

The Power of Strategy: Environmental NGO Influence in International Climate Negotiations



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*Surprisingly little is known about how government representatives pay attention to the input of nongovernmental organizations in international negotiations. This article presents an analytical framework and illustrates, with findings from the climate change negotiations 2009–2012, the conditions under which government representatives pay attention to the input from transnational advocacy networks like the Climate Action Network. Demonstrations and lobbying attempts on the international level are frequently ignored, given that negotiation mandates with little leeway are agreed on beforehand. This requires a longer-term perspective toward changing government positions for the next round of negotiations following high media attention. Governments value NGO involvement because they grant legitimacy and signal public support. Successful lobbying requires policy entrepreneurial strategies, close networks, and early input on the domestic level. **Keywords:** NGOs, influence, international negotiations, activism, climate change.*

INTERNATIONAL NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs) HAVE BECOME important actors in international relations.¹ Much research has been conducted on strategies of NGOs.² We know that NGOs participate in large numbers in international negotiations,³ that they seek to influence the negotiation outcome according to their objectives, and that they matter somehow in global governance.⁴ A gap remains in the literature toward a better understanding of when and how NGOs contribute to more effective and democratic global governance⁵—and, in particular, when government representatives pay attention to these NGO contributions as a prerequisite for influencing international negotiations.

This is important, given that NGOs representing civil society have no formal role in negotiations within the United Nations, which are dominated by nation-states as the sole legitimate decisionmakers with voting rights. To have a chance at influencing the negotiations, NGOs need to communicate their demands and positions to government representatives. These in turn need to receive the information, reflect on it, and incorporate it into their own negotiation position⁶ to push for agreement on the NGOs' behalf.

Nonstate actors pursue different strategies to attract the attention of government representatives. These can be differentiated along their roles as activists, lobbyists, or experts.⁷ They can organize protests and demonstrations as activists to raise public pressure on governments via the media,⁸ or they can lobby government representatives by presenting their requests to them during meetings at the negotiations or in the capitals. Other activities include formal speech interventions and provision of information at side events or exhibits as well as observing the negotiations.⁹ In this article, I focus on environmental NGOs as one of the largest and most diverse groups of nonstate actors influencing international negotiations. These are increasingly interlinked in regime complexes.¹⁰ The role of local governments and cities, indigenous peoples, corporations, and epistemic communities has been discussed in other contributions.¹¹

While most literature focuses on one specific role, I take a cross-cutting perspective and analyze under what conditions (i.e., strategies used by NGOs) government representatives pay attention to NGO input as a prerequisite for NGO influence on the negotiations. My article contributes to theory by examining how input from NGOs as independent variable prompts government delegates to reflect on the input as dependent variable via a two-level analytical framework. This question of government representatives' perception of NGO input is highly relevant for NGOs because it can contribute to efficient use of scarce civil society resources to more effectively influence governmental decisionmaking on large-scale complex challenges of the twenty-first century such as climate change.

First, I review the literature on NGO activities to offer an analytical framework for determining when NGOs are most likely to attract the attention of government representatives. Then, I apply the framework to an empirical case study on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations of 2009–2012 with a focus on the 2009 conference in Copenhagen (COP-15). This case is particularly relevant as a large number of NGOs sought to influence the negotiations. This megasummit on climate change marked the largest gathering of heads of state and diplomats on an environmental issue, compelled the major polluters of the twenty-first century to acknowledge their responsibility for the first time, and pointed toward the increasing importance of emerging economies as major players in multilateral negotiations. This signals that “international society has absorbed some environmental norms and has come to accept responsibility for the planet . . . , [pointing] to a profound change in international relations.”¹² The specific choice of a case study with an observation time frame between 2008 and 2013 allows for drawing wider conclusions to other international conferences similarly focused on economic development and environmental impacts.

Conceptual Approaches to Determine NGO Impact

There are different theoretical frameworks for explaining aspects of NGO impact in international negotiations and domestic policymaking. However, the literature lacks a comprehensive lens for understanding under what conditions NGOs are most likely to attract the attention of government representatives as a key prerequisite to evaluating the influence of nongovernmental actors in global governance. In this section, I discuss the literature on NGO strategies targeted at influencing domestic and international policymaking.

