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The 1990s were a golden age for nongovernmental organizations. It was a time when well-known groups such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Oxfam grew their budgets and expanded their global reach. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of international NGOs—not-for-profit groups that are largely independent from government and work in multiple countries in pursuit of the public good—increased by 42 percent. Thousands of organizations were founded. Many of these organizations championed liberal causes, such as LGBTQ rights and gun control. Conservative groups emerged, too, with rival policy agendas.

As their numbers grew, NGOs became important political players. Newly minted organizations changed state policies. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, a coalition of NGOs formed in 1992, successfully pushed for the adoption of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in 1997—an effort that won it the Nobel Peace Prize. Transparency International, a Berlin-based NGO established in 1993, raised the profile of corruption issues through its advocacy, building

momentum toward the adoption of the UN Convention Against Corruption in 2003. Future UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights that “the twenty-first century will be an era of NGOs.” In an influential 1997 essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Jessica Mathews argued that the end of the Cold War brought with it a “power shift”: global civil society, often formalized as NGOs, was wresting authority and influence from states. More and more often, Mathews contended, NGOs were taking over responsibilities for the delivery of development and humanitarian assistance, pushing governments around during international negotiations, and setting the policy agenda on issues such as environmental protection and human rights.

Today, however, the picture looks remarkably different. The population of international NGOs has stagnated: between 2010 and 2020, their numbers grew by less than five percent. Over the past two decades, public skepticism about the virtues and advantages of NGOs has deepened, governments have honed strategies to undermine NGO activities, and many of the revenue streams that keep NGOs operational—such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which officially closed this week—have begun to dry up. Overall, the NGO sector has less political opportunity and capacity than it once had. And in many cases, NGOs have not just lost power relative to previous decades. States have clawed that power back. The result is an end to the era of NGOs—a great loss for the people who have relied on these organizations’ services, and a boon to autocratic governments that have seen their advocacy as a threat.

MOUNTING CRITICISM

Our research over the past ten years has documented changes in the international NGO sector. In addition to collecting information from organizational directories and tax records to study trends in NGO founding, closures, and budgets, we spoke with senior staff from many different types of organizations—by fielding a large-scale survey, holding focus groups, and conducting qualitative interviews—to gather the perspectives of those that work in this sector.

What we found was a stark transformation. When NGOs first rose to prominence as international actors, their commitment to principled activity and their nonprofit character distinguished them from governments and private companies. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, for instance, earned plaudits for protecting vulnerable individuals and promoting stricter international standards for human rights. NGOs also gained legitimacy because they provided important input to global governance, channeling the voices of citizens and interests that otherwise were not well represented in international institutions. Those working within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, for example, brought perspectives from environmentalists and communities affected by climate change to high-level negotiations. Recognizing the value of such guidance, international organizations expanded NGOs' access significantly. The services NGOs provided directly to communities, moreover, brought them into closer cooperation with national governments. From the 1990s onward, governments increasingly relied on NGOs such as CARE International and Mercy Corps to deliver foreign aid. In this optimistic time, the rise of NGOs was seen by many as a chance for organized civil society to make the world a better place, providing better service delivery and influencing progressive policy change on the environment, human rights, and arms control.

By the early years of the twenty-first century, however, criticism of NGOs was mounting. Skeptics on both the right and the left raised questions about NGOs' effectiveness, accountability, and extensive political influence. Some NGOs made attempts at reform. They created transparency initiatives to share more information about their finances and decision-making processes. In the 2010s, many groups began to reorganize operations through localization initiatives, which were meant to devolve decision-making and spending power to partners in developing countries. But that has not stopped world leaders—including in Western countries that were key to NGOs' initial growth—from making vehement objections to NGO activities. Members of the European Parliament have accused environmental NGOs of corruption, opacity, and working against

EU objectives, values, and interests. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has questioned the “political neutrality” of civil society groups that receive government funding, accusing several of partisan activity.

