

The changing political legitimacy of international NGOs: A look from India

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/11/19/the-changing-political-legitimacy-of-international-ngos-a-look-from-india/

2012-11-19

Francesco Obino questions whether the creation of 'fully national' offices as part of a broader decentralisation process within international NGOs supports their efforts to enhance political legitimacy and anchor global development agendas in domestic development debates.

Students of International Relations (IR) are known to venture very rarely into domestic politics (to the extent that these are infamously referred to as a 'black box') and India has certainly not been an exception. Yet, in [an earlier post](#) on this blog, Professor Stuart Corbridge argues that "the decision not to study India would be a poor choice for any serious social scientist." How does this apply to IR scholars, and in what circumstances would delving into India's domestic politics contribute to the study of IR?

India offers one of the most complex political, cultural, and institutional contexts social scientist can study today. It has internal conflicts, an articulate political infrastructure, a multifaceted political culture (both formal and informal), up to one-third of the world's poor, and certainly the largest [food](#) and social welfare public systems worldwide. The country hosts deep socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural cleavages yet at the same time has a surprising capacity to coalesce around crosscutting national symbols (be it Gandhi, cricket, Bollywood, or its national prestige in the region and the globe). For one, this combination makes India a uniquely compelling ground of work for international organisations – both governmental and non-governmental – particularly those with a developmental mandate, ranging from the OECD to Amnesty International.

But India's complexity should also attract IR students because it makes for an extraordinary context in terms of scale, degree, and diversity. Issues of scale, degree and diversity apply to every country. Their interplay in India is somehow exceptional, though issues themselves (from democracy to political mobilisation and the welfare system) are certainly not unique to the country. As such, India represents not only a last test environment for scholarship or policy that has proven valid elsewhere, but also a first testing ground, if in many respects an 'extreme' one, for ideas and policies that are being scaled-up and reproduced around the world. In sum, India's exceptionalism does not rule out a priori the methodological scope for comparison and generalisation, but in specific circumstances it arguably magnifies it.

The latter is evident in the choice by most large development-oriented international NGOs (INGOs) of India as one of the first countries in which to experiment with decentralisation. After decades of operations as international aid agencies, global organisations such as Oxfam, Plan, Save the Children, Action Aid, and Care have recently supported the creation of fully independent and 'fully national' Indian offices. Even though other countries (Mexico, Colombia, South Africa, etc.) have also been involved, India is the first country where virtually all these organisations have decentralised. The new Indian national entities have rapidly graduated into full members of their respective federations, gaining a vote and a 'voice' within their respective global decision-making bodies as well as exclusive decision-making powers over national programmes and finances. The assumption so far has been that national offices will increasingly contribute to global agenda-setting based on their own work at the grassroots level and their locally embedded vision of development issues.

So why start with India? Several factors probably drove the decision to view India as an ideal testing ground for new development models: India's lively and empowered domestic development sector, which thrives despite the current funding crisis and makes it increasingly contentious to operate as a foreign entity; its democratic political institutions and the scope they offer for direct advocacy; India's centrality to global poverty-eradication efforts both in terms of scope and diversity of development challenges and the fundraising and mobilisation potential offered by India's emerging middle class.

India also poses less progressive challenges for INGOs, which are as significant: the central government's rhetoric against India's need for international aid; oft-repeated claims that INGOs represent a 'foreign hand'; the notoriously staunch nationalism of India's civil society actors and the mistrust of international aid agencies—in these circumstances the redefinition of INGOs' role and ambit in India has become an urgent task. It is increasingly difficult to define India's development as an international issue when faced with the activism of specific public institutions, particularly the judiciary, the existence of progressive legislative initiatives (at least *prima facie*), and a free media (albeit increasingly controlled by corporate powers).

As such, the Indian development context **magnifies** the many challenges INGOs will increasingly face in 'Southern' contexts that have **transitioned** from implementation grounds of international aid to 'middle-income countries' by World Bank definitions.

The conversation about the shifting roles and functions of INGOs in traditional development settings is, nevertheless, just **beginning**. Decentralisation itself emerged as a response to mounting criticism by academics and international governmental organisations of INGOs' limited legitimacy and out-dated approaches—no doubt, this process too will soon be critiqued.

Some, including INGO management and development studies students, view INGO decentralisation as the ultimate paradigm shift from 'aid' to 'development'. IR students, on the other hand, should identify in decentralisation the seeds of a new approach to building organisational legitimacy in domestic civil societies. Importantly, this approach is instrumental to INGOs asserting their political legitimacy on the world stage, based on their increased capacity to link global agendas and domestic constituencies.

Whether the emerging procedural quality of INGOs' legitimacy will prove true or not, new methodological and theoretical approaches are needed to study INGOs' operations between the global and the local. The 'fully national' India-based offices of INGOs and their work within India's development sector thus offer an important, if unusual, research context particularly for IR students interested in the changing quality of INGOs' political claims and their role on the world stage. The real question for IR student therefore becomes, why not India?

Francesco Obino is a Bagri Fellow at the Asia Research Centre and an MPhil/PhD candidate at LSE's Department of International Relations.

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics