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Introduction

The public narrative surrounding international NGOs (INGOs) often envisions sectors in crisis. Right-wing media narratives highlight growing popular hostility towards INGOs and record declining giving to development causes across the global North (Henson and Lindstrom 2013; Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Bryant 2016; Gulrajani 2017). Well-publicised safeguarding scandals in 2018 fuelled these fires, tarnishing the “legitimacy” of once impeccable brands. These have given strength to the idea that public faith in NGOs as altruistic and trustworthy actors is misguided.

Yet this collection demands we be careful of any predictions of actual changes from these events and narratives among the existing allies of international NGOs. The Covid-19 crisis will undoubtedly cause casualties in the sector. But the underlying picture is more robust, and complex, than a crisis narrative can capture. Often there are simply no data on trends in actual levels of support. Where they do exist they do not portray a crisis.

Research on INGOs has multiplied as their importance has grown, but this body of work highlights our *ignorance* as much as our understanding. Brass et al.’s (2018) systematic analysis of 35 years of scholarship on development NGOs highlights its rich theoretical roots and diverse empirical insights. But case studies dominate the methods, offering little insight into broader groups of development NGOs and focusing on the largest to the exclusion of others. Yet without understanding sectoral dynamics in more detail – the size, scale and mechanics of INGO sectors and the influence of government policies, public attitudes and media representations (among others) on these – it is difficult for policies for funding civil society to be evidence-based and hard for INGOs to respond to perceived trends as a sector.

This Special Issue brings ten exciting new papers that combine methodological advancements, critical new empirical findings and important fresh insights. In this Guest Editorial we draw out some of the key findings across them. First, we consider methodological advancements offering new insights into INGO sectors in Britain (Banks and Brockington 2020), the Netherlands (Schulpen and Van Kempen 2020), and grassroots INGOs (GINGOs) in Canada (Davis 2020). Second, we examine the operating environments of INGO sectors in diverse contexts. The papers here explore a range of policies for funding civil society, including a comparative study across the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Germany (Verbugge and Huyse 2020), the Netherlands (Kamstra 2020), the US (Mitchell and Stroup 2020) and in the EU (Keijzer and Bossuyt 2020). Two papers then explore public attitudes to aid, and INGOs in particular, across the UK, the US, France and Germany (van Heerde-Hudson et al. 2020) and in Canada (Davis, Henson, and Swiss 2020). Finally, Vossen (2020) brings new insight into media representations of INGOs in the Netherlands.

Section 1: new methodological perspectives on INGO sectors in the global North

New methodologies, new insights

The burgeoning academic literature on development NGOs still has little analysis available of NGO sectors. Much work focuses on individual organisations, small sub-sectors, or just the largest organisations. The empirical base of knowledge of these sectors is thin, rendering evidence-based policies

hard. Banks and Brockington (2019) highlight this blind spot in three areas of research: defining and theorising INGOs; situated explorations of their activities by country or sector of operation; and analysing partnerships between development NGOs in the North and South.

Theories and typologies of NGOs explore their comparative advantages vis-à-vis market actors and the state and whether they can live up to these expectations, including what this means for INGOs and NGOs in terms of efficiency, accountability and legitimacy (c.f. Hulme and Edwards 1997). A long-standing critique concerns NGOs' transformative potential given the restrictions of the broader aid system (Banks, Hulme, and Edwards 2015). Recognising the diversity in the sector is key to this literature, exploring across different sizes or "types" of INGO, or across different contexts or ways of working, to analyse the influence of such differences on outcomes, impact and effectiveness. Yet studies are rarely systematic and we cannot "add up" everything we know from individual studies or small collectives of development NGOs to help us understand the sector more broadly across different contexts. This is especially the case when diversity is so central to our research questions and empirical findings to date.

