

International NGOs as intermediaries in China's 'going out' strategy

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International non-governmental organizations (INGOs)¹ are formal NGOs that operate in more than one country and in many cases are headquartered in the global North.² Worldwide, INGOs have played an essential role in global governance and development.³ Traditionally, they are considered an essential conduit in North–South development, helping to spread liberal norms, encourage democratization and foster development in southern minority countries.⁴ In recent years, however, the rise of new powers, such as China, Brazil and India, has unsettled the longstanding western-dominated international development regime and led to the expansion of South–South cooperation (SSC).⁵ Given the changing dynamics of development cooperation, how do northern actors, such as INGOs, interact with SSC?

Several studies have shown that northern actors are diversifying and intensifying their engagement in SSC. For example, McEwan and Mawdsley discuss the

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¹ Also termed transnational NGOs, international civil society organizations, or, in China, Overseas NGOS (ONGOS). See Elizabeth A. Bloodgood and Hans Peter Schmitz, 'The INGO research agenda: a community approach to challenges in method and theory', in Bob Reinalda, ed., *The Routledge handbook of international organization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 67–79.

² We use the terminology of the global North and South because of the centrality of the South–South Cooperation (SSC) concept to our respondents. We use these terms as placeholders, with northern countries defined as the group of economically dominant or minority countries that are the traditional providers of development assistance.

³ John Boli, 'International nongovernmental organizations', in Walter W. Powell and Richard P. Steinberg, eds, *The nonprofit sector: a research handbook*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 333–54; Susanna Campbell, Matthew DiGiuseppe and Amanda Murdie, 'International development NGOs and bureaucratic capacity: facilitator or destroyer?', *Political Research Quarterly* 72: 1, March 2019, pp. 3–18; Sherine Jayawickrama and Neil McCullagh, *What makes international NGOs distinctive? Contributions, characteristics and challenges* (Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, 9 Dec. 2009), https://cpl.hks.harvard.edu/files/cpl/files/distinctive_contributions_of_ngos.pdf?m=1440181017. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 28 Sept. 2021.)

⁴ Michael Barnett, *Empire of humanity: a history of humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Simone Dietrich and Joseph Wright, 'Foreign aid allocation tactics and democratic change in Africa', *Journal of Politics* 77: 1, 2015, pp. 216–34.

⁵ Kojo S. Amanor and Sérgio Chichava, 'South–South cooperation, agribusiness, and African agricultural development: Brazil and China in Ghana and Mozambique', *World Development*, vol. 81, 2016, pp. 13–23; Emma Mawdsley, 'South–South Cooperation 3.0? Managing the consequences of success in the decade ahead', *Oxford Development Studies* 47: 3, July 2019, pp. 259–74.

politics of trilateral development cooperation in foreign aid, wherein a northern donor and/or multilateral agency partners with a so-called pivotal, emerging or anchoring country to work with a third recipient country.⁶ Abdenur and Da Fonseca show that northern aid agencies have worked to engage with SSC in three important ways: building new or reinforced platforms related to SSC with multilateral organizations; developing triangular cooperation; and fostering knowledge production about SSC.⁷

Despite these insights, little is known about how INGOs intersect with SSC. What resources do they contribute? How do they bring resources to development cooperation? In the case of China, for example, little is known about INGOs' role in its accelerating outbound expansion, which is widely perceived as an enterprise of the Chinese state and, to some extent, Chinese private actors.⁸ China's 'going out' strategy and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have aroused alarm, and China has been charged with using its economic might to cultivate allies, extract resources or prop up unsavoury political regimes through infrastructure financing, soft loans and aid.⁹ Despite countervailing evidence, portrayals of 'land grabbing', 'rogue aid' or 'debt-trap diplomacy' are pervasive.¹⁰ How do global actors, such as INGOs with a presence in China, facilitate, shape or navigate the party-state's outbound thrust and its exercise of soft power?¹¹

This article contributes to the literature by analysing the various intermediary roles that INGOs play in SSC and China's global expansion. We first review studies on INGOs in global governance and the intermediary literature. We then focus specifically on China's 'going out' strategy in SSC and contextual factors

⁶ Cheryl McEwan and Emma Mawdsley, 'Trilateral development cooperation: power and politics in emerging aid relationships', *Development and Change* 43: 6, 2012, pp. 1185–209.

⁷ Adriana Erthal Abdenur and João Moura Estevão Marques da Fonseca, 'The North's growing role in South–South cooperation: keeping the foothold', *Third World Quarterly* 34: 8, 2013, pp. 1475–91.

⁸ Given the increasingly important role that China has played in SSC, the Chinese literature has begun to focus on how domestic NGOs can engage in it. For example, some studies have discussed how Chinese NGOs can learn from INGOs to participate in international affairs. However, to our knowledge, no studies have examined how INGOs engage in China's 'going out' efforts. See Ming Wang and Li Yang, 'An outline of international NGOs', *China Nonprofit Review*, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1–33; Yifeng Yang and Guosheng Deng, 'The historical change of International NGOs' participation in foreign aid in developed countries and its inspiration to China', *Chinese Public Administration*, no. 3, 2014, pp. 109–14.

⁹ Denis M. Tull, 'China's engagement in Africa: scope, significance and consequences', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 44: 3, 2006, pp. 459–79; Hassen Abda Wako, 'Aid, institutions and economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa: heterogeneous donors and heterogeneous responses', *Review of Development Economics* 22: 1, 2018, pp. 23–44; Jason Towers, *Conflict dynamics and the Belt and Road Initiative: ignoring conflict on the 'road to peace'* (Platform Zivile Konflikt Bearbeitung, 2020), https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/fileadmin/mediapool/blogs/Kruckow_Caroline/Analyse97-en-v08-Web.pdf; Chris Alden and Lu Jiang, 'Brave new world: debt, industrialization and security in China–Africa relations', *International Affairs* 95: 3, 2019, pp. 641–58; George Karavas, 'How images frame China's role in African development', *International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020, pp. 667–90.

