Abstract

The post-Cold War period has been a time of rapid change in the international system. One major shift is a dramatic increase in the demands placed upon the United Nations. This increased reliance on the UN suggests that there may be a shift in opportunities for this and other international institutions to have a greater effect on the dynamics of global politics than was possible under the bi-polar system of the past. What are the implications of these changes for non-governmental actors in the global system? We focus on a subset of international non-governmental organisations called transnational social movement organisations (TSMOs), and begin to document their forms and activities in the global arena. In what ways are TSMOs similar to or different from national social movement organisations, and how do TSMOs organise to engage in transnational political efforts? How do TSMOs interact with international institutions? Our analysis consists of detailed, systematic comparisons among seven TSMOs in the human rights, environmental, peace and development issue arenas, including: Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Oxfam, Peace Brigades International and War Resisters International. We examine five dimensions of variation: founding and mission; leadership structure; membership; resources; and tactics. This work builds on the earlier work of Dennis Young (1992) and helps to inform future research in this area.

Global politics in the post-Cold War era

Since the founding of the United Nations, non-governmental organisations have increased rapidly in number, and some have dramatically expanded their political activities (Skjelsbaek, 1972; Boulding, 1990).
While the UN often found its efforts thwarted by Cold War political deadlock, non-governmental organisations were less constrained by Cold War politics, and they confronted global insecurity directly by raising global awareness, monitoring compliance with international agreements, pressing for international political action, and mitigating the effects of government negligence of human welfare. By doing so, they played a complementary role in support and operation of international institutions and in the promotion of values of international peace and security expressed in the UN Charter and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Transnational social movement organisations as global actors

Our analysis focuses on a category of transnational non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that engages in activities that challenge the behaviours of states and that attempt to influence international institutions. We call these actors transnational social movement organisations, or TSMOs, thereby distinguishing these from other NGOs (Pagnucco and McCarthy, 1992). The cases included in the study are Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Oxfam, Peace Brigades International and War Resisters International. The perspective guiding this analysis differs markedly from dominant trends in the field.

International relations theory and TSMOs

The realist perspective, which defines many of the assumptions in international relations scholarship, assumes that states are the most important actors in the international system – a system which is inherently anarchic and thus conflictual. Given these assumptions, a central empirical problem is to explain the apparent anomaly of international cooperation (Keohane, 1982, p.140). Realist and neo-realist approaches to this question remain largely state-centric and static, ignoring the questions of whether international institutions and other actors might have significant influence on states’ behaviour, or whether institutions might shape states’ own perceptions of their interests and possibilities for action.

Interdependence and regime theorists work with the assumption that states’ behaviour is constrained by more than simply the power of other states. Formal and informal norms and agreements serve to pattern state behaviour and facilitate international cooperation. But questions of how norms and institutions become embedded in international relations have again been asked primarily from state-centric