Between a Rock and a Hard Place: International NGOs and the Dual Pressures of Donors and Host Governments

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The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators. By Sarah Sunn Bush. (Cambridge University Press, 2015.)

Help or Harm: The Human Security Effects of International NGOs. By Amanda Murdie. (Stanford University Press, 2014.)

Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model. By Jessica C. Teets. (Cambridge University Press, 2014.)

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The nonprofit world labors under multiple constraints. Situated between the private sector and the government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are expected to combine the "efficiency and expertise from the business world with public interest, accountability, and broader planning from government" (Etzioni 1973, 315). If NGOs behave too much like private sector businesses and engage in resource-maximizing behavior, they can drift from their deeper missions. At the same time, if NGOs disregard market forces and only serve the public interest and

advance their ideals, they put their financial survival at risk. NGOs that work internationally face additional constraints on their activities. Although they work outside their home countries, international NGOs (INGOs) are beholden to (and shaped by) the laws, regulations, and norms of those countries (Stroup 2012; Stroup and Murdie 2012). In addition, in order to engage in advocacy or provide services in sovereign states, INGOs must also adhere to the legal regulatory environment of the states they target—or risk losing access to the country. However, if the regulatory environment is too restrictive, INGOs may be unable to effectively pursue their missions. This conflict between INGO ideals and the institutional environments in which they operate gives rise to a strategy Mitchell and Schmitz (2014) have termed *principled instrumentalism*: international NGOs "pursue their principled objectives within the economic constraints and political opportunity structures imposed by their external environments" (489).

Two such economic and political opportunity structures have changed dramatically over the last few decades. First, nondemocratic governments have tightened the regulation of NGOs and civil society as these actors have repeatedly taken central roles in domestic protests and have been empowered by social media and transnational funding and support. Second, in response to concern about the efficacy of development aid and as part of the push towards evidence-based policymaking and accountability, policy makers have created indicators to improve their ability to evaluate development policy reforms (Arndt 2008; Arndt and Oman 2006). The United Nation Development Programme's *Human Development Report* (1990), and the World Bank's *Governance Indicators* (2002) include many such measures. Remarkable growth in data and indicators (Kelley and Simmons 2015) has reshaped the norms that dictate how donor organizations—whether national agencies, international governmental organizations, or large philanthropic foundations—distribute funding to recipient NGOs. Increasingly, donors demand evidence of the effectiveness of policies that are no longer meant simply to prop up friendly regimes.

Figure 1 demonstrates how these two environmental pressures have increased over time. The left panel indicates that the legal and regulatory environment for domestic and international NGOs has become more constrained over time: an increasing number of countries have passed laws that require NGOs to register with the government, prevented NGOs from engaging in certain forms of advocacy, and prohibited NGOs from accepting money from international donors. The right panel shows a similar change in donor demands. The right panel shows a similar change in donor demands. Based on data from Bush (2015), it highlights two characteristics of the National Endowment for Democracy, a critical donor for democracy establishment NGOs: over the past 30 years, more NED staff hold graduate and professional degrees, and more NED grants require that NGOs carefully measure and evaluate the outputs and outcomes of their activities. That is, as donor organi-
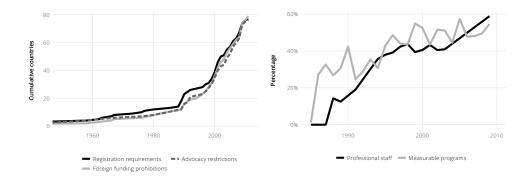
Figure 1: *Left panel*: the cumulative number of countries with laws restricting civil society (source: Christensen and Weinstein 2013); *right panel*: the proportion of National Endowment for Democracy (NED) staff with advanced professional degrees and the proportion of NED grants awarded to programs that are measurable and quantifiable (source: Bush 2015)

zations themselves adopt a culture of professionalization, they raise their demands for accountability, professionalization, and performance in the NGOs they fund.

This changing environment directly influences the day-to-day operations of NGOs. But how do the preferences and behavior of both donor organizations and host countries affect the strategies, activities, and effectiveness of INGOs? Seminal work by Cooley and Ron (2002) has set off a wave of research on the relationship between donors and NGOs, but research is still emerging on the more complex and developing set of relationships among the full triad of actors and how these relationships may have influenced NGOs' effectiveness. At the dawn of a new set of international development goals, and during a time in which democracy is receding globally (Puddington and Royance 2016), these relationships are ever more crucial to understand.