¹⁰ See, respectively, Irna Hofman and Peter Ho, 'China's "developmental outsourcing": a critical examination of Chinese global "land grabs" discourse', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39: 1, 2012, pp. 1–48; Axel Dreher and Andreas Fuchs, 'Rogue aid? An empirical analysis of China's aid allocation', *Canadian Journal of Economics* 48: 3, 2015, pp. 988–1023; Deborah Brautigam, 'A critical look at Chinese "debt-trap diplomacy": the rise of a meme', *Area Development and Policy* 5: 1, 2020, pp. 1–14.

¹¹ The Chinese literature has discussed the important role of INGOs in supporting grassroots NGOs and domestic development in China. See Qiusha Ma, 'Globalisation, international NGOs, and the development of Chinese grassroots NGOs', *Open Times*, no. 2, 2006, pp. 119–38; Qingcai Liu and Nongshou Zhang, 'Analysing the role of non-governmental organizations in global governance', *International Studies*, no. 1, 2006, pp. 48–52. However, no studies in China have examined how INGOs operating in China have engaged in China's 'going out' efforts.

driving INGOs to take part in China's outbound strategy. Drawing on in-depth interviews with INGO executives, domestic NGOs and scholars in China, we show that many INGOs have begun actively engaging with China's development efforts abroad. We develop an integrated framework to conceptualize INGOs' various intermediary roles, based on the content of intermediary support (tangible versus intangible resources) and the function of intermediaries (bridging versus initiating). We conclude the article with a review of the implications of INGOs' role in global governance and development.

Theoretical orientation—INGOs as intermediaries

Scholars have adopted a number of different perspectives in seeking to understand how INGOs play a systematically relevant role in global governance.¹² The constructivist approach focuses on rules, norm diffusion, socialization, legitimacy and identities.¹³ It emphasizes INGOs' role in leveraging moral authority to facilitate norm diffusion and socialization in international politics. Moral authority stems from three sources: (1) INGOs' ability to raise important issues and influence policy agendas in international arenas; (2) their use of expertise or epistemic authority; and (3) their claim of moral transcendence. For example, Keck and Sikkink explain how INGOs form transnational advocacy networks and use strategies based on information, symbolism, leverage and accountability politics to push states to adopt norm-compliant behaviour and corresponding policy changes.¹⁴

By contrast, the rationalist approach assumes that INGOs work for their own survival and expansion; those adopting this perspective tend to focus on the organizations' political and economic interests rather than their altruistic ones.¹⁵ From this viewpoint, INGOs act instrumentally, engaging in strategic resource-maximizing behaviour motivated by competition for funding and media attention.¹⁶ Another strand of the literature uses the political economy perspective to explore how INGOs respond strategically to their resource and institutional environments.¹⁷ For example, Dupuy, Ron and Prakash show that as states worldwide enact laws to restrict NGOs' access to foreign funding, INGOs must rebrand or switch their work from proscribed areas in order to survive.¹⁸

¹² Boli, 'International nongovernmental organizations', p. 333.

¹³ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Taking stock: the constructivist research program in International Relations and comparative politics', *Annual Review of Political Science* 4: 1, 2001, pp. 391–416; Christopher Marc Lilyblad, 'NGOs in constructivist International Relations theory', in Thomas Davies, ed., *Routledge handbook of NGOs and international relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 113–27.

¹⁴ Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: advocacy networks in international politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Youngwan Kim, 'Rationalist explanations for NGOs', in Davies, ed., *Routledge handbook of NGOs and international relations*, pp. 90–100.

¹⁶ Alexander Cooley and James Ron, 'The NGO scramble: organizational insecurity and the political economy of transnational action', *International Security* 27: 1, 2002, pp. 5–39.

¹⁷ Sarah Sunn Bush and Jennifer Hadden, 'Density and decline in the founding of international NGOs in the United States', *International Studies Quarterly* 63: 4, 2019, pp. 1133–46.

¹⁸ Kendra E. Dupuy, James Ron and Aseem Prakash, 'Who survived? Ethiopia's regulatory crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs', *Review of International Political Economy* 22: 2, 2015, pp. 419–56.

Mitchell and Schmitz argue that a constructivist–rationalist bifurcation precludes more comprehensive explanations of INGO activity. They thus introduce the heuristic of ‘principled instrumentalism’ to amalgamate the two approaches.¹⁹ From this perspective, INGOs can be considered intermediaries for resource exchange and norm socialization in an embedded political-economic environment. As Banks, Hulme and Edwards conclude:

In a world that is increasingly integrated and connected, the intermediary position that defines most NGOs remains a significant advantage as they continue striving to demonstrate what works for poverty reduction. Their ability to build links, coordinate between sectors, and apply their knowledge of local contexts mean that NGOs could strengthen their roles in social transformation even as delivery functions decline.²⁰

Existing studies often define an intermediary as a third-party agent that connects two or more disparate entities that might interact directly, but for some reason, find it difficult to do so.²¹ Intermediaries can play various roles.²² Dutt and colleagues examine how intermediary business incubators in emerging markets develop the services and facilities necessary to support the market, and develop and improve local organizations’ capabilities.²³ Liu distinguishes two roles that intermediaries perform: bridging, which facilitates a positive relationship between firms and outsiders; and buffering, which insulates firms from potential adversarial environments or offers them greater flexibility in tackling external demands.²⁴

In the NGO field, scholars have examined NGOs’ multiple, overlapping intermediary roles as accountability broker, networker, bridge, communicator, resource mobilizer, catalyst and convener.²⁵ Shea examines how NGO intermediaries help facilitate policy implementation by providing smaller grants to community-based organizations, capacity-building, training and technical assistance.²⁶ Kerlin and colleagues discuss the role of intermediaries in framing, explaining and promoting the hybrid attributes of social enterprises to strengthen their legitimacy.²⁷ Most of these studies have focused on one or two intermediary roles, and few have systematically examined INGOs’ intermediary roles in a global governance context.

¹⁹ George E. Mitchell and Hans Peter Schmitz, ‘Principled instrumentalism: a theory of transnational NGO behavior’, *Review of International Studies* 40: 3, 2014, pp. 487–504.

²⁰ Nicola Banks, David Hulme and Michael Edwards, ‘NGOs, states, and donors revisited: still too close for comfort?’, *World Development*, vol. 66, 2015, pp. 707–18.

²¹ Rakesh Khurana, ‘Market triads: a theoretical and empirical analysis of market intermediation’, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 32: 2, 2002, pp. 239–62.

