



# Theorizing the relationship between NGOs and the state in medical humanitarian development projects



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## ABSTRACT

Social scientists have fiercely debated the relationship between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the state in NGO-led development projects. However, this research often carries an implicit, and often explicit, anti-state bias, suggesting that when NGOs collaborate with states, they cease to be a progressive force. This literature thus fails to recognize the state as a complex, heterogeneous, and fragmented entity. In particular, the unique political context within which an NGO operates is likely to influence how it carries out its work. In this article, we ask: how do NGOs work and build relationships with different types of states and – of particular relevance to practitioners – what kinds of relationship building lead to more successful development outcomes on the ground? Drawing on 29 in-depth interviews with members of Partners in Health and Oxfam America conducted between September 2010 and February 2014, we argue that NGOs and their medical humanitarian projects are more likely to succeed when they adjust how they interact with different types of states through processes of interest harmonization and negotiation. We offer a theoretical model for understanding how these processes occur across organizational fields. Specifically, we utilize field overlap theory to illuminate how successful outcomes depend on NGOs' ability to leverage resources – alliances and networks; political, financial, and cultural resources; and frames – across state and non-state fields. By identifying how NGOs can increase the likelihood of project success, our research should be of interest to activists, practitioners, and scholars.

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## 1. Introduction

Activists, practitioners, and social scientists have fiercely debated the relationship between NGOs and the state in NGO-led development projects. In his important review of the field written almost two decades ago, Fisher (1997) illuminated how NGOs have generally been categorized either as instrumental and apolitical tools for development in an era of neoliberalism (Biggs and Neams, 1996; Edwards and Hulme, 1996), or as alternatives to governmental power capable of transforming the state (Friedmann, 1992; Lind, 1992). However, Fisher (1997: 446) warned scholars not to ignore or downplay the political roles of NGOs. James Ferguson (1990) also reminded us that NGOs can become part of the “anti-politics machine of development.” A growing body of work has examined the political role of NGOs, some of which

carries an implicit, and often explicit, anti-state bias, suggesting that when NGOs collaborate with the state, they cease to be a progressive force (Bebbington, 2005; Foley and Edwards, 1996; Lipset, 1994). Other work criticizes NGOs for usurping the state's role in providing crucial services for its citizens in developing countries, which can have substantial political, economic, and social consequences (Brass, 2012; Hall and Lamont, 2013; Leonard and Straus, 2003; Manji and O'Coill, 2002; see Watkins et al., 2012 for a review).

Fisher also recognized that, although the “NGO field is a heterogeneous one ... the state, too, needs to be acknowledged as a complex, heterogeneous, and often fragmented actor” (Fisher, 1997: 452). To that end, we argue that the unique political context within which an NGO operates is likely to influence the degree to which the state supports a development project and, consequently, how the NGO carries out its work (see, e.g., P. Evans, 2010; Spires, 2011). We nevertheless lack a framework that appropriately reflects the tug-of-war of power and interests between states and NGOs across political contexts. Furthermore, our current understanding of the state-NGO relationship is limited by a lack of empirical data on the

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role of the state in NGO-led development projects across political settings. We therefore ask: how do NGOs work and build relationships with different types of states and, of particular relevance to practitioners, what kinds of relationship building lead to more successful outcomes on the ground?

Drawing on 29 in-depth interviews with members of two international relief organizations engaged in medical humanitarian projects worldwide, we argue that NGOs are more likely to succeed when they adjust how they interact with different types of states through processes of interest harmonization and negotiation. We offer a theoretical model for understanding how these processes occur across organizational fields. Specifically, we utilize field overlap theory to illuminate how successful outcomes depend on NGOs' ability to leverage resources – alliances and networks; political, financial, and cultural resources; and frames – across state and non-state fields. Successful NGOs vary how they relate to different state apparatuses by adjusting how they use leverage across fields. Our theoretical approach thus foregrounds critical issues of agency (i.e., “the efficacy of human action” or “the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts” (Sewell, 1992: 2–18)) and strategy (i.e., “the targeting, timing, and tactics through which [actors] mobilize and deploy resources (Ganz, 2000: 1005)).

Field theory, an important framework in organizational sociology (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), has been used to explain the emergence of transnational networks for the development and implementation of cooperative public health policy across borders (see Collins-Dogrul, 2012) and for labor rights advocacy (see Kay, 2011b). We suggest that it also offers an analytically powerful tool for understanding state-NGO relationships. Evans and Kay's (2008) concept of the architecture of field overlap and its concomitant mechanisms – alliance brokerage, resource brokerage, and frame adaptation – is particularly useful because it illuminates how actors can leverage resources across fields to create social and organizational change. They define a field as a “local social order of actors who take one another into account as they carry out interrelated activities and *that is characterized by an orienting principle or goal*” (Evans and Kay, 2008: 973; see also Fligstein, 2001; McAdam and Scott, 2005; emphasis in original). We extend their theory by pushing beyond their single social movement case (of environmental and labor organizations that leveraged across fields to change the parameters of trade policy during the NAFTA negotiations) to examine how field overlap creates unique opportunities for NGOs to effectively negotiate and harmonize their interests with the state. We argue that overlap

between state and non-state fields provides NGOs with pressure points that can be leveraged to overcome states' reluctance to support development projects.

