5 The Spreading Out of INGOs

In 2008, American college student Seth Maxwell met a friend for coffee in Los Angeles to discuss her recent service trip to Uganda. The next day he went to a film screening about poverty in the developing world. And the third day he attended church, where his pastor talked about the need for mission work to provide safe, clean water. As Maxwell later described:

> Three consecutive days changed everything … Over the next several months, through my own research and several uncanny, seemingly chance encounters that could only be described as God at work, I met with some of the most prominent individuals and organizations exploring ways to provide solutions to this problem, and knew I had to take action.[1]

Maxwell got together eight friends, and with the $70 they were able to raise among themselves they bought water bottles from a local grocery store. The friends took the bottles to Hollywood Boulevard, where they handed them out to passersby with a request for a donation toward providing clean drinking water in the developing world. By the end of the day, they had raised $1,700 – enough to rehabilitate one freshwater well.

Buoyed by this success, Maxwell and his friends started to think bigger. He reflected, "It was then that we realized that, despite the huge number of water organizations and agencies that exist to address the global water crisis, NOBODY was activating students – young people – around this issue. So, we created the Thirst Project."[2] Thirst Project believed it had found a niche by focusing on raising money in middle schools, high schools, and colleges. This strategy seems to have

[1] Thirst Project, "Our Story." Available at https://thirstproject.org/about/our-story/ (last accessed July 23, 2023).
[2] Ibid.

worked: Since its creation, Thirst Project has raised millions of dollars to fund 3,300 projects, providing over 500,000 people with safe, clean water.[3]

Thirst Project has distinguished itself from other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) focused on water in another important way as well. It initially funneled most of its donations to other INGO partners, but as it grew, Thirst Project decided to move its programming teams in house. And as part of that strategic decision, the leadership team chose to concentrate its efforts on a single country: The Kingdom of Eswatini in Southern Africa (formerly Swaziland).

On the face of it, the decision to focus on Eswatini instead of another country that is needier or more attention-grabbing is puzzling. The country is extremely small, with a population of just over a million people. In 2012, the World Bank reported that 64 percent of its population had access to basic drinking water services, much more than many other countries in the region, such as Uganda (43 percent) or neighboring Mozambique (44 percent).[4] And Eswatini is not well known to most Americans, the primary donors and supporters. Thirst Project describes the decision as follows:

> While many nonprofits have been making progress on solving the water crisis, no organization has focused efforts specifically in one country, with the goal of bringing an entire nation clean water. The eSwatini [sic] project will work as a case study about the positive effects of bringing clean water to a developing country and will demonstrate benefits such as improved education and heightened development.[5]

Thirst Project's outreach materials repeatedly highlight that its work in Eswatini is part of "What Makes Thirst Unique."[6] And by focusing on a small country, the organization could claim to "do what no one

[3] Thirst Project, "Our Impact." Available at https://thirstproject.org/about/our-story/ (last accessed July 23, 2023).

[4] World Bank, "DataBank: People Using at Least Basic Drinking Water Services." Available at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.H2O.BASW.ZS?end=2012&locations=SZ&start=2000 (last accessed July 23, 2023).

[5] Thirst Project, "Kingdom of eSwatini." Available at https://thirstproject.org/about/our-story/ (last accessed July 23, 2023).

[6] Thirst Project Club Program, "What Makes Thirst Unique." Available at https://hammerdownoprf.weebly.com/uploads/1/6/6/3/16631190/thirst_what_makes_thirst_project_unique.pdf (last accessed July 23, 2023).

has ever done before," in a way that it presumably couldn't in a bigger country, like Uganda or India.[7]

Thirst Project is specialized, both programmatically and geographically, and thus illustrates the dynamics studied in Chapter 4. Yet Thirst Project's story also exemplifies another trend in INGO decision-making, which we address in this chapter: INGO leaders are increasingly avoiding overseas countries that are crowded "hotspots" and seeking out new geographic niches for their work. From many perspectives, this trend is surprising. If INGOs are focused on organizational effectiveness, why wouldn't they channel their scarce resources to where the need is greatest? For issues like clean water, which often have important economies of scale, why not focus on countries or regions where people live in particularly dense communities, where a project can reach more people? More broadly, why is this strategy of finding a geographic niche so popular?

This chapter highlights an important reason why American INGOs are increasingly seeking out new geographic niches: Many once-popular countries are now "saturated" and can no longer easily support more INGOs. Even in places with strong ties to the United States and relatively robust civil society protections, observers and decision-makers have expressed a growing wariness about INGO density. For example, critics have argued that the INGO sector is too large in countries including Haiti[8] and Kenya.[9] (Over)saturation can lead to a variety of operational problems. Reflecting on the influx of INGOs following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, a representative from World Vision noted "the absence of coordination coupled with a lack of an accountability mechanism led to challenges like duplication of activities and saturation in some project sites."[10] Even before

[7] Ibid.

[8] Kristoff and Panarelli (2010).

[9] Cecelia Lynch, "Kenya vs. NGOs: Round 3?" Critical Investigations of Humanitarianism in Africa, February 11, 2015. Available at www.cihablog.com/kenya-vs-ngos-round-3/ (last accessed July 27, 2022). The domestic nongovernmental organization (NGO) population in Kenya is also extremely crowded and is in some ways difficult to distinguish from the INGO population. See Brass (2016, 78).

[10] Eliza Villarino, "World Vision: Lessons from Haiti," *Devex*, January 11, 2013. Available at www.devex.com/news/world-vision-lessons-from-haiti-80096 (last accessed July 27, 2022).

the earthquake, Haiti was referred to as a "republic of NGOs"[11]; one of our focus group participants with extensive experience in the humanitarian field described Haiti as experiencing a "proliferation of NGOs."[12]

Post-disaster response efforts often generate similar criticisms of INGO population density, as already mentioned in Chapter 1 with respect to the 2004 Asian Tsunami. For example, after Cyclone Pam tore through Vanuatu in 2015, it experienced what was described as a "torrent of NGOs, surge staff, and the aid sector's labyrinthine coordination,"[13] which was said to have overwhelmed local response efforts. Multiple large INGOs criticized their own efforts in Vanuatu and called for greater coordination.[14] Concerns about INGO saturation can encourage or at least provide justification for the legal restrictions on INGO activities that have spread in recent years.[15] The Indonesian government, for example, prohibited INGOs from operating without a local partner after the devastating 2018 earthquake and tsunami in Central Sulawesi Province, citing concerns about foreign organizations' overlapping mandates and operational confusion.[16]

