The Role of Non-State Actors in Shaping the International Order

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Abstract: This paper examines how non-state actors, referred to as non-governmental groups and organizations, are becoming increasingly important in influencing the international order. By looking at many recent studies, it explores how these groups influence global decision-making, conflict resolution, and international cooperation. For this, the paper opts for a Systematic Literature Review (SLRL as a research method to provide a clear picture of this complex situation. The key findings are that these non-state actors or groups, from rebel forces to charitable organizations, are playing a fundamental role in shaping international policies, helping to solve conflicts, and working together on global issues. This challenges the traditional idea that only countries have power in international relations. The research also shows how these entities can sometimes work with countries and other times compete with them. They are increasingly using their influence and the internet to have a bigger impact worldwide. By and large, the paper endeavours to show the way the world is governed is changing, and more actors are involved. It argues that governments need to consider these different groups when making decisions. By understanding the complicated relationship between countries and non-governmental groups, this research helps to better understand how the contemporary international order is changing that gives policymakers with valuable information to bring positive change in the process of global governance.

Key Words: Non-state Actors, International Order, Non-governmental Organizations, Global Governance, International Institutions

Introduction

Non-state actors, comprising a diverse array of entities such as multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational social movements, and even terrorist organizations, are increasingly recognized as significant players in the global arena. The emergence of non-state actors as influential actors in global affairs is driven by various factors, including globalization, technological advancements, and the proliferation of global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and human rights violations (Mabera, 2022). As non-state actors exert growing influence on global governance structures, decision-making processes, and norms, it becomes imperative to analyze their roles, motivations, strategies, and impacts on shaping the international order.

Moreover, the role of non-state actors in shaping the contemporary international order has expanded significantly in recent decades. This expansion can be attributed to several factors, including the democratization of information, the rise of global civil society, and the growing interconnectedness of the world economy. Non-state actors now operate across national borders, leveraging their resources, expertise, and networks to influence global governance structures and policies (Saifullah et al., 2020). From advocating for environmental protection to promoting human rights and social justice, non-state actors play diverse and multifaceted roles in addressing global challenges and shaping the norms and rules that govern international relations. These entities, which

encompass a wide spectrum including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational social movements, and terrorist organizations, are increasingly asserting their presence on the global stage (Hosli et al., 2020). Such a phenomenon marks a significant departure from the conventional understanding of international relations, where nation-states have traditionally held the monopoly on power and authority in shaping global affairs.

In this context, understanding the role of non-state actors in shaping the international order is not only timely but also essential for comprehending the complex dynamics of contemporary global governance.

The Emergence of Non-state Actors in the Retrospect

(Research Background)

The involvement of non-state actors in international affairs is not a recent phenomenon but rather a historical continuum that dates back centuries. From the medieval trading guilds to the anti-colonial movements of the 20th century, non-state actors have long played a role in shaping the course of world events. However, it is in the contemporary era that their influence has become most pronounced, thanks in part to the democratization of information and the rise of global civil society (Olter et al., 2021). Moreover, within the dissolution of the bipolar world order, characterized by the ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, new

spaces and opportunities emerged for non-state actors to assert their influence. The proliferation of liberal norms such as democracy, human rights, and free trade provided fertile ground for non-state actors to mobilize around common causes and challenge traditional power structures (Furlan, 2020).

Furthermore, advancements in technology, particularly the internet and social media, have revolutionized the way non-state actors operate on the global stage. These tools have enabled unprecedented levels of connectivity, communication, and mobilization, allowing non-state actors to coordinate across borders and amplify their voices on issues ranging from environmental conservation to humanitarian aid. In the context of the international order, non-state actors have come to occupy a variety of roles and functions. They serve as advocates for marginalized communities, watchdogs holding states and international institutions accountable, providers of humanitarian aid and development assistance, and catalysts for social and political change (Moschetti et al., 2020). Today, their actions and interventions shape not only the policies and practices of states but also the norms and values that underpin the international system.