Table 1 summarizes our theoretical model of how field overlap creates unique opportunities for NGOs to effectively negotiate and harmonize their interests with the state. We argue that NGOs and their development projects are more likely to succeed when they harmonize their interests and negotiate with different types of states by effectively leveraging resources across state and non-state fields. The first resource – alliances/networks – allows NGOs to gain access to, increase their legitimacy with, and/or influence the decision-making calculus of the state by brokering valuable alliances across fields. The value of alliance brokerage depends upon the quality and number of connections between both fields. Examples include, but are not limited to, an NGO providing the state with access to an expert or epistemic community, to a funding network, or to a community organization and its supporters.

The second resource is financial, political, or cultural resources that states can find valuable. Resources can include money, technology/information, connection to an international standard or norm, or political legitimacy. NGOs' ability to engage in resource brokerage depends on how dependent a state is on external resources. NGOs can leverage valued resources to influence a state's willingness to participate in medical humanitarian projects by inducing tradeoffs, buying access, and providing valuable information. Examples of resource brokerage include, but are not limited to, an NGO providing access to a large foundation, an international certification process, new technology, or a multilateral political institution.

The final resource we outline is frames, or the construction of particular ideas, concepts, or strategies. Frames, which hold tremendous discursive power (Snow and Benford, 1992), can be adapted across fields to garner state support and participation for particular projects. The value of this resource depends on the salience of the frame and its underlying concept or idea, the frame's plasticity, and its political resonance. Examples of frame adaptation include, but are not limited to, an NGO pushing to re-conceptualize health care as a human right, outlining the parameters of corporate responsibility, or redefining collective/community property rights. By strategically adapting ascendant frames from a non-state to a state field, an NGO can facilitate the reconceptualization of key political ideas, discursive parameters, and rights paradigms. Adapting frames can also “transform the collective understanding of available political options” (Evans and Kay, 2008).

**Table 1**  
Mechanisms, definitions, and strategies of field overlap in the State-NGO relationship.

Mechanism of field overlap	Definition	Examples of strategies
Alliance brokerage	The ability of actors to broker alliances that can influence how decisions are made across fields. Brokerage can also provide actors with access to a field or increase their legitimacy within it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build relationships with individual politicians at national or local level</li> <li>• Find common ground within national ministries or government agencies</li> <li>• Engage with experts in a non-state field</li> <li>• Cooperate with advocacy, civil rights, and/or civil society organizations</li> <li>• Help build advocacy networks or social movements</li> </ul>
Resource brokerage	The extent to which actors can use valued financial, political, and/or cultural resources to gain influence or power in another field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiate with state to elicit funds for project support</li> <li>• Offer outside experts or valuable local experts</li> <li>• Provide new technology/information or access to it</li> </ul>
Frame adaptation	The ability of actors to strategically adapt frames in order to facilitate their resonance or adoption in another field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconceptualize political idea or concept</li> <li>• Link two or more issues in a new way</li> <li>• Create new rights discourse</li> <li>• Adjust, expand, or constrain the rhetorical parameters of existing discourse</li> <li>• Transform collective understanding of available political options</li> </ul>

See Evans and Kay (2008) for the original discussion of the architecture of field overlap.

Our contribution to the literature on states and NGOs is two-fold. First, we provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding a more dynamic state-NGO relationship that takes into account the interests of each but also recognizes the importance of agency and strategy. We agree with scholars who foreground interests, but we mediate their salience in our model; states need NGOs to deliver critical services while NGOs need states to provide resources to facilitate their delivery. Second, we identify negotiation and interest harmonization as processes of leverage by which NGOs deploy resources across fields, and that vary by political context and in turn, shape development project outcomes. By identifying how NGOs can increase the likelihood of project success, our research should be of interest to activists, practitioners, and scholars.