Given the growing possibility that American INGOs will consider key foreign countries too crowded, our theory predicts that – much like Thirst Project – they will increasingly seek out new (less dense) geographic niches. Building on the previous chapters, this approach

[11] Kristoff and Panarelli (2010).
[12] Focus group conducted via Zoom, October 13, 2022.
[13] Irwin Loy, "Aid Reform in the Pacific held up by Power, Purse Strings, and Trust," *The New Humanitarian*, November 14, 2017. Available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2017/11/14/aid-reform-pacific-held-power-purse-strings-and-trust (last accessed July 27, 2022).
[14] Rebecca Barber, "One Size Doesn't Fit All: Tailoring the International Response to the National Need Following Vanuatu's Cyclone Pam," Report published by CARE International, Oxfam International, Save the Children, and World Vision International, June 2015. Available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/reflections-on-cyclone-pam_whs-v2.0-report.pdf/ (last accessed July 27, 2022).
[15] Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2016); Bromley, Schofer, and Longhofer (2020); Glasius, Schalk, and De Lange (2020); Chaudhry (2022).
[16] Irwin Loy, "Why Indonesia's Rules on Foreign Tsunami Relief are Rattling the Aid Sector," *The New Humanitarian*, October 16, 2018. Available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2018/10/16/why-indonesia-s-rules-foreign-tsunami-relief-are-rattling-aid-sector (last accessed July 27, 2022).

highlights that country-level population density is an important predictor of where INGOs choose to work, and thus how decisions about geographic siting might change predictably over time. This perspective complements previous research that has emphasized the importance of country need, funding, and political institutions as drivers of whether (and where) INGOs engage.[17] These factors are clearly important, but we suggest that they paint an incomplete picture. In particular, previous scholars have overlooked density-driven temporal shifts in INGOs' geographic decisions.

Similar to the argument advanced in Chapter 3, our approach in this chapter emphasizes the curvilinear effect of density – this time, on geographic decisions. When a country has low levels of INGO density, the presence of some INGOs demonstrates the feasibility of operating there and attracts more INGOs. However, after this initial population growth, a country's INGO population will become crowded, with fewer resources available for new INGO entrants. After this saturation point, further increases in INGO density will have a negative effect: The more INGOs that are working in the country, the more likely it is that a new INGO will be crowded out of the environment. We support this argument with a statistical analysis of original and existing data on INGOs' locations as well as a qualitative case study of conservation INGOs.

The chapter's findings have potentially important implications for our understanding of global governance. We demonstrate that, net of other influences, the uneven supply of INGOs across national contexts can be explained by the first half of the INGO density curve: INGO presence initially attracts more INGOs. But after saturation occurs, density will repel INGOs, leading them to seek their own geographic niches. INGOs are not simple aid chasers; they undertake cost–benefit analyses of working in environments with varying densities.

We emphasize that "saturation" does not necessarily imply that the country's needs have been met. This can happen in some cases, like in major relief efforts previously discussed where INGO activity outstrips local capacity to absorb resources. But perhaps more commonly, saturation occurs when additional INGOs anticipate that they will

[17] Ron, Ramos, and Rodgers (2005); Büthe, Major, and de Mello e Souza (2012); Hill, Moore, and Mukherjee (2013); Hendrix and Wong (2014); MacLean et al. (2015).

struggle to acquire the necessary resources to survive in an environment. Thus, if many countries are reaching their saturation points, we should expect to see greater geographic dispersion over time. INGOs significantly influence the countries where they work through service provision, advocating for policy reforms, promoting international norms, and providing technical expertise, among other things. Thus if American INGOs are spreading out globally, more countries may become exposed to Western-led economic and political networks, which could lead to both the diffusion of associated norms and practices and also potential political backlash. We elaborate on these points in the next section.

5.1 Why Geographic Choices Matter

An INGO setting up an office or maintaining staff in another country shapes political and social life there in at least three important ways.[18] First, INGOs are important service providers. They have played a growing role in delivering private and public foreign economic assistance.[19] Although this foreign assistance often comes with strings attached, governments are loathe to restrict it because it "help[s] them deliver services, relieve[s] budgetary pressure, and t[ies] them more closely to key international actors."[20] Second, INGOs can also provide technical expertise to national and local governments and socialize government employees to international practices, as has been the case on global health issues.[21]

Third, some INGOs are important channels for the diffusion of international norms and policy changes.[22] For example, when human rights INGOs are operating in a country, this draws international attention to abuses[23] and encourages domestic groups to engage in

[18] INGOs can engage with countries in various ways that do not necessarily involve a physical presence, such as by "naming and shaming" their human rights records or grading their performance in an international benchmark. INGOs' decisions about which countries to focus on in these ways fall outside the scope of the chapter.
[19] Büthe, Major, and de Mello e Souza (2012); Dietrich (2016).
[20] Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2016, 302).
[21] Murdie and Hicks (2013). See also Freyburg (2015) and Campbell, DiGiuseppe, and Murdie (2019) for other studies of INGOs' effects.
[22] Boli and Thomas (1999).
[23] Meernik et al. (2012).

protest.[24] A local presence of human rights INGOs also helps domestic activists mobilize to pressure governments to improve their human rights records.[25] When countries pass laws that prevent INGOs from operating, it can deter domestic civil society actors from advocating for political reform.[26] In these ways, the presence of progressive INGOs may promote countries' integration into the liberal world order. Yet INGO efforts to spread liberal norms have provoked unintended consequences, sometimes including a nationalist backlash to external interference[27] or a counter-movement of more politically conservative INGOs.[28] Such a backlash may be more likely when an INGO is physically located in a country.

5.2 Prior Research on INGO Geography

Even large INGOs lack the resources to set up operations in every country; they must therefore make hard choices about where to work. Our approach builds on a small body of research that has empirically examined the countries in which INGOs operate. These studies emphasize the importance of three considerations that are also highlighted in the literature on domestic NGOs' geographic choices *within* countries:[29] (1) a location's need, (2) how welcoming it is to domestic and international NGOs, and (3) the availability of resources to work there. We discuss each in turn.

First, INGOs seek out countries where there is a need for their activities. Research on large service-delivery INGOs shows that they are more likely to work in countries with greater need.[30] Examining US humanitarian and development INGOs, Tim Büthe, Solomon Major, and André de Mello e Souza analyze an original dataset of private aid allocation and conclude that recipient need is statistically and substantively the biggest determinant of where private aid goes.[31] Although

[24] Murdie and Bhasin (2011).
[25] Bell, Clay, and Murdie (2012).
[26] Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2015).
[27] For example, Gruffydd-Jones (2019).
[28] Bob (2012); Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024b).
[29] For example, Brass (2012); Dipendra and Lorsuwannarat (2022).
[30] Moyer et al. (2024).
[31] Büthe, Major, and de Mello e Souza (2012).

they examine where INGOs spend money rather than where they are geographically located, these outcomes are likely correlated.

