What Have We Studied? What Have We Found? A Systematic Review of the NGO Literature 1980-2014

Presented at the Philanthropy Research Workshop Lilly Family School of Philanthropy

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Overview of talk

1. Motivation for study
2. Data and methods
3. Findings: text analysis
4. Findings: detailed coding analysis
5. Implications
Motivation for study

- Growth of NGO numbers 1980s
- Social science scholarship emerged in parallel
- No systematic aggregation of findings

NGO Knowledge Collective (NKC) goals:

1. What we’ve studied/know about NGOs
2. Whether/how NGOs impact outcomes
Data and methods

• **What is a systematic review?**
  - based on a clearly formulated question
  - identifies relevant studies
  - appraises their quality
  - summarizes the evidence by use of explicit methodology (Khan et al 2003)
Data and methods

• All English, peer-reviewed social science journal articles on NGOs (broadly defined) working in developing countries 1980-2014

• Computer-assisted content analysis of ~1750 of these articles

• Detailed coding of 10% sample
Process

• Create list of searchable terms

• Search Academic Search Premiere Database of EBSCO
  ▫ produced a group of ~11,000 articles
  ▫ Eliminate false positives

• We located a PDF version of each article
  ▫ Remove duplicate text and references for CACA

• Create systematic coding document (Qualtrics)
  ▫ Detail code ~10% of the articles; 15% double coded
Search terms for article inclusion

- Our organizational prefixes:
  - Nongovernmental, nonprofit, community-based, faith-based, civil society, grassroots, (private) voluntary, microfinance, human rights, etc.
  - Excluded: universities, hospitals, churches, political parties, and labor unions

- Geographic and development terms:
  - Regions, countries, development terms (aid, develop*, low-income, less-developed, etc.)
Findings: Computer Assisted Content Analysis

n=1742 articles
Published social science articles on NGOs, 1982-2014

180 annual articles (1,800 cumulative)

160 (1,600)
140 (1,400)
120 (1,200)
100 (1,000)
80 (800)
60 (600)
40 (400)
20 (200)

No data (1983)

1,742 in corpus (as of Fall 2016)
Average word count: 8,487.49
## Most common geographies and sectors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GEOGRAPHY</th>
<th>HITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHINA</td>
<td>8648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFRICA</td>
<td>6975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIA</td>
<td>5508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSNATIONAL</td>
<td>5235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASIA</td>
<td>4117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BANGLADESH</td>
<td>3779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOUTH AFRICA</td>
<td>3414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEXICO</td>
<td>2425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUSSIA</td>
<td>2365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISRAEL</td>
<td>2230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTOR or TOPIC</th>
<th>HITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NGOS</td>
<td>70643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEALTH</td>
<td>26779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUMAN RIGHTS</td>
<td>20502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLICY</td>
<td>19739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>11119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>10681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNANCE</td>
<td>8198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEMOCRACY</td>
<td>7825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAND</td>
<td>7285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td>6647</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Country focus of articles, 1982-2014

* Determined by whether country was mentioned at least ten times in text.

- India (138)
- China (102)
- South Africa (85)
- Bangladesh (76)
- Nigeria (50)
- Mexico (47)

Legend:
- More than 68 articles
- 46-68
- 24-46
- 2-24
- Less than 2
- No data
Country focus of articles, 1982-2014

* Determined by whether country was mentioned at least ten times in text.

Nigeria (50)
Uganda (42)
Kenya (40)
Tanzania (28)
South Africa (85)
Sector focus of articles, 1982-2014

* Determined by whether sector or topic was mentioned at least ten times in text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Changes in interest on various sectors or topics

* Number of articles mentioning sector/topic at least ten times
## Associations between sectors and geographies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total word count (ln)</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>HIV</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Microcredit</th>
<th>Human Rights</th>
<th>Democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>0.523***</td>
<td>0.696***</td>
<td>-0.051</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.086)</td>
<td>(0.070)</td>
<td>(0.055)</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
<td>(0.078)</td>
<td>(0.062)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.185**</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.157*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.090)</td>
<td>(0.074)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
<td>(0.082)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>0.291**</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>0.241**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.103)</td>
<td>(0.084)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>(0.094)</td>
<td>(0.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East &amp; North Africa</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>-0.383**</td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td>-0.133*</td>
<td>0.724***</td>
<td>0.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.142)</td>
<td>(0.116)</td>
<td>(0.090)</td>
<td>(0.061)</td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td>(0.103)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>0.622***</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>0.184***</td>
<td>-0.271**</td>
<td>-0.259***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.094)</td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
<td>(0.060)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.086)</td>
<td>(0.068)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Asia</td>
<td>-0.217</td>
<td>-0.148</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>-0.182**</td>
<td>0.299**</td>
<td>0.727***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.122)</td>
<td>(0.139)</td>
<td>(0.078)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.112)</td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total word count (ln)</td>
<td>0.111*</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.472***</td>
<td>0.058**</td>
<td>0.516***</td>
<td>0.463***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.032)</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.045)</td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.775**</td>
<td>-0.332</td>
<td>-3.568***</td>
<td>-0.523</td>
<td>-4.834***</td>
<td>-4.393**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.429)</td>
<td>(1.172)</td>
<td>(0.909)</td>
<td>(0.616)</td>
<td>(1.309)</td>
<td>(1.034)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Year fixed effects**
- Yes
- Yes
- Yes
- Yes
- Yes
- Yes