## 2. Methodology

Because we are interested in understanding how NGOs work and build relationships within different political contexts, as well as how different kinds of relationship building can result in more successful development outcomes, we employ a two-pronged qualitative approach. First, we adopt a comparative case study research design (see [Yin, 2009](#)) and select two international relief organizations, Oxfam America and Partners in Health, as study sites. Since both organizations work in myriad countries around the globe, this approach is advantageous because it maximizes variation in the political contexts in which the state-NGO relationship operates. In addition, our research design allows us to examine the similarities and differences in the state-NGO relationship *across settings*. Second, we rely on in-depth, semi-structured interviews to uncover how officials from both organizations understand the dynamics of the state-NGO relationship and how they surface in medical humanitarian projects on the ground ([Miles and Huberman, 1994](#)). This type of multi-method approach is important for researchers interested in achieving more robust, and more generalizable, qualitative findings ([Creswell, 2009](#); [Yin, 2009](#)).

### 2.1. Study setting

Based in Boston, Massachusetts, Oxfam America (OA) operates in ninety-four countries with the goal of creating lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and injustice ([Oxfam America, 2013](#)). It utilizes a community empowerment model to allow individuals to fashion independent solutions to their respective medical, political, or social problems. OA's current work focuses on several development issues, including public health, community finance, gender equality, and access to potable water. With active projects throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, it is an ideal case for evaluating how state-NGO relationships vary by political context, as well as for gauging the implications of this dynamic for project outcomes.

Partners in Health (PIH), also in Boston, pioneered the community-based care model around the world and emphasizes the importance of preventative medical treatment for poor populations ([Partners in Health, 2013](#)). Its community-based care model supports health care and socioeconomic development in its partner countries throughout Latin America, East Asia, and Western and Southern Africa. According to PIH, successful models of treating and eradicating disease “can only be made available widely through national health systems” ([Partners in Health, 2013](#)). To that end, PIH involves community members at all levels of project design and implementation to support the work of public health professionals. PIH is therefore another excellent case for understanding how political context shapes the state-NGO relationship.

### 2.2. Data collection

A team of research assistants conducted interviews with key officials from OA and PIH at their respective Boston offices and by phone between September 2010 and February 2014. Understanding that individuals from different levels of each organization would experience the state-NGO relationship differently, we employed a purposeful sampling approach ([Seidman, 2012](#)); that is, we interviewed officials from as many levels as possible. Although confidentiality concerns preclude us from disclosing respondents' exact job descriptions, participants included high-ranking officials, project managers, and lower-level staff from both organizations. We asked each respondent how they identify and choose state partners, how projects are implemented and terminated, and how each organization engages with states at the local, regional, and national levels. In total, we conducted 29 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with representatives from OA and PIH. Interviews averaged approximately 2 hours in duration and most were audio-recorded with each respondent's consent. Harvard University's Institutional Review Board approved this study. We have decontextualized the data where appropriate to ensure respondents' confidentiality.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Research assistants transcribed all interviews, which both authors then coded independently. Although we wanted to understand how the state-NGO relationship varies across political contexts, we did not code our data with any preconceptions about what we might find; rather, our inductive and iterative approach allowed us to explore themes that emerged organically from our analyses (see [Glaser and Strauss, 2009](#)). We first read all interviews independently in order to acquaint ourselves with the data. Formal analysis then began, following [Miles and Huberman \(1994\)](#). Both authors read through the interviews once more in order to systematically generate codes related to the state-NGO relationship across political contexts. At the end of this process, we compared our coding and found the inter-rater reliability score (i.e., the total number of agreements in coding divided by the total number of comparisons) to be approximately 92% ([Miles and Huberman, 1994](#)). Both authors reviewed all analyses at the conclusion of this process in order to ensure consistency in how all interviews were coded. This type of inductive coding is particularly important for researchers interested in understanding how different contexts shape actors' behaviors ([Maxwell, 2012](#)), allowing the discovery of causal processes leading to an outcome (in this study, project success or failure) ([Maxwell, 2004](#)).

## 3. Findings

NGOs engaged in medical humanitarian projects attempt to deliver services to those most in need, while the state – contingent upon its willingness and capacity to participate – enables or constrains NGO activities, thereby shaping project outcomes. Our analyses of 29 interviews with OA and PIH officials reveal that they recognize the balancing act that partnering with states often requires. As an OA official described, failure to find synchronicity with the state can “undermine the work of many, many years in a community.” While the state may not always represent the ideal partner, respondents argued that the long-term benefits of working with the state outweigh the short-term costs; cooperation can institutionalize a project and allow the state to continue benefitting from it after an NGO withdraws. Indeed, one OA official explained that, without the cooperation of national governments, “[t]here's no way you can take [development projects] to scale.” A PIH official concurred:

If we didn't have to work with the government, we would be able to do things on a much quicker basis, but we wouldn't have that long-term impact. We wouldn't have nursing students from the national school rotating through our sites if we didn't have the opportunity to partner with the government. But it can be challenging. And maybe they don't like what you're producing, and then you need to redirect your efforts. It definitely requires a lot of flexibility.