Recent books by Sarah Bush, Jessica Teets, and Amanda Murdie bring unique ideas and empirical evidence to illustrate different parts of this question. To discuss the arguments in each book, as well as explore incidental ties between the three, we suggest a simple framework for organizing and understanding the dual institutional constraints on INGOs (see Figure 2). In this essay, we use this framework to identify how each book addresses these influences on INGOs and how, in some cases, INGOs can reverse the direction of influence.

The influence of donor norms

The preferences, rules, and institutions of donors comprise the first significant pressure on NGO activities and behavior. As a corrective to the overly optimistic conception of NGOs as altruistic, high-minded, deeply principled organizations posi-

Donor norms
and expectations
Bush 2015

Regulatory
environment
Teets 2014;
Murdie 2014

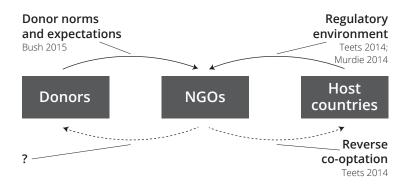| Donors | NGOs | Host countries |

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Reverse
co-optation
Teets 2014

Figure 2: The dual environmental constraints confronting INGOs

tioned to address critical policy failures (Nye and Keohane 1971; Skjelsbaek 1971; Corry 2010), early research began to examine how NGOs shift their priorities away from core missions, values, and constituents in an effort to secure funding. Distortions and competition in the market for INGO funding ultimately reorient NGO missions toward *donor* priorities—and away from *NGO* preferences—causing gaps in the kinds of advocacy and services that are provided (Witesman and Heiss 2016). To chase available money, INGOs can drop highly valued, but underfunded objectives in favor of issues that align more closely with the preferences of available donors (Cooley and Ron 2002). For instance, in post-Soviet Russia, foreign donors interested in democracy promotion flooded the country's nascent civil society sector with millions of dollars of aid, leading to two diverging outcomes. Foreign donors enhanced NGO organizational capacity by providing substantial funding, equipment, and practical training. However, these efforts ultimately weakened the sector, as recipient NGOs linked themselves to foreign donors in patron-client relationships (Henderson 2002). Instead of a strong grassroots civil society with robust and independent NGOs, donors created a market-based "professionalized realm of NGOs, inaccessible to most local groups and compromised by its links to a neoliberal vision of development" (Hemment 2004, 215). Similar distortions—NGOs with overly strong links to donors—have occurred throughout the world, including in Ghana, India, Mexico (Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley 2004), Palestine (Jamal 2007), and Haiti (Schuller 2012).

In addition to restructuring social ties between recipients and their constituents, donors can also inadvertently distort NGO behavior by fostering competition for funding. As similar NGOs compete for the same funding sources, some may undermine their competitors, withhold information, or continue to work on failing (yet profitable) endeavors (Cooley and Ron 2002; Kelley 2009). Others may even

exaggerate the severity of crises to obtain additional funding from donors (Cohen and Green 2012).

Competitive fundraising can thus result in dysfunctional behavior; the world of NGOs is not a meritocracy of policy issues, in which donors immediately fund the worthiest efforts to solve human rights and humanitarian problems. INGOs compete in a "harsh, Darwinian marketplace where legions of desperate groups vie for scarce attention, sympathy, and money" (Bob 2002, 37). NGOs that use emotive marketing, employ native English speakers, use charismatic spokespeople, and align their messages with Western sensibilities are far more effective than their competitors at advancing their agenda and securing funding from donors.

In *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*, Sarah Bush makes a novel contribution to this well-established field of donor–NGO research. Using a mix of statistical models and detailed case studies, Bush advances a scathing critique of the democracy promotion establishment by showing how the measurement revolution and the rising demand for evidence-based policies have distorted NGOs' core operations. By conditioning funding on evidence of program effectiveness, donors have incentivized NGOs to reshape their programs to deliver evidence of activity rather than results. In the 1980s, for example, the NED supported and funded dozens of foreign NGOs and dissidents, all of which directly challenged dictators and repressive regimes. But in the intervening decades, NGOs that offered more technical— and less confrontational—programming, like support for local governance, became more likely to receive funding. Donor demands for measurability and logic models have led many NGOs to shift their core programming to activities that allow them to quantify their inputs, outputs, and outcomes and facilitate statistical evaluations for their donors. Unfortunately, these requirements are also less compatible with old-fashioned, more confrontational NGO efforts to promote democracy. In this strained donor environment, the last thing an NGO wants to do is push for too much reform in ways that might jeopardize its ability to work in the country, which in turn weakens its long-term ability to pursue its mission and obtain funding.