Second, international NGOs seek out countries that are politically open to INGOs and relatively safe. Colin M. Berry et al. describe this in their study of how human rights INGOs' geographic choices are shaped by countries' "political opportunity structure[s]."[32] The legal environment is often a powerful barrier to INGO engagement.[33] Similarly, violence against humanitarian organizations is frequently intended to encourage them to leave.[34] Consistent with these findings, a survey of domestic NGO staffers in Cambodia finds that repression is viewed as a significant impediment to advocacy and service organizations' ability to achieve their objectives.[35]

Beyond the threat of crackdown, INGOs' geographic choices may also reflect their perception of where their work can have the greatest impact due to other indicators of how welcoming a country is. Even if a country has substantial objective need, its political environment may lead INGOs to believe they are unlikely to be able to make progress. Previous research suggests that INGOs may seek to work in contexts with low corruption, high stability, and important Western alliances, which may provide leverage for INGOs' activities.[36] Renewable energy NGOs are more likely to work in countries with higher levels of democracy, for example, even though these organizations are nominally apolitical.[37]

In a third consideration, INGOs seek out countries where they are able to secure funding and other resources to support their work. Need and political opportunity structure shape access to resources, but other factors also drive funding availability and potential, including donor states' political priorities. INGOs are increasingly important channels for the delivery of foreign economic aid,[38] and many large INGOs bid for and accept project funds from governments that require engagement in specific countries. For example, Mercy Corps generates as much as 90 percent of its revenue by securing government contracts

[32] Barry et al. (2015, 89).
[33] Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash (2015); Chaudhry (2022).
[34] Narang and Stanton (2017).
[35] Springman et al. (2022).
[36] Büthe, Major, and de Mello e Souza (2012); Hendrix and Wong (2014).
[37] MacLean et al. (2015, 726).
[38] Dietrich (2016).

and awards to work in countries prioritized by donors such as the United States Agency for International Development and the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office.[39] Others, like Save the Children, have more diversified revenue streams but still generate a substantial portion of their funding from government sources.[40]

Recognizing the restrictions imposed by government funders, other organizations jealously protect their ability to make their own geographic (and other) decisions. For example, Médecins Sans Frontières, Amnesty International, and Greenpeace International generally do not accept government funding.[41] But working in a particular country may still require these organizations to fundraise from foundations, firms, other INGOs, or individual donors, many of which also prefer to fund programming in specific places.[42] Such funders may be interested in supporting work in countries that are more prominent or with which they have stronger personal connections through religious, ethnic, or other types of ties. As one INGO staffer told us with respect to private funders, "people just don't fund where they haven't been on vacation."[43] Of course, INGOs with multiple revenue streams may choose to use discretionary (rather than project-based) funds to work in less marketable locations.

INGOs' decisions about where to work also reflect other strategic considerations. The literature on naming and shaming highlights how INGOs' choices about which violations to publicize are based on patterns of global media attention and desire for organizational continuity in programming, among other considerations.[44] The desire to work in

[39] Audited financial statements are available at Mercy Corps, "Financial Information and Annual Reports." Available at www.mercycorps.org/who-we-are/financials (last accessed March 6, 2023).

[40] Save the Children, "Annual Report 2021." Available at www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/annual-report/annual-report/2021-annual-report/2021-annual-report-results-for-children.pdf (last accessed March 6, 2023).

[41] Though see Srivastava (2022) on Amnesty's evolving approach to government funding.

[42] Chaudhry and Heiss (2021).

[43] Interview with a senior staff member of American conservation INGO, by Zoom, June 13, 2022.

[44] Cooley and Ron (2002); Bob (2005); Ron, Ramos, and Rodgers (2005); Hendrix and Wong (2014); Chaudhry (2019).

highly visible places may be one factor that promotes crowding: Since 2022, attention has focused on Ukraine's humanitarian emergency at the expense of other contemporaneous "forgotten emergencies" such as the drought in Somalia.[45]

In summary, relatively few studies have sought to directly explain INGOs' decisions about where to operate globally and those that do tend to focus on organizations in a single sector, such as human rights or renewable energy.[46] And previous research is somewhat divided over whether country need, political opportunities, available funding, media attention, or other factors should most strongly attract INGOs. Our approach develops a different understanding of organizational incentives that treats INGOs' choices as interdependent: an INGO's decision about whether to work in a country will depend on other INGOs' previous decisions about working there. After developing this argument in the next section, we test it empirically alongside other relevant variables identified in previous research.

5.3 How Density Shapes Geographic Strategy

We argue that an INGO's decision about where to work depends on the density of countries' existing INGO populations. Here, we define a country's INGO population in terms of the number of foreign nongovernmental organizations of the same nationality that are already working there, defined further by the sector whenever possible. Although this population definition excludes domestic NGOs, we think this approach is appropriate for our analysis, as there is a great deal of cross-national variation in organizational forms, behaviors, and norms,[47] and domestic NGOs may have quite different structures, patterns of activity, and normative orders than international NGOs. During the time period of our study, domestic NGOs have typically struggled to compete with international NGOs for resources from foreign aid donors, who are a major source of revenue in most issue areas

[45] Corinne Redfern, "How the Focus on Ukraine Is Hurting Other Humanitarian Responses," *The New Humanitarian*, July 7, 2022. Available at www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/07/07/Ukraine-aid-Russia-invasion-funding-donors (last accessed July 26, 2022).
[46] Barry et al. (2015); MacLean et al. (2015).
[47] Stroup (2012).

(although these dynamics may be changing due to trends in aid localization, as we discuss in Chapter 6). This approach also makes our analysis empirically tractable, as no systematic data source exists to document populations of domestic NGOs by country.

Similar to our argument about foundings presented in Chapter 3, we expect density to have a nonlinear effect on geographic location, reflecting an inverted u-shaped relationship between density and geographic choice.[48] Working in a country with very few other INGOs present may initially be difficult. INGOs provide one another with mutual support and encouragement in the early stages of their population growth. If major INGOs maintain offices in a country, others may consider it as well since INGO leaders gather information about how needy and welcoming countries are from their colleagues. Moreover, staff may learn from their peers how to work in the country, including how to legally register, recruit employees, and conduct their activities in a way that matches the needs and norms of the environment. Finally, international workers share many everyday social encounters across organizations that create a sense of belonging.[49] At low levels of density, we expect the presence of other INGOs to initially encourage other INGOs to engage in a country, as INGO staff help one another become more familiar with the national environment and its requirements.