We consider a typology of four different kinds of states: 1) willing and capable; 2) willing and incapable; 3) unwilling and capable; 4) unwilling and incapable. NGOs harmonize their interests with "developmental states," or those run by competent, coherent bureaucrats committed to designing and delivering public services (Evans, 2010; Evans and Heller, 2013). These states exhibit willingness to participate in development projects, regardless of their capacity to support the mission through material or other resources. A state is willing when it actively cultivates an environment that facilitates NGOs' medical humanitarian work. A state is capable when it has financial, material, or other resources to directly support and aid NGOs in their work. By contrast, NGOs try to negotiate with "predatory states," or those that undercut development at the expense of society (Evans, 1995) and are generally unwilling to participate in humanitarian projects. In these political contexts, NGOs attempt to negotiate with the state in order to find overlap in their interests that allow for project implementation. In general, we find correspondence between a state's willingness and capacity and how NGOs leverage critical resources – alliances and networks; financial and cultural resources; and frames – across state and non-state fields. NGOs are more successful in building relationships with states and achieving successful development outcomes when they negotiate and harmonize their interests across political contexts by leveraging these resources across fields.

### 3.1. Building alliances and networks across fields

Alliance brokerage allows NGOs that may lack influence in the state field to draw upon relationships with influential actors in or outside it to gain direct access to a state field, to increase their legitimacy within it, or to indirectly influence decision-making in it. Alliance brokerage highlights the potentially transferable nature of influence; relationships with powerful actors in non-state fields can become an effective political resource, and legitimacy within non-state fields can facilitate access to state fields (Evans and Kay, 2008). As an OA official explained, building alliances with individual politicians can be extremely important for project success: "So it's the fickle nature of the context of what's going on there. And sometimes it's individuals. So if you get a politician who leans one way, who might be very favorable to us, the next politician that comes in may be not so favorable to us."

Another OA official explained the calculus by which he decides with whom to build alliances across fields:

You've got good governments and bad governments, [and] you've got good people even within bad ministries. There's the director-general level that is higher, but that's often a political appointee. Pay attention to that director level – they are the ones really responsible for the actual operation and implementation of policy. And if you find good people at that level, that's often an indication that you can make some movement. You can have a good director-general and a bad director-level person and get nothing done. But the question is how do you decide whether to work with them or not? Do they control resources? Do they control access to resources? Do they prevent access to resources? Do they have the mandate? How exclusive

is their mandate to be working on issues that you care about? If they control resources or access to resources and they have an exclusive mandate, they may be the only game in town because the private sector, for example, may be weak in that particular case. If you want to achieve some kind of scale and impact, you probably better consider working with the government.

Respondents also recognized the importance of alliance brokerage with local government officials. A PIH official described a project in one country to train women as community health instructors that initially failed because they had not recruited the right participants:

We went to the community and recruited a hundred women. We trained them, and it didn't really work. And the chiefs were like, what is this? What are you doing? What's going on? And so we had to go back and have meetings with each of the chiefs and talk to them about public health issues ... and explain what we wanted to do, why we felt it was so important to train women as community health instructors. And they said: OK, that's great. But you chose the wrong people for these special community health worker roles. So, we had to go through and work with the chiefs, re-choose the people to be trained, and then do another training. And, since then, the program has been very successful. As we spread from that one pilot site to all of our other health centers, we knew going into it that the first thing we needed to do was have those conversations with the chiefs.

Brokering alliances with chiefs enabled PIH's project to ultimately succeed with a state that was willing and capable. An OA official explained that local partners play a crucial role in building the right alliances that make success more likely:

They can talk to communities directly, they can talk to the [government] minister ... [and they] know how to change their vocabulary [and] their form of address to ... communicate with multiple stakeholders. That provides them with a privileged position in terms of brokering alliances – they have a convening facility. They're able to bring people together. They're able to negotiate. They're able to move people along from sometimes quite polarized positions toward a platform that will move toward consensus or a common action.

An OA official explained how brokering an alliance with an expert in a non-state field could provide NGOs with legitimacy and influence within the state field:

If you're developing a program, you need a lot more firepower than just what a small, local NGO can provide. You oftentimes get additional leverage by having a national university involved doing research because ... the research that might accompany a program ... is going to find the same things the NGO has been finding in the field. But if an NGO talks to a government agent, they can kind of get dismissed, like, "Well, what do you know?" But if the professor from the local university says the same thing, that makes it more powerful – it gives the NGO more strength.

Another OA official was explicit about how building alliances across fields can increase pressure on states:

[I]n humanitarian [projects], we largely do work with national NGOs and some government parties. But increasingly we also work with advocacy organizations, civil rights organizations, civil organizations, or civic organizations because we believe it is the [ir] role [to put] pressure on government because the

government [has been] ... unwilling to help in certain disasters and they should be [helping]. So, it's the local voice or the national voice that demands that the government take responsibility and help the people who have been affected.