The tension between the need to measure activities and the risks inherent in engaging in those activities leads to Bush's main thesis about the "taming" of democracy promotion programs: democracy promotion NGOs that are dependent on foreign donors engage in advocacy that is (1) measurable, thereby appeasing donors, and (2) regime compatible, thereby keeping host governments satisfied and allowing to the NGOs' continued operation. This mix of competing constraints creates a watered down version of democracy assistance, one that fails to provoke meaningful reforms or confront dictators.

Bush makes several important empirical and theoretical contributions. First, she notes that despite popular debate about democracy promotion, scholars know very little about how democracy assistance works in practice (Bush 2015, 213). *The Tam-*

ing of Democracy Assistance remedies this shortcoming through its rich description of how democracy promotion is carried out today; Bush's impressive fieldwork and primary research highlights the work of dozens of donor organizations and NGOs. She bolsters her qualitative work by quantifying and statistically modeling the measurability and regime compatibility of NGO programming, categorizing several thousand NED grants. Her analysis provides convincing evidence that the structures and institutions for grant-making have changed drastically in ways that shape NGO behavior. Her findings provide a mechanism underpinning the "NGO scramble", the hypothesis that increased competition among NGOs would lead to more uncertainty, competition, insecurity, and ineffectiveness in the sector (Cooley and Ron 2002): competition *between* NGOs and professionalization pressures *within* NGOs increase the proportion of NGO programming that is measurable and regime-compatible.

Bush's insight is important and even paradoxical. Precisely in their effort to engender greater effectiveness, donors—or at least USAID and the NED—are taming the programming they sponsor and pushing dictators less, not more. Notably, programmatic taming can lead to advocacy that can ultimately stymie or even hobble democracy promotion. NGO programming may be better funded and more measurable, but to what end? Donors, take note!

Notwithstanding these contributions, the book's analysis contains some minor shortcomings. Although it addresses donor and host government constraints on NGO activities (i.e. both sides of Figure 2), the bulk of the book's evidence is focused on the former, and evidence of government pressures is relatively thin. For example, in the model explaining determinants of regime compatible programming, increased competition and professional norms significantly influence the proportion of regime compatible activities. However, because neither varies between countries, the effect of the variables is indistinguishable from other time trends. Meanwhile, regime type (as measured by Freedom House) has no effect. This is surprising: even as programming becomes more technical and less confrontational, we would still expect the mix of NGO programming to be less compatible with more autocratic regimes, and the book's later case studies argue as much. This absence of a significant statistical effects could perhaps be the result of the choice to model regime type as exponential: when the relationship is modeled as purely linear, a significant relationship between autocracy and regime compatibility emerges, suggesting that host regimes can influence NGO programming.

At its core, the argument of *The Taming of Democracy Assistance* is about survival. Survival strategies dictate NGO programming—NGOs measure outputs and outcomes (and correspondingly tame their programming) because donors require it to receive funding, and NGOs ensure that programs are compatible with the regime

(and correspondingly tame their programming) because host governments allow or deny access to their countries.

Bush tackles two aspects of survival, but many other strategies remain unexplored and are ripe for future research. While instrumental concerns like funding and access drive NGO behavior, principled motivations also animate their actions (Mitchell and Schmitz 2014). The practice of taming programming to obtaining funding inevitably clashes with NGO norms. How do NGOs balance funding needs with their mission to promote democracy, challenge undemocratic regimes, or bolster human rights? Do NGOs compromise their principles or do they forgo funding or access to remain true to their ideals? Rather than uniformly tame its programming, an INGO might shift its resources to other countries with more favorable regulatory environments. For example, Russia deemed the Open Society Foundations (OSF)—one of Bush's case study organizations—to be an "undesirable organization" and expelled it in 2015. Instead of taming its programming to stay active in the country, OSF moved its focus to other countries in the region, temporarily abandoning its Russia projects in favor of more effective advocacy and assistance elsewhere (Heiss 2016a).