But we anticipate that the relationship between density and INGOs' geographic decisions will shift as density increases. Countries eventually reach saturation in terms of the number of INGOs they can comfortably support. After that, further increases in density cause INGOs to be less likely to engage with a country. At higher levels of density, the presence of many INGOs can introduce competition for local employees, confusion about overlapping objectives, and programmatic redundancy, among other issues. In a focus group conducted for this study, a staff member of an education INGO described recruiting staff in Guatemala as competitive for some of these reasons, saying, "We have so few professionals that hiring the professionals to be part of the NGOs has become a competition . . . specialists are taken from the little NGOs."[50] The founder of a humanitarian INGO in

[48] See also Hanegraaff, Vergauwen, and Beyers (2020).
[49] Mosse (2011); Autesserre (2014).
[50] Focus group conducted via Zoom, October 7, 2022.

Uganda raised similar concerns about populations being too crowded, telling us she would advise would-be founders:

> [T]hink about not going where everyone is, because there are certain areas where you go and there's no CSO [civil society organization] really doing anything and yet they should be doing something there. So they should focus, not concentrate in the same place as everyone is, and then duplicate the work.[51]

In dense environments, organizations may also find it more difficult to secure funding because too many other INGOs are applying for the same grants and contracts and soliciting donations from the same interested public. As a result, existing INGOs in a location may be motivated to engage in entry deterrence – actively discouraging other INGOs from working in a particular place. As a staff member at a humanitarian INGO with more than a decade of experience explained in a focus group we conducted for this book:

> [I]n the relief space where there's a crisis and a fire hose of money is going to get turned on in the next 6 weeks, getting to be the number one agency in your sector in that area is tremendously competitive. And not wanting other agencies to be able to get a foothold in your sector to meet that problem so that you can remain the de facto lead is super common.[52]

To be clear, high levels of density will not completely dissuade INGOs from working in countries that are attractive locations for reasons of need, openness, resources, or some combination thereof. This dynamic is why we observe situations (like those discussed in the introduction of this book) that are intensely competitive in ways that may have deleterious consequences for social welfare. Nevertheless, our argument is that INGOs anticipating this dynamic leads to a predictable trend: Increases in INGO density once a country has already reached its saturation point will be associated with fewer additional INGOs working there, whereas the initial increases in INGO density have a positive effect. As the old joke about a popular restaurant goes, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."[53]

[51] Interview with Brenda Peace, Uganda Fund, via Zoom, June 8, 2021.
[52] Focus group conducted via Zoom, October 7, 2022.
[53] We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this quote.

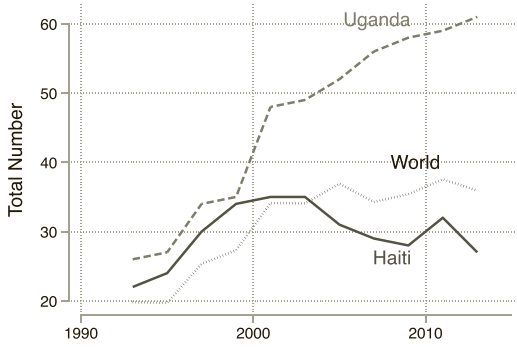

Figure 5.1 INGO density trends in Haiti and Uganda, 1993–2013
Notes: The data source is the Transnational Social Movement Organization Dataset (Smith and Wiest, 2012; Smith et al., 2019). In addition to displaying the total number of American INGOs in Haiti and Uganda, this figure includes the mean total number of American INGOs globally, calculated by averaging across all countries in the dataset.

Cross-national differences in INGO population density can be stark, and the same national environments can vary quite a bit in population density at different points in time. Figure 5.1 depicts the total number of American INGOs located each year in Haiti and Uganda, which exhibit different trends in density over the post-Cold War period.[54] Haiti is frequently characterized as having too many INGOs; the number of American INGOs there grew rapidly throughout the 1990s, but plateaued and eventually declined by the late 2000s. The 2010 earthquake generated a brief spike, but the trend generally follows the inverted u-shaped pattern that characterizes population saturation. By contrast, the number of American INGOs working in Uganda steadily increased throughout the same period, indicating that population saturation was not reached in this larger country.

This argument builds on our discussion in Chapter 4 about missions and the importance of identifying a niche. As we argued there, INGOs may seek to distinguish themselves from their peers by stipulating a

[54] This figure uses data from the Transnational Social Movement Organization Dataset (Smith and Wiest, 2012; Smith et al., 2019). As explained later in this chapter, this dataset includes a biannual coding of entries in the Yearbook of International Organizations. Because this biannual coding includes odd-numbered years, we start the analysis in 1993 instead of 1992, as we do elsewhere in the book.

specialist mission, such as by focusing on a particular geographic location or a narrow programmatic focus. But even if American INGOs are becoming more geographically narrow in their missions, a question remains about *where* they actually work. This chapter examines that question, exploring how increases in density encourage and then discourage INGOs from working in particular locations. For a single-country American INGO like Thirst Project, we are interested in why Eswatini was chosen as the location as opposed to some other country. And for an organization such as Freedom House that has a global mission and thus could in principle work in any or even every country, we are similarly interested in where it chooses to operate.[55] As of 2024, it maintains offices in "nearly twenty countries;"[56] this chapter addresses the factors that make a country more likely to be chosen to be part of that group. Our theory and empirical analysis therefore complement Chapter 4 by investigating what drives INGOs to work in some countries but not others at a given point in time.

We acknowledge that the search for geographic niches may operate somewhat differently in different issue areas. We expect INGOs in many issue areas to feel pressured to respond to major events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even as identifying geographic niches characterizes their longer-term strategy. Because humanitarian and peace and security INGOs often focus on urgent disaster response and major conflicts, they may have less strategic ability to avoid highly dense and competitive country environments than other types of INGOs, especially if they have global missions. As one staff member at an peace and security INGO explained in a focus group, "You can't just not be active on major crises sequentially. You might be able to miss one but you can't miss three in a row."[57] This inability to mitigate competition by specializing in a particular geographic

[55] The organization states the following after "our mission": "Freedom House is founded on the core conviction that freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people. We speak out against the main threats to democracy and empower citizens to exercise their fundamental rights through a unique combination of analysis, advocacy, and direct support to frontline defenders of freedom." See Freedom House, "Ways to Give." Available at https://freedomhouse.org/ways-to-give (last accessed July 27, 2022).

[56] Freedom House, "About Us." Available at https://freedomhouse.org/about-us (last accessed February 12, 2024).