Problem Statement

The increasing prominence of non-state actors in global affairs presents both opportunities and challenges for the international order. On one hand, non-state actors bring diverse perspectives, expertise, and resources to global governance processes, contributing to innovation, adaptation, and responsiveness in addressing pressing global challenges. On the other hand, their involvement raises questions about accountability, legitimacy, and democratic governance (Callamard, 2019). Non-state actors often operate outside traditional systems of checks and balances, leading to concerns about their transparency, representativeness, and impact on democratic decision-making processes. Also, the asymmetrical power relations between state and non-state actors can exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of international institutions (Wood, 2020).

Research Questions

1. What are the primary motivations driving non-state actors to engage in shaping the international order?

2. How do non-state actors influence global governance structures, decision-making processes, and norms?

3. What are the implications of non-state actor involvement for the legitimacy, effectiveness, and accountability of international institutions?

Research Significance

This research is influential in a manner that it informs policymakers, academics, and practitioners seeking to navigate the complexities of contemporary international relations. Additionally, the findings of this research can help identify opportunities for enhancing collaboration between state and non-state actors to address global challenges, promote sustainable development, and foster inclusive and democratic global governance structures. Besides, highlighting the diverse ways in which non-state actors contribute to global governance would increase the significance of engaging with and harnessing the potential of non-state actors as partners in building a more peaceful, prosperous, and equitable world.

Literature Review

Understanding the Phenomenon of Non-State Actors

Non-state actors represent a diverse array of entities that operate outside the traditional structures of government but wield significant influence on global affairs. These actors transcend national boundaries and operate across a spectrum of sectors, including economic, social, political, and cultural domains. Among the most prominent non-state actors are multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational social movements, terrorist organizations, religious institutions, and advocacy groups (Schoenefeld, 2020). As the world becomes increasingly interconnected through advances in technology, communication, and transportation, the barriers to entry for non-state actors to engage in international affairs have significantly diminished. This interconnectedness has facilitated the exchange of ideas, resources, and expertise across borders, enabling non-state actors to mobilize support, coordinate action, and influence global governance processes (Olajide et al., 2022).

Moreover, the democratization of information and the rise of civil society have empowered non-state actors to challenge traditional power structures and advocate for change on a global scale. Through their ability to mobilize public opinion, shape discourse, and influence decision-making processes, non-state actors have become key drivers of social, political, and economic transformation in the 21st century. As per the studies of Hosli et al., (2020) and Maclean (2021), non-state actors are characterized by their diversity, adaptability, and flexibility, which enable them to operate in diverse contexts and pursue a wide range of objectives. Multinational corporations, for example, leverage their economic power and global reach to influence trade agreements, investment policies, and regulatory frameworks. NGOs and civil society organizations mobilize grassroots support and advocate for human rights, environmental protection, and social justice. Transnational social movements, meanwhile,

mobilize collective action around shared grievances and aspirations, challenging existing power structures and advocating for systemic change.

In recent years, the role of non-state actors in shaping the international order has become increasingly prominent, challenging the primacy of states and traditional intergovernmental institutions (Saifullah et al., 2020). Their ability to mobilize resources, build coalitions, and deploy innovative strategies has enabled them to influence policy outcomes, shape norms and values, and advance their interests on the global stage. As such, understanding the motivations, strategies, and impacts of non-state actors is imperative for assessing contemporary global governance and charting a path towards a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable international order (Rauta, 2020).