A broader sectoral framing is more common in research on development NGOs in the global South, with research exploring the prevalence, strategies, activities and partnerships of NGOs in Southern contexts. This has entailed looking at NGOs in particular continents (c.f. Brass 2016), countries (c.f. Lewis 2017), or operational sectors (c.f. Bukenya 2017; Power and Wanner 2017). Others have looked at the challenges NGO sectors are facing across the global South, including changes to global development agendas such as the shift from the MDGs to the SDGs, the reduction of aid to countries transitioning to lower-middle-income status (Appel 2017), or the challenges posed by increasingly restrictive operating environments (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015). These diverse literatures recognise the importance of analysing *across* NGOs within countries or *along* operational settings. Yet understandably, studies here are largely based on a sample of organisations rather than full sector-wide surveys.

There is less sectoral work on INGOs in the global North. The literature here tends to focus on relationships and positioning: between INGOs and donors, and between INGOs and their global South partners. There have been some attempts to look across the collective experiences of INGOs. Koch et al. (2009) researched the distributional choices (i.e. where they choose to operate) of INGOs and their "ODA turnover" across multiple OECD countries. Their methodology speaks to some of the difficulties of large-scale analyses of INGOs. The authors had to rely upon personal requests for data to 98 organisations, and while they had a good response rate (66%), several significant organisations were missing. This cross-OECD approach also (understandably) meant focusing on the largest INGOs. Another strand of research provides rich empirical analyses into large INGOs (c.f. Archer 2010; Footitt 2017) or qualitative studies across several organisations (Stroup and Wong 2017). Finally, other authors examine the challenges INGOs are facing and how they are responding (Fowler 2016; Hayman and Lewis 2018).

We can see then, that our understanding of Northern INGOs predominantly concerns the experiences of a few of the largest organisations. These may be the "heavy-hitters", but they do not necessarily operate in the same manner as INGOs more broadly. This leads to a paradox whereby the diversity of Northern NGO sectors is well-recognised (Bachke, Alfnes, and Wik 2014; Davis 2019), but not adequately researched. In the process, the experience of the largest INGOs are projected onto the sector as a whole. New methodologies to understand it are needed.

The three papers in Section 1 provide such new methodological insights in Britain, the Netherlands and Canada, looking at the scale of INGO sectors and their dynamics over time. This new approach gives us a fuller picture of Northern INGO sectors, moving away from an understanding based on the largest organisations to bring the hundreds of smaller- to mid-sized organisations below these into the research spotlight.

In Britain, Banks and Brockington's research highlights the scale of the sector's contribution to the UK's foreign aid efforts (£7 billion in 2015, around 55% of the country's ODA for that year). They show its growth in expenditure and number of organisations over the study period (2009–2015), and

yet also its structural stability dominated by the biggest INGOs. The authors also examine INGO income sources, and how they are changing over time. They show persistent and significant financial support from public donations which contributed 40% of the sector's income across the study period, more than the next two income sources (the UK government and other charities) combined. They also show a shift in UK government funding away from smaller INGOs towards the largest, leading to a greater intermediation of funds for INGOs within the UK sector. That is, the government has increasingly outsourced the distribution of funds to smaller INGOs through bigger INGOs.

In the Netherlands, Schulpen and Van Kempen reveal a generally stable Dutch INGO sector with annual income averaging around €2.3 billion across the study period (2010–17). Income is concentrated among the largest INGOs, with 11% of organisations controlling nearly 82% of revenues. Their analysis also highlights the diversity of experience within size classifications. It is only through this sectoral view that we can begin to understand the divergent pathways across INGOs. The experiences of an “average” organisation within a particular size classification can be far removed from the many and diverse organisations within it; some perform significantly better, some significantly worse. Many INGOs fluctuate between gaining and losing income year-on-year. This tension between collective stability and individual fragility within the sector also highlights the importance of complementing sectoral approaches with work on external influences on the sector, as the Special Issue does in Section 2's contributions.

Davis explores an important, though often invisible, sub-sector of INGOs in Canada, that of grass-roots INGOs (or GINGOs). He highlights the shift from the “age of INGOs” (1980s to 90s) to the “age of GINGOs” (2000s), arguing that our knowledge of this sector needs to expand alongside their growing importance as development actors. Davis created a database of 607 small-scale, privately-funded, volunteer-run Canadian INGOs. Among other findings he shows that their operations do not tend to engage with political advocacy and are tightly clustered in a small number of countries (30% of the sector's entire funds were spent in Kenya, India, Haiti and Uganda alone). Davis finishes with reflections on GINGOs' potential contributions, possibly moving away from more technical service delivery roles to connecting and giving voice to local inequalities at national and international levels.