[57] Focus group conducted via Zoom, October 7, 2022.

niche has led to what they described as intense competition among conflict and humanitarian INGOs, where many organizations compete for the same pooled funds (see also Chapter 4 on competition among humanitarian INGOs). But other leaders in the humanitarian sector had different opinions about avoiding crowded locations. A staff member from the International Committee of the Red Cross stated in an interview, "we plan very carefully, we look at what others are doing to make sure we're not going to be bumping into each other and duplicating efforts."[58] Thus, niche-finding dynamics may apply to humanitarian organizations as well. As a staff member told us:

> I think before we were always like, "Oh, we need to have a presence in many countries because we're needed." … But now I feel like it's less about being in a lot of countries, it's really digging deep and being even in potentially fewer or the same countries if other agencies are complementing us in other countries.[59]

5.4 Where INGOs Work

To gather data on where INGOs work, we first return to the sample of 868 American INGOs that we introduced in Chapter 4. The sample was drawn from the National Center for Charitable Statistics' (NCCS) coding of all 501(c)(3) organizations in the United States filing Form 990 tax returns. It covers INGOs working on conservation, civil society and democracy, global health, and humanitarianism.[60]

Using this sample, we had research assistants (RAs) visit each organization's website around the start of 2020 to record in which countries the INGO reported programs or offices. As such, this measure captures both permanent offices and more temporary activities. The RAs found that 24 percent of the organizations in our sample had no website (potentially indicating that they no longer existed) or no relevant information about their geographic locations.

[58] Interview, Helen Durham, Director of International Law and Policy, International Committee of the Red Cross, July 30, 2021, by Zoom.
[59] Interview with executive at an American humanitarian INGO, October 8, 2021, by Zoom.
[60] Chapter 3 contains a fuller discussion of the NCCS data's strengths and limitations.

We also draw on the Transnational Social Movement Organization Dataset (TSMOD), developed by Jackie Smith, Dawn Wiest, Melanie M. Hughes, Samantha Plummer, and Brittany Duncan.[61] The TSMOD contains a biannual coding of entries from the Yearbook of International Organizations (YIO) from 1953 to 2013.[62] As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the YIO contains a less comprehensive list of American INGOs than the NCCS, which draws on US government tax records. However, it offers the advantages of a panel data structure and information on INGOs from a range of countries, not just the United States.

The TSMOD contains a subset of organizations in the YIO. It aims to include "international nongovernmental organizations defined by their explicit efforts to alter some aspect of the status quo."[63] It includes all major advocacy and service provision groups in the YIO. Among other organizational attributes, the TSMOD contains information on the headquarter country for each INGO, allowing us to identify American INGOs. The TSMOD does not directly record the countries in which INGOs work, but it contains data on the countries in which they "have members."[64] Following other research,[65] we treat "having members" in the TSMOD as an indicator that an INGO is "working in" a country, although it is arguably a weaker indicator than our original one. The two data sources reveal some interesting trends in the geographic choices of American INGOs. In our original data, we identified 190 countries in which American INGOs reported working as of 2020. The average country has around 22 American INGOs, and 75 percent of countries have fewer than 30. The United States is the densest country: 33 percent of American INGOs also have

[61] Smith and Wiest (2012); Smith, Plummer, and Hughes (2017); Smith et al. (2019).
[62] Union of International Associations (1953–2023).
[63] Ibid.
[64] In the TSMOD, an INGO "member" is a broad category: It can include other NGOs in a federated structure, individuals, project teams, political parties, national governments, banks, and other categories. Most organizations listed in the TSMOD report having a federated structure of memberships (25 percent), a structure for national and local organizations to be members (29 percent), or individual members (32 percent). Other types of membership are less common. The membership variable is missing for 21 percent of organizations.
[65] For example, Barry et al. (2015).

domestic programs. The top ten foreign countries with the highest density of American INGOs are Haiti, Kenya, India, Uganda, Mexico, Guatemala, Philippines, Tanzania, Peru, and China (Figure 5.2). This list includes both countries that critics allege are overrun by INGOs (e.g., Haiti) as well as large countries (e.g., China and India) that may attract INGOs due to having relatively strong needs, resources, or media coverage, among other considerations.

Most INGOs focus their work in one or a small number of countries; few have the capacity to be truly global even if they have a generalist mission with respect to geography. The American INGOs in our original data worked in an average of six countries, with a range of 1–172 reported. Consistent with our data on the prevalence of mission specialization from Chapter 4, 44 percent of organizations reported working in only one country beyond the United States,[66] and only 15 percent worked in over ten countries. Only eighteen organizations operated in more than fifty countries. If, as we hypothesize, INGOs need to strategically differentiate in their geographic choices due to increasing density, we should expect them to "spread out" to more countries over time. Figure 1.2 illustrates this trend toward dispersion among American INGOs from 1993 to 2013. We also examine the proportion of countries in the world with at least one American INGO during the full time period covered by the TSMOD (see Figure 5.3). If our argument is correct, we would expect INGOs to be concentrated in fewer countries earlier in the time series and to be more widely distributed later. As expected, the proportion of countries with American INGOs in the TSMOD steadily increased during the observed time period, reflecting a shift from 35 percent of the world's countries in 1953 to 95 percent in 2013. American INGOs are indeed "spreading out" to more countries. Of course, this trend could be due to factors other than population density, such as increases in the raw number of American INGOs or in the resources that permit INGOs to work in more countries. In what follows, we attempt to tease apart the influence of density and other factors.

[66] The data we collected on mission breadth for that chapter (as reported in Figure 4.2) indicated that 51 percent of INGOs had missions that specialized in only one country other than the United States.