These questions are beyond the scope of the book but illustrate fruitful avenues of future research. Bush makes a persuasive argument for the first relationship in our framework, demonstrating how the donor environment shapes NGO behavior, and deepening our understanding of how the measurement revolution has unintentionally influenced the content of NGO programming. Her work raises important questions for the democracy promotion establishment, and is both theoretically interesting and highly policy-relevant. Though her treatment of the effect of the second relationship in our framework—how the host country environment influences NGO activities—is more nascent, less explored, and less convincing based on the empirical evidence discussed, it opens the door to future analysis. And indeed, it is a question others have begun to explore.

The influence of the host country legal environment

In *Civil Society under Authoritarianism*, Jessica Teets addresses the second relationship in our framework, investigating how the preferences, politics, and legal environment of host countries shape NGO behavior and programming. Teets looks at one of the most interesting cases for INGO activism, namely that of China, where civil society has grown significantly over the last decade as the government has sought to balance the pressures of economic growth and a wealthier and more educated citizenry. The book seeks to resolve a paradox: why does the Chinese communist party allow advocacy NGOs like Greenpeace to operate? It might seem

that an autocratic government would not permit foreign organizations that could destabilize and threaten it to operate. Indeed, in China, environmental issues are among the most problematic facing government—pollution lowers the quality of life for millions of its citizens and disasters periodically harm and subsequently enrage localities. However, the party has allowed—and even encouraged—foreign-influenced associational life to develop within China. Teets' solution to this paradox is a new model of state-society relations she terms *consultative authoritarianism*: autocrats encourage the development of a strong and autonomous civil society under the aegis of newer, indirect methods of state control.

Scholars have identified dozens of strategies for survival and stability that authoritarian regimes can institute in a top-down manner. Previous research shows that autocrats establish institutions like consultative councils and executive cabinets to give voice to and build patronage with elites and create democratic-appearing institutions like legislatures, elections, or civil society to manufacture popular loyalty and mitigate threats from society or the opposition (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 2014; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006, 2007; Brownlee 2007). Teets' consultative authoritarianism falls within in this theoretical strain as she shows that the Chinese government has similarly institutionalized civil society in an effort to maximize the benefits of NGOs while minimizing the risk.

Teets helpfully expands the literature on authoritarian institutionalization by investigating the processes behind the creation of civil society regulations. The novelty of the new model of regulation provided in *Civil Society under Authoritarianism* lies in its consultative component. Using carefully selected case studies of government officials and NGOs working in Yunnan, Beijing, Jiangsu, and Sichuan provinces, Teets shows that the regime does not unilaterally create civil society regulations, which are instead the result of a bottom-up dynamic learning process undertaken *with* NGOs. According to her argument, policy makers and bureaucrats, who are pressed for time and resources, recognize that civil society organizations are useful potential partners to filling gaps in service delivery and policy execution. For example, provinces suffering from severe pollution can enlist the help of environmental INGOs. Bureaucrats also establish regulations—including tax laws, registration requirements, and other mechanisms for oversight and accountability—in attempts to mitigate the potential threat inherent in turning to foreign organizations.

Up to this point, the model mimics prior adaptation strategies by dictators. Government regulations initially constrain how much advocacy NGOs can pursue within China—for instance, Greenpeace is not able to engage in its most radical forms of lobbying or activism. Teets, however, goes further to discuss how civil society reacts, thus offering a more dynamic account. She argues that NGOs do not passively accept government directives, but become co-architects of the regu-

lations they face (Teets 2014, 145). NGOs build a menu of strategies that allow them to create positive experiences for local officials and shape the regulatory environment in beneficial ways. In an act of reverse co-optation (Najam 2000; Baur and Schmitz 2012), organizations invite government officials to conferences and workshops, hire retired government officials with connections to sitting bureaucrats, or publicly shame government agencies that impose harsher regulations. In turn, bureaucrats modify civil society regulations.

This dynamic, consultative relationship between the regime and NGOs is perhaps the book's most groundbreaking theoretical contribution. Using compelling and well-crafted qualitative research, Teets convincingly demonstrates that government regulations on NGOs indeed constrain NGO behavior, but also that, to an extent, NGOs shape those regulations and constraints to their own benefit (shown with the dotted arrow in Figure 2).