Role and Influence of Non-State Actors in Shaping the International Order

When it comes to the role and influence of non-state actors in shaping the international order, they involve a broad range of activities and engagements across various sectors and issue areas. Non-state actors wield influence through diverse channels and mechanisms, leveraging their resources, networks, and expertise to advance their agendas and contribute to global governance processes (Droubi et al., 2020). One key aspect of non-state actor influence is their capacity to mobilize public opinion and advocate for policy change at both the national and international levels. NGOs, advocacy groups, and civil society organizations play a critical role in raising awareness about pressing global issues, mobilizing grassroots support, and pressuring governments and intergovernmental institutions to take action (Darwich 2021). Through campaigns, protests, and lobbying efforts, non-state actors seek to shape public discourse, influence policy agendas, and hold decision-makers accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, non-state actors contribute to shaping the international order through their participation in global governance structures and decision-making processes. NGOs, for example, engage in advocacy and capacity-building activities within international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, seeking to influence policy outcomes and promote their interests (Widiatmaja et al., 2019). Similarly, multinational corporations participate in international forums, trade negotiations, and industry associations, where they advocate for favourable policies and regulations that align with their business objectives (Mabera, 2020).

Through collaborative partnerships, innovative initiatives, and resource mobilization efforts, non-state actors have filled gaps in global governance and complemented the efforts of states and intergovernmental organizations in tackling complex transnational issues. For example, NGOs and humanitarian organizations provide humanitarian assistance (Breslin et al., 2020). Therefore, by framing issues, mobilizing support, and building coalitions, non-state actors influence the development of international norms and standards, shaping the behaviour and practices of states and other actors in the international system.

Impact on Regional and International Actors and Power Politics

The increasing prominence and influence of non-state actors have significant implications for regional and international actors, as well as power dynamics within the global arena. As non-state actors assert their presence and engage in global governance processes, they shape the behaviour, strategies, and power relations of both state and non-state actors, contributing to the evolving dynamics of international politics. One key impact of non-state actor involvement is the reconfiguration of power politics and the distribution of influence within the international system (Droubi et al., 2020). Traditionally, power in international relations has been primarily concentrated among states, which wield authority and influence through formal institutions, military capabilities, and economic resources. However, the rise of non-state actors challenges this state-centric view of power by introducing alternative sources of authority and legitimacy, such as expertise, network connectivity, and normative influence (Darwich, 2021).

Non-state actors with significant resources, expertise, and networks can wield considerable influence in global decision-making processes, often shaping outcomes in ways that reflect their interests and priorities. Multinational corporations, for example, leverage their economic power and market dominance to influence trade agreements, investment policies, and regulatory frameworks, often to the detriment of smaller states or marginalized communities (Borlini, 2020). In a converse manner, states may perceive certain non-state actors as threats to their interests or security, leading to efforts to constrain or regulate their activities through legal, diplomatic, or coercive means (Mabera, 2020).

Overall, the impact of non-state actors on regional and international actors and power politics is profound, reflecting the interests and values in the global arena. By understanding and engaging with the diverse array of non-state actors operating in the international system, states and other actors can effectively overhaul the complexities of contemporary global governance and work towards building a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable international order.

Challenges and Opportunities in Non-State Actor Engagement

It is important to explore the increasing involvement of non-state actors in shaping the international order

presents both challenges and opportunities for global governance and diplomacy. While non-state actors bring diverse perspectives, expertise, and resources to the table, their participation also raises questions about accountability, legitimacy, and representation in decision-making processes (Callamard, 2019). In this regard, one of the significant challenges associated with non-state actor engagement is the issue of accountability and transparency. Unlike states, which are subject to democratic processes, legal frameworks, and international norms, non-state actors often operate in decentralized and non-hierarchical structures, making it difficult to hold them accountable for their actions (Saifullah et al., 2021).

In addition to it, the legitimacy of non-state actors in global governance processes is often questioned, particularly when their agendas and interests diverge from those of states or the broader international community. It is argued that non-state actors lack democratic legitimacy and representativeness, leading to concerns about their influence on decision-making processes and their ability to advance narrow or self-serving agendas (Maclean, 2020). Therefore, balancing the competing demands of legitimacy, representation, and effectiveness is a central challenge for global governance institutions seeking to engage with non-state actors in a meaningful and inclusive manner. Furthermore, the proliferation of non-state actors in the global arena can lead to fragmentation, duplication, and competition among different actors, undermining coordination, cooperation, and coherence in global governance efforts (Stivachtis 2024). With a diverse array of NGOs, advocacy groups, and social movements operating across issue areas and geographical regions, there is a risk of overlap, redundancy, and inefficiency in their activities, leading to suboptimal outcomes and resource allocation.