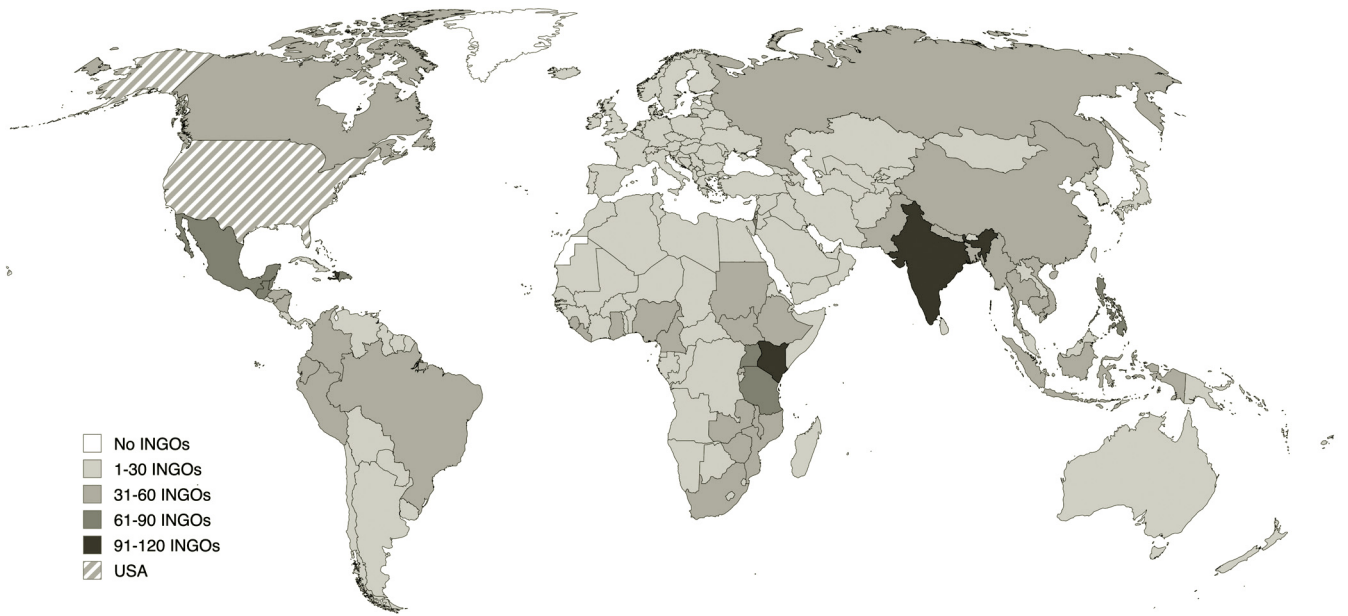

Figure 5.2 Density of American INGOs by country, 2020

Notes: Based on authors' original coding American INGOs' programs and offices collected from their websites. The sample of INGOs is from the NCCS and includes INGOs working in the fields of conservation, civil society and democracy, health, and humanitarianism as described in Chapter 4.

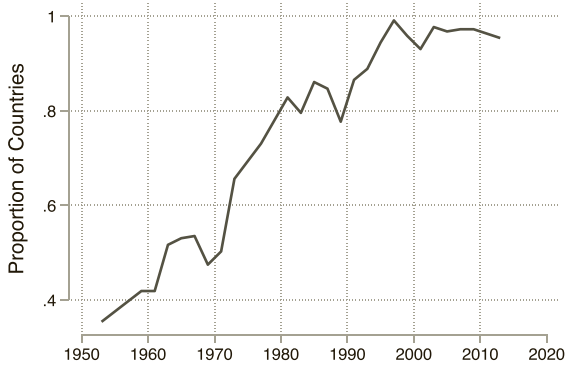

Figure 5.3 American INGOs' global spread, 1953–2013
Notes: The graph shows the proportion of all countries in the world that have at least one American INGO working there based on the TSMOD.

5.5 What Explains Where American INGOs Work?

We present two complementary analyses, first using our original data and then drawing on the subset of American INGOs in the TSMOD to conduct a longitudinal analysis. In both, we remove observations related to whether INGOs choose to work in the United States, which is consistent with our focus on American INGOs' *international* activities.

5.5.1 Original Data

Our key explanatory variable is a country's pre-existing INGO density. To measure it, we count the total number of all American INGOs in the previous time period and also square this variable to model the hypothesized curvilinear relationship. We standardize these variables for visualization so that their mean values are 0 and their standard deviations are 1. This count comes from the TSMOD data, which ends in 2013. Our theory anticipates a time lag between shifts in a country's INGO density and organizations' decisions about where to work. Since our original data collection began in 2020, this pairing is appropriate, though longer than our one-year lags in the main analysis in Chapters 3–4. Although we cannot use a shorter time lag due to the lack of more recent TSMOD data, we used a range of time lags (2–6 years) in Chapters 3 and 4 as robustness checks and did not find that the

length of the lag matters significantly for the results.[67] We also note that because the TSMOD includes only a subset of American INGOs based on the YIO, subsetting it to create issue-specific measures of American INGO population density is not possible without too much missingness in certain populations.

The richness of our original data allows us to include covariates measured at the organization level, as in Chapter 4. First, we expect that wealthier INGOs will work in more countries. Second, we anticipate that INGOs that are more institutionalized and better connected politically (proxied by their location near Washington, DC) will operate in more countries. Finally, we predict that faith-based organizations will work in fewer countries because they may prefer to deliver services to individuals who share their faith.[68] We also include a measure of the INGO's geographic scope (single country, regional, or global), as we expect the choice to work in a particular country to be shaped by the breadth of the organization's mission.

At the country level, we control for the three main factors identified earlier – country need, a welcoming environment, and resources. All country variables are lagged by one year unless otherwise noted. To measure a country's need, we include measures of population and gross domestic product (GDP) per capita.[69] All else equal, we expect larger and poorer countries to have a greater need for INGOs' expertise and services. Both variables are logged to address skewness.

To measure how welcoming countries are, we include a measure indicating whether a country experienced significant civil society organization (CSO) repression from V-Dem.[70] We also expect countries

[67] We also find that there is a substantial correlation between the number of American INGOs reporting members in a country according to the TSMOD in 2013 and the number of American INGOs still working in that country in 2020 based on our original coding. The correlation coefficient is 0.51 for all countries, and 0.72 for countries in the Global South, which are the main focus of many INGOs' efforts.

[68] Alternatively, more missionary-driven faith-based INGOs may operate in fewer countries because they want to work in communities that are not already part of their religion.

[69] The source for these variables is Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), "Country–Year: V-Dem Full + Others v12" Dataset. See Coppedge et al. (2022). The original source for these variables is Fariss et al. (2022).

[70] Coppedge et al. (2022).

that are politically aligned with the United States to be more supportive of American INGOs and vice versa. We therefore include indicators for countries' past alliances with the United States.[71]

Finally, since American INGOs may seek to work in countries with better fundraising potential, we include the amount of US foreign economic assistance each country received.[72] To measure media and political attention – which may also affect fundraising potential from US foundations, firms, and individuals – we include the number of *New York Times* articles published about a country in 2019. Countries that are mentioned more frequently in the American news receive more attention and likely have better resources for INGOs, understood broadly.[73] For example, countries with larger diaspora populations living in the United States or cultural and linguistic similarity may tend to receive more attention and therefore have more potential for resource generation. Our media attention measure may also pick up on countries' needs (e.g., more coverage in the wake of natural disasters) or relationships with the United States (e.g., more coverage of US allies). Both the US aid and media attention variables are logged because they are skewed.