Teets provides evidence for consultative authoritarianism in China—an important case in and of itself—but it is unclear how well the theory travels to other countries or policy issues. In the book's final chapter, she applies the theory preliminarily to several other cases, showing how the urge to regulate civil society has diffused across authoritarian regimes, as dozens of countries have enacted laws similar to those in China. Indeed, as we show in Figure 1, regimes around the world—both democratic and authoritarian—have increased their regulation of civil society. However, not all new regulations are designed to allow autocrats to benefit from civil society. In an extended case study, Teets argues that Russia has followed a path similar to China, passing a law in 2006 (in partial consultation with domestic NGOs) that could have strengthened civil society under conditions favorable to the state. However, more recent developments, such as the 2012 Foreign Agents law and the 2015 Undesirable Organizations law veer from this trend. The newer, harsher regulations have given the Russian government substantial power over NGOs it deems threatening and has prompted many to exit the country.

A substantial body of work has looked at how NGOs influence the laws and policies of the countries in which they work, showing that they can roll back and participate in government programs, partner directly with governments to design state policies or supply employees for government agencies, and assist with government policy learning and implementation (Brass 2016; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015; Brass 2012; Cloward 2016). However, Teets' work represents a significant contribution by analyzing the ability of NGOs to shape the laws regulating the civil society sector itself.

Still, while her argument is exciting, it is also based on the experiences of a handful of NGOs working on environmental issues. This raises important questions about the generalizability across sectors and countries and highlights opportunities for future research to focus on the scope conditions of this phenomenon of

reverse influence. When can INGOs working on other policy issues influence the regulations that govern them—even if they advocate for more contentious issues, such as human rights? Furthermore, looking to our simple framework in Figure 2, what donor pressure do NGOs and INGOs in China face? How do donors respond when an INGO works closely with dictators? And how do NGOs find the right balance between collaboration and independence in a way that satisfies their own goals and those of their donors? Similar to Bush's argument, INGO collaboration with governments may lead to programmatic taming, reducing the amount of good activists can accomplish and potentially damaging their causes. If INGOs and civil society remain active in authoritarian regimes, what influences can they have on policies and services in those countries?

In sum, *Civil Society under Authoritarianism* is a remarkable contribution in that it opens up the black box of civil society–government relations in an important repressive regime. Teets provides sound and detailed qualitative evidence for the phenomenon of consultative authoritarianism between the Chinese government and environmental INGOs. The book's insights about how the Chinese government attempts to balance the many pressures it faces from both domestic and external actors raise questions for future research and make it a good model for how similar research might be carried out elsewhere and on other topics.

Donor and host country influences

Bush and Teets each address individual institutional pressures on NGOs, effectively arguing that both donor norms and the host country's regulatory environment constrain and shape NGO behavior. Their two books fit squarely in our simple dual-constraint framework, showing that NGOs are essentially stuck between a rock and a hard place—institutional constraints from both donors and host governments limit their freedom of operations. But can NGOs accomplish any of their goals under such constraints? Are they able to do any good?

Amanda Murdie's *Help or Harm* seeks to answer these questions by investigating the effectiveness of a wide range of NGOs in the countries in which they work. She begins by reviewing a broad swathe of the existing literature on NGO effectiveness and finds it wanting in many aspects. In response, Murdie sets an ambitious goal of determining whether and under what conditions NGOs help improve human security. Murdie separates the broad issue of human security into the dual freedoms from both "want" and "fear," which international NGOs address by engaging in service provision (to address want) or human rights advocacy (to address fear). She presents a creative formal game theoretic model to structure her analysis of how INGOs interact with those other actors in these two sectors, and uses the model's

various equilibria to generate hypotheses about the motivations and influences of INGOs. The model reinforces the internal logic of the argument and makes the empirical analysis clear and easy to follow.

Help or Harm explores the conditioning factors for these effects using data on over 1,000 NGOs in more than 100 countries. To address the causal effects of programming—a challenge, given that NGOs are not randomly assigned to the countries or issues they work on—the book employs two-stage least square regression using several instruments, or variables that predict the outcome variable *only through* a given explanatory variable, including the annual percent increase in telephone mainlines (to predict the effect of INGOs on improving women's rights and physical integrity rights) and both the number of tourism arrivals in a country and the annual percent change in access to an improved water source (to predict the effect of INGOs on improving access to potable water). Based on these models, Murdie concludes that INGOs tend to help far more than harm, and that service and advocacy INGOs have improved human security outcomes.

