

Beyond Activism: Environmental NGOs As Shadow Political Institutions in Climate Governance

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Abstract:

Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) are widely conceptualized as external pressure and watchdog groups seeking to influence policy decisions outside formal state structures. However, with increasing intensity of global climate crisis, decreasing levels of public confidence in governmental institutions, and increased globalization of environmental regulation, ENGOS are evolving both operationally and politically. In this paper it is argued that ENGOS are becoming 'shadow political institutions' operating within current climate governance frameworks. While ENGOS do not possess formal constitutional authority or electoral legitimacy, they currently influence public policy, create a legislative agenda, mobilize citizens to become involved in politics, operate as part of international climate negotiation processes, and make contributions to actual governance processes. Using governance theory, neo institutionalism and political opportunity structure theories, this research will examine how ENGOS transitioned beyond being activist organizations and became quasi politically active. This article also examines how ENGOS reshape environmental governance by addressing institutional gaps left by political parties and state actors.

Keywords: Climate Governance, Civil Society, Environmental NGOs, Shadow Political Institutions, Political Mobilisation, Political Representation.

Introduction

Climate Change is one of the most dominant governance challenges facing governments around the world today. Governments are being asked to do something about increasing global temperature, declining biodiversity, deteriorating ecosystems, and inequitable distribution of environmental burdens. Many governments, however, have been unable or unwilling to act on climate change because their electoral calculus, economic interests, ideological differences, and institutional resistance to change are too great. As a result, ENGOS have become significantly more important to the governance process than they were previously. Historically, ENGOS worked outside government and corporate structures to monitor what governments and

corporations did relative to the environment; to organize public campaigns focused on environmental issues; and to raise public awareness regarding environmental problems. However, the current state of climate politics indicates an important shift toward a new role for ENGOs where they work inside government processes historically exclusive to political institutions. ENGOs are participating in international climate negotiations; contributing to the development of policy; influencing election-based discourse; facilitating coordination among transnational advocacy networks; and using digital media to mobilize people who want to take action. ENGOs like Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and Fridays for the Future are now able to shape both public perception of environmental issues and environmental policy globally.

Conceptualising ENGOS As Shadow Political Institutions

The term ‘shadow political institutions’ describes all types of organizations functioning outside governmental formal frameworks but in addition to their non-political role function like a typical political institution in terms of agenda-setting, policy-influencing, governing participation, public mobilizing, norms creating and politically representative roles. In this article it is argued that ENGOs are now performing many of these shadow political institution roles within modern environmental governance and in so doing have become significant players in environmental politics working closely with governments and global institutional bodies. ENGO’s exert considerable power over the practice of environmental politics through influencing government policies, providing science-based information, utilizing the media for environmental messaging, using legal action to force policy changes and building transnational networks to facilitate collaborative environmental governance (Bulkeley & Newell, 2015).

NGOs influence political processes by utilizing four types of political activity including; information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics and accountability politics (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). These forms of political action allow ENGO’s to push both government and corporate decision making while influencing public discussion surrounding environmental disasters and sustainability. Groups such as Sierra Club, WWF and Greenpeace began in their early years as environmental organizations and have become significant political players. The anti-whale campaign and the nuclear power campaign led by Greenpeace in the 1970s illustrated that ENGO’s can affect international environmental policy and also effect a change in public perception (Doyle, 2005). As an example, the Chipko movement was able to demonstrate how local environmental activism can bring about changes in forest management policies and provide representation to those who are most marginalized.

The institutional involvement of ENGOs rose dramatically following the recognition of civil society at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit as an important player in the global governance of the environment. Today’s environmental governance is increasingly decentralized and multi-stakeholder in nature with participants including governments, corporations, international institutions and civil society organizations. (Bulkeley &

Newell, 2015). In the context of the present governance model, ENGOs operate in multiple roles including agenda setting, influencing policy, mobilizing public support, and entrepreneurialism as they seek to create new norms or change existing ones. For example, ENGOs such as 350.org have made fossil-fuel divestment and climate justice campaigns more mainstream; ClientEarth uses strategic litigation to enforce greater accountability for the environment; and Fridays for Future, a global movement of young people advocating for immediate climate action, mobilized youth across the world to put pressure on their respective national governments to take action to address climate change. ENGOs are significant actors in creating norms that promote sustainable development, environmental justice, and inter-generational equity. As well as using grassroots campaigns to protest against deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest and the construction of pipelines such as the Dakota Access Pipeline (an underground pipeline over 1,800 miles long located in North America), ENGOs help to establish a sense of environmental ethics and stimulate policy debate outside traditional political systems. For example, in India ENGOs represent marginalized communities who were previously excluded from formal decision-making processes. Additionally, these same ENGOs challenge dominant models of economic development. Organizations such as Centre for Science and Environment, TERI, Indian Youth Climate Network, Greenpeace India, WWF-India, Development Alternatives, and Unessa Foundation use renewable energy generation methods, promote afforestation, implement waste management practices, develop climate adaptation plans, conduct research and deliver community-based resilience building programs.