Public skepticism about the virtues and advantages of NGOs has deepened.

Some of the criticisms are grounded in real developments in the NGO sector. For one, as the number of NGOs rose, groups had to compete for resources. NGO staff frequently note that this competition for funding from donors, access to governments, and attention from the media and the public can distract from their service delivery and advocacy. For example, staff who work in disaster relief have described to us how, after a catastrophe, NGOs jockey to lead the response effort in order to secure funding and media attention. This impedes coordination among humanitarian groups, sometimes to the detriment of the people they are trying to help. The perception that NGOs are primarily focused on courting donors and the media—regardless of whether such behavior takes place—has weakened the notion that they are different from for-profit firms.

The NGO world has also been rocked by prominent cases of misconduct. For example, Oxfam Great Britain, a national affiliate of an international organization that aims to reduce poverty, was embroiled in a sexual exploitation scandal in Haiti in 2018, making it ineligible for British government funding for three years. The organization eventually had its funding access restored, only to face additional accusations of sexual abuse and fraud in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2021. Similar scandals have plagued humanitarian and development operations run by Plan International and the Red Cross. These cases of unethical behavior toward vulnerable aid recipients have had lasting harmful effects on the reputations not just of individual NGOs but of the whole sector.

Public trust in NGOs has suffered as a result. In 25 years of Edelman Trust Barometer polling across 28 countries, 2021 was the first year that respondents reported that they had more trust in businesses than in

NGOs. In 2025, businesses were seen as nearly as ethical as NGOs and far more competent.

CRACKING DOWN

These critiques of NGOs come at a bad political moment for the sector. In the liberal order that dominated after the Cold War, donor states' and international organizations' support for NGOs spread to countries across the world. As countries became more democratic, especially in Africa and eastern Europe, they became more welcoming of such bodies. The number of nondemocracies that permitted NGOs to operate also expanded in the 1990s, with countries such as China and Zimbabwe attempting to bolster state capacity by allowing NGOs to deliver essential public goods. But this tolerance has eroded as challenges to democracy grow. Particularly since the late 2010s, democratic rights have declined globally, including in large countries such as India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Turkey. This shift has gone hand in hand with greater scrutiny of and stricter restrictions on NGOs. International NGOs' ability to operate has contracted or disappeared altogether in nondemocracies, and the likelihood that domestic civil society groups will face repression for cooperating with international NGOs has increased.

Many authoritarian governments now fear that allowing NGOs to operate freely will create pressures that lead to democratization or even regime change, and so they have sought ways to undercut these organizations to protect their hold on power. In Russia, for example, President Vladimir Putin pushed through a law in 2006 that imposed broad restrictions on NGO activities, including by allowing the government to deny the registration and prohibit the programming of any NGO that the government deems a "threat to the Russian Federation." The crackdown came amid worsening relations between Moscow and the West and was motivated, in part, by Putin's belief that Western-aligned NGOs had orchestrated the Color Revolutions—a series of protest movements against autocratic rule in former Soviet states and Serbia in the early twenty-first century—and could stir similar protest activity in Russia.

In 2012, Putin's government went even further, passing a law that requires all NGOs that engage in political activity and receive foreign funding to register as foreign agents, which subjects them to onerous financial reporting requirements and enables government monitoring of their activities. They also must identify themselves publicly as foreign agents, undermining their credibility with domestic audiences. The Russian foreign agents law became a prototype for similar legislation in many other countries, including Georgia, Hungary, and Kyrgyzstan.

Governments have honed strategies to undermine NGO activities.

According to research by the political scientist Suparna Chaudhry, more than 130 countries have adopted restrictions on international and foreign-funded NGOs in the past three decades. In addition to imposing burdensome administrative rules such as those in the Russian law, these restrictions can also create the conditions for legal sanctioning, imprisonment, or the violent repression of activists. Under such pressures, NGOs find it difficult to work on human rights, gender, anticorruption, democracy, environmental protection, and other politically sensitive issues.