However, despite these challenges, non-state actor engagement also presents significant opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness, legitimacy, and inclusivity of global governance processes. Non-state actors bring unique perspectives, expertise, and networks to the table, enriching policy debates, generating innovative solutions, and mobilizing support for collective action on pressing global challenges (Charountaki et al., n.d). While non-state actor engagement in global governance presents challenges in terms of accountability, legitimacy, and coordination, it also offers opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness, inclusivity, and relevance of international efforts to address pressing global challenges (Wood, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing the role of non-state actors in shaping the international order, scholars and practitioners draw upon various theoretical frameworks and approaches from the field of international relations.

Firstly, pluralist theory suggests that power in society is dispersed among multiple actors, including both state and non-state actors, who compete and cooperate to advance their interests within a decentralized and fragmented political landscape. According to pluralist theorists, non-state actors play a crucial role in shaping public policy and influencing decision-making processes through advocacy, lobbying, and coalition-building (Lagoutte, 2021). Pluralist approaches stress the importance of open and inclusive political systems that accommodate diverse interests and perspectives by assessing the role of non-state actors as essential contributors to democratic governance and pluralistic societies.

Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) is another relevant theory that focuses on the emergence and operation of networks of non-state actors who collaborate across borders to promote shared values, norms, and policy objectives. TANs encompass a wide range of actors, including NGOs, advocacy groups, social movements, and grassroots organizations, who mobilize resources, expertise, and public support to influence global governance processes (Rauta 2020). TANs theory highlights the importance of networked governance structures and informal channels of communication in facilitating collective action and shaping policy outcomes in areas such as human rights, environmental protection, and social justice.

Thirdly, constructivist theory argues about the role of ideas, identities, and social norms in shaping international relations, highlighting how non-state actors contribute to the construction and contestation of norms and values in the global arena. According to constructivist theorists, non-state actors play a crucial role in norm entrepreneurship, agenda-setting, and socialization, influencing the evolution of international norms and standards through their advocacy, mobilization, and persuasion efforts (Widitamaja et al., 2019). Constructivist approaches underscore the ideational power of non-state actors in shaping global discourses and shaping the role of states and other actors in the international system.

Finally, power transition theory focuses on the ramifications of power shifts and realignments in the international system, highlighting how the rise of non-state actors can challenge existing power structures and alter the distribution of influence among states and non-state actors. According to power transition theorists, non-state actors with significant resources, capabilities, and networks can disrupt established hierarchies and alliances, leading to shifts in the balance of power and the emergence of new centres of influence in global affairs (Darwich, 2021). Power transition theory offers with exemplification of the strategic interactions and power dynamics between states and non-state actors in shaping the international order.

In amalgamating these theoretical perspectives, an adequate understanding of the role and influence of non-state actors in shaping the international order can be developed, specifically by identifying the drivers, mechanisms, and implications of their engagement in global governance processes.

Research Methodology

This research paper opted for a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as a data analysis strategy by beginning with the identification of relevant keywords and search terms to access recent and pertinent studies on the role of non-state actors in shaping the international order.

Search Strategy

Keywords such as "non-state actors," "global governance," "international order," "transnational advocacy networks," and "civil society organizations" were used to retrieve relevant literature from academic databases, journals, and repositories. The search strategy will be designed to prioritize recent publications (from 2019 to 2023) and exclude older or irrelevant studies that do not meet the inclusion criteria, totalling 20 articles for the overall data analysis.

PRISMA Framework

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework guided the systematic literature review process, ensuring transparency, rigor, and replicability in the selection and analysis of studies. The PRISMA framework comprises four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Identification: A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using the predefined keywords and search terms. The search results were subsequently exported to reference management software for further analysis.