The increasing role of ENGOs in climate governance was also evident from their increasing numbers as part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) observer organization. In total 1236 observer organizations were represented at COP 21 in Paris in 2015; of these 1109 were NGOs and 71 international government organizations (IGOs) (UNFCCC, 2015); by COP 30 in Glasgow in 2025 this number had increased to 4081; of which 3907 were NGOs, and 174 IGOs. Overall, there has been an increase of over 230% since COP 21 (UNFCCC, 2026). Many types of actors are included among these organizations, for example, environmental organizations, indigenous people's organizations, youth networks, women & gender groups, research institutions, labour unions and business associations. As such, they demonstrate how the field of climate governance is being transformed into a diverse multi-stakeholder system.

Theoretical Framework

Neo Institutional Theory and Political Opportunity Theory provide additional insight into the emergence and development of ENGO's role in Climate Governance. Governance Theory demonstrates that political authority is no longer a monopoly of the central government but has been diffused to other actors including State and Non-State Actors through policy networks, where cooperation and collaboration are seen as key aspects of effective governance. Rhodes outlines how, since the 1970s, modern governance has come to rely

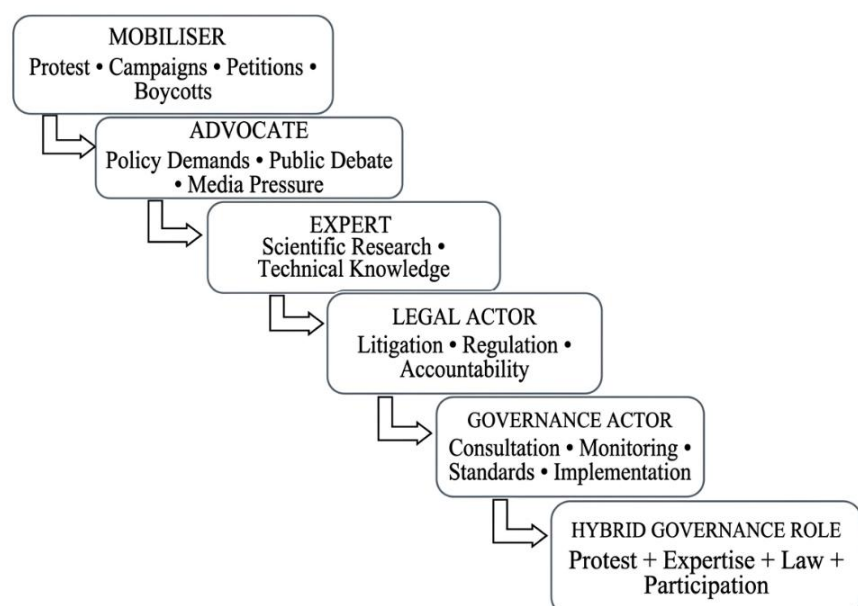
on collaborative or cooperative forms of governance amongst governments, international institutions, and Civil Society Organizations (Rhodes, 1997). ENGOs provide important contributions to this form of governance; they advocate for policies that promote environmental protection at both national and international levels; they bring specialized scientific knowledge; they mobilize public opinion; and they cooperate with each other across borders. According to James G March and Johan P Olsen, the gradual acquisition of legitimacy and institutional authority by ENGOs can be explained in part by the neo institutionalist view that institutions become authoritative because of their organizational structures, professionalized practices, and established norms (March & Olsen, 1989). Many ENGOs today function in much the same way as formal political institutions; they are staffed with expert employees who work within sophisticated networks that span many countries. Finally, Political Opportunity Theory provides an explanation for why ENGOs have grown in importance as participants in Climate Governance. When Government responds poorly to the problems caused by climate change, it creates an environment in which social movements can emerge as powerful players in the governance process. Sidney Tarrow points out that Social Movements tend to be successful and grow stronger when a government fails to respond effectively to Public Concerns (Tarrow, 2011).