Transnational Advocacy Networks

In their standard-setting work on transnational advocacy networks, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink define “transnational advocacy networks” as including “those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services.”¹³ In this article, I focus on NGOs that coordinate their activities within a transnational advocacy network. They are different from social movements since they include not only activists but also lobbyists making use of their close networks to government representatives.¹⁴ Transnational advocacy network conceptualizations have been further developed by a wealth of research contributions over the past fifteen years. These have improved our understanding of agenda formation and why transnational advocacy networks focus on particular issues¹⁵ and how international NGOs within transnational advocacy networks organize.¹⁶ Key elements of NGO strategies, however, have remained valid throughout different empirical applications.

Transnational advocacy networks can also be understood as network hybrid model accommodating NGOs focused on activist strategies (e.g., Greenpeace, Avaaz, or 350.org) and on lobbyist strategies (e.g., WWF). The choice of strategy is furthermore determined by regulatory and funding characteristics of the home government, even in the case of international NGOs. The ability of NGOs to form a network to government representatives in the first place depends on how approachable and open the respective home government is. This openness, also determined by funding structures and institutional culture, varies across countries and determines whether NGOs choose a more confrontational strategy of demonstrations and activism, engage in lobbying and capacity building,¹⁷ or use boomerang tactics to convince other governments more supportive of their cause to put pressure on their home government.¹⁸

Micro- and Macrodemands of NGOs: Friends or Foes with Government?

NGO demands can be differentiated along macro- and microdemands. *Macrodemands* refer to overarching objectives such as achieving climate

justice or agreeing on a strong, legally binding post-Kyoto Protocol agreement. These macrodemands can be communicated easily as short messages to the media and unite a large group of NGOs for demonstrations with otherwise divergent detailed interests. *Microdemands* refer to aspects of particular interest to some NGOs or countries that rarely enter the wider public mainstream. These include, for example, the design for policies on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) and measuring and verification of emissions.¹⁹ Lobbyists with direct access to government representatives are better positioned than activists to push for these microdemands as they can directly target like-minded governments.

A further factor is whether the objectives of an NGO are aligned with the home government and other governments they approach (“friends”) or whether they have opposing points of view regarding key issues (nonalignment of objectives) and could thus be considered to be “foes.”²⁰ NGOs can follow lobbying strategies of approaching friends and foes simultaneously or approaching them exclusively.²¹ Which strategy they choose depends on the strength of existing networks to government representatives and their interests. Lobbyists prefer to target countries with need for capacity building, democracies in leadership roles, and countries holding the presidency of the negotiations.²² When objectives are aligned, NGOs can enter more easily into collaborations with governments as welcomed helpers in the areas of capacity building, providing information, or simply strengthening the government’s legitimacy. In the case of nonaligned objectives, NGOs pursue a confrontational approach by maximizing public pressure via demonstrations and persistent lobbying.

Interdependence Between the National and International Levels

A dimension rarely integrated into the literature on international negotiations is the importance of domestic influence in forming state negotiation positions. Christian Downie points out that states take into account the preferences of domestic actors and respond to their pressures while studies rarely recognize that state interests are fluid and subject to change during negotiations instead of remaining a constant factor.²³

This two-level distinction between domestic policymaking and international negotiations has been emphasized by Robert Putnam²⁴ and more recently illustrated as pathways of transnational actors’ influence on the domestic policy process containing four pathways.²⁵ These include international rules such as treaties, international norms that can be encouraged via transnational advocacy networks,²⁶ markets, and direct routes of influence. The direct routes via lobbying and capacity building are particularly relevant and, at the same time, underresearched. Steven Bernstein and Benjamin Cashore point out that it is more acceptable to support domestic groups to

increase their influence on governmental decisionmaking than to challenge sovereignty and accountability via the direct intervention of transnational actors.²⁷