²² Jeremy Howells, ‘Intermediation and the role of intermediaries in innovation’, *Research Policy* 35: 5, 2006, pp. 715–28.

²³ Nilanjana Dutt, Olga Hawn, Elena Vidal, Aaron Chatterji, Anita McGahan and Will Mitchell, ‘How open system intermediaries address institutional failures: the case of business incubators in emerging-market countries’, *Academy of Management Journal* 59: 3, 2016, pp. 818–40.

²⁴ Ning Liu, ‘Institutional intermediaries and firm choices in response to regulations’, *Academy of Management Journal* 64: 3, 2021, pp. 981–1007.

²⁵ Lehn M. Benjamin, ‘Mediating accountability: how nonprofit funding intermediaries use performance measurement and why it matters for governance’, *Public Performance and Management Review* 33: 4, 2010, pp. 594–618.

²⁶ Jennifer Shea, ‘Taking nonprofit intermediaries seriously: a middle-range theory for implementation research’, *Public Administration Review* 71: 1, 2011, pp. 57–66.

²⁷ Janelle A. Kerlin, Saurabh A. Lall, Shuyang Peng and Tracy Shicun Cui, ‘Institutional intermediaries as legitimizing agents for social enterprise in China and India’, *Public Management Review* 23: 5, 2021, pp. 731–53.

China's 'going out' strategy

South-South cooperation emerged as a framework for building technical cooperation among developing countries to facilitate self-reliant development. It includes monetary aid and trade, political and military support, and training, education and cultural exchange. In recent years, rising powers such as China are playing new roles in SSC.²⁸ By framing its international strategy 'in a language of brotherhood and non-interference', China seeks to provide 'an alternative to the post-colonial relations particularly of European countries'.²⁹

In the early 2000s, the Chinese government announced the 'going out' strategy as part of its economic integration into the international economy.³⁰ Since then, China's globalizing efforts have gained momentum and commanded attention. Between 2008 and 2019, Chinese policy banks—state financial institutions that support central government's national economic development plans, including the Belt and Road Initiatives—have provided foreign governments with almost half a trillion dollars in development finance, nearly matching the World Bank's lending in the same period.³¹ The BRI, launched in 2013, has grown to embrace 140 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America, and has been described as one of the most significant global initiatives and most dramatic proposals for a new direction in global governance.³² In addition to investment, a host of institutions were created, such as the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and regional free trade bodies that contribute to 'an alternative architecture to the postwar Western order'.³³

It is difficult to make a case for a monolithic 'single hand' behind China's global engagement;³⁴ a range of actors, including private firms and NGOs, have been increasingly involved in the process. Having said that, many firms are state-owned or linked to the government, and many operate in the infrastructure and resource extraction sectors. Despite the soaring levels of investment overseas, Chinese enterprises abroad lack engagement with local communities, leading to significant community pushback.³⁵ For example, Chinese businesses in south-east Asia have faced community resistance because of 'a lack of relevant expertise, personnel,

²⁸ Amanor and Chichava, 'South-South cooperation', p. 13.

²⁹ Arjan de Haan, 'Will China change international development as we know it?', *Journal of International Development* 23: 7, 2011, pp. 881–908.

³⁰ China's 'going out' strategy was formally established in the Tenth National Five-Year Plan in 2001, supporting and encouraging Chinese enterprises to engage in foreign direct investment (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference [CPPCC], 2001).

³¹ Rebecca Ray, Kevin P. Gallagher, William Kring, Joshua Pitts and Alexander Simmons, *Geolocated dataset of Chinese overseas development finance* (Boston: Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2020), <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinas-overseas-development-finance/>.

³² Christoph Nedopil, *Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Beijing: International Institute of Green Finance Green BRI Center, 2021), <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>; Towers, 'Conflict dynamics and the Belt and Road Initiative'; Mingjiang Li, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: geo-economics and Indo-Pacific security competition', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 169–88.

³³ David Shambaugh, 'China's soft-power push: the search for respect', *Foreign Affairs* 94: 4, 2015, pp. 99–107.

³⁴ Nicholas Loubere, 'Chinese engagement in Africa: fragmented power and Ghanaian gold', in Jane Golley, Linda Jaivin and Paul J. Farrelly, eds, *China Story Yearbook 2018* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2019), pp. 211–15.

³⁵ Yuan Wang and Simon Zadek, *Sustainability impacts of Chinese outward direct investment: a review of the literature* (Canada, Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2016).

and partners for engaging local communities, along with a reluctance to work with local NGOs'.³⁶

Most Chinese NGOs involved in the 'going out' strategy are government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) with solid state ties. The Chinese government has provided resources for these GONGOs to develop partnerships abroad, hoping that these home-grown NGOs can serve as carriers of soft power and rectify some of the damage to community relations caused by Chinese investment. However, GONGOs are inexperienced in cross-border development work and have faced significant challenges in navigating overseas environments.³⁷ For example, Hsu and colleagues have shown that Chinese NGOs do not have detailed knowledge of host countries' domestic political and regulatory frameworks, and have yet to make a substantial impact in Africa.³⁸

INGOs, on the other hand, possess the global development experience and contacts that Chinese actors lack. They have been stepping in to mitigate development problems, facilitate collaboration overseas and seek to help China become a more responsible global actor.³⁹

Contextual factors for INGOs' engagement in China's 'going out' strategy

INGOs' engagement in China's 'going out' efforts is driven by factors relating to the political, economic and social environment in which they are embedded. As civil society space contracts around the world, NGOs in China have also seen their activities curtailed. INGOs, in particular, are suspected by Beijing of being backed by foreign powers with vested interests, infiltrated by these interests or serving as covers for secret activities.⁴⁰ Strict measures have thus been taken to regulate INGO activities, including a new *Law on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in China*, passed in 2016.⁴¹ Under this law, INGOs must find a professional supervisory agency, register with the public security bureau and report to both agencies. Registered INGOs are subject to government pressure and must be politically alert and cooperative if they are to maintain their registration status. Many INGOs were asked, directly or subtly, by the supervisory agencies to shift their programmatic focus to BRI-related projects. For

³⁶ Peiyuan Guo and Zhirong Duan, 'Community engagement by Chinese companies investing overseas', in Anthea Mulakala, ed., *Asian approaches to development cooperation: partners in Asian development cooperation. The role of the NGOs and the private sector* (Korea Development Institute-Asia Foundation, 2016), pp. 123-50.