It should be noted, however, that none of Murdie's outcome measures capture harm, but only the degree of good provided. Additionally, the instrumental variables used may not all meet the requirements that they only affect the outcome through the independent variable—especially since one is a lag of the dependent variable itself. Accordingly, the variables might provide less solid analytical foundations than the conclusions suggest.

Murdie's argument rests on the help/harp dichotomy: INGO strategies will either result in net positive (help) or net negative (harm) changes in human rights and service provision in target countries. Viewed through the lens of our framework, less restrictive regulations and donor requirements can enable INGOs to do more good with their activities; conversely, more restrictive environments can distort INGOs' strategies, taming programming and bringing activities in line with the government's stability-seeking calculus. However, whether the distortions produced by restrictive environments ultimately cause harm by exacerbating conditions or prolonging bad regimes is question that none of the books addresses empirically. And whether they produce *more* harm than good is an even harder question to answer.

While Murdie's help/harm dichotomy raises useful questions, it is also problematic in some ways. When democracy assistance organizations tame their programming, or when INGOs purposely align themselves with government preferences, they reduce the amount of helpful programing they provide. However, merely being ineffective is not the same as being harmful. To causally assess the level of harm stemming from these decisions is difficult and requires careful and detailed evidence, which goes beyond the scope of this not only this book but indeed most research on INGOs.

As for host countries' influence, rather than focus on how host country regulations or regime types might constrain NGO behavior, *Help or Harm* points to domestic features that condition INGO effectiveness. Murdie finds that freedom-from-want INGOs (service providers) most successful when they work in countries with less corruption, garner support from the international donor community, and serve domestic populations that have increased access to global civil society (i.e. are more urbanized and legally permitted to participate in associational life) and value the services provided. She finds a different combination of conditions facilitate success in advocacy. Freedom-from-fear INGOs (advocacy organizations) are also more effective when they have closer connections with domestic populations (i.e. when the citizens of the countries they target have better access to information and contact with the global community). Additionally, these INGOs are most effective when addressing issues that have broad, unified domestic support, a finding in line with past research (Sundstrom 2005) and with the turn to a focus on domestic "ownership" of development aid more generally (Woods 2008). Advocacy INGOs are also more effective when they have the support of other states, IGOs, and INGOs—notably, INGOs that work in countries that play host to other internationally focused INGOs have better success. Finally, such INGOs see better human rights outcomes when working in countries that are more economically and politically vulnerable, or more dependent on trade and exports. These findings align well with research on factors that mediate the effectiveness of external reforms (Levitsky and Way 2006).

The book's emphasis on a handful of practical (and measurable) outcomes and influences reflects an unfortunate lack of INGO-related data in general (a fact with which we are both intimately familiar). Murdie admirably works within these limitations and justifies how each measure she uses proxies for grander outcomes. However, the depth of the factors discussed in the introductory chapters leaves the reader hoping for micro-level data, and thus, the macro-level evidence may at times oversell some of the book's conclusions. For example, Murdie argues that the effectiveness of human rights INGOs depends on the costs of information and social contact with the domestic population. She uses Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay's (2014) measure of freedom of association to capture this factor. The variable, though, is far broader than the underlying concept, making it difficult to know whether the estimated effect rests precisely on information and social contact, or something else related to freedom of association. Murdie's analysis here looks at a range of outcomes, including physical integrity rights and women's social, economic, and political rights. The level at which these outcomes are measured is also quite removed from the success or failure of INGO programs and may be influenced by other factors. The data the book uses to study service provision INGOs is narrower still, as it is focuses only on access to water; though declared the top global

risk by the World Economic Forum in January 2015, as an outcome it might not represent the service sector as a whole.

Help or Harm's marco-level approach, then, is consistent with the ambitious scope of the project, but struggles to do justice to Murdie's nuanced arguments and critiques in the opening chapters. Murdie does supplement the statistical analysis with interesting case studies throughout, but these are far less detailed or convincing than the case studies provided by Bush and Teets, both of whom delve deeper into the details of the effects of INGO programming. Future research would benefit from micro-level data or field research to better understand subtler ideas articulated in Murdie's larger—and quite engaging—theoretical discussion.