In India, for example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has revoked the registrations of thousands of foreign-funded NGOs since 2014. This crackdown targeted well-known organizations such as the environmental group Greenpeace India, which was barred from receiving foreign donations in 2015—and as a result had to shed staff and close two of its offices. Citing India's 2010 Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, the government charged that Greenpeace had "prejudicially affected the economic interest of the state" and concealed the receipt of foreign funds. The group claims that it was targeted for its efforts to organize communities to protest pollution and coal mining, and it has denied the allegation that it misreported its funds. To date, Indian court rulings have allowed Greenpeace to keep its offices open, but the organization has scaled back and reoriented many of its campaigns. In Ethiopia, meanwhile, the researchers Kendra Dupuy, James Ron, and Aseem

Prakash have found that an NGO registration law introduced in 2009 forced nearly all human rights organizations there to close, and those that remained stopped their rights-based advocacy work and began to provide only general development services such as education and poverty-alleviation programs.

Undermining NGOs can take less direct forms, too. In some cases, governments have created NGO-like organizations that, while posing as citizens' groups, pursue the governments' own agendas. Low-quality or "zombie" international election monitors, for instance, now observe elections in countries such as Azerbaijan, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. These groups endorse contests that are neither free nor fair, providing autocratic leaders a way to dispute the assessments of more reliable election monitors, such as the Carter Center. Government-organized NGOs also submit written reports and make oral statements as part of the UN's Universal Periodic Review, a peer review of each UN member state's human rights record that takes place in four-year cycles, to praise repressive countries. These NGO impostors can muddy the waters of genuine advocacy by civil society and further erode the legitimacy of NGOs in the eyes of the public.

The growing influence of nondemocracies—especially China and Russia—in global politics has eased the way for a proliferation of government strategies to check the power of NGOs. The political scientists Christopher Adolph and Aseem Prakash have found that the more developing countries orient their exports toward China and away from the West, the more likely they are to repress NGOs—because Beijing, unlike Western governments, does not use trade sanctions to pressure other countries to protect human rights. One of us (Bush), together with the political scientists Christina Cottiero and Lauren Prather, has documented how Russia has consistently cast doubt on the legitimacy of Western election observers and denounced democracy promotion efforts as a violation of state sovereignty since the early 2000s. As a result of Moscow's efforts, countries are more likely to host low-quality election monitors when they have closer political and economic ties to Russia.

BUDGET SQUEEZE

Even if they disapprove of NGOs' political activities, governments have often hesitated to place severe restrictions on such groups because NGOs fund and implement valuable development, health, and humanitarian aid programs. But this incentive is changing. As budget constraints tighten, competing priorities mount, and populist opposition intensifies, governments have begun to reduce their spending on foreign aid—a major source of funding for international NGOs. Overseas development assistance by top donor countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development fell by more than seven percent in 2024, with significant reductions likely still to come.

This change has been most abrupt in the United States, where President Donald Trump's administration has cut nearly all foreign aid programs since he entered office in January. But the trend precedes Trump and applies beyond the United States. Development budgets have also come under threat in Europe. In some cases, the pressure comes from right-wing parties, as in Norway and Sweden, but in others the impetus for retrenchment has come from the center and the left. Germany, the world's second-largest donor in terms of formal development assistance, made steep cuts to both humanitarian and development aid as part of an austerity drive led by the coalition government composed of progressive, green, and center-right parties in 2024. The new conservative chancellor, who faces demands to raise defense spending, is unlikely to reverse those steps. The United Kingdom has been slashing its foreign aid budget since 2020 amid a weak post-pandemic economic recovery, and the current Labour government expects to make further cuts as it, too, ramps up defense spending. France, facing decreased growth and a ballooning public deficit, also significantly reduced its budget for overseas development assistance in 2024.