Unfortunately, our analysis does not include a control variable that captures the number of domestic NGOs that exist in a country because such a measure does not exist cross-nationally. It is plausible that countries with more domestic NGOs would be more attractive locations for INGOs since domestic NGOs can be important partners and implementers for many INGO programs. In general, we expect the country-level control variables discussed earlier to do a reasonable job of capturing the size of the domestic NGO population in countries, since countries that are poorer, smaller, and more repressive also tend to be less hospitable to domestic civil society activity.

We use linear probability models that estimate the probability that an American INGO is located in a country. Linear probability models are ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with binary

[71] Leeds et al. (2002). This variable comes from 2018, which is the latest year in the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions dataset.

[72] Data came from US Overseas Loans and Grants (Greenbook): Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2019. Available at www.foreignassistance.gov/reports (last accessed September 25, 2023).

[73] Bob (2005).

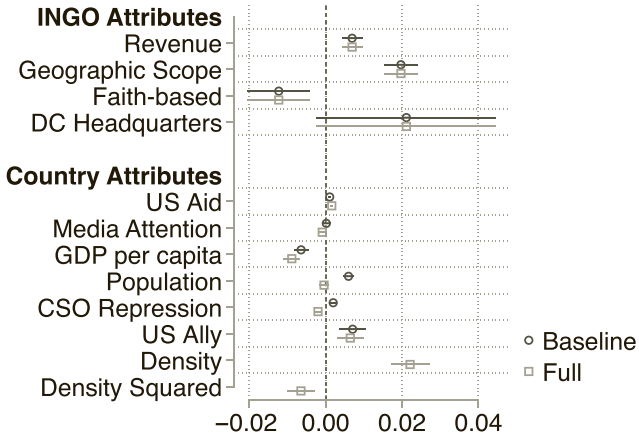

Figure 5.4 Correlates of American INGOs' geographic choices, 2020
Notes: Based on regressions that estimate the likelihood of an organization working in a particular country in 2020 using linear probability models. $N = 129,888$. Standard errors are clustered by organization. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are shown. *Revenue*, *US Aid*, *Media Attention*, *GDP per capita*, and *Population* are logged. *Density* and *Density* are standardized. All country-level attributes are lagged by one year. Data combine our original coding and information from the Transnational Social Movement Organization Dataset. Online Appendix §3 reports the results in a table (Bush and Hadden, 2025a).

outcome variables. In all models, standard errors were clustered by organization.

As Figure 5.4 illustrates, in the baseline model, we find that INGOs with larger revenues and those with broader geographic missions are more likely to work in any given country, as expected. Faith-based groups are less likely, all else being equal. Having a base in Washington, DC is positively associated with our outcome, although the large standard error prevents us from estimating this relationship with confidence. Of the country-level variables, US aid, population, and US alliances are all positively associated with American INGO presence, and GDP per capita is negatively associated, as expected. Civil society repression is positively associated with our outcome in the baseline model, contrary to what we expected.

The full model adds our predictors related to a country's INGO population density. As expected, above and beyond other factors, an

American INGO's choice to engage in a country in 2020 is statistically significantly associated with the density of American INGOs engaged there in 2013. The relationship between density and an organization's choices is curvilinear: Initial increases in density encourage an organization to engage, up to a point at which further increases discourage it. The control variables in the full model generally have the same relationships with geographic choices as they did in the baseline model, with the exception that CSO repression is now negatively and statistically significantly signed, and the coefficient estimate for population is no longer statistically significant at conventional levels.

These results are robust to four types of tests.[74] First, we use an alternative estimation method – rare events logistic regressions, which address the issue that our outcome is a binary measure with mostly zeroes.[75] Second, we use additional controls – corruption, political stability, and democracy.[76] Third, we substitute a measure of US imports for US alliances and density measures that are based on all INGOs instead of ones that are based on American INGOs.[77] The count of all INGOs is based on the TSMOD and constructed in a similar manner to the count of American INGOs. We use this measure because it is possible that saturation in terms of funding, staffing, and other considerations involves INGOs of multiple nationalities. Fourth, we introduce indicator variables for the issue area and the organization, the latter of which provides a particularly demanding test since it allows us to examine the effect of density while holding constant all organization-level traits.

Overall, the full model suggests that INGOs' geographic decisions are affected by both organizational- and country-level factors. But because our models are not longitudinal, our measure of INGO density in 2013 may capture other country-level, time-invariant features that attract or deter INGOs. Our longitudinal models described in what follows help us better understand these factors.

[74] Online Appendix §4.3 reports the results associated with these robustness checks (Bush and Hadden 2025a).

[75] King and Zeng (2001).

[76] These measures come from the V-Dem dataset. See Coppedge et al. (2022). The original source for the corruption and political stability measures is the Worldwide Governance Indicators. See Kaufmann and Kraay (2023).

[77] The measure of US imports come from the World Bank. See World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) Data, available at https://wits.worldbank.org/ (last accessed April 4, 2024).

5.5.2 Longitudinal Data

We now examine the TSMOD alone as a time series to assess how American INGOs decided where to work during the available post-Cold War years, that is, from 1993 to 2013. The TSMOD contains 174 American INGOs, which include groups active in a range of topics within the "social change" category, including Food for the Hungry International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Pathfinder International, and the Rainforest Action Network.

Our measure of density is the lagged number of American INGOs that reported having members in a country. We also include that number squared to test our theory. Both variables are standardized for visualization purposes. In the main model, we use a two-year lagged measure of INGO density. In robustness checks, we use longer lags of 4–6 years to more closely approximate our approach in Section 5.5.1.[78]

As with our earlier analysis, we include both organization- and country-level covariates. At the organizational level, we are constrained by the availability of covariates in the TSMOD dataset, which itself is based on the YIO. Although we would like to include a direct measure of an organization's budget (similar to what we included in Figure 5.4), this data is not available. We instead include the organization's age. Since older organizations tend to have larger budgets, organizational age is a reasonable proxy for organizational size.[79] At the country level, we use the same measures and data sources as described in our previous analysis. Finally, we include a variable measuring the year of the analysis to capture any time trends.

As before, our analysis is run using linear probability models in which the outcome of interest is whether an organization has members in a country in a particular year. We cluster the standard errors by organization. The results displayed in Figure 5.5 support the main hypothesis and are quite similar to those in Figure 5.4. The full model establishes that the number of INGOs already in a country has a curvilinear relationship with an organization's decision to have members there in the year of analysis.

We also explore several alternative estimation methods. The results are similar if we use rare events logistic regressions. These results are

[78] Online Appendix §4.3 reports the supplementary results described in this section (Bush and Hadden 2025a).