³⁷ Lu Zeng, 'The Asia Foundation co-creates a Chinese NGO "going out" operation manual', in Mulakala, ed., *Asian approaches to development cooperation*, pp. 69-79.

³⁸ Jennifer Hsu, Timothy Hildebrandt and Reza Hasmath, "'Going out" or staying in? The expansion of Chinese NGOs in Africa', *Development Policy Review* 34: 3, 2016, pp. 423-39.

³⁹ Shawn Shieh and Signe Knutson, 'The roles and challenges of international NGOs in China's development', *China Development Brief* (Beijing, 2012), <https://chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/publications/special-report-the-roles-and-challenges-of-international-ngos-in-chinas-development/>.

⁴⁰ Author interview 8, Aug. 2019; author interview 9, June 2019; author interview 16, Oct. 2020.

⁴¹ For more information on the details and impact of this legislation, known as the 'INGO law', please see Mark Sidel, 'Managing the foreign: the drive to securitize foreign nonprofit and foundation management in China', *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 30: 4, 2019, pp. 664-77; Shuoyan Li, 'Global civil society under the new INGO regulatory law: a comparative case study on two INGOs in China', *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 31: 4, 2020, pp. 751-61.

example, one INGO changed its focus from sustainability development within China to the impact of Chinese investment overseas, partly because of subtle cues from its supervisory agency.⁴²

As well as coming under government pressure from Beijing, INGOs were asked by their western headquarters, funders and boards to turn their attention to China's global impact. For example, one INGO reported that its global and regional boards raised questions about Chinese companies' investment in BRI countries, which often focuses on building infrastructure projects such as coal plants, with consequent environmental issues.⁴³ The boards thus asked the INGO to look for opportunities to influence these companies' behaviour.⁴⁴ A few voices within the global INGO community have also highlighted the importance of INGOs in developing a global China strategy, which could include collaborating with Chinese outbound actors—both to take advantage of opportunities arising from Chinese overseas financing and technological innovation to support development, and to contain potential threats.⁴⁵

INGOs' shift of focus to China's 'going out' strategy is also influenced by the change in their perceived added value in China. With China's rapid social and economic development and rising wealth, INGOs are no longer valued for their ability to channel financial resources, expertise or best practices.⁴⁶ They have therefore had to overcome an 'existential crisis' and redefine the value they offer.⁴⁷ Their positioning within China, their familiarity with domestic concerns and policy processes, and often politically acute Chinese staff, provide them with opportunities to contribute to China's emergence as a responsible global actor. As one INGO leader succinctly summarized:

For the 30 years of reform and opening, our theory of change was to bring in outside expertise and technology and resources to help China. Now it has changed, and authorities see that China has figured out its own process of development, it doesn't need resources or expertise, but needs help to think about how to play its role in the world, to build capacity in financial institutions, and how to think about inequality [abroad].⁴⁸

Data and methods

This study draws on interviews, observation and participant immersion among INGOs operating in China. In-depth interviews with actors on the ground unveiled shifts in INGO activities and their impact on China's 'going out' strategy. These shifts would be difficult—if not impossible—to capture through official or even survey data, particularly given the sensitive and covert nature of many

⁴² Author interview 10, June 2020.

⁴³ Selina Ho, 'Infrastructure and Chinese power', *International Affairs* 96: 6, 2020, pp. 1461–85.

⁴⁴ Author interview 12, Oct. 2020.

⁴⁵ See Bertram Lang, 'Scanning the Horizon: sector guide #1', report prepared for *International Civil Society Centre*, <https://icscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/StH-Sector-Guide-China-November-2019.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Author interview 8, Aug. 2019; author interview 12, Oct. 2020; author interview 13, Oct. 2020.

⁴⁷ Author interview 31, Jan. 2021; author interview 16, Oct. 2020.

⁴⁸ Author interview 16, Oct. 2020.

activities. Iterative interactions with INGO staff, interviews and detailed analysis of specific projects were required to piece findings together.

The study draws primarily on 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Of these, 27 were with INGOs operating in China, and six with scholars and domestic actors, such as GONGOs and grassroots NGOs that have partnered with INGOs in 'going out'. Among the 27 interviews with INGO executives, some were from the same organizations: in all, we interviewed 21 distinct INGOs, based in a range of countries and regions, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, France, Hong Kong and Macau (see table 1). These INGOs work in various areas, including environmental protection, health, education, poverty alleviation, disaster relief, law and justice.

Table 1: Characteristics of INGOs interviewed for this article

| <i>Registration status</i> | <i>Headquarters location</i> | <i>Field of work</i> | <i>Engagement in 'going out'</i> |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Registered: 14 | United States: 12 | Comprehensive development: 11 | Yes: 17 |
| Not registered: 7 | United Kingdom: 3 | Environment: 8 | No: 4 |
| | Europe: 2 | Health: 1 | |
| | Hong Kong: 3 | Law: 1 | |
| | Macau: 1 | Hunger relief: 1 | |
| | | Education: 1 | |

Most interviews were conducted in 2019–2021 via video-conference or in person. Informants were initially identified through personal networks, and subsequent interviews were arranged through snowball sampling, which established a strong foundation of trust and facilitated candid responses on potentially sensitive issues. Nonetheless, to alleviate concerns, participants were informed in advance that interviews would be confidential and anonymous. Both authors were present in most interviews, and extensive notes were taken. Annual reports, news reports, and published interviews and talks related to the sample of INGOs were also examined.

While our sample may not be representative of all INGOs operating in China, we believe that we have achieved data saturation, to the point where further data collection would probably yield similar results and confirm emerging themes and conclusions.⁴⁹ The interviews were analysed qualitatively, following a grounded theory approach.⁵⁰ The analysis follows three steps. The first is open coding, which involves labelling the texts, dividing them into segments, and scrutinizing for commonalities that could reflect categories or themes. For example, one theme

⁴⁹ Robert K. Yin, *Case study research: design and methods* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014).