Lessons on national and international data

Sectoral approaches to understanding NGOs have been handicapped by a lack of good data. Even in Britain, where the Charity Commission publicly compiles comprehensive data, the process of collecting and preparing data for this purpose can be time-consuming. All three papers in this section displayed a similar methodology in this respect, establishing as comprehensive a “list” of INGOs as possible. Key here is creating a systematic and logical system of inclusion and exclusion criteria that try to balance achieving “representativeness” of the sector alongside the “manageability” of compiling the list and collecting the data for all organisations within it.

Banks and Brockington (2020) and Schulpen and Van Kempen (2020) both followed similar strategies, looking first at NGO umbrella body membership bases and records of the geographical arenas of activity (national/ international) compiled by charity regulators. They also looked at grantee recipients of major donors, including government funders and other large grant-giving organisations (such as Comic Relief in the UK). The importance of inclusion and exclusion criteria becomes apparent at this stage, given the number of INGOs on the “long list” that results from this process. A search of the online NGO Explorer tool, for example, finds 17,899 charities registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales that are operating internationally.¹ No research study would be easily able to collate and compile data for such a large number of organisations – nor would all of these constitute the development-oriented organisations that the research focuses on.

After a comprehensive list has been put together, the next step is to compile the data for each individual organisation on it. Here, the task is made much easier if universal submission of this information is made mandatory by charity regulators (as in England and Wales). But in the Netherlands,

where recording these figures is optional, Schulpen and Van Kempen (2020) only found complete income and expenditure data across their study period for 37% of the 773 registered organisations on their long-list of INGOs; the rest they had to look for manually. Charity regulators here, have an important role and must weigh up the benefits of data accessibility against the additional burden of reporting requirements for organisations.

Some advancements in data availability on INGO programmes globally come courtesy of International Aid Transparency Initiative's d-portal.² IATI is a global initiative that seeks to improve the transparency of development and humanitarian resources and the results they achieve globally, bringing together governments, multilateral organisations, private sector, academic and civil society organisations, among others, in order to do this. For INGOs reporting this information, detailed information on "active", "planned" and "ended" projects is available. Users of the d-portal can then search this information by country, thematic area or "publisher" in order to explore the issues they are interested in. A quick look highlights between 1,100 and 1,200 "publishers" submitting data, giving a wealth of information on who is spending what, and where. Many of these are NGOs. Searching for bilateral, core contributions to NGOs and other private bodies/PPPs highlights spending of US\$44.3 billion across 25,489 projects and 222 countries.³ This more expansive data can start to give more indication of the global INGO sector's reach.

But who submits their data to IATI, and who does not? Accountability requirements are a core driver of submission. The IATI website donors' reporting requirements page suggests that only the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UK's Department for International Development and Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs request this formally of their grantees. In contrast USAID reports its own IATI data on a quarterly basis, but does not make this a reporting requirement for its own grantees. The IATI data, therefore, represent a relatively narrow group of organisations – both in terms of their country of origin and potentially of the size of NGOs represented. Only a relatively small number of INGOs in the Netherlands and Britain – and the largest of these – benefit from substantial government funding and so report to IATI. Further, an INGO may not submit IATI data for *all* their projects – just those funded by bilateral donors.

Such large-scale databases, therefore, are likely to overlook the contributions of large numbers of smaller INGOs, thereby exacerbating the tendency of our knowledge and research to be concentrated among a relative minority of large and influential INGOs.