- Screening: Initial screening of search results involved reviewing titles and abstracts in order to identify relevant studies that meet the inclusion criteria. Studies that do not focus on the role of non-state actors in global governance or are not published within the specified timeframe were later on excluded from further consideration.

- Eligibility: The eligibility criteria was applied to the full-text articles identified during the screening phase to determine their relevance and suitability for inclusion in the systematic literature review. Articles that provide empirical evidence, theoretical insights, or policy analysis related to the research topic will be included, while editorials, commentaries, and opinion pieces will be excluded.

- Inclusion: Finally, the selected articles that meet the inclusion criteria, totalling 20 papers, were included in the systematic literature review. Data extraction was conducted to extract relevant information from each included study, including author(s), publication year, research methods, key findings, and theoretical contributions.

By following PRISMA framework and applying rigorous search, screening, eligibility, and inclusion criteria, the systematic literature review provided with an evidence-based analysis of the role of non-state actors in shaping the international order. The findings of the SLR contributed to advancing knowledge and understanding in the field of international relations, informing policy and practice in global governance and diplomacy.

Findings and Analysis

The above articulated selected studies offered valuable insights into the diverse roles and impacts of non-state actors in shaping the international order. While some studies focus on specific types of non-state actors such as NGOs, corporate entities, and social movements, others adopt a broader perspective encompassing various actors and their interactions. Across the studies, common themes emerge regarding the influence of non-state actors on global governance processes, including agenda-setting, policy advocacy, norm entrepreneurship, and diplomatic engagement (Wood, 2020). However, there are also differences in emphasis, methodology, and theoretical frameworks employed. For instance, studies examining the role of NGOs highlight their transnational advocacy networks (TANs) and their capacity to mobilize public opinion, leverage on digital activism platforms, and engage in diplomatic activities to influence policy outcomes (Furlan, 2020). Similarly, research on corporate actors highlights their economic and political power, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and lobbying efforts in shaping regulatory frameworks and sustainable development agendas (Mabera, 2020)

While some studies like those of Borlini (2020) and Breslin et al., (2020) focus on the constructive contributions of non-state actors to global governance, others critically examine their power dynamics, accountability mechanisms, and potential challenges, such as co-optation, elite capture, and marginalization of grassroots voices. Moreover, comparative analyses and case studies offer valuable insights into cross-national variations in non-state actor influence, institutional contexts, and policy outcomes.

Overall, the comparative analysis of the selected studies provided with a thorough understanding of the multifarious roles, strategies, and impacts of non-state actors in shaping the international order, highlighting both opportunities and challenges for global governance and democratic accountability.

Discussion

The findings and analysis of the selected studies further helped in understanding the role of non-state

actors in shaping the international order. The discussion articulated in the following passages synthesized comparative analysis from the literature review and, thereby, offers reflections on the implications for global governance, power dynamics, and democratic accountability.

One of the central themes that emerge from the reviewed literature is the significant influence and agency exerted by non-state actors in global governance processes. NGOs, corporate entities, social movements, philanthropic foundations, and diaspora organizations are recognized for their capacity to mobilize resources, advocate for policy change, and challenge existing power structures. Whether through transnational advocacy networks, digital activism, or diplomatic engagement, non-state actors play a crucial role in shaping policy agendas, promoting social justice, and advancing sustainable development goals. However, alongside their constructive contributions, the literature also highlights the complex power dynamics and accountability challenges inherent in non-state actor engagements. Corporate actors, in particular, are scrutinized for their undue influence on policy-making processes through lobbying, CSR initiatives, and partnerships with governments. Additionally, questions of transparency, accountability, and representation arise concerning the legitimacy and accountability of non-state actors in global governance. Also, concerns are raised about the co-optation of civil society organizations, elite capture, and the marginalization of grassroots voices within transnational advocacy networks.