⁵⁰ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing grounded theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).

is related to action, which is manifested in such phrases as 'exchanging information', 'building community support' and 'piloting projects'. The second step is axial coding, which makes connections among the categories and subcategories. Building on this coding stage, we combined different dimensions to identify the main clusters: these include gaps and challenges, to capture the various problems associated with 'going out'; resources, both tangible and intangible, that INGOs bring to various actors; and roles, enabling examination of the mechanisms through which INGOs work with other actors to fill the gaps in 'going out', such as bridging resources or developing pilot projects. The third step is selective theoretical coding, which enables the conceptualization of an analytical story and its coherent presentation. At this stage, a typology of INGO acting as intermediaries was developed.

A typology of INGOs' intermediary roles

We found that 81 per cent of interviewed INGOs have been involved in facilitating China's 'going out' strategy. Our findings show that INGOs play four intermediary roles, depending on the content of intermediary support and the function of the intermediary (see figure 1).

Figure 1: A typology of INGOs' intermediary roles in China's 'going out' strategy

| | | <i>Function of the intermediary</i> | |
|--|-----------------------------|---|--|
| | | <i>Bridging</i> | <i>Initiating</i> |
| <i>Content of intermediary support</i> | <i>Tangible resources</i> | <p>I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridging funds, expertise • Integrating resources | <p>III</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing funds, technical assistance, expertise • Building capacity |
| | <i>Intangible resources</i> | <p>II</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesizing knowledge • Connecting actors | <p>IV</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modelling innovations • Telling China's story |

Bridging tangible resources

Chinese foreign aid projects are carried out in three siloed categories: economic cooperation, which includes the construction of basic infrastructure; material assistance, which includes the provision of equipment or goods; and technical assistance, which includes bringing personnel to China for training and capacity-

building, or sending Chinese personnel abroad. The aid apparatus is divided into functional areas, which are not systematically integrated, leading to practical difficulties in implementation. For example, public health projects may include hospital construction, the provision of medical equipment and drugs, and training of medical personnel, but these may take place in different localities and be coordinated by different bodies.

INGOs have a unique capacity to integrate and bridge different tangible resources. As one respondent noted, ‘These are naturally intersecting categories, and we [the INGO] can fill the gap.’ The INGO worked with Chinese aid agencies to integrate these siloed categories by bridging different resources from key stakeholders. For example, one of its projects focuses on fighting malaria in an African country. After developing a resource inventory (such as insect repellents, bed-nets and drugs), the INGO approached state departments in China and other countries to secure resource commitments. It also worked with local partners to distribute medical resources to the communities.⁵¹

One INGO relies on its strong partnerships with overseas agencies to bridge various resources, such as finance, technical assistance and expertise.⁵² INGOs such as this coordinate resources and expertise from different actors, such as donors, universities, think tanks and intergovernmental organizations. One respondent mentioned that some INGOs coordinate collaboration between international development NGOs and Chinese development agencies to help them implement joint projects in a third country. These networks enabled the INGO in question to support Chinese actors in responding to a major earthquake in one of China’s BRI partner countries.⁵³ Another INGO helped the Chinese government organize an international conference on biodiversity by coordinating efforts between international environmental bodies and domestic actors, including inviting guest speakers, organizing concurrent panels and mobilizing public support.⁵⁴

Bridging intangible resources

Community engagement seems to be the most significant problem area for Chinese government actors, enterprises or NGOs going abroad. Insensitivity to community needs and lack of proficiency in local language and culture contribute to the issue. One INGO executive said: ‘Chinese teams do have the desire to collaborate with local actors, but they don’t know how.’⁵⁵ INGOs have bridged some of these intangible gaps by synthesizing knowledge, interacting with local community stakeholders and connecting Chinese actors with these groups.

First, INGOs serve as hubs for synthesizing and disseminating knowledge about outbound development. They have created institutionalized platforms for dialogue between Chinese NGOs and their counterparts in Chinese aid-receiving

⁵¹ Author interview 24, Nov. 2020.

⁵² Author interview 1, Sept. 2018.

⁵³ Author interview 29, Dec. 2020.

⁵⁴ Author interview 32, Jan. 2021.

⁵⁵ Author interview 14, Oct. 2020.

countries. These platforms include a range of civil society actors who can explore how civil society can participate in Chinese outbound activities in a meaningful way beyond simply playing a facilitating or oppositional role.⁵⁶ INGOs gather knowledge by researching Chinese aid programmes in other countries and disseminating it through country-specific case-studies with policy recommendations, aiming to increase the effectiveness of Chinese aid abroad.⁵⁷

Second, some INGOs bring community voices to the attention of Chinese private and government stakeholders. INGOs have convened spaces in which Chinese NGOs and think tanks can interact with overseas grassroots stakeholders to discuss the environmental impacts of Chinese investment. For example, one INGO collects community feedback through civil society actors abroad and then channels it back to Chinese enterprises or officials. These Chinese enterprises, such as Huawei, have projects in many countries and must navigate the complexities of a diverse range of local communities. The INGO has assisted community stakeholders to engage with the enterprises through Chinese NGOs, who know the Chinese context and can directly connect to enterprise headquarters.⁵⁸

Third, INGOs play an important role in brokering trusted partnerships with community organizations and NGOs in host countries. As mentioned above, Chinese aid projects abroad, government or non-governmental alike, often face significant difficulties establishing contact with local communities, NGOs and partners on the ground. Others identify local partners based on political ties to the Chinese Communist Party or host incumbent governments only to have these choices questioned by local citizens. For example, a Chinese GONGO doing cataract surgery in Myanmar chose to work with an organization directly under the Burmese army rather than with local hospitals, thereby distancing itself from local communities and impeding trust-building.⁵⁹ Similarly, a Yunnan-based foundation carrying out cardiac testing for children and transferring children in need of surgery back to China was collaborating with the local Youth League, which was staffed by 'local officials' sons and daughters rather than individuals in the community'.⁶⁰ Thus, Chinese actors going abroad hope to work with what would be considered 'real civil society rather than organizations that people don't feel happy about'.⁶¹ INGOs therefore supply an important resource in the form of, as one respondent put it, 'international network resources [*guoji wangluo ziyuan*]'.⁶² Several INGOs with China offices mentioned drawing on their offices in other countries to facilitate Chinese projects in those countries.⁶³ INGOs also function as trusted relationship brokers, connecting Chinese projects to trusted local NGOs or community leaders. One INGO senior programme officer noted that Chinese aid projects are often focused interventions and isolated from local communities.