Limitations

All three papers in Section 1 raise as many important questions as they do answer them. Banks and Brockington highlight the conundrum that the British public have given more to INGOs across a period when incomes are squeezed. Who is providing this giving and are they representative of the British public in general? Likewise, Schulpen and Van Kempen highlight a restructuring of the Dutch Government ODA spending channelled to INGOs, but further investigation is needed to tell us more about such changes to government funding and how these influence both the volume *and* the type of funding INGOs are receiving. This new sector-wide understanding of the sector, therefore, can be deepened by complementary studies that investigate the broad range of external influences on the sector in more detail. As our papers on Britain and the Netherlands show, two main sources of income stand out for INGOs: government funds and income from the public. The first is principally important for medium-sized and big INGOs, the latter is central for small organisations. We see real importance in bringing studies of these influences (such as governmental policies, levels of funding and regulatory frameworks, public attitudes to aid and INGOs, or media narratives of the aid sector) side-by-side with these new sector-wide perspectives on INGOs, so that we can build more comprehensive understandings across different contexts. The papers in Section 2 do just this.

Section 2: new insight into key external influences on INGO sectors in the global North

The influence of donor funding on INGO sectors

In 2018, DAC members allocated nearly US\$21 billion for INGOs, amounting to 15% of all ODA (OECD 2020). Most of this – 66% – goes to INGOs within DAC members' own countries, with a further 27% going to INGOs in other OECD countries (OECD 2020). Yet there is variation in trends for civil society funding across DAC members. In their contribution, Verbrugge and Huyse explore trends in government funding to INGOs in five European countries. They confirm the rise in government funding in the UK and its decline in the Netherlands found in Section 1. While Belgium has also witnessed a limited reduction in INGO funding, a growth in government funding is also visible in France and Germany. Overall, these findings suggest that INGO funding by governments is increasing, or is at least resilient. But, paradoxically, while government funding is at an all-time high, INGO sectors have growing concerns for their futures. Verbrugge and Huyse convincingly show that these concerns do not necessarily stem from the *amount* of government funding, but from the *conditions* attached to it. First, they highlight the continuous emphasis on “effectiveness” within the aid world and perceived sectoral inefficiencies among INGOs compared to the private sector. Second, they highlight the increasing number of conditionalities accompanying government funds, including thematic and geographic conditionalities; those related to effectiveness, efficiency and transparency, and those that bring more market-based mechanisms such as open competition for funding. Together these conditionalities are indicative of increasingly managerial policies and processes that continue to push INGOs to operate in more business-like ways.

These trends show little progress towards recognising and valuing the comparative advantages of INGOs as offering alternatives to the development mainstream. Instead, the trend towards managerial tendencies persists, despite long-standing critiques that these may undermine the impact of INGO activities. Most recently this managerial focus has been condemned by the OECD (2020, 17) for the fact that it does not “yet appear to be offering effective development support for INGOs as part of the enabling environment for civil society”. Verbrugge and Huyse highlight that managerial tendencies are particularly visible in the UK and Netherlands. However, the Netherlands has recently taken a radical step away from this managerial approach. In his contribution, Kamstra explores the Dialogue and Dissent policy framework in detail. It represents a clear response to such criticisms by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its (ongoing) move from a managerial approach to funding INGOs towards a social transformative one recognises that development is a power struggle, as well as a technical problem, and therefore requires political solutions and political roles for INGOs. Despite these clear steps forwards, Kamstra still details the tensions and conflicting demands that prevail while operating a social transformative policy in a ministry, and among CSOs, who remain largely guided by managerial principles. Change is complex for all actors when managerial systems have dominated for so long and when INGOs still have to balance competing accountability requirements across an often-wide range of bilateral and multilateral donors.

Mitchell and Stroup's paper on the environment for INGOs in the USA begins with the fact that INGOs are both global and national players and thus have to deal with both global and national interests. It then examines the influence of legal and cultural environments in the US on the work and impact of INGOs. Overall, the US is depicted as representing a “permissive social and political environment”, albeit with a strong cultural dimension that is “anti-bureaucratic” and “pro-market”. Whereas the first celebrates civil society as representing the ideal of self-organising to solve social problems, the second emphasises market-driven norms for the ways in which CSOs should operate and open competition between INGOs and the private sector. Mitchell and Stroup then identify several major implications of this cultural and regulatory environment for INGOs including forcing INGOs to spend (often unrealistically) small parts of their budget on overheads, providing little incentive to INGOs for

being accountable to those they claim to serve, and providing a relatively small scope for more political-oriented activities outside of service delivery.