Our data suggest that alliance brokerage is particularly important for NGOs dealing with less capable and willing states. Although all respondents acknowledged the importance of building alliances to deal with myriad informal, operational, judicial, regulatory, and statutory rules that complicate their work, the obstacles recalcitrant states use to thwart NGO activities can be especially challenging. A senior OA official described some of them:

[States] have been in many cases enacting laws that restrict the ability for international organizations to advocate the government .... They put on different rules and regulations that require that spending is made in [some] areas but not others. So, they recognize that this is the area that they want investment, but everyone else recognizes that's not where the investment needs to be made. So they could do a lot of different things to obstruct us – prevent us from getting visas, not license us, not allow us to get goods into the country, kick out staff, not allow us to open a bank account, give us unfavorable banking terms, force us to use an exchange rate that's less than advantageous to us and not equal to market value. [...] So, everybody scrambles to appease them in some way. And [the states] don't act on the law but they keep using it ... any time there's a conflict.

In some cases, building alliances across fields involves cobbling together coalitions from across civil society. An OA official detailed how NGOs build alliances to resist states' heavy-handed restrictions on their work:

One thing [states] like to do is divide and conquer .... They'll pick on one NGO, so a lot of international NGOs will band together in those cases, whether it's through the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs], whether it's through InterAction, or some other inter-NGO kind of forum that we can all talk about the issues that are coming up and share advice and come back with a united voice. That seems to be a very effective tool that has worked in many regards, in helping prevent some of the onerous laws from being enacted in countries like Cambodia .... With Cambodia, in particular, that was very effective, not just in us doing it, but the whole international NGO community coming forward and voicing their concern. And not just NGOs, but the local people, so it was a quite effective way of doing it.

It is important to emphasize that political contexts are not static; states and political environments change, which requires a renegotiation of priorities and alliances. As an OA official explained:

In some cases, [states'] priorities change. In Senegal, we had a very good relationship with the government and their extractive industries until they discovered oil [laughs]. Then all things changed. [...] [T]hey don't want us to be in there, they don't want us to be talking about these things [i.e., civil society]. But previously when it seemed to be advantageous to have us working on these things, they were quite open to having us and kept us in the loop and gave us unprecedented access. But when oil's discovered, that's a different question – “You have no business here anymore.”

The Senegal example reveals the fragility of the state-NGO relationship, particularly with unwilling states. The discovery of

oil changed the government's priorities, causing the previous harmonization of state-NGO interests to fall out of sync. Here, a good relationship soured quickly, rendering longstanding alliances irrelevant and negotiations difficult. When alliances across state fields become blocked, respondents explained that they often attempt to find new common ground with the state that allows their work to continue. As one OA official indicated: “You do have to work through them and you have to find a way to help them change that attitude and hold them accountable for what they are responsible for ... to advance the process of helping people we want and moving our agendas forward.” She continued:

[E]ven in a difficult country like Ethiopia [where] they don't have a very clean human rights track record ... we can find common ground in the agriculture section of Agriculture Extensionists, our agriculture extension worker program. [It's a] great idea, working with the right ministries to help deliver the long-term development process possibilities.

If alliances across state fields become blocked at the national level, however, NGOs may be able to synchronize their interests with state actors at the local-level. An OA official explained:

We have found repeatedly that the Ethiopian government calls on international assistance too late in response to drought or food crisis. NGOs and international organizations technically are not permitted to fundraise and declare an emergency before the government does – the government has to do it first. So, we may have an unwilling national government ... but there are usually individuals in the livestock department and the water resources department who are from the affected areas themselves who are much more sympathetic to, and aware of, the technical support of international NGOs. So, in these cases, the local government is willing and the national government is reluctant. What do you do? You have to understand that situation – the inability of the local individuals to give permission [themselves, but their ability to pressure the national government to accept assistance].

An NGO may therefore be able to harmonize its interests with an unwilling state by brokering alliances at the local level. Although this can require an NGO to work with oppressive national regimes, our respondents expressed their preference for this than for total non-participation, which, they argued, leaves vulnerable populations without critical medical services and protections. Only in situations in which state and local governments are extremely recalcitrant did respondents advocate disengaging or bypassing the state in order to improve the likelihood of project success.

