

# **Why Has the Number of International Non-Governmental Organizations Exploded since 1960?**

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The rapid expansion of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) numbers in the last half-century is usually explained to be a result of decolonization, globalization, and/or increase in the number of global issues. One additional hypothesis, which has not been discussed in the political science literature, is suggested by the demographic-structural theory. According to this hypothesis, the acceleration in INGO numbers was caused by the post-war baby boom and a crisis in the credential system. This study finds that cyclical increases in INGO numbers were preceded by expansions in the 30–39 cohort. Interestingly, the mean age of leaders across 12 international governmental institutions also oscillated, but with a lag (thus correlated with expansions of the 55–64 cohort). Thus evidence supports the idea that demographic-structural mechanisms contributed to the surge in INGO numbers during the last 50 years as a by-product of intraelite competition.

## **Introduction**

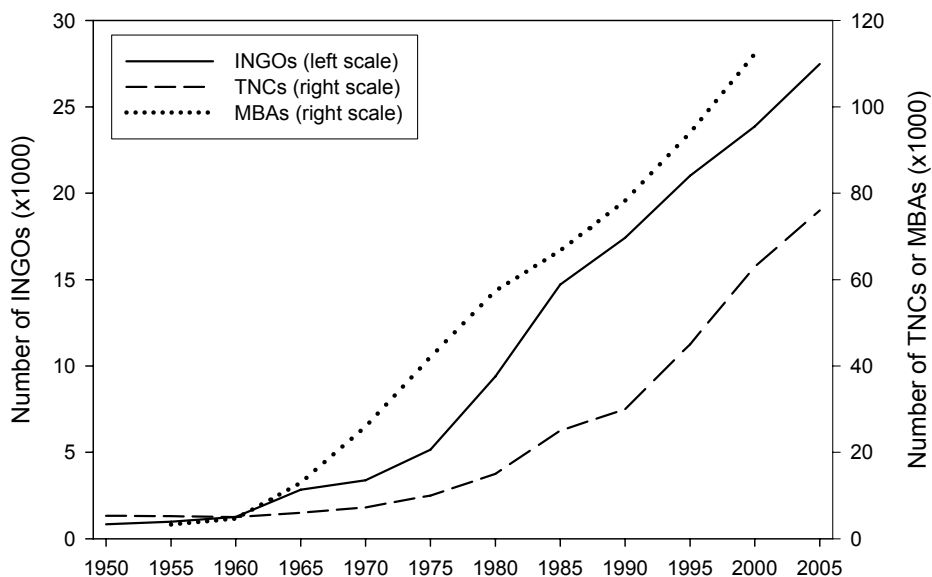
International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are an important part of the global civil society and play a significant role in world affairs (Mathews 1997; Charnovitz 1997; Thomas and Boli 1999). INGOs interact with other international actors, such as transnational companies (TNCs), international governance organizations (IGOs), and sovereign states. One function of the typical INGO is lobbying of political decision-makers. Today over 3,000 INGOs have consultative status in the United Nation's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (United Nations 2009). When an important international conference is held, INGOs frequently organize a "shadow conference" at the same time (Holsti 2004: 203). However, the rise of the INGO is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the existing literature does not adequately explain why the numbers of these organizations increased so dramatically in the last several decades.

As not-for-profit institutions, INGOs exist on wealth surplus produced by societies. INGOs may receive funds from a wide variety of sources: donations

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from individuals, states, corporations, foundations and trusts. The largest INGOs, like the World Wide Fund for Nature, are multi-billion dollar organizations with highly paid ruling executives. These international large-scale organizations, like their TNC and IGO cousins – which also employ tens of thousands of highly credentialed staff – are unique historical entities that have gained their huge numbers only recently. Data assembled by the Union of International Associations (UIA) shows that three-quarters of all estimated 27,472 INGOs active in 2005 were added since 1975 (Figure 1). The number of new INGO foundations peaked around 1995 (see Table A1 in the Data Appendix).