Wariness towards more political roles for INGOs and a focus on working with specific types of INGOs is also clear from the last paper on EU policies and funding by Keijzer and Bossuyt. A clear preference to fund the largest INGOs and service delivery activities is also apparent. They explore case studies from Central Asia, describing how EU funding principally goes to Western or Western-type “professional” organisations, thus bypassing local civil society and certainly communal civil society. This is in sharp contrast to the EU’s official civil society policy, which over the years has moved from a narrow focus on NGOs to a much broader focus on civil society organisations. Keijzer and Bossuyt’s main argument is that the EU policy towards INGOs and CSOs is “principled on paper, yet pragmatic in practice” and that this impacts on what is funded and who is funded. The principled-pragmatic reflects the same kind of schism within funding agencies that Kamstra described for the Netherlands. For the EU this schism is clear from the open and broad policy with its emphasis on local CSOs, on the one hand, and on the much more restrictive selection criteria used in concrete NGO funding schemes, on the other.

The influence of public attitudes and behaviours

As government support flows to larger organisations, others look for other sources, in particular donations from the general public. Understanding general public attitudes and behaviours, and their relationships to the attitudes of groups who give to INGOS (giving publics) is therefore important. The last three papers in this Special Issue look particularly at these issues. Two do so through looking at public surveys to explore differences in and drivers of change in public engagement with development causes in France, Germany, the UK and the US (van Heerde-Hudson et al. 2020) and to explore the issue of public trust in INGOs in Canada (Davis, Henson, and Swiss 2020). The third looks at the media’s role in shaping or influencing public perceptions of aid and INGOs (Vossen 2020).

Drawing upon five-year panel surveys, using nationally representative samples of between 6,000 and 8,000 respondents in each of France, Germany, the UK and the US, van Heerde-Hudson, Hudson, Morini, Clarke and Stewart give critical new insight into public engagement with global poverty from 2013 to 2018. These surveys explore the public’s engagement with development issues through 18 key actions and behavioural indicators that build from “shallow” to “intensive” engagement. Public engagement actions vary from reading, watching or listening to news on global development, discussing the issues with family and friends, volunteering, donating or petitioning, to writing to their representative, protesting or organisation building.

Their findings show five categories of “public” with regards to their engagement with development issues: the totally disengaged; marginally engaged; informationally engaged; behaviourally engaged and the fully engaged. But the overwhelming majority fall into the lowest two categories of “totally disengaged” or “marginally engaged”. Even where higher levels of engagement are evident, engagement with “cheap” engagement strategies – those involving the least, often one-off, efforts – are most common, such as donating, watching or reading news items about development, or discussing these issues with friends and family. More intensive engagements, such as volunteering, setting up an organisation, protesting, or petitioning political representatives are undertaken by few. Of individual attributes, the most consistent driver of public engagement is a sense of personal duty to help people in poor countries.

The authors find a decline in financial donations to development causes. These have fallen in all four countries, by as much as 29–38% in Germany and the UK respectively. The contrast of this fact with increasing revenue from the public in Banks and Brockington’s work suggests that those giving more are in fact an extremely wealthy few who are not easily captured in van Heerde-Hudson et al.’s findings.

One key, ominous, finding concerns their insights into the “engagement journeys” that INGOS seek to cultivate in their supporters. In general, levels of engagement remain consistent or have declined over the five-year period. There is scant evidence of the existence of individual engagement journeys. Patterns of engagement tend to stay fixed, and where there is movement it is as likely to be movements *down* the engagement ladder as it is to be up. Likewise, there is no evidence of a “threshold” engagement that once reached is sustained.