From Protest Politics to Governance Participation

A key shift in the function of ENGOs exists today in contemporary climate politics. In their early years, ENGOs operated largely outside of formal government processes. Therefore, ENGOs relied upon other means to bring about environmental policies, including but not limited to; protests, petitioning, civil disobedience and mass media campaigns. Examples of this can be seen with Greenpeace's (1970s-1980s) international campaigns on issues like commercial whaling, nuclear testing in the Pacific and large-scale deforestation. Likewise, the Chipko Movement in India used grassroots environmental activism to influence policy at the national level by using community based nonviolent resistance to protect forest resources. The movement's success was based on moral legitimacy, citizen involvement and drawing attention through media outlets to build support among citizens and create pressure for policymakers to take action. Today, groups such as 350.org, Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future continue this pattern of influencing public policy indirectly through the organization of global climate marches, strikes, raising awareness of climate related concerns among citizens and pressuring governments to include climate change at the top of their policy agendas. While this approach has had significant results regarding influencing what topics are placed on government policy agendas and building citizen level support for climate related actions; it continues to limit the effectiveness of ENGOs to directly influence the process of policy creation due to the fact that most often they act outside of traditional governmental decision-making frameworks.

Over the last twenty years the functions of some ENGOs have broadened greatly. Rather than depending on protest and lobbying, many ENGOs are now using various forms of engagement with national Governments, International Organizations, Regulatory Agencies and other institutions in order to exercise their influence through Shadow Governance. This form of governance includes advocacy for policy, conducting scientific research, participating in technical consultations, using strategic litigation, monitoring policy, and negotiating at an international level. For example, the World Resources Institute (WRI), was one of the co-authors of the Green House Gas (GHG) Protocol that is currently being utilized by over 50% of global companies for measurement and reporting GHG emissions. Similarly, the World Wildlife Fund uses its scientific capacity to contribute to forest conservation programs, biodiversity governance, REDD+ initiatives and ClientEarth use strategic litigation to force compliance from Governments in a number of European Countries regarding environmental and climate obligations. Organizations such as Climate Action Network, WWF, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth all participated in influencing climate negotiations during the COP 21 negotiations that led to the adoption of the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 through the submission of expert reports, provision of technical briefing papers, lobbying and running public awareness campaigns. These organizations did not possess formal voting powers but were able to influence discussion related to the establishment of emission reduction targets, transparency and accountability arrangements for emissions reductions (Falkner, 2016). The increasing role of ENGOs in governance processes can also be observed in legislative processes. Environmental organizations in Europe have provided input into the development of renewable energy legislation; biodiversity conservation policies; and commitment to achieve carbon neutrality. In Germany, organizations such as BUND and NABU frequently work together with policymakers; parliamentary committees and Government Departments through providing them with technical advice and policy suggestions. Similarly, Greenpeace Germany has been influential in generating public and political debate regarding coal exit strategies and the shift towards renewable energy.

Figure 1: Evolution of ENGO Political Roles



Source: Author's Compilation

This research has demonstrated that ENGOs have moved from simply being protest focused advocacy groups toward becoming significant participants in the processes of environmental governance. As such, while public demonstrations and raising environmental awareness are still at the core of what most ENGOs do, it appears that an increasing number of these organizations now actively participate in the development of policies, the generation of new scientific knowledge, the establishment of standards, providing technical assistance related to policy implementation, enforcement and ensuring that compliance occurs with established environmental regulations. While ENGOs are external to the government's formal organizational structure and therefore lack the statutory authority to make decisions regarding policy or regulation, they continue to engage in governmental activities and provide technical information that enables them to carry out tasks typically performed by public institutions. The evolution of ENGOs' roles within climate governance demonstrates the increasingly networked nature of governance of climate issues; and how authorities can be created through the interaction of state and non-state actors, which is described as authority through networks (Bulkeley & Newell, 2015). Thus, examining ENGOs as shadow political institutions provides an effective framework for analysing the expansion of their political roles.

ENGOs In Networked Governance

ENGOs have greatly increased the ability of democratic participation within the area of climate governance through involvement in public discussions about environmental issues, development of knowledge, and protection of the rights of vulnerable populations. As a result, ENGOs add new pathways for representation, knowledge generation, and impact on policies in global climate processes (UNFCCC, 2024). Therefore, the combination of the experiences and needs of affected communities and the expertise and advocacy of ENGOs will enhance inclusive, participatory and accountable climate governance. In addition, today's role of ENGOs reflect an overall trend toward multi actor climate governance where states increasingly collaborate with governments, NGOs, corporations, international organizations, experts and local communities. Furthermore, ENGOs now play roles beyond that of activist or advocates. They also engage in policy making, knowledge creation, governance and political mobilization (IPCC, 2022) and when working together with formal institutions are able to increase participatory and networked environmental politics. Ultimately, the increasing importance of ENGOs is indicative that modern climate governance is increasingly dependent upon citizen participation; community-based expertise and civil society engagement beyond conventional political or electoral institutions.