**Figure 1.** Since 1960 growth in MBA-credentialed professionals has preceded the rapid increase in INGOs (by a decade) and TNCs (by two decades). Data for INGOs from the Union of International Associations.

The existing literature proposes two classes of explanations for the dramatic proliferation in number of the INGOs. Most commonly, authors invoke factors increasing the demand for INGOs, such as decolonization or increased number of global issues. A second class of explanations points to technological changes that made INGOs easier to organize and operate. An additional explanation, which is not usually discussed in the political science literature, can be deduced from the demographic-structural theory (Collins

1979, Goldstone 1991, Turchin 2003). According to this hypothesis, the acceleration in INGO numbers was caused by the post-war baby boom and a crisis in the credential system. The proximate mechanism for the surge in INGOs was an expanding supply of credentialed professionals, rather than a greater demand for their services. This article tests these hypotheses against the available data.

## **Demand-Side Explanations**

If INGO numbers expand in response to increased demand for their services, then changes in the prevailing global environment should be correlated with ups and downs in INGO numbers. In this respect, analyzing INGOs in the 20th Century, Boli and Thomas (1999) highlight the importance of major wars: INGO numbers reflect the state of world-polity formation “rising in periods of expansion and declining rapidly in times of crisis, with the declines beginning shortly before the outbreaks of two major wars.” (Boli and Thomas 1999: 23). The Boli and Thomas statement might appear to be contradicted by the Correlates of War record of general wars (Sarkees and Wayman 2010) which shows that conflicts worldwide actually increased between 1950 and 1990 (see Table 1) just as the hypothesized world-polity rapidly expanded. On the other hand, these wars were qualitatively different from the two world wars because the local and regional war zones were not in Western Europe. This may explain Western Europe’s greater numbers of INGO memberships compared to more conflict prone Third World states (UIA 2008: 140–144). However, while it is clear that the observed oscillation between war and peace helps explain INGO numbers in the first half of the twentieth century it is not so clear whether the qualitative and quantitative shift the West observed in terms of its INGOs from the 1970s was simply due to absence of war and not some additional factors.

Another global trend is decolonization (see Table 1). By the 1980s Western colonial states had ceded sovereignty over nearly all of their Third World colonies (Kent and Young 2004: 277–279). According to world-system theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989), the increase in INGO activity could be due to the expansion of the Western capitalist system into the former colonies, with INGOs replacing Western employment and the power that was used to govern the colonies. The record indeed shows that the number of Western INGOs increased during the 1960s, which were the peak of decolonization (Table 1). But this explanation could be only partial because the numbers of INGOs continued to increase after decolonization.

Yet another demand-side explanation is that today there are many more global issues for INGOs to resolve with services. Whether the introduction of additional issues caused the rise in number of INGOs can be tested with ECOSOC data. Table 1 documents how many new global issues were introduced in each decade since 1940 (the issues themselves are listed in Table

A5 in the Data Appendix). We find that the great majority of global issues had been proposed before 1970, thus predating the INGO surge.

**Table 1.** Global trends and issues 1940–2006.

Number at decade end	INGOs	Decoloni- zations <sup>a</sup>	Wars <sup>b</sup>	New global issues <sup>c</sup>
1940		4	23	13
1950	832	3	24	7
1960	1,268	22	34	3
1970	3,379	6	50	10
1980	9,396	0	36	7
1990	17,419	0	51	4
2006	27,472	NA	24	NA

<sup>a</sup>Data from Kent and Young (2004:119–20, 277–279). The data are not complete (e.g. missing is Fiji which gained independence in 1970) but provides an indicative sample

<sup>b</sup>Data from Sarkees and Wayman (2010).

<sup>c</sup>United Nations Economic and Social Council’s list of non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council as of 1 September 2009.

Does not include non-English language non-governmental organizations.