Questions over trust in and the legitimacy of INGOs have been increasingly raised in the public narrative, but there is little tangible evidence on the drivers associated with higher or lower levels of trust. Davis, Henson and Swiss examine how the framing of the INGO influences how much Canadians trust them and how this trust is influenced by socioeconomic characteristics, attitudes and values. Data from their 2017 survey of nearly 2,100 Canadians reveal that almost 70% of Canadians report having a “high” or “medium” level of trust in INGOs. When it comes to how development issues are framed, they reveal that for the Canadian public, “social justice” was the framing for INGOs that triggered the lowest levels of trust among respondents. This stands in stark contrast to complaints within the sector that the move to apolitical service delivery is problematic and to a long history of academic literature lamenting the loss of INGOs’ transformative potential through the pressures they face to prioritise service delivery over social justice. Perhaps the question here is not about INGOs reframing their activities to promote the most trust, but also about donors and INGOs engaging with and educating the public about different types of and returns to development activities.

The study also reveals the socio-economic characteristics, attitudes and values that are associated with higher or lower levels of trust in INGOs. This reveals some surprising findings, such as the fact that homeownership – often indicative of wealth – is negatively associated with trust. As would be expected, knowledge of, engagement with and interest in issues of development cooperation yields higher levels of trust. Yet herein lies a paradox, as these findings somewhat contradict those of van Heerde-Hudson et al.’s in terms of individual engagement journeys remaining relatively static: that is, once you are engaged in a specific way, you are likely to stay at that level of engagement. Of course, trust in and engagement with INGOs are two separate issues, perhaps pointing to the importance of research focusing on how higher levels of trust can be turned into higher levels of engagement.

Finally, Vossen delves into the role of media, starting from the idea that negative press is instrumental in breaking down public opinion and support for INGOs. She then examines the extent to which development cooperation and organisations actually do, as commonly perceived, receive a “bad press” that could stifle or undermine public trust and support. Vossen does so by selecting a “quiet” period (2011–2013), before recent scandals hit the sector, and conducts a framing analysis of news articles on developing countries and development organisations across a selection of Dutch national and regional newspapers.

She finds little evidence that development cooperation mainly gets a negative press. In fact, newspaper articles use a largely positive tone when talking about developing countries and a neutral voice when talking about development organisations. It is instead the opinion pieces that carry a predominantly critical and negative tone of voice that emphasise bad governance or criticise the waste and misuse of aid money.

One particularly interesting insight that Vossen brings out through her careful analysis is that INGO advertisements may also feed into negative opinion pieces in newspapers. While positive in tone, she highlights that INGO advertisements pay little attention to actual achievements. In doing so, she suggests, INGOs may be inadvertently fuelling beliefs that INGO activities and operations are having little impact on the ground, and in turn fuelling the more negative opinion pieces in newspapers that might impact negatively on public opinion.

Concluding reflections

The diverse array of papers shed new insight into what, until now, has been a significant blind spot in NGO research, taking a sector-wide approach to reveal the scale, diversity and dynamics of INGO

sectors in the global North and exploring a broad range of external influences on these. In doing so they highlight important lessons for various development stakeholders.

First, this approach rectifies a long-standing bias in knowledge creation in favour of the largest, most “professionalised” organisations. This research bias layers on top of a clear bias from governments to fund the biggest and most “professionalised” organisations. Now our approach has brought the hundreds of smaller- to mid-sized organisations and their contributions into the research spotlight. Alongside revealing the *scale* of these sectors for the first time, these studies are therefore revealing for shining a light on their *diversity*; this diversity has remained largely unexplored by academic literature. These new methodologies and the perspectives they offer, therefore, will hopefully play a role in promoting broader, more inclusive civil society policies among governments and donors. The sector-wide evidence and analysis we offer is key to more effective and evidence-based civil society policies.

There are important lessons here not only for INGO researchers and donors, but also for charity regulators. The magnitude of the task of compiling the databases presented here is clear from the papers in this collection. This is starkly clear through a comparison between Britain, where the Charity Commission for England and Wales collects and allows users to download annual income and expenditure data for all charities in those nations, and the Netherlands, where charities have no legal obligations to report these data. Clear, consistent and accessible data are critical to a broader and deeper understandings of INGO sectors. Legal reporting obligations are critical to facilitating this. Charity regulators have an important role to play here and must weigh up the benefits of data accessibility against the additional burden of reporting requirements for organisations.

