seek transformative and architectural changes. Refusing to change or attempting only incremental and reactive adaptations, the authors argue, may drive these organizations to a state of "successful irrelevance", i.e., "continuing to survive by satisfying the expectations of the architecture but without necessarily providing relevant solutions for those they claim to serve" (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 233). This message is echoed in the Afterword by Barney Tallack, who contends that TNGOs can either "transform radically" to remain relevant in the future, choose that their existence should "end well" by handing over useful resources and capabilities, or let it "end badly" if staying in denial (Mitchell et al., 2020, p. 256).

Overall, this book is a solid culmination of a relative new line of research within the TNGO literature that adopts a managerial perspective to study TNGOs as organizations. This is an important contribution because although a trove of research, especially in international relations and political science, has explored the roles of TNGOs, "we know surprisingly little about them as organizations" (Stroup & Wong, 2013, p. 163). It is also worth commending that this book, just like many other research efforts coming from the TNGO Initiative, was strongly inspired and informed by TNGO practitioners' interests and insights, while managing to maintain academic standards for quality research. By striking a delicate balance between theory and practice and providing both theoretical ideas and practical recommendations, this book may entertain not just academic scholars and students but also TNGO leaders, employees, volunteers, donors, consultants, beneficiaries, regulators, and other stakeholders. Hence, despite certain limitations such as questions of generalizability or a lack of truly novel findings, this work deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone who cares about the future of TNGOs.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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