The numbers of INGOs within ECOSOC increased not because there were more issues for them to address, but as a result of multiplication of the INGOs addressing the same theme. To discover the most popular issues within ECOSOC, I counted separate instances of the keyword used in titles. For example, the category “women” by 2009 became the most popular issue in ECOSOC (present in 256 INGO titles). The issue was introduced in the 1940s, while 84% of INGOs addressing it were registered after 1995. “Development” (mentioned 179 times) was introduced during the 1970s, but 83% of INGOs addressing this issue registered after 1995. The same pattern obtains for other popular issues such as “Environment,” “Human rights,” and “Health”. No matter when the issue was introduced, the great surge in the number of ECOSOC organizations addressing it came around 1995 (Table A9 in the Data Appendix).

## Enabling Role of Technology?

Communications technology – the rise of the personal computer, mobile phone, global internet connection, and satellite transmission – has made transnational organization (non-governmental, inter-governmental, or corporate) easier “as anyone with a computer can be a desktop publisher, and anyone with a modem can communicate with distant parts of the globe at a trivial cost” (Keohane and Nye 1998: 82; see also Krasner 2001). Technological

globalization may explain the amazingly rapid climb of the INGO count to its current historically unprecedented height.

If the spread of technology caused the dramatic rise in INGOs one might predict TNCs would show a large rise in numbers. Existing estimates suggest that TNCs have increased at the same time as INGOs, and more dramatically in number than INGOs (see Figure 1). There were 5,300 TNCs in 1950 and 76,000 in 2005 (Gabel and Bruner 2003; Progressive Policy Institute 2008). The globalization of technology appears to help explain the dynamics of INGO and TNC growth.

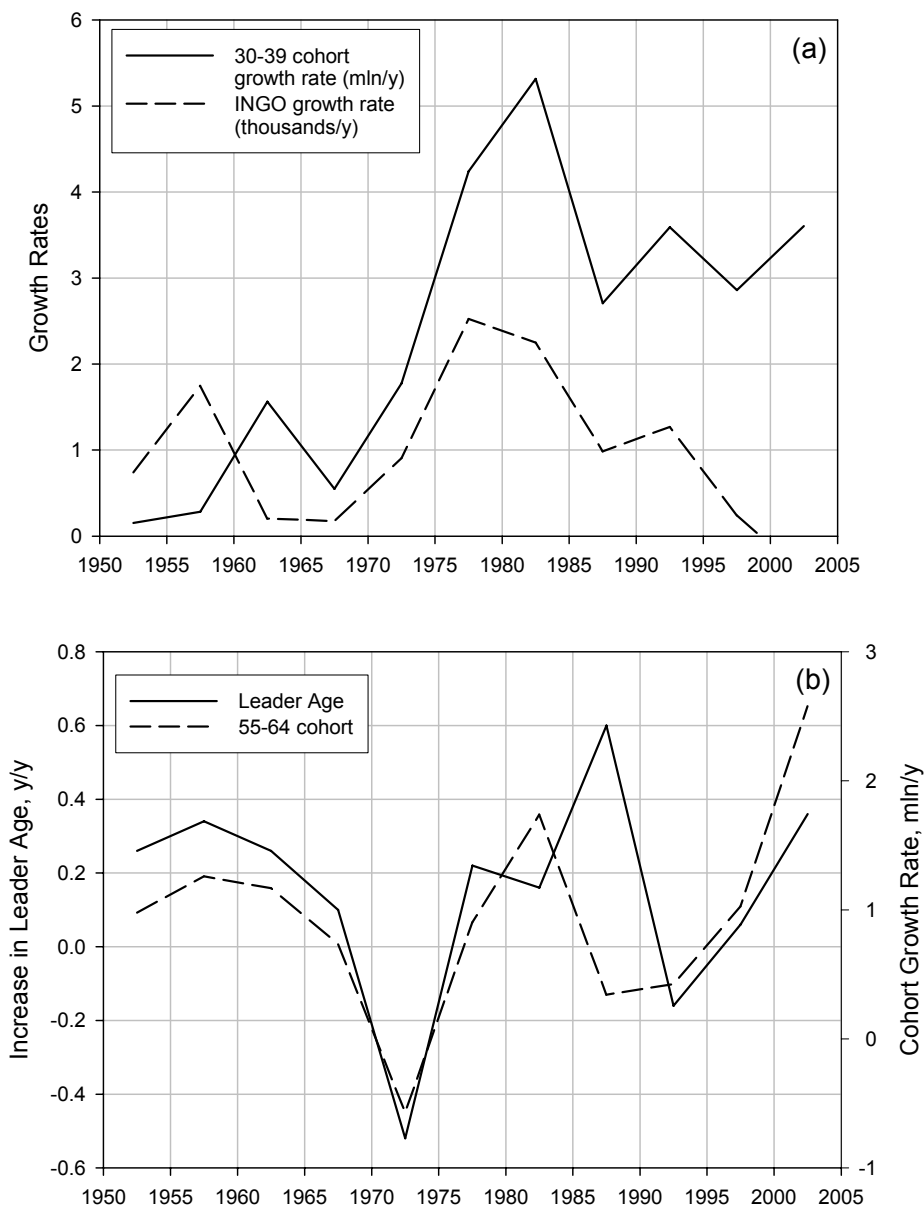
There are limitations to this explanation. Computer transistors have doubled in number every two years since the early 1970s but the rate of growth in numbers of INGOs and TNCs has varied. For example, the fastest growth period for INGOs was the late 1960s and early 1980s (see Figure 2a). Technological advances do not seem to explain these patterns.