In her research on domestic lobbying influence, Amy McKay found that lobbying against an issue by focusing on negative social and economic consequences is more effective than lobbying in favor of a preset objective when compared to other factors such as resources, institutional influences, majority preferences, and political conflict.²⁸ This points toward the need to differentiate between aligned objectives (i.e., the lobbying of government delegations considered by the NGOs as friends) and not-aligned objectives (i.e., governments considered by the NGOs as foes) with the objective to change the governments' positions by pointing out negative consequences of following through with their current objectives.²⁹

Time Lag of Influence

Activist strategies are pursued on the domestic and international level predominantly when NGOs disagree with government positions. The influence on the domestic level can be potentially high when governments have not yet formed their negotiation position and, in the face of mass protest and public pressure, have time to adapt their negotiation position accordingly, for example, by increasing their ambitions on macrotopics such as pledging to reduce CO₂ emissions. This is important since changing a key position frequently requires consent from the national parliament and interim negotiations with the countries' international negotiation bloc such as the European Union (EU), Group of 77 (other developing countries), or the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). Especially smaller or poorer countries require this time because they pool their resources within coalitions to participate more effectively. Demonstrations on the international level put pressure on all governments represented in the negotiations and illustrate that the world public cares about the negotiation issue. Aligned objectives with some government positions can also boost their arguments as they can demonstrate the support of civil society.

This dynamic needs to be situated within recurring negotiation cycles since it suffers from a time-delayed impact. Domestic attention to a topic frequently depends on its visibility within international negotiations, when mass demonstrations and protest can be mobilized. Unless the demonstrations are of a scale large enough to put considerable pressure on high-level political leaders to reconsider their government's position during the negotiations so as to avoid a loss of face if the negotiations fail to arrive at a publicly demanded solution, they are likely to influence the government's position only after the current negotiation cycle concludes. The modified government position is then carried on into the next negotiation cycle (e.g., the prenegotiations for the next big annual summit). Similarly, the demands

of lobbyists also are unlikely to change predecided government positions during the negotiations if their demands fall outside the government delegations' predecided negotiation margin. In the second negotiation cycle, however, they may be taken on board to modify the national position to accommodate new information, scientific knowledge, and NGO demands.

Activist Strategies

NGOs pursuing activist strategies are usually members of transnational advocacy networks or other types of interest group coalitions as their key route of influence is via protests and demonstrations.³⁰ They use these strategies to put pressure on government representatives via the media as a means to influence public opinion as well as illustrate in mass demonstrations that a perceived majority of the population (and, thus, the voters in the next election) is deeply concerned about an issue and demands appropriate government action. They engage in four types of strategies within transnational advocacy networks. First, *information politics* describes increasing the influence of NGOs via the distribution of information within their network and to the media. Information is frequently disseminated in the form of personal experiences that are normatively interpreted as right or wrong to overcome scientific uncertainty and frame the issue in an emotional way.³¹

Second, *symbolic politics* involves the interpretation of symbolic events to reflect the NGOs' objectives and is part of the persuasion process employed by NGO networks to raise awareness among the population and to increase their reach. Drowning polar bears and the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina 2005 in New Orleans serve as powerful emotional symbols.³² Third, NGOs especially strive to influence key actors toward changing their negotiation position via *leverage politics* by mobilizing their members for demonstrations and increasing public pressure on governmental decisionmakers, especially in democracies. Finally, transnational advocacy networks use *accountability politics* by publicly blaming and shaming governmental actors for their environmentally adverse behavior. NGOs can also hold governments accountable by publicly exposing the disparity between reality and rhetoric.³³

Lobbyist Strategies

NGOs within transnational advocacy networks not only engage in more visible activist strategies but they lobby national governments on the domestic and international level to influence governmental negotiation positions toward reflecting the NGOs' objectives. Environmental NGOs use similar information-based lobbying strategies such as the strategies used by green business associations and multinational corporations.³⁴ Key prerequisites for exercising influence are access to the government representatives on the domestic or international level, resources (particularly information and

knowledge), and engaging in activities such as working with negotiators, providing advice, and communicating demands.³⁵ Environmental NGOs include research units of environmental NGOs and think tanks dedicated to influencing the policymaking process via research outputs and information provision.³⁶