A sectoral approach cannot tell us everything we need to know about INGO sectors. We move from being “blind” to the scale, structure and dynamics of INGO sectors to one in which we become aware of other new blind spots. While highlighting the importance of diversity in INGO sectors, for example, these new approaches do not give us all the data or tools that we need to explore key issues, trends or surprising findings in more detail. More and different forms of data are necessary to understand and explore some issues, including qualitative studies with INGOs and qualitative and quantitative studies exploring the external influences impacting upon INGO sectors. Without understanding these external influences, it is hard for INGOs to devise effective strategies that seek to bolster or mitigate potential positive or negative influences.

In terms of government support for INGOs, we see that while the “language” of donor policies may be shifting (with donors increasingly funding “civil society organisations” rather than NGOs), there is little substantive difference in funding practices. Managerial principles still dominate funding policies and processes, and large (predominantly Northern-based), professional and service-delivery oriented INGOs are those most-funded. While we see strong steps forwards from this *status quo* in the Netherlands, we also see the difficulties in seeking transformative change across an aid chain that has operated and institutionalised managerial thinking and processes for decades. It is clear from these studies that the concept of an “enabling environment” for INGOs – much discussed in countries of the global South, but less explicitly discussed in the global North – should be at the forefront of our analysis. This means looking beyond the simple measure of government funding to also considering the role that government rules, regulations and *modus operandi* play in shaping how INGO sectors look and operate in particular contexts.

The research also raises important questions around popular narratives of INGO sectors, highlighting the diverse “giving publics” that exist within and across countries, each with different ideas on international development. In recent years we have seen increasing numbers of anti-aid narratives that would indicate that INGO sectors are in crisis. Yet these research findings show little evidence that this had turned into a financial crisis for INGOs by the mid-2010s. Financial crises may be the most outwardly visible and easily “measurable” crisis, but is not the only type of crisis for INGOs that counts. Social crises questioning the legitimacy of INGO sectors or individual organisations are having important impacts through their impacts on support to the sector in the short and longer term. The evidence presented here is mixed – the cross-country and longitudinal analysis

of public engagement and giving behaviours certainly points ominously to a general decline in these respects and suggests that typical INGO strategies for promoting engagement journeys may not be well-founded. Yet these findings are accompanied by other evidence that suggests trust in INGOs remains relatively high, and that media narratives of the sector are not as unsupportive as often assumed. These papers highlight the benefits of understanding how INGOs are framed and frame themselves in the media and in their interactions with the giving public. They present new insights into some of these issues that can inform INGO strategies to engage with supporters, “advertise” their successes and strive for their ongoing successes even into uncertain futures.

At the time of writing it is impossible not to highlight the catastrophic impact that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on those futures. Surveys in the UK (Bond 2020) and the Netherlands (Schulpen, Van Kempen, and Kinsbergen 2020) highlight the considerable stresses the pandemic is placing on INGOs; many expect to lay off staff or go out of business given a rapid and drastic loss of funding. Yet at the same time, the pandemic rearticulates ever more powerfully the conditions within which INGOs can contribute so valuably, as the need and urgency for vital services and assistance increases rapidly worldwide and the world’s fight against poverty is potentially set back by up to 30 years (Sumner, Hoy, and Ortiz-Juarez 2020). Maintaining such databases and studies over the longer-term will help to monitor how these changes play out across the sector – though the time-lag caused by data availability and slower-to-respond research timetables makes it hard for academic research to “keep up” with the rapid and dramatic landscape change that INGO sectors are facing. How INGOs themselves are responding and whether (and what) actions are being taken by other development stakeholders to strengthen the enabling environment for INGOs amidst these catastrophic circumstances will no doubt be at the forefront of INGO research in years to come.

Notes

1. The NGO Explorer was created following Banks and Brockington’s research project as a way of making Charity Commission data, which are publicly available, more easily accessible and relevant to charities working internationally. It can be found at ngoexplorer.org.
2. See <https://iatistandard.org/en> for more information on IATI, and its d-portal website (<https://d-portal.org/ctrack.html#view=search>) to access and explore this data.
3. Figures accurate as of 27 April 2020.

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