Digital Mobilization and Political Communication

Digital communication opened up an enlarged political space for ENGO's. They are now able to reach out to citizens, the media, and politicians simultaneously. Through social media, online petitions, digital campaigning, and international networking, organizations such as Greenpeace, 350.org, and Fridays for Future

were able to garner public support, bring climate issues to the fore, and apply pressure on Governments. The case of Fridays for Future, started by 15-year-old Greta Thunberg in 2018, exemplifies how digital communication has contributed to the growth of climate activism. The Fridays for Future campaign originated from a school boycott but it quickly grew into a global climate activist movement using digital networks. This allowed younger generations to voice their environmental concerns in a larger and more accessible forum than previously possible and further increased public awareness and discussion of climate change. Castells argued that digital communication networks provide new opportunities for social movements to form connections among participants; organize collective actions; and exert influence upon political processes (Castells, 2012). As such, digital communication can transform individual concern into a large-scale collective act of political engagement. Therefore, for ENGO's, the application of digital activism is not merely an avenue to increase their exposure; they have also gained significant ability to contribute to shaping public debate, influencing policy agendas, and engaging in climate governance. Their expanding ability to link citizens with governmental institutions while being outside formal Governmental structures further strengthens the claim that ENGO's are increasingly functioning as shadow political institutions.

ENGOS And the Crisis of Political Representation

The increasing political influence of ENGOS is partially due to the failure of political parties to maintain a consistent focus on long term environmental concerns. As a result, political parties have to respond to both electoral expectations and other pressing issues like job creation, economic growth and social welfare. ENGOS are now helping fill the gaps created by political parties, by putting environmental considerations on the agenda of government and political decision making through their advocacy efforts, through research, by mobilizing public support for environmental causes and through their involvement in governmental decision-making processes. In India, organizations such as Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), Greenpeace India, and WWF-India have been contributing to environmental advocacy and research. Additionally, the Chipko movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan have put ecologically based and livelihood-based concerns on the agenda for discussion within the political realm. It also demonstrates that NGOs and civil societies provide greater political emphasis to environmental matters than electoral politics would likely produce.

ENGOS, therefore, cannot be seen solely as protest organizations. They are increasingly connecting citizens and affected communities with state institutions and international organisations. ENGOS do not replace political parties, but they increasingly perform representational and political functions outside formal party structures.

ENGOS As Shadow Political Institutions: An Analysis

The increasing impact of ENGOS on political decision making, indicates their emergence as a shadow political institution within the realm of climate governance. While lacking both the formal authority, as well as the electoral mandate associated with traditional forms of government, ENGOS continue to shape political agendas, generate policy debate, contribute to scientific knowledge production, organize and engage citizens, serve as advocates for environmental and community interests, and actively participate in governance processes. This transformation from protest-oriented activist work to providing policy-based research, policy analysis, advocacy, legal enforcement of environmental regulations through litigation, and interaction with governments and international climate agreements illustrates that political power does not reside solely within the boundaries of formal institutional arrangements. In addition to this transformation, digital media has enhanced the ability of ENGOS and climate movements to facilitate citizen engagement and to link localized concerns to broader climate discourse. Furthermore, digital media can be used to give voice to those who suffer from environmental harm or have been marginalized by an electoral process which fails to provide adequate representation. Like all informal institutions, ENGOS do not possess either statutory or coercive authority to compel compliance with the positions they advocate. Though, they derive much of their legitimacy from a variety of sources including expertise, public support, community involvement, and advocacy efforts.

Conclusion

Climate governance is now no longer only being driven by governments. As environmental problems become more difficult to manage, ENGO's are emerging as key actors linking public concern with scientific information, community voices with political decision-making. The expanding role of ENGOS in political processes illustrates that political actions do not need to occur via electoral means or within formally defined institutional boundaries. Although ENGOS cannot hold formal political office, their ability to assist define options for formal political institutions is increasing. Therefore, understanding ENGOS as shadow political institutions offers an expanded view of modern-day climate politics; illustrating how political influence does not need to be derived solely from formal authority; rather it can also result from knowledge, networks, participation and collective action.

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