Another key prerequisite for lobbyist influence is that the government representatives receive their communications.³⁷ Their source of influence is the knowledge and expertise they can provide in terms of capacity building, and if their objectives are aligned with the government representatives (i.e., friends). If they are not aligned (i.e., foes), they still can try to use information to persuade government representatives of their opposite position. However, their base of influence is strongly diminished since they lack the authority of experts presenting scientific findings that are not politically biased and thus appear as neutral to government representatives working on the technical level.³⁸ Particularly politicians tend to use information in the form of studies politically. Political use of information and scientific knowledge means that actors pick the evidence that supports their political objectives but discard information that undermines their position.³⁹ Input early in the negotiations allows for a higher chance of influencing a government's position on the domestic level via negative lobbying⁴⁰ in the case of nonaligned objectives. If their objectives overlap, NGO lobbyists can provide support in the form of capacity building and information provision, which in turn can also increase governmental ambitions. On the international level, they may be invited to join government delegations to continue providing support and even negotiating on behalf of the government. Joining government delegations carries potential high gains in the form of access to the negotiation text and the potential to shape the negotiation bloc's overall positions. Yet this is more likely to occur if an NGO already agrees with a government in most points. The need to fully represent the government's position in all points, even those with which the NGO disagrees, can also result in taming an NGO and a subsequent loss of the NGO's credibility with its grassroots supporters and other governments. The NGO's input may also be used instrumentally to justify preexisting government positions and to increase the government position's legitimacy with the public.⁴¹

Consequently, our understanding of the influence of NGOs in international negotiations can be improved by addressing two remaining gaps in the literature clarified by the following framework (Table 1). First, the framework integrates the direct link between the international and the domestic levels. Second, it acknowledges that government representatives differentiate between input presented to them depending on the role(s) played by the NGO (i.e., activists and lobbyists) and whether the negotiation position of the NGO is aligned with the government (friend) or opposed (foe).

Table 1 Government Delegates' Attribution of NGO Influence According to NGO Strategies Along Domestic and International Governance Levels

		Activist	Lobbyist
Domestic level	Aligned objectives (friend)	Illustrates that voters care about issue, positive momentum for higher ambitions	Capacity building, provision of information to further support government's case
	Nonaligned objectives (foe)	Pressure on government to reconsider position if majority of voters seem concerned	Negative lobbying that illustrates adverse consequences of government's plans, success depends on standing of lobbyist and credibility of studies
International level	Aligned objectives (friend)	Illustrates support of world public and increases legitimacy of government's position	Capacity building and active support in negotiations, possibly also via joining government delegation and negotiating on its behalf
	Nonaligned objectives (foe)	Pressure on government to change position, yet too late as changes require domestic consent	NGO input can be ignored since negotiation position has been decided on national level beforehand

Source: Author.

Methodological Considerations

Most studies on NGO influence and goal attainment in the domestic and international context have focused on interviews or surveys with NGO representatives. Study participants were asked about their agenda-setting process,⁴² activities, and strategies.⁴³ Some researchers went further by using process-tracing approaches and comparing the extent to which NGOs' objectives matched specific policy outcomes.⁴⁴ Process tracing can be regarded among the most powerful methods to evaluate the impact of an actor's involvement on the overall negotiation process and outcome to ultimately determine the actor's influence. In aggregate, the influence of a group of actors can be evaluated.⁴⁵ Yet there are a number of limitations of a method's feasibility in this context. Process tracing requires a large amount of resources unavailable to most researchers. Researchers need to observe the negotiations (which can be challenging as the access of researchers to the negotiations can be limited by security and capacity restrictions) and follow the activities of each of the hundreds of NGOs involved within a transnational advocacy network. They must determine via interviews which NGO representative communicated with which government representative of the over 190 delegations, what kind of information was transferred, and to what effect this information was used by the government representative and others. Furthermore, it is difficult to rule out counterfactual explanations for government positions that match with NGO

input provided beforehand since governments may have arrived at the same position as the NGO due to their national self-interests or the input provided by others. Process tracing could be limited to “access” and “goal attainment” indicators.⁴⁶ However, using these indicators alone limits the analysis to the specific cases examined (e.g., legal aspects of technology transfer in the UNFCCC negotiations of December 2010) and is strongly outcome focused, although NGOs can have considerable impact on the negotiation process. The high numbers of variables, counterfactuals, and alternative explanations inherent in multilateral UN negotiations make it difficult to accurately attribute a policy outcome to the input of a specific NGO via process tracing and related methods.