The comparative analyses and case studies included in the review revealed cross-national variations in the roles, strategies, and impacts of non-state actors, reflecting diverse institutional contexts and policy environments. The effectiveness of non-state actor interventions is shaped by contextual factors such as political regimes, legal frameworks, civil society resilience, and socio-economic conditions. Understanding these contextual subtleties is inevitably hinge on designing contextually appropriate strategies for non-state actor engagement and ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of global governance initiatives.

This exhaustive discussion showcases the opportunities and challenges presented by non-state actors for global governance and democratic accountability. While their contributions to policy innovation, advocacy, and social mobilization are lauded, concerns persist regarding their potential for co-option, capture, and elite influence. With these notions and perspectives, efforts to strengthen the accountability mechanisms, transparency standards, and inclusivity of non-state actor engagements are essential for fostering more equitable and participatory forms of global governance. More importantly, promoting dialogue, collaboration, and partnerships between state and non-state actors can enhance synergies and maximize the collective impact of global governance initiatives. By fostering the collective agency of state and non-state actors, the international community can address perplexed challenges, promote sustainable development, and advance the principles of democracy and human rights on a global scale.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research paper attempted to examine the key yet complicated role of non-state actors in shaping the international order by emanating findings from a systematic literature review of recent scholarly studies. The findings highlight the diverse and influential roles played by non-state actors, including NGOs, corporate entities, social movements, and philanthropic foundations, in shaping policy agendas, promoting social justice, and advancing sustainable development goals. Despite their constructive contributions, challenges persist regarding power dynamics, accountability mechanisms, and contextual variations in non-state actor engagements. In this regard, efforts to strengthen transparency, together with democratic accountability, in global governance processes are essential for promoting more equitable and participatory forms of international cooperation.

Based on the findings of this paper, several recommendations as a blueprint are suggested for policymakers, academicians, and researchers alike:

First and foremost, in light of the influential roles played by non-state actors in global governance processes, policymakers should prioritize enhancing transparency and accountability mechanisms to ensure the integrity and legitimacy of decision-making processes. This includes promoting greater disclosure of funding sources, lobbying activities, and decision-making procedures to foster public trust and confidence in global governance institutions.

Secondly, fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaborative initiatives between state and non-state actors is essential for addressing complex global challenges effectively. By capitalising on the diverse expertise, resources, and networks of stakeholders, policymakers can enhance the effectiveness and impact of global governance initiatives in areas such as climate change mitigation, human rights protection, and peacebuilding efforts.

In addition, efforts to strengthen civil society resilience and capacity building are crucial for empowering grassroots movements, civil society organizations, and community-based initiatives to advocate for policy change and social justice. Investing in civil society empowerment, network building, and coalition building can amplify marginalized voices, promote inclusive decision-making processes, and advance the principles of democratic governance at the local, national, and international levels.

Finally, further research and evaluation are needed to deepen our understanding of non-state actor dynamics, their impacts on global governance, and their implications for democratic accountability. Investing in interdisciplinary research, comparative studies, and empirical evaluations can generate new knowledge, evidence, and insights to inform policy debates, shape best practices, and drive positive change in global governance processes.

By acting upon these recommendations, it will be possible to work together to strengthen the role of non-state actors in shaping the order and advancing the principles of democracy, human rights, and sustainable development on a global scale.

Research Limitations

The systematic literature review chosen as a research method may be subject to scope limitations and selection bias, as it focuses primarily on peer-reviewed scholarly studies published in English-language journals. Consequently, relevant research published in other languages or non-peer-reviewed sources may be overlooked, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the findings. Also, the quality and availability of data on non-state actor engagements, activities, and impacts may vary, posing challenges for empirical research and evidence-based policymaking. Besides, research on non-state actor dynamics may raise ethical considerations related to informed consent, data privacy, and power asymmetries between researchers and research participants. Adhering to ethical guidelines, obtaining appropriate approvals, and prioritizing the protection of human subjects' rights are essential for conducting responsible and ethical research in this area.

Despite these limitations, this research paper contributes to advancing a holistic understanding of the prevalent role of non-state actors in shaping the international order.

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