⁵⁶ Author interview 33, Jan. 2021.

⁵⁷ Author interview 4, Dec. 2018.

⁵⁸ Author interview 23, Nov. 2020.

⁵⁹ Author interview 27, Nov. 2020.

⁶⁰ Author interview 27, Nov. 2020.

⁶¹ Author interview 27, Nov. 2020.

⁶² Author interview 28, Nov. 2020.

⁶³ Author interview 16, Oct. 2020; author interview 4, Dec. 2018.

He explained:

While Chinese actors do see the value in finding local partners, they do not want extra trouble. Local organizations are of all different kinds. So how do they know who is trustworthy and good? We [the INGO] can identify local partners; this way at least there are some relationship guarantees [*danbao guanxi*].⁶⁴

Initiating tangible resources

Chinese government funding for foreign investment is often rigidly allocated to different areas, such as infrastructure or personnel, and excludes other areas, such as international exchange and training.⁶⁵ INGOs sometimes provide specialized funding to initiate activities in neglected issue areas. Funding helps jump-start aid projects; it also gives Chinese personnel and host country staff alike incentives to work collaboratively on the projects. When Chinese teams leave, funding is provided to maintain the project and empower local organizations. For example, overseas hospital construction is often paired with medical teams of clinicians who train local teams in other countries. Funding for these teams is usually limited to the Chinese doctors' salaries and travel expenses; the teams lack the skills and resources to interact with local organizations and communities. One INGO provided supplementary funding for host-country facilitators to work with Chinese physicians to bring their knowledge and expertise to neighbouring communities, expanding the efficacy of medical projects abroad. 'Chinese money is not allowed to be spent on foreigners [local facilitators], so we can solve this problem for them. But we also need to supplement a little to the Chinese personnel to motivate them.'⁶⁶

In addition to insufficient funding in certain areas, many outbound domestic enterprises and NGOs lack the capacity and resources to go abroad. For example, while domestic NGOs are enthusiastic about 'going out', they realize that 'there's a lot of difficulty in doing it ... they need to have enough capacity, money, people, language, and expertise to work abroad, and most don't have that'.⁶⁷ Therefore, as interest grows, 'the need to fill the outbound NGO capacity gaps has become urgent'.⁶⁸ INGOs have played an increasingly active role in training outbound Chinese government agencies, enterprises and NGOs to strengthen their capacity.

First, INGOs have provided training to government officials. For example, an INGO with existing globalized physical training mechanisms was approached to train official Chinese medical teams. Another INGO, a bilingual organization that has materials available in Chinese, was approached by the National Poverty Alleviation Office, a GONGO tasked with fighting poverty in BRI countries but without sufficient capacity to carry out the work and communicate with local stakeholders. The INGO conducted capacity-building training for Chinese

⁶⁴ Author interview 24, Nov. 2020.

⁶⁵ Author interview 13, Oct. 2020.

⁶⁶ Author interview 24, Nov. 2020.

⁶⁷ Author interview 16, Oct. 2020.

⁶⁸ Zeng, 'The Asia Foundation co-creates a Chinese NGO "going out" operation manual', p. 69.

government officials to impart 'international standards and norms' and teach them how to work internationally.⁶⁹

Second, state-owned and private enterprises comprise another set of beneficiaries in INGOs' capacity-building efforts. Such training fulfils a dual function—it facilitates Chinese outbound investment; and it seeks to shape this investment in ways that make it more sustainable, equitable and responsible. For example, one INGO works with industrial associations and corporate social responsibility consulting agencies to build the capacity of Chinese investors to deal with environmental and gender issues. They also work with Chinese companies to promote compliance with environmental standards and environmentally responsible behaviour.

Third, INGOs have played a significant role in capacity-building for domestic civil society organizations in China; such capacity-building has now extended into training domestic NGOs to 'go out'. For Chinese NGOs, this could involve setting up an office abroad, implementing programmes abroad, or participating in international networks and international forums.⁷⁰ One INGO works with Chinese NGOs to help them to participate in such forums and to join civil society networks and platforms under the BRI, as one of the five cooperation priorities of the initiative set out by the National Development and Reform Commission under the rubric of 'people-to-people connections'.⁷¹ Led by an experienced INGO, several INGOs compiled a training manual for outbound Chinese NGOs. The manual includes such topics as feasibility studies, stakeholder engagement, daily operations, fundraising and project management. It helps Chinese NGOs working abroad to navigate foreign customs, regulations and expectations. This operation manual, which 'drew the first roadmap for Chinese NGOs' overseas operations and has found wide application in capacity-building activities for outbound NGOs', was used to train over 200 Chinese NGOs in 2016 alone.⁷²

Initiating intangible resources

Many of China's outbound activities are carried out to expand the reach of the country's 'soft power'.⁷³ While the classic formulation of the soft power concept characterizes it dichotomously in distinction from 'hard power'—a country's economic, political and military might—others suggest that the two are inextricably linked.⁷⁴ Most of the Chinese literature on the subject suggests that while

⁶⁹ Author interview 9, June 2019.

⁷⁰ Author interview 28, Nov. 2020.

⁷¹ Author interview 28, Nov. 2020.

⁷² Zeng, 'The Asia Foundation co-creates a Chinese NGO "going out" operation manual', p. 69.

⁷³ For Nye, soft power relies on attraction and co-optation to shape the preferences of others, rather than coercion. The concept has become popular in Chinese official discourse and a focus of foreign policy, as evidenced by Xi's 2014 directive to 'increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world'. See Joseph Nye, 'Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept', *Palgrave Communications* 3: 1, 2017, pp. 1–3; 'Enhancing cultural soft power, tell Chinese stories well', *People's Daily*, 7 Jan. 2019, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0107/c40531-30507321.html>.