The long history of INGOs is a cyclical one (Charnovitz 1997). Charnovitz has suggested the post-2000 period witnessed a decline in INGOs (Charnovitz 2003). This observation would contradict the technological globalization explanation as one might expect a rise in global internet connections to accelerate INGO foundings. UIA estimates also suggest fewer INGOs founded after 1995 (see Table A1 in the Data Appendix).

## **Demographic-structural trends**

Although factors discussed above – decolonization, global issues, and technological progress – likely contributed to the expansion of the INGOs, one cannot escape the conclusion that these are partial explanations, at best. Such approaches shed little light on interesting cases of INGO activity. A few months after the Haiti earthquake, the “Republic of NGOs” had at least 10,000 non-governmental groups (Economist 2010). Afghanistan, currently a war zone, has 174 civil society development organizations while neighboring Uzbekistan (which has a similar population but is at peace and has a higher GDP) has just 31 (Directory of Development Organization 2010).

One alternative explanation to the mechanisms reviewed above is based on the demographic-structural theory (Goldstone 1991; Turchin 2003, Turchin and Nefedov 2009). The demographic-structural hypothesis stresses that an over-supply of elites (and elite aspirants) might lead to the creation of auxiliary vehicles for maintaining wealth and status – such as the INGOs. The causes of the over-supply of elites are therefore important for understanding the dynamics of organizational genesis. Such causes may include a rise in the numbers of individuals with advanced degrees, a baby boom, cultural trends (such as targets to employ more females in top positions), economic displacement of middle class workers due to globalization and technological



**Figure 2.** Cohort dynamics and increase in (a) INGO; (b) age of IGO leaders.

change (Collins 1979, 2009; Goldstone 1991; Turchin 2003; Turchin and Nefedov 2009).

The demographic surge in individuals competing for work and status is usually accompanied by what Collins termed a “credential crisis” (Collins 1979: 191). In the United States, for example, the numbers of individuals earning the MBA (Master of Business Administration) has grown extremely rapidly both in absolute terms (Figure 1) and relative terms (Table 2, last column). Law school enrollment in the U.S. similarly outpaced growth in numbers of young adults (exclusively due to female enrollment), while the frequency of young lawyers in relation to the population cohort more than doubled between 1965 and today (American Bar Association 2010) (see table A10 in the Data Appendix). This academic credential explosion preceded the expansion in INGOs (Figure 1). The increase in female education and participation in the workplace increased the overall size of the applicant pool competing for jobs and made advancement to leadership positions more competitive (see Table 2 for trends in the MBAs).