### 3.2. *Exchanging resources across fields*

Resource brokerage depends on the extent to which financial, political, and/or cultural resources from one field can be useful or necessary for the effective functioning of another field. It can be ranked from high to low depending on how reliant a field is on external resources (Evans and Kay, 2008). The exchange of financial, political, or cultural resources across fields represents a valuable leverage mechanism between state and non-state fields. Officials from OA and PIH underscored how they utilize valued resources to influence a state's willingness to participate in medical humanitarian projects by inducing tradeoffs, offering incentives and support, and providing valuable information to the state. A PIH official described the resources they rallied to obtain support from the Rwandan government for a new cancer center:

[I]n Rwanda, we have [a partnership] around the cancer center that we opened. We have the first public, national referral center for cancer; not just [for] Rwanda, but the surrounding region. And the partnership consists of funders ... [and] we are partnered with, obviously, the Ministry of Health, the local government, Brigham and Woman's Hospital, which brings expertise in terms of trainers and pathology in cancer care, [and] with Dana Farber Cancer Institute and Harvard Medical School. So, [we] really try to ... to make that partnership complete and collaborative, in a way that will help us have the maximum impact.

As another PIH official explained, willing and capable states might have preferences regarding the services being delivered, requiring the NGO to align or make tradeoffs with the state and redistribute resources so that the project satisfies both institutions' interests:

[I]n Rwanda, our biggest partner is the government and that can be at any level. [F]or example, we work in three of the thirty districts in Rwanda. So, every year when the district is planning for the year and we are planning for the year, our first step ... is that our leaders sit down with the district leaders and talk about what the priorities are to make sure that what we are doing is aligning with their priorities .... And then, again, stepping back, because we are taking direction from the Ministry of Health and the government on what to focus on, and we sort of think of our mission in Rwanda is to strengthen the ability of the district to complete those goals, but also to build on that plan in areas that we think are opportune that may not be part of the ministry plan because there's no system in place for it yet.

Resource brokerage is particularly important when an NGO partners with a willing but incapable state. In contrast to the Rwanda example above – where the government is viewed as bureaucratic but actively cultivates and supports an environment conducive to the NGO's work – some states may support a project by *allowing* its implementation but may not be able to provide sufficient support to establish or institutionalize it. As a PIH official explained, sometimes their original plan must be amended so that it more directly satisfies the state's health care needs instead of the NGO's primary health care goals:

[W]e decided that we wanted to allocate a small amount of our budget to hire a nurse educator in Malawi. [T]his person would ... [provide] continuing education for our nurses. [...] But because there is such a severe staffing shortage in Malawi, and all the nurses are Ministry of Health nurses, they asked us not to hire that nurse because we'd be drawing someone away from clinical care. [...] And, in this instance, the government asked us not to, which is frustrating, but it makes sense. And, I think, in the long-term, it will be for the best. Hopefully in a few years we can revisit the idea. And right now we'll use the money probably to improve the current nurses, to try to make their jobs a little better. So we just have to redirect.

Working with unwilling and/or less capable states often requires NGOs to use financial, cultural, or political resources to *negotiate* with the state. NGOs' negotiations across difficult political settings, however, are context-dependent. As an OA official explained:

With willing and not capable states, you assess the situation and suggest potential allies in government. But if a lack of resources is the problem, then you work on the lack of capacity and figure out how to mobilize resources to assist them. On the other end, a strong but unwilling government presents different issues. For example, Sudan has capacity but is unwilling in Western Sudan and Darfur, so

you have to have a different focus and strategy and approach, which is to find alliances to overcome that unwillingness.

A high-ranking official at PIH provided a concrete example:

In the case of Malawi, we – stupidly, I have to say – reached a stalemate with them because they would not designate [a hospital we were building] as a district hospital ... and therefore they wouldn't complement it with additional government funds unless we [did certain things]. And the things that they were asking for, now, on reflection – for housing for the doctors and nurses living there – they were right. How are you going to attract doctors and nurses to the middle of nowhere if you don't have decent housing? And we were just so focused on getting that hospital up and running, that they were a hundred percent right on that ... We've learned as we've gone along. But mostly, we want the government and the district or national government to make the decisions. If we think they're making a massive mistake, we'll do much more negotiating.

Respondents reveal the often hidden negotiations that grease the wheels of NGO-state cooperation and collaboration. Depending on the political context, resources can be crucial to those negotiations.

### 3.3. *Adapting frames across fields*

Frames are the final resource that NGOs may adapt across fields to garner state support for medical humanitarian projects. A collective action frame “is an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment” (Snow and Benford, 1992: 137). Changing a dominant frame is a formidable task that involves “collective framing” work in which actors mobilize a new consensus around a modified or broader understanding of policy concerns and possible outcomes (Klandermans, 1988; Snow and Benford, 1992). Frame adaptation refers to actors' ability to strategically adapt ascendant frames from one field in order to facilitate the reconceptualization of key political ideas or discursive parameters in another. Skilled actors can build upon existing frame concordance between fields or translate conceptual understandings from one field to another. They can thereby transform the collective understanding of available political options (Evans and Kay, 2008).