⁷⁴ Mingjiang Li, 'Soft power: nurture not nature', in Ming Li, ed., *Soft power: China's emerging strategy in international politics* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 1–18; Xin Xin, 'Soft power to whom? A critical analysis of the publicity film *CPC (Communist Party of China) is with you along the way* in relation to China's soft power project', *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism and Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information*

China's sustained economic growth has laid a solid foundation for the extension of its soft power across the world, it faces several challenges in doing so, such as limited capacity in agenda-setting in international affairs and limited cultural appeal (as indicated by an underdeveloped cultural industry and NGO sector).⁷⁵ Western commentators view China's soft power drive as largely ineffective, despite the investment of resources on a massive scale.⁷⁶ This ineffectiveness is attributed to China's authoritarian political structure and a lack of the attractive 'universal' values and norms espoused by the West.⁷⁷ The scholarly consensus is thus that China has a soft power deficit.⁷⁸

In this area, INGOs engage in China's 'going out' strategy by modelling new approaches and telling China's story, which can contribute to the increase of China's soft power. They also exert some influence on China's global strategy, not through oppositional tactics, but discreetly, from within, by modelling innovations and exerting discursive influence or epistemic power.⁷⁹

Establishing model projects plays an important role in influencing China's outbound efforts. One INGO sets up model projects to respond to the government's need by integrating 'theory and practice'. It selects a country where public health is a significant concern and funds health and agricultural pilot projects with Chinese and local partners. It then monitors the project to make sure they run smoothly. As the executive noted: 'We don't need to promote to the Chinese government because Chinese collaborators are already all too eager to display the results back to Chinese authorities.'⁸⁰ Another environmental INGO adopted a similar approach.⁸¹ It sought to promote clean energy as part of the 'green BRI' by conducting analyses of various stakeholders, their interests, capacities and niche contributions, by promoting green development ideas to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and by piloting renewable energy projects in Africa. In addition, one INGO developed a grievance mechanism to enable local civil society organizations outside China to articulate their grievances to Chinese financial institutions, creating a feedback mechanism to bring higher environmental, social and governance standards into Chinese overseas financing.⁸²

INGOs have also been involved in telling China's story to the world. One INGO reported that its government supervisory department 'wants us to tell the China story well, to take China's experience to the world'. Now that China has a presence on more international stages, the INGO is invited 'to go and be cheer-

Society 18: 1, 2020, pp. 286–303.

⁷⁵ Jinhui Huang and Zhongyi Ding, 'Review on research of China's national soft power', *Social Sciences*, no. 5, 2010, pp. 31–9.

⁷⁶ Shambaugh, 'China's soft-power push', p. 99.

⁷⁷ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 'What China and Russia don't get about soft power', *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>; Shambaugh, 'China's soft-power push', p. 99.

⁷⁸ Maria Repnikova, 'Rethinking China's soft power: "pragmatic enticement" of Confucius Institutes in Ethiopia', paper presented at annual meeting of Association for Chinese Political Studies (virtual meeting), Oct. 2020.

⁷⁹ May Farid and Hui Li, 'Reciprocal engagement and NGO policy influence on the local state in China', *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 32: 3, 2021, pp. 597–609.

⁸⁰ Author interview 24, Nov. 2020.

⁸¹ Author interview 17, Jan. 2021.

⁸² Author interview 16, Oct. 2020.

leaders, supporters, and eventually become a key member of those initiatives. This is very clear: we are asked to fill this role.⁸³ Another INGO discussed being called on to assist in telling China's development story to the world:

The government wants us to bring China's development experiences to the world. So we serve as a 'middle-man' or 'medium'. For example, in Africa, the government wants us to demonstrate China in the developing world, to highlight what it has done.⁸⁴

Telling China's story involves significant translation work: 'For China to go abroad involves contextual and language problems, how to use the language and thinking necessary for entering these international spaces. In this area we [as an INGO] definitely have a value add.'⁸⁵ INGOs help government departments describe their work in a language that can be understood by international actors.⁸⁶

Chinese international development work is closely intertwined with its diplomacy. As one respondent pointed out, the supervisor of the newly established China International Development Cooperation Agency reports to the foreign minister, China's top diplomat.⁸⁷ Several INGOs therefore saw themselves as essentially engaged in a form of diplomatic activity. One INGO facilitated lower-level bilateral collaboration between local governments on environmental issues and characterized its work as 'track II diplomacy'.⁸⁸ Like INGOs elsewhere, INGOs operating in China can step in to engage in 'back-channel diplomacy' as non-state actors to advance diplomatic climate, environmental and governance agendas, particularly when track I diplomacy stalls. For example, one INGO seeks to bring both Chinese and BRI countries' civil society voices to international institutions and global governance forums, such as the BRI platform or regional multilateral banks.⁸⁹

Discussion

As INGOs become increasingly involved in the globalizing efforts of rising powers and in SSC, they face three significant and interrelated paradoxes.

Conflicts between domestic and international work

Some INGOs expressed concern about balancing domestic priorities with the push to look overseas. On the one hand, they recognize the importance of China's global engagement and the need to engage with it, whether they wish to or not. At the same time, these groups feel the need to focus their resources within China. As one respondent put it:

⁸³ Author interview 31, Jan. 2021.

⁸⁴ Author interview 9, June 2019.

⁸⁵ Author interview 31, Jan. 2021.

⁸⁶ Author interview 9, June 2019.

⁸⁷ Author interview 24, Nov. 2020.

⁸⁸ Author interview 12, Oct. 2020.

⁸⁹ Author interview 33, Jan. 2021.

We feel really torn because it's exciting work, but it also shifts our focus. And also there's the Belt and Road Initiative, of course, which is like formalizing all that. And as a kind of a mini compromise, we decided, OK, we'll participate a little bit in the Belt and Road stuff because it is so important ... but it would be spreading kind of our resources and our strategy a little bit thin.⁹⁰

Legitimacy concerns: speaking for China or speaking truth?

In seeking to promote responsible engagement, INGOs recognize that an effective strategy requires a careful avoidance of two extremes. One is to 'uncritically endorse China's role', while the other is 'demonizing China and largely exculpating the West (a most unsatisfactory arbiter of what "responsible power" should look like)', or taking actions that seem even implicitly to be pressuring China 'to join the "ethical" West'.⁹¹ In reality, it is challenging for INGOs to find a balance between these extremes. When working with different actors in China's outbound efforts, INGOs must navigate a complex environment and be alert to social, cultural and political sensitivities in China, their headquarter countries and host countries. When bridging resources, introducing international norms, developing innovative models and telling the China story, INGOs face a tension between speaking their perceived truth and speaking for the party-state. As one respondent vividly observed:

In some senses, it seems like if a group like [INGO name] does that, I guess they're sort of using their legitimacy and extending it to that other entity under the Chinese Communist Party and giving them legitimacy and paying for it. And I guess my question is, well, why do you want to do that? How does that change any of these sorts of issues on the ground?⁹²

Outcomes of intermediation: facilitating or shaping China's outbound expansion?