In this article, I suggest a different methodological approach by linking ego and alter perceptions of NGO representatives with government representatives’ perceptions of when NGO input matters most to them. This proxy originally used by Lars Gulbrandsen and Steinar Andresen⁴⁷ allows conclusions on government representatives’ overall agreement across a number of specific negotiation topics and sessions. Using the deductively constructed analytical framework presented in Table 1 in interview- or survey-based research allows for identifying and comparing NGO impact across cases. Despite the recently revived interest in NGO input within international negotiations, little research has focused on the alter perspective of government representatives. This is surprising since these are the crucial intermediaries in state-centered negotiations within the UN institutional framework and, consequently, either veto or further the effect of NGOs.

From this review of the academic literature on prerequisites for NGO influence in international climate negotiations, I formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Influence is higher when NGOs provide input early in the negotiations before governments decide on their negotiation positions. Medium-term influence can still occur in subsequent negotiation rounds.

Hypothesis 2: Large-scale public pressure via demonstrations and high media coverage influences negotiations toward a negotiation outcome.

Hypothesis 3: Lobbyists need to form close networks to government representatives and are more likely to be influential as friends offering capacity-building support.

In the empirical section that follows, I describe how I tested these key hypotheses on ego-alter perceptions of NGO input into the UNFCCC negotiations between 2009 and 2012.

The Influence of the Climate Action Network at UNFCCC

In this section, I show how I tested the framework on the impact of NGOs in the UNFCCC climate change negotiations between 2009 and 2012 with a particular focus on the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit (Conference of the Parties-15). This data is based on twenty interviews with government representatives active in the UNFCCC negotiations across all negotiation groups and in the EU as well as twenty representatives of international NGOs active in the EU or developing countries and in the international climate negotiations.

In the issue area of climate change, environmental NGOs coordinate closely within the Climate Action Network (CAN). CAN can be regarded as a transnational advocacy network whose members share common beliefs and values regarding environmental justice, sustainable development, and the necessity to combat climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to its unavoidable consequences. As in developing countries, there is a strong focus on common but differentiated responsibilities and climate justice with existing overlaps to the Climate Justice Network.⁴⁸ CAN is organized in regional groups and an international secretariat. With over 500 national and international environmental NGOs, it is a forum to exchange information, pool resources, and coordinate demonstrations to attract media attention and influence public opinion toward increased efforts to combat climate change.⁴⁹ CAN uses a mix of information, symbolic, accountability, and leverage politics inside and outside the conference center to attract the attention of government delegates and influence public opinion via the media.⁵⁰ The objective is to put pressure on decisionmakers that encourages them to change their negotiation position or increase already existing ambitions aligned with CAN objectives.⁵¹

First, I focus on the cross-cutting aspects of issue alignment and issue nonalignment as well as the importance of focusing on the domestic level before negotiation positions are fixed. Then, I zoom in on particularities for activist and lobbyist strategies.

Alignment and Nonalignment of Objectives

The route of influence is determined by the alignment of the NGO's objectives with the respective government delegation's negotiation position while liberal environmentalism remains a dominant frame.⁵² This influences the strategies used by activists and lobbyists alike. It is important to acknowledge different interests, strategies, and capabilities in the Northern- and Southern-based NGOs within CAN, which is illustrated by their campaigns.⁵³ In the UNFCCC negotiations, the positions of most environmental NGOs and thus CAN are aligned with the demands of developing countries, which are most vulnerable to climate change. Both target their demands of ambitious greenhouse gas mitigation objectives and funding for adaptation at the developed countries. Government representatives

from developing countries share similar negotiation positions with CAN and, therefore, can be regarded as allies or friends:⁵⁴