The primary frame adaptation focus for PIH and OA involves changing conceptions of rights across non-state and state fields. Respondents described their organizations' consistent and intense work to advocate for a rights-based health model whereby governments provide or ensure health services to their citizens as a basic right. As a PIH project manager explained:

Partners in Health believes that health is a right, and rights are conferred by governments. So it's the government that needs to be providing access to that right. [...] [H]aving NGOs just set up parallel systems is not, in our opinion, going to have the strongest outcome. If instead, all resources could really be focused on strengthening one system – and a system that works and that can have maximum impact – then you're going to have better health outcomes.

An OA official echoed these comments:

[Y]ou have the rights-holder – that's the citizen. You have a right to health and health care, clean drinking water ... Who's

going to uphold that right? A very key player has to be the state and the government at different levels. So, if you think of that model, then obviously working with the government is essential. You can't even work without the government ... so we engage on a consistent basis.

A senior official at OA explained this rights-based approach as one by which governments provide the conditions for medical humanitarian work to occur while NGOs help to implement projects. Recognizing that not all states may be *capable* of service-provision, however, he underscored the importance of a state's *willingness* to support NGO projects by creating conditions conducive to their work. As he explained:

We firmly believe that people do have rights, [and] that these are inalienable rights and we need to help facilitate ... their expression of those rights and their claims on people in authority to guarantee those rights or to fulfill those rights or to cause those rights to be fulfilled. There's an important distinction there. The government doesn't have to do everything but the government's got to create the conditions so that everything that's needed to be done can get done. [ ... ] If the government can't provide water for everybody because of limited budget, they need to provide a policy environment in which private investors in water systems can come in and both sides can make a profit or benefit from it. [ ... ] So that's a key tenet of the rights-based approach.

Respondents revealed that rights reframing across state fields is not easy and can take years to achieve, almost always in collaboration with other NGOs and civil society organizations. An OA official recounted a rights adaptation success story in Latin America around indigenous peoples' rights:

Thirty years ago, we were providing basic funding to indigenous organizations that were already there and organizing. We didn't start it but we identified the key players and helped build capacity. Back then they were just struggling for recognition. But now they are players. And for example, in Ecuador, indigenous rights are now part of the constitution and they go to major global meetings around the world. This year we closed the program down because we found ourselves competing for a big grant from an international donor with one of the local organizations we funded. And we lost to them, our own organization! It was a great moment. And we decided we should get out now.

Not surprisingly, respondents acknowledged that frame adaptation is more difficult with incapable and unwilling states. An OA official described how some states resist the reframing of rights issues by limiting the kind of work NGOs can undertake:

The challenges [to working with governments] are different from ... context to context. [In Ethiopia,] you can't even actually in public use the rights language. That's just unacceptable in those contexts. And in fact, a lot of ... rules and regulations [are] in place that actually are closing the space of NGOs to work in. [T]he Cambodian government is getting really good at [this]....And that is a real danger in this day and age. And I think it's because a lot of NGOs are using this rights-based approach and suddenly the governments are saying, "Oh, you're not just going to go clean the water supplies scheme, but you're going to hold me accountable to do it? And you're going to point out corruption and inefficiency,

and where there's oppression? Oh no, that's not what we need." So that's where space is being clamped down and closed. So that's really affecting our work.

These difficulties do not thwart respondents' frame adaption efforts. Indeed, they described how they deal with these challenges by adjusting their strategies in different political contexts. As an OA official explained:

[T]here are ways of engaging with [the state]. So, for instance, in South America, you can do confrontational politics with the government and so public pressure can be a huge factor [for] ... indigenous people and gender-based violence .... But then you get into, say, Ethiopia where confrontational politics and campaigns don't work. You do that [and] you get thrown out. [ ... ] So there, the engagement with the government is much more working very quietly with ministries, very much back door, going in partnership with them, and not confronting them. Not shaming them but saying here is a way we can work with you. You are, of course, responsible. You know what is the best for your citizens, but here are some suggestions from us. And you have to do it in that way otherwise it doesn't work. Same with Cambodia. It's also very much like that.

Respondents emphasized that reframing across fields with willing states can also be difficult, requiring time and patience. A PIH program coordinator explained the framing problems that arose when PIH tried to establish a national community health system in Rwanda using the successful model it had utilized in Haiti. In the PIH model, community health workers are paid for their work and provide daily health care if necessary. The Rwandan government refused to pay its community health care workers. As the program coordinator explained, PIH attempted to reframe the Rwandan government's conception of the value of these health workers so that they could be remunerated:

For PIH, our fundamental component of our work and mission is that we pay community health workers for their work. So, we were trying to bring that to the discussion to say that we really believe that this should be a national priority. It's not a national priority; community health workers in Rwanda are not paid .... But in the districts where we work, we're also paying them so that we can get better health outcomes .... It's really an enhancement of the government health model rather than doing our own model. We haven't yet been successful that they have to or they should be paying community health workers in the entire country.