Beyond its empirical claims about when and how NGOs interact with host countries, *Help or Harm* also examines how NGOs respond to donor preferences. At its core, Murdie's formal model reflects a signaling game; in the absence of cheap and reliable information, INGOs must signal their accountability and effectiveness to donors, a process that our framework encompasses (Figure 2). Murdie argues that INGOs signal their type by maintaining consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), whose preferences and norms align with those of donors. The process of obtaining and maintaining ECOSOC status is considered to be "arduous and time-consuming," (2014, 69), and can thus been seen as a signal of organizational principled-ness. The service-provision and advocacy statistical models show a positive correlation between organizations with ECOSOC affiliation and human security outcomes, suggesting that INGOs with this status are more effective. Like Bush, Murdie questions the assumption that INGOs are purely principled actors, and provides formal evidence for the line of research started by Cooley and Ron (2002). She carefully reframes the principled-ness of INGOs as yet another factor that influences their effectiveness rather than as an underlying assumption of their behavior.

However, while Murdie claims that the consultative status program "could be argued to be the longest and well-known of any voluntary accountability program" for international NGOs (2014, 70), ECOSOC rarely turns down applications for consultative status (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2016). Additionally, UN's directory of ECOSOC-affiliated organizations is not completely reliable: in mid-2016, more than 160 of the 2,000 international and regional organizations with ECOSOC status were defunct or unreachable (Heiss 2016b). ECOSOC status is a longstanding system for INGO accountability, but it is unclear how credible a motivational signal it actually provides to donors.

Ultimately, *Help or Harm* contributes to our understanding of INGO effectiveness, makes ambitious use of limited data, and offers a creative—and highly accessible—method for exploring the implications of a complex formal model. It is worth keeping in mind that the analysis rests on conceptual operationalizations that may be

overly broad and that the nature of some of the proxies warrants a cautious inter-
pretation of the results. Still, Murdie's macro-level findings pave the way for future
research that can offer policy advice for donors seeking to support more account-
able and effective NGOs and for NGOs hoping to have more of an impact despite
the constraints imposed by host countries.

Avenues for future research

Taken together, *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*, *Civil Society under Authoritar-
ianism*, and *Help or Harm* provide new insights into how institutional constraints
influence NGO behavior. Situating these books' findings in our framework raises
additional questions about the effect of donor and host country institutional pres-
sures on NGOs and opens up several new avenues for future research.

Murdie and Bush both focus on INGOs' need to please donors, but they stress
very different signals. Whereas Bush shows that INGOs adjust their *activities* to
conform to donor demands, resulting in more measurable (and tamer) program-
ming, Murdie argues that they emphasize and adjust their *signals* to demonstrate
trustworthiness to donors by subjecting themselves to ECOSOC review (with no
visible changes in their programming itself). Perhaps Murdie's signaling is a type
of low-cost adjustment, similar to donor demands for measurable programs, allow-
ing INGOs to make minor modifications in order to access donor resources without
taming their programming. But can INGOs substitute simple signaling strategies
for more complicated changes in behavior? (i.e., can obtaining ECOSOC status
help preclude the possibility that an INGO's programming could be tamed by fur-
ther donor demands?) Are INGOs aware of donor preferences when signaling or
adjusting, or are there information asymmetries? (i.e., do donors really care about
ECOSOC status or detailed program metrics?) Beyond ECOSOC status, what other
strategies can INGOs use to signal their principles? Does engaging in more readily
measurable programming serve as a useful signal too? For their part, what de-
termines donors' institutional norms and expectations? Do donors understand the
compromises that come with requiring program measurability, and do they actually
check INGOs' ECOSOC status? How do such demands vary across donors?

The three books also raise important questions about the relationship between
INGOs and their host governments. Murdie's distinction between freedom-from-
want and freedom-from-fear INGOs suggests that host governments may be torn
between regulating service and advocacy NGOs. She finds that advocacy INGOs are
most effective when working in countries that host other internationally focused
INGOs and concludes that this indicates that organizations tend to collectively ad-
dress issues that have broad, unified support from other actors, including states,

intergovernmental organizations, and other INGOs. However, as noted previously, INGO concentration might also be due to these countries' more liberal regulations towards foreign organizations rather than their governments' support for INGO agendas. While most regulations are so generic as to seem benign, governments often retain significant discretion in policy implementation. Registration—a common element in repressive regulation—allows governments to select INGOs that can be active in their countries. Teets demonstrates that the Chinese government applies a standard set of legal regulations unevenly, favoring INGOs that align with the regime's policy preferences and cracking down on INGOs working on more challenging policies. China, for instance, is highly dependent on exports and, following Murdie, should be more susceptible to advocacy INGOs shaming campaigns. However, because of the inconsistent application of its legal restrictions, it is able to prevent these INGOs from acting effectively. New research on the interplay between *de jure* INGO regulations and the *de facto* implementation of those regulations would thus be fruitful.