The NGOs and the government have very similar objectives. We all want that industrialised countries reduce their emissions and stabilize the CO₂ concentration at 350ppm, limit global warming to 1.5°C and provide a good amount of adaptation funding for poor countries. . . . We are fighting for a common cause here.⁵⁵

This was illustrated not only by the large number of developing country delegates joining demonstrations at COP-15 but also by signs of solidarity. The activism-focused NGO 350.org organized a large number of public protest and symbolic actions by mobilizing millions of concerned citizens for demonstrations during 2009.⁵⁶ “There is a big coalition between G-77 countries and civil society, we all want the industrialized countries to take action.”⁵⁷ Delegates emphasized their solidarity by wearing ties with 350.org logos and putting 350.org stickers on their briefcases and laptops “to show that we have the same objective.”⁵⁸

While CAN activists are regarded highly by developing country delegates due to their shared objectives, developed country delegates rarely share their objectives (issue nonalignment or foes). However, overall, government delegates of developed countries do appreciate that CAN is trying to raise awareness of climate change to influence domestic decisionmaking and thus change negotiation positions in the medium term:

The developed countries have taken the position to embrace NGOs, because they don’t want to be on the other side [target of their protests]. The governments of developed countries are paying attention to the NGOs in their countries and to the international NGOs like Greenpeace, CAN and others. One of the strengths of these NGOs is their ability to reach the media.⁵⁹

Governments perceive NGOs not as “negatively or as disturbing, rather neutral to positive, civil participation is important for the government.”⁶⁰ Thus, both lobbying activities and demonstrations inside and outside the conference center add a sense of urgency and public involvement to the negotiations and improve accountability.⁶¹ Government representatives frequently display an awareness of the importance to address climate change but find themselves unable to change their position due to opposition within the national decisionmaking system by competing economic interests.⁶²

Timing as a Crucial Factor: The Importance of Approaching Government on the Domestic Level

All government representatives emphasized that the timing is crucial; that is, when in the negotiation cycle NGOs try to provide input into the nego-

tiations. The negotiations continue over several years following an annual cycle that begins after the large Conference of the Parties (COP) in November–December. After the COP, countries revisit their negotiation position and may make changes based on previous negotiation results. In most countries, the negotiation position requires discussion and agreement between several government departments concerned with environment, economic development, and energy.⁶³ The government’s proposal is then further discussed in the parliament and frequently also requires an approving parliamentary vote:⁶⁴ “[Our government’s] position is fixed to a large extent since several months. After COP-14, we decided on our national position. But now that the position is set, we cannot simply abandon it and meet the high demands of the protesters.”⁶⁵

In the case of close-knit negotiation blocs such as the EU and Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), countries also need to agree to a group position. Once agreed, it can hardly be changed over the course of negotiations later in the annual negotiation cycle:

Country delegations, especially those of the EU, have agreed on their positions a long time ago before the negotiations. Therefore, they are not going to change their position at the negotiations, whatever actions NGOs may take, whether they lobby us or do demonstrations inside the conference centre or outside like the large demonstration [on] 12.12.2009.⁶⁶

The government representatives are given a negotiation mandate from which they are not able to differ during negotiations, regardless of the NGO activities and whether the negotiators personally agree with the NGOs’ demands since “all countries’ positions have been agreed on beforehand. Everyone arrived there with fixed positions and a clear negotiation mandate.”⁶⁷

Consequently, activities targeted at influencing governments on the domestic level before negotiation positions are formed are more likely to be taken into account. Activities at large international conferences can still result in influence; however, this will likely occur in the next negotiation round due to the time delay of governments adjusting their positions. This points toward the importance of medium-term involvement. Particularly, lobbyists need to build and strengthen their networks to government representatives to secure access and communicate their position. Governments can make small adjustments during the negotiations in response to both other governments’ and nongovernmental actors’ demands as part of the normal bargaining process. In the case of most environmental NGOs’ input, however, the demands are far outside the governments’ negotiation margin or “negotiation slack.”⁶⁸