**Table 2.** Population growth and MBA awards in the USA, 1955–2000.

Year <sup>a</sup>	Male 21-year-olds (millions) <sup>b</sup>	Total MBAs earned	Percent MBAs earned by females	Percent 21-year-old males with MBAs
1955	1.02	3,280	4.9	0.3
1960	1.13	4,643	3.6	0.4
1965	1.43	12,959	2.6	0.9
1970	1.80	25,977	3.9	1.4
1975	2.03	42,054	11.7	1.8
1980	2.20	57,391	25.1	2.0
1985	2.17	66,689	31.1	2.1
1990	1.97	78,255	35.0	2.6
1995	1.93	93,982	37.6	3.0
2000	2.01	112,258	39.8	3.4

Data source: National Center for Education Statistics (2010)

<sup>a</sup>1960 uses year 1959–60 and 2000 the year 1999–00. Other figures represent five-year increments beginning 1955–56.

<sup>b</sup>US male cohort size 1980–2000 from UN World Population Database “Population by five-year age group and sex”. 1955–1975 uses US Population Estimates “National Estimates by Age, Sex, Race: 1900–1979.”

If this hypothesis is correct, then we expect that surges in the INGO numbers would be correlated with demographic oscillations in the USA and Western Europe. A graph of the rate at which INGOs expanded shows a peak in the early 1980s. This peak was preceded by an increase in the rate of

expansion of the cohort aged between 30 and 39 (Figure 2a; see also Table A2: “Correlation between cohorts, INGOs and TNCs” in the Data Appendix).

Another, indirect measure of intraelite competition is provided by the average age of leaders of international organizations. When competition is high, advancement to the rank of the leaders is slow, and leader age should increase. Conversely, when competition is low younger individuals advance to leadership positions sooner. Between 1950 and 2005 the mean age of the leaders of twelve IGOs increased by 8 years (from 56 to 64), and the periods of most rapid increase closely correlated with the growth rate of the 55–64 cohort (see Figure 2b).

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that broad explanations of INGO activity – the rise of enabling technology, the absence of major war and the expansion of the capitalist system – actually tell too little of the story of the great surge witnessed over the last half century to be satisfactory. We have observed that demand side factors, such as issue genesis, while they may explain organizational ‘genres’ (i.e. environment, human rights, poverty), do not explain INGO numbers or their distribution across time, genre, or in geopolitical space. The alternative explanation for the upward trend observes that cyclical demographic-structural processes have increased intraelite competition over the last half-century. This is supported by evidence of rising credentialism, strong direct correlations with diagnostic cohorts, and indirect support of rising leadership age within IGOs.

Acceptance of the demographic-structural thesis of INGOs may serve to harmonize theoretical debate on the recent history of Eastern Europe (see table A3 in the Data Appendix) with the subsequent evolution of inter-governmental activity. Contemporary numbers employed in the European Union, United Nations system and 16 other IGOs have reached at least 114,000 (European Commission 2009; UN 2008; Vaubel et al. 2007). As with the number of INGOs, this figure has no historical parallel. Future research could focus on better quantification of the number of individuals employed in INGOs/non-governmental organizations relative to TNCs, IGOs and sovereign states, and improved modeling of temporal relationships.

While many variables must determine how many INGOs exist in any given time and place, this paper has shown that demographic-structural processes, the availability of the building blocks for a rapid expansion (a surplus of credentialed professionals and intraelite competition), should be considered a powerful driver of INGO activity.



## Supplementary information

Additional data tables and analyses can be viewed by clicking the 'Supporting Material' tab on the left, and at:

[http://cliodynamics.info/PDF/4Turner\\_Appendix.pdf](http://cliodynamics.info/PDF/4Turner_Appendix.pdf)

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