**Observations**
- 1,783
- 1,783
- 1,783
- 1,783
- 1,783
- 1,783

**R²**
- 0.08
- 0.12
- 0.15
- 0.06
- 0.13
- 0.19

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05; two-tailed tests

Note: Region dummies based on countries or regions mentioned at least ten times in article. Reference category: No regional focus.
Findings: Detailed Coding Sample
n=231 articles
Most studied countries

- India
- Bangladesh
- China
- South Africa
- Afghanistan
- Philippines
- Kenya
- El Salvador
- Uganda
- Tanzania
- Pakistan
Where does NGO knowledge come from?
First authors’ region
N = 126
Where does NGO knowledge come from?
First authors’ region
N = 38
Disciplinary trends: Who studies what?

N = 100

- Library/Information Sciences
- Education
- Communications
- Social Work
- Economics
- Anthropology
- Nursing/Nutrition
- Public Administration
- Environmental Sciences
- Geography
- Int. & Area Studies
- International Development
- Sociology
- Other (unique)
- Political Science
Author writing about organizations that employ or fund them

- Author's Employer: 81%
- Author's Funder: 9%
- Funder AND Employer: 2%
- None: 8%
Data type used, by decade

- **1980s**: Neither
- **1990s**: Both
- **2000s**: Qualitative Only
- **2010s**: Qualitative Only

**Legend**:
- Yellow: Quantitative Only
- Orange: Qualitative Only
- Blue: Both
- Grey: Neither
Social science or not?

% of Articles

Social Science Framework
Merely Descriptive

1980s 1990s 2000s 2010s
Research methods when studying NGOs

- Experiment
- Longitudinal Statistics
- Archival
- Cross-Sectional Statistics
- Ethnography
- Field Research
- Interview
- Case Study

Proportion of Articles

[Bar chart showing the proportions of research methods used in studies of NGOs]
Sector of focus

- Agriculture: 3%
- Conflict: 3%
- Economic Development: 8%
- Education: 6%
- Environment: 7%
- Governance: 15%
- Health: 15%
- Infrastructure: 1%
- Peoples and Cultures: 15%
- WASH: 3%
- No Sector Specified: 24%

24% No Sector Specified
Outcomes
Challenges in assessing outcomes

• Publication bias:
  • Plausible against null findings
  • Possible against negative findings

• Researcher bias:
  • Reflection in gaps and emphases

• Comparability: differences and variation in time, geography, and action analyzed
Effects of NGOs on development outcomes

- Conflict
- Agriculture
- Environmental Outcomes
- Economic Development
- Governance/Political Outcomes
- Health Outcomes

- Unfavorable effect
- No effect
- Mixed effect
- Favorable effect
Effects of NGOs: Example from agriculture

- 6 articles, 4 aim to show NGO effects
  - 3 do assess outcomes:
    - Anemia
    - Food security
    - Agricultural policy reform
  - Only 1 identifies clear indicator and measures it
Effects of NGOs: Example from Economic Development

- 17 articles, 11 aim to show NGO effects
  - 5 positive; 5 mixed; 1 negative
- Only 2 identify a clear indicator and measure it
  - Both on microfinance
Instead of Causality, Examining...

- NGO-NGO relationships
- NGO-state interactions
- NGO engagement with community
- Processes internal to NGOs
- Strategies NGOs use to implement programs
- Normative questions on role of NGOs in various efforts, such as supporting capitalism or democracy
Bigger Picture Implications

• Increasing rigor in literature over time
  ▫ But more measurement needed on NGO effects
  ▫ And considerable bias, even in peer-reviewed literature
  ▫ With Northern country authors

• Fewer assessments of NGOs’ effects on measurable development outcomes than anticipated

• Instead, focus on processes involving NGOs
What’s Next

• Short term:
  ▫ Re-running analyses on full corpus
    ◆ ~3400 full-text articles, references removed
    ◆ ~300 detail-coded articles
  ▫ Expand qualitative analysis of outcomes
  ▫ Addition of Topic Modeling

• Medium term:
  ▫ Sector-specific systematic reviews
  ▫ Geography-specific systematic reviews
What’s Next

• Long term:
  ▫ **Creation of database of articles, sortable by topics, keywords, geography, etc.**
    • Shared resource, located online
    • NGO Knowledge Collective (NKC)
  ▫ **Collection of academic work that aggregates findings to build knowledge**
    • Articles, edited volumes, etc.
  ▫ Better understanding of systematic reviews of disparate literatures, methodologically
Thank you.

Questions?

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