Activist Strategies

Demonstrations and information campaigns inside the conference center are primarily targeted at government representatives while activities outside the conference center target the media, the wider public, and ultimately politi-

cal decisionmakers. These in turn can change governments' positions. In 2009 CAN used leverage and accountability politics by mobilizing millions of members and concerned citizens to affect public opinion via mass demonstrations and the media, thereby pressuring democratic governments with potential consequences in the next elections:

Demonstrations are important, they force certain issues on the screens of the people at home. So when these demonstrations occur, like in Copenhagen on Saturday, the media loves that and the cameras capture the messages, and that is how the public is becoming aware of the negotiations and the issues.⁶⁹

And "the media build up massive pressure and high awareness by placing COP-15 in the headlines, what raises awareness and expectations in the population, and requests for strong action on climate change, which further enhances pressure on governments to act."⁷⁰ This can widen the leeway among friends; that is, countries with issue alignments and similar negotiation objectives to CAN. These demonstrations can provide the justification to increase national ambitions toward making stronger commitments: "What the [Climate Action Network does] is important, it shows that the world's civil society cares about the climate change issue and gives leeway for stronger negotiation positions. It is important in terms of awareness-raising and to engage the media."⁷¹

This public pressure motivated 110 heads of state to attend the climate change conference on short notice instead of sending their ministers dealing with climate change issues or special envoys:

The pressure from civil society had an effect on the final outcome in a sense that the Heads of States could not come out of the negotiations with nothing in their hands. For some time, it looked like as if the negotiations were about to fail with no agreement or accord whatsoever. Due to the pressure from the civil society via the media, they had to come up with something, which was the Copenhagen Accords. . . . But without the strong external pressure, we may not even have got the Heads of States attending the meeting, had the US President and Chinese President talk to each other and had gotten the Copenhagen Accords.⁷²

Activists did not change the negotiation position of states, but they used information politics to frame climate change as a danger requiring urgent action and pushed the climate change issue up the domestic agenda by organizing demonstrations drawing media attention. Decisionmakers react when they realize that their electorate is concerned about an issue and this requires the government to take appropriate action. As a consequence, many governments and political parties developed national climate change strategies, established departments dealing with climate change mitigation and adaptation, and mainstreamed climate change into the wider public and political debate.⁷³ If CAN activists succeed in convincing public opinion

and the majority of voters, politicians in democracies can hardly afford to ignore their demands, even if it may not be directly relevant for their success in the next elections.⁷⁴ This can lead to changes in the national negotiation position over the long term:

On the other hand, their demonstrations have some influence in the indirect way and on the long run. They lead to media reports, which translate into pressure from civil society and on our parliamentarians, which can change the national position on the long run via the democratic process. The media reports and pressure of civil society led to high public attention for COP-15, which motivated many more Heads of States to join the High-Level-Segment at the end of the conference than if the pressure by civil society had not been so strong.⁷⁵

Lobbyist Strategies

Environmental lobbyists have limited influence on the negotiations according to government representatives,⁷⁶ which is also pointed out by lobbyists: “The high-level delegates are very cold and block every contact. They are not approachable and do want to be left alone. They do not even want to engage in a dialogue about the issue with us.”⁷⁷

There are several reasons for this. First, as lobbyists, they advocate a certain position; that is, they demand something from the government representatives but have little to offer in return. Consequently, their position is communicated and received by the government representatives; however, the latter see no reason to act on the input and adapt their position unless the environmental lobbyist has considerable bargaining power and resources at hand. In contrast to business and industry representatives, who in fact have high financial capabilities and are central partners in the implementation of climate agreements, few environmental NGOs have this leverage power.⁷⁸ However, if they possess the capabilities of high expertise and excellent networking, government delegates value them. This enables lobbyists to engage in capacity building, either in close contact to the government delegation or they may even join the government delegation as members. They do not need to lobby the delegates anymore since a two-way street of communication and mutual appreciation is established.