Although an NGO may fail in adapting a frame across fields, respondents universally preferred engagement with the state when it meant *approaching* the fulfillment of the NGO's goals, even if those goals were not entirely satisfied.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

Recognizing that the state is "complex, heterogeneous, and often fragmented" (Fisher, 1997: 452) in its relationship with medical humanitarian NGOs, this study presented a theoretical framework that better reflects state-NGO interactions across political contexts. Our two-pronged qualitative approach revealed that NGOs and their medical humanitarian projects are more likely to succeed when they adjust how they interact with different types of states through processes of interest harmonization and negotiation. Specifically, utilizing field overlap theory, we demonstrated

how successful outcomes depend on NGOs' ability to leverage resources – alliances and networks; political, financial, and cultural resources; and frames – across state and non-state fields (cf. [Evans and Kay, 2008](#)). Explaining how overlap between state and non-state fields provides NGOs with pressure points to overcome states' reluctance to support medical humanitarian projects is important for three reasons.

First, this approach extends previous scholarship on NGOs' embeddedness within political contexts by recognizing NGOs' and states' *mutual dependence*. Scholars studying non-profits have used field theory to suggest that an NGO's position within a local social order of actors might influence medical project outcomes. [Lune and Oberstein \(2001\)](#) examine HIV/AIDS nonprofits in New York City and classify them – based on the extent of their dependence on state resources – as “directly embedded,” “mediating,” or “outsider” institutions. In each case, whether completely dependent or entirely independent of government institutions, NGOs' successes are contingent upon the state's willingness and capacity to support a medical project. In the international context, this schema of one-sided dependence has the potential to generate political conflict and impede project implementation ([Collins-Dogrul, 2012](#)). In our model, however, states and NGOs are mutually dependent – states need NGOs to deliver critical services while NGOs need states to provide financial, cultural, and other resources to facilitate their delivery. Importantly, state actors also make decisions about how to leverage resources and negotiate with NGOs. While beyond the scope of this article, future research that examines the calculus by which they make those decisions would be invaluable.

Second, we contribute to a growing body of knowledge on transnational social movements and networks. Several studies have identified the potential of non-state actors in transnational settings to transform domestic political systems and international politics through a variety of processes, including issue creation, constituent mobilization, altering understandings of interests and identities, and changing state practices ([Brysk, 2013](#); [Kay, 2005, 2011a, b](#); [Khagram et al., 2002](#)). By mobilizing constituencies, for example, these scholars suggest that non-state actors such as NGOs may facilitate citizens' participation in civil society ([Clark, 2003](#)), defined as an inclusive associational system in which citizens may participate in a variety of independent public spheres ([Edwards, 2009](#): 104). The literature's anti-state bias ([Bebbington, 2005](#); [Foley and Edwards, 1996](#); [Lipset, 1994](#)), however, leaves critical issues of actors' strategy and agency unresolved. Our findings, particularly with respect to alliance brokerage and political, cultural, and financial resource exchange, show that states and NGOs engage in a tug-of-war of power and interests in their attempt to negotiate and, in the long-term, institutionalize successful service-provision outcomes for populations in need. Only in situations in which state institutions are entirely reluctant to participate in a medical humanitarian project did respondents advocate outwardly criticizing, disengaging, or bypassing the state altogether.

Finally, our study extends prior findings on NGO-state negotiation strategies by providing a framework from which to comprehensively consider the range of strategies available to NGOs to increase the likelihood of project success. Some work has provided a normative account of state-NGO relationships, suggesting how practitioners in the global South may interact with states in the global North given the particular type of context within which the organization finds itself (see, e.g., [Fowler, 2009](#)). However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to development. Indeed, our respondents were reluctant to make such normative claims and consistently argued that how NGOs should interact with a state “just depends on the country.” Moreover, they emphasized that political contexts are not static; rather, they change over time.

Nevertheless, through negotiating or harmonizing interests with the state, NGOs can leverage valuable resources in order to find complementarities with the state ([Amengual, 2010](#)) and, ultimately, bolster the likelihood of project successes.

Although the two cases we present are quite strong and generate robust data, additional cases are needed to better explore how resources are leveraged between NGOs and states. We believe, however, that the theoretical framework we elucidate here may be applied to NGOs more generally. Indeed, the kinds of overlap, leverage, and resources we identify are not unique to medical humanitarian NGOs; examining their prevalence across wider political and organizational contexts will likely affirm those we identify but may also uncover additional ones that NGOs utilize as they attempt to provide to those most in need and ensure development project success.

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