Focusing on elements of the host's institutional environment beyond regulations can also be helpful. What is the relationship between general host country characteristics like corruption and the more specific regulatory and legal environment for INGO activities? Corruption and NGO restrictions likely correlate closely, but not in all cases—democratic countries with low corruption like Canada, Israel, South Africa, and the United Kingdom have each passed some of the civil society restrictions shown in Figure 1, (Christensen and Weinstein 2013). As human rights and service provision organizations improve human security in the countries they target, does their work improve the regulatory environment in those countries? Does INGO success beget more success? Finally, what happens when INGOs cannot temper the regulations of repressive regimes? At what point do they cease to tame their programming and exit the country? Given the rise of INGO regulations around the world and the increasingly closed space for civic engagement (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014; Carothers 2015), these questions are particularly pressing today.

These books also point to different ways our framework can be expanded. The dual institutional pressures on NGOs are not unidirectional. As Teets argues, NGOs in China have consulted with the government in ways that have allowed them to directly shape and influence their regulatory environment. Can NGOs influence donors in similar ways? Is there a corresponding consultative donor-recipient relationship? Do NGOs try to reduce donor demands on their activities (i.e. reduce requirements for measurability)?

Finally, these books point to the crucial fact that institutional environments of both donors and host countries may distort the priorities of the INGO sector as a whole. For instance, Murdie finds that INGOs are more successful when they work

in countries with a higher density of other INGOs. But what causes this clumping of INGO activity? Do donors like the NED prefer to fund a consolidated collection of NGOs, or is the regulatory environment of certain countries more conducive to activism? If so, are NGOs searching under the lamppost, flocking to countries with the lightest regulations? Understanding the effect is critical from a policy perspective; NGO bandwagoning may lead to the neglect of countries that are most in need.

However, looking for potential distortions in INGO priorities is difficult because of the nuanced logic and longer perspective of INGO decision-making. For instance, while taming democracy assistance is arguably less helpful on its face, INGOs often willingly tame their programs to gain or maintain access to a hard-to-reach country and instead play a long game to maximize the good they can do in that country (Heiss 2016b). Actions that appear to dampen activism or service provision in the short term can enable more helpful work later on. Beyond issues of time horizons, it is possible that many INGOs—in particular those that do not deal directly with democracy promotion—are less affected by taming and other potential programmatic distortions because of their underlying missions. Service provision NGOs (Murdie's freedom-from-want NGOs) often simply want to relieve human suffering. If pursuing good entails supporting or tacitly propping up nondemocratic regimes (thereby hampering future advocacy), NGOs can still achieve their goals even though the government stays in power. Here, weighing the cost of potentially prolonging the duration of an autocratic regime against the benefit of alleviating human suffering becomes a deep moral dilemma. Scholars therefore must use caution in claiming that harm has occurred and weigh such questions in the context of explicit empirical and normative frameworks.

New works like *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*, *Help or Harm*, and *Civil Society under Authoritarianism* are terrific foundations for an emerging research agenda that strives for a more sophisticated understanding of the complex set of relationships between donors, INGOs and host governments. This is an important agenda, and Figure 2 reminds us of the many questions that will need to be answered. The adoption of the UN's new Sustainable Development Goals will unleash new donor funding to INGOs, but the donors will be demanding evidence of effectiveness and trustworthiness. Meanwhile INGOs—especially those aiming to promote democracy, but others as well—must work in ever more repressive environments. This leaves the INGOs between a rock and hard place. What insights can research offer? Future work that deploys analyses closer to the level of the INGO project itself is likely to be particularly helpful to understanding variation within countries and between projects. Donors and INGOs alike may derive workable insights from this type of research, which ultimately should be a collaborative effort.

Software

Code to replicate and recreate all figures is available at https://github.com/andrewheiss/Between-rock-and-hard-place and uses the following open source software:

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