A core indicator is when in the negotiation process environmental lobbyists approach government representatives. All government delegates interviewed agreed that once the national decisionmaking body, usually the parliament, has decided the negotiation position, it cannot be changed for imminent negotiations, regardless of how hard NGOs try to lobby them. Environmental NGO delegates working in the lobbying section of CAN prepare detailed lobbying strategies, coordinate their efforts in daily coordination meetings over several hours, and even lobby government delegates at the hotel bar at 2 A.M. or stay at the conference center if the negotiations

continue into the night. In the case of lobbying by environmental NGOs on the international level, the costs of personal effort, lost sleep, attending conferences, and coordinating lobbying strategies do not match the benefits from lobbying government delegates in the form of influence on the high-level negotiations, neither on the negotiation process nor on the negotiation outcome. This is especially the case when environmental NGOs lobby government delegations whose negotiation positions do not match their objectives. When environmental NGOs lobby delegations whose positions they share, they quickly move from the lobbyist role to the advisory role because delegations welcome the expertise and technical input to their work on capacity building.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed when government representatives pay attention to NGO contributions as a prerequisite for influencing international negotiations at the example of the Climate Action Network's strategies used during the post-Kyoto Protocol UNFCCC negotiations. The quantity of activities carried out by CAN during 2009 and the high number of civil society representatives that attended the 2009 COP-15⁷⁹ would suggest a considerable impact of their activities on government representatives. This high number and multitude of activities, however, also resulted in the disenfranchisement of many CAN delegates as they were not permitted into the conference venue and instead began to merge with global justice activists to form a new activism-focused climate justice movement.⁸⁰ Yet most civil society representatives as well as countries that were excluded from the final Copenhagen Accord compromise deal regarded the conference outcome as a failure with corresponding low influence. This is particularly important as the prenegotiated text was discarded following a negotiation deadlock. Instead, a small group of heads of state (the United States, Brazil, China, India, and South Africa) drafted the Copenhagen Accord.⁸¹

The comparative ego-alter interviews with government representatives revealed only limited impact. While developing country representatives, especially those from AOSIS and from Least Developed Countries, share CAN's demands and regard them as allies, the view of developed country representatives is more critical. For the latter, the demonstrations and lobbying activities were simply too late as they had received their negotiation mandates much earlier, preventing them (including attending heads of state) to alter their negotiation positions according to the NGO's demands. However, the large scale of the demonstrations did have an effect because government representatives felt they could not let the negotiations fail entirely. This may have contributed to the emergence of the Copenhagen Accord, which paved the way to the Cancun Agreement and Durban Platform on

Enhanced Action in the following two major negotiation rounds in 2010 and 2011. Consequently, all three of my hypotheses can be confirmed.

These research findings carry implications for civil society representatives trying to effectively communicate their positions to government representatives. The findings suggest that activists should focus their limited resources on organizing large-scale demonstrations over a sustained period of time, particularly at the domestic level. In the case of like-minded governments, this can open up the political leeway to increase ambitions. If issue nonalignment is dominant, media attention and linkages to potential consequences in elections can incentivize government representatives to reconsider their current positions. To achieve this level of public attention, activists would need to cooperate closely with the media to reach, convince, and mobilize enough citizens to demonstrate that there is a societal consensus against current government practice.⁸²

Lobbyists can be most effective when they choose strategies allowing information provision, capacity building, and advisory activities to the extent of joining government delegations at international negotiations. Such deep engagement results, however, in a certain responsibility of NGOs for the negotiation outcomes⁸³ as well as a risk of taming the NGO, instrumentalization of the NGO to demonstrate the government's legitimacy, and even co-optation by assimilating the NGO as the weaker group. If the outcome is regarded as strong disappointment as in the case of the 2009 climate change negotiations, NGOs can find themselves in a difficult position when explaining the negotiation results to their constituencies. Many NGOs address this legitimacy challenge by specializing in either activist strategies (e.g., Greenpeace) or hybrid strategies with closer ties to governments, including consulting activities and partnerships (e.g., WWF). This draws different groups of supporters because their funding structures are also different, ranging from European Commission and national grants to membership contributions, donations, or crowd sourcing via online advertisements. 🌐

Notes

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