Astute INGOs observe that influencing China's outbound efforts, even to a small degree, translates into an impact on the broader global governance landscape. Despite this potential, questions remain about whether INGOs modulate China's global influence or are simply accelerating it. Several respondents questioned the efficacy of INGOs' efforts 'to influence the way China does aid'.⁹³ Such scepticism may also come from INGOs' headquarters: 'We are tiny, our board would say: how do you think you can change the trajectory of China's overseas investment?'⁹⁴

Nonetheless, in some cases, INGOs are exerting influence on China's global engagement, in several ways. First, they do so indirectly by influencing Chinese outbound actors. As they shape dialogue and conduct training for Chinese actors

⁹⁰ Author interview 12, Oct. 2020.

⁹¹ Emma Mawdsley, 'Fu Manchu versus Dr Livingstone in the dark continent? Representing China, Africa and the West in British broadsheet newspapers', *Political Geography* 27: 5, 2008, pp. 509–29.

⁹² Author interview 27, Nov. 2020.

⁹³ Author interview 27, Nov. 2020.

⁹⁴ Author interview 16, Oct. 2020.

going abroad, they infuse these actors with concepts, approaches and norms that can, in turn, have an impact on China's aid and investment. This occurs more directly when INGOs engage official actors in research, training or capacity-building, but also indirectly when INGOs transfer global norms and approaches to Chinese NGOs and enterprises.

INGOs are applying lessons learned from domestic operations in China to their engagement in China's outbound development efforts.⁹⁵ Knowing that 'naming and shaming' strategies are largely ineffective, they quietly effect change by working closely with objects of potential influence in collaborative projects. By their nature, these effects are largely invisible: 'In the NGO field, publicity is everything, to secure funding and support. But the nature of this work in China is that it *can't* be publicized.'⁹⁶

As the number of potentially sensitive topics rises with the increasingly restrictive political climate, INGOs (like their domestic Chinese counterparts) have learned to 'code' or 'label' sensitive issues wisely and to pursue sensitive work under the radar. One INGO discussed how previously innocuous gender issues have become a sensitive topic since 2015. After that date, the organization continued to pursue gender projects, but 'put them under the label of sustainability; we just can't put them in our headlines any more'.⁹⁷

Conclusions

Scholars and practitioners increasingly agree that China's outbound efforts and the recent BRI have become more of a global governance platform than a simple economic initiative. The Chinese government has relied heavily on SOEs, party institutional actors (such as the Propaganda Department and the United Front Work Department), and state-controlled media to project its image and frame narratives around its international development cooperation. INGOs have never been considered major players in China's soft power projection.⁹⁸ However, our research unveils that INGOs have played an important intermediary role in China's outbound efforts.

Drawing on in-depth interviews, we developed a typology of INGO intermediary roles in the process, based on the content of intermediary support (tangible vs intangible resources) and the function of the intermediary (bridging vs initiating). These intermediary roles are neither mutually independent nor temporally fixed; they may change over time, with some predictable patterns in movement from one role to another. For example, an INGO may initially bridge tangible resources; then, as it becomes more involved and strengthens trust with Chinese government agencies, SOEs or NGOs, it may be asked to help initiate tangible

⁹⁵ See May Farid, 'Advocacy in action: China's grassroots NGOs as catalysts for policy innovation', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 54: 4, 2019, pp. 528–49; Hui Li, Carlos Wing-Hung Lo and Shui-Yan Tang, 'Nonprofit policy advocacy under authoritarianism', *Public Administration Review* 77:1, 2017, pp. 103–17.

⁹⁶ Author interview 33, Jan. 2021.

⁹⁷ Author interview 33, Jan. 2021.

⁹⁸ We thank one of the reviewers for this important point.

and intangible resources, for example providing capacity-building training and telling China's story abroad. It is also likely that an INGO may simultaneously play multiple intermediary roles, which may be in support of or in conflict with one another. Each INGO, therefore, must assess organizational characteristics and partner expectations, identify competitive advantages and determine its optimal role.

Our framework responds to Mitchell and Schmitz's conceptualization of principled instrumentalism by incorporating tenets associated with constructivist and rationalist research and highlighting the role of INGOs in resource exchange and norm diffusion and socialization.⁹⁹ It offers possibilities for fruitful collaboration between different perspectives in international development. In addition, while most intermediary studies focus on one or two intermediary roles in business transactions, few have mapped out NGOs' intermediary roles on the basis of different dimensions. Our framework contributes to this literature by proposing a typology of INGO intermediary roles in international development.

This framework serves as a starting point for future theorization. First, future studies can examine (a) how INGO characteristics and operating environments affect their strategic choice of intermediary roles; (b) how these roles evolve; and (c) the impact of INGOs' intermediary roles on organizational development, China's 'going out' strategy and, more broadly, global governance. Second, our integrated framework can be applied to analyses of INGO activities in other rising powers (e.g. Brazil and India) providing aid to the global South, allowing for fruitful comparative studies. For example, INGOs can play different forms of bridging and initiating functions in view of the differing political regimes, levels of economic development and cultural legacies across these countries.

Widely divergent opinions, among scholars and publics alike, on China's role in international development create a singular challenge for INGOs operating in China, which need to navigate both the political climate that dominates at their western headquarters on the one hand, and the narratives prevalent in China and in many of the other countries in which they operate on the other. Within this shifting and perilous complexity, these organizations must refine their theories of change, redefine the value they can add and revisit their roles as important global actors. How they do so has implications for predictions of where global civil society will choose to invest its significant material and discursive resources, and for our understanding of how global actors under authoritarianism internalize, resist or promote its projects.

⁹⁹ Mitchell and Schmitz, 'Principled instrumentalism', p. 487.