The pool of resources available to NGOs is shrinking at the same time that skepticism grows at the highest levels of government about the wisdom of using these groups to deliver foreign aid. When

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the U.S. government officially shut down USAID, Secretary of State Marco Rubio wrote that “the executives of the countless NGOs” the agency had supported were “the only ones living well . . . while those they purported to help fell further behind.” And in the Netherlands, right-wing Foreign Trade and Development Minister Reinette Klever has called for both reducing foreign aid and decreasing funding to civil society organizations as a proportion of government aid.

Some nongovernmental funders may step up in response to reductions in public spending. In the United States, over 70 foundations have signed a “meet the moment” pledge to fill gaps created by the Trump administration’s cuts. A group of private donors has also created a “bridge fund” to help provide short-term support to programs whose funds were frozen as part of the administration’s shutdown of USAID. Given the current global financial uncertainty, however, it is a difficult time for philanthropies and other private donors to make major investments. And ultimately, private capital cannot match the economic resources of states.

Many organizations worldwide have already begun to shed staff, and the loss of funding will further curtail humanitarian relief efforts, programs for migrants, vaccine administration, and other NGO activities. It also leaves NGOs vulnerable to repressive governments that allow these groups to operate only because they provide useful services. Such governments may, instead, turn instead to China, which offers an alternative source of development assistance via its Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese model does not involve NGOs or expect recipient countries to meet any human rights or democracy standards. In effect, without the value that Western money affords them, NGOs in many parts of the world may become targets of governments that see their independent advocacy as more trouble than it’s worth.

POWER SHIFTS BACK

Growing popular skepticism of NGOs, active government efforts to undermine these organizations, and shrinking resources all reduce the power of NGOs in world politics. In many cases, states have reclaimed

this power for themselves. A government that expels human rights monitors increases its ability to control information and suppress dissent. A government that restrains environmental NGOs has an easier time polluting and engaging in destructive economic activity. And without an active civil society at home, a government becomes more insulated from the pressure of international organizations and foreign governments when it fails to live up to treaty obligations or societal expectations. These developments enhance the power of the state and feed into the global decline of liberal norms.

If NGOs are to reverse these trends, they may now have to do much of the work themselves. It seems unlikely that governments will suddenly expand their foreign aid budgets or that growing illiberalism will soon give way to a friendlier international environment. NGOs can highlight their many good deeds and capacity to learn from past mistakes, but that will do only so much to restore their legitimacy. Organizations will also need to undertake overdue reforms to make their financial reporting more transparent and increase their accountability to their beneficiaries. And if they work together, NGOs may be able to resist repression: in Kenya in 2013 and Nigeria in 2017, civil society groups organized successful campaigns to prevent the adoption of legal restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs.

NGOs were never impervious to political challenges or financial constraints.

Where government funding is no longer available, NGOs will need to think creatively to either refocus their programming or seek alternative sources of support. Ultimately, however, many may fold under the financial strain. Other types of actors—including socially conscious businesses and direct-giving campaigns such as GiveWell—could step in to provide some of the services these NGOs once did. But NGOs' critical roles as advocates and watchdogs may simply be left unfilled.

After the Cold War, the dramatic growth of NGOs brought with it a transfer of power from states to civil society. This development benefited

democratic governments whose interests were largely aligned with these organizations' objectives—in 2001, former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell famously (and controversially) called NGOs a “force multiplier” for achieving U.S. foreign policy goals, including democracy promotion and human rights protection. By reducing the foreign aid budgets that support NGO activities, the United States and Europe are walking away from a key source of influence. They have little to gain from a weakened NGO sector; nondemocratic governments, on the other hand, see political advantages in the suppression of organizations that promote liberal values.

The post–Cold War power shift generated optimism that an active and well-resourced global civil society would change the world for the better. But the NGO sector was never impervious to political challenges or financial constraints. What the optimists did not foresee was that power could eventually shift back.