[79] Hadden (2015) uses a similar approach.

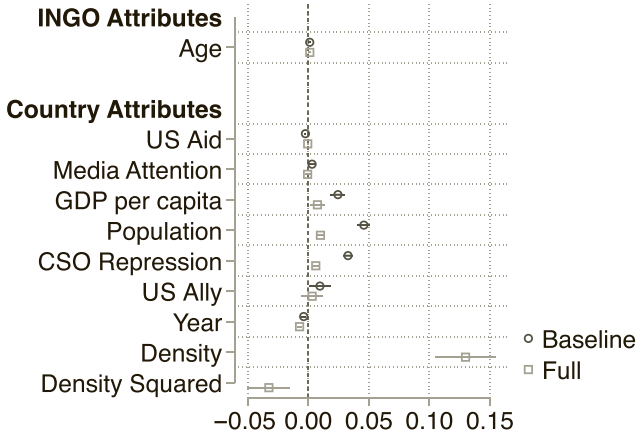

Figure 5.5 Correlates of American INGOs' geographic choices, 1993–2013
Notes: Based on regressions that estimate an organization's likelihood of working in a particular country-year using linear probability models. Standard errors are clustered by organization. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals are shown. N = 383,889 for both models. *Revenue*, *US Aid*, *Media Attention*, *GDP per capita*, and *Population* are logged. *Density* and *Density Squared* are standardized. All country-level attributes are lagged by one year, except for *Density* and *Density Squared*, which are lagged by two years. Online Appendix §3 reports the results as a table (Bush and Hadden, 2025a).

also consistent when using random effects at the organization–country dyad level, which capture time-invariant elements that may motivate certain organizations to engage with particular countries. We also introduce a lagged dependent variable as an explanatory variable in all three types of models – linear probability models, rare events logit, and random effects – to capture how an INGO's decision to work in a country may be path dependent. Our findings for density and density squared are signed similarly in all three cases, although the density squared variable loses statistical significance in the linear probability model.

The results related to density and density squared are also robust to four other types of tests. First, we use time lags of 4–6 years (instead of 2 years) for the density variables. Second, we introduce the same additional controls described earlier – corruption, political stability, and democracy – as well as a measure of barriers to foreign-funded

NGOs that is available for the years in this earlier time period.[80] Third, we again substitute a measure of US imports for US alliances and total INGO density measures for American INGO density measures.[81] Fourth, we include year and organization indicator variables.

Beyond density, the results of the time-series analysis show that country need and country environment predict engagement. In the TSMOD analysis, contrary to what we found in Figure 5.4, richer countries are more likely to host American INGOs; the same is also true for larger countries, and (less anticipated) more repressive countries. We also find evidence that INGOs value consistency over time from our analysis of models including a lagged dependent variable: INGOs often continue to work in the same places. Moreover, there is a significant time trend: INGOs are less likely to work in a given country over time. This relationship may be because the greater INGO density in many countries over time is associated with overall decreases in international membership.

Finally, we do not find clear evidence that American INGOs are chasing foreign aid (beyond how resources might be related to INGO density) or basing their decisions on media coverage or US alliance patterns in Figure 5.5. Once we include density in our full models, US foreign aid and media coverage are not significantly correlated with INGO membership in a country. This finding is again striking in light of previous research that suggests such factors might be important drivers of human rights INGOs' behaviors. The lack of a clear relationship between US foreign economic assistance and American INGOs' geographic choices in Figure 5.5 stands in contrast to the positive relationship in Figure 5.4. One possible explanation for the different results is the different American INGO samples used in the two analyses for the outcome measures. Our original dataset on 868 American INGOs plausibly includes a higher proportion of organizations engaged in monitoring, enforcement, and service provision vs. the 174 "social change" INGOs that are the focus of the TSMOD; the American INGOs included in our original dataset therefore may rely more heavily on government funding than those in the TSMOD.

[80] The source for the barriers to foreign-funding measure comes from Chaudhry (2022).

[81] For this analysis, the imports measure comes from the Correlates of War Project Trade Data. See Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins (2009); Barbieri and Keshk (2014).

5.6 Geographic Choices and Conservation INGOs

To further explore geographic choices and address some of the limitations of the preceding analysis, we conducted a case study of the population of American INGOs working on conservation, which offers a relatively difficult test of our theory. Density dependence is unlikely to drive geographic choices in this sector for at least three reasons. First, as described in Chapter 3, it is the smallest sector in our analysis. Since cooperation tends to be easier in smaller populations, we might expect mutual support to prevail among conservation INGOs, making geographic differentiation unnecessary.

Second, conservation INGOs draw on a much wider range of resources than those in some other sectors (such as civil society and democracy INGOs, which primarily depend on government funds). This broad resource base may dilute some of their competition.

Third, conservation is characterized by relatively consensual global prioritization processes, in which major players like the United Nations (UN) Environmental Programme, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and Conservation International identify a set of geographic locations that are most deserving of attention and then other actors follow suit.[82] Although these prioritization exercises always attract criticism,[83] Benjamin Halpern et al.'s analysis indicates substantial overlap across different prioritization models produced by various conservation organizations.[84] Thus, we might naturally expect American INGOs to concentrate in key hotspots like Brazil and Indonesia, when in fact (as we explain in what follows) they are much more geographically dispersed than prioritization models would predict. This case study presents evidence of our hypothesized mechanism: That density in the conservation sector is causing INGOs to identify geographic niches. It draws on published memoirs and histories of major environmental organizations, including WWF and Conservation International, as well as the secondary literature on conservation INGOs, newspaper articles, and other popular accounts. It also relies on interviews with thirteen representatives of environmental INGOs.[85]

[82] Conservation International, "Biodiversity Hotspots." Available at www.conservation.org/priorities/biodiversity-hotspots (last accessed July 21, 2022).
[83] Kareiva and Marvier (2003); O'Connor, Marvier, and Kareiva (2003).
[84] Halpern et al. (2006, 60).
[85] The Appendix details our interview methods.

5.6.1 A Brief History of Conservation

International conservation involves the protection of endangered species and habitats globally. Conservation INGOs engage in advocacy, monitor species and ecosystems, and provide a range of services, including protecting areas and parks, treating and rehabilitating species, researching habitat threats and diseases, educating citizens, supporting community development, and enforcing laws related to nature preserves.

Systematic conservation efforts first began as domestic activities in the late nineteenth century.[86] The creation of organizations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the United Kingdom (1889) and the Sierra Club in the United States (1892) launched an initial wave of NGOs focused on domestic conservation and wildlife management.[87] Nature conservation became more internationally oriented after World War II with the creation of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The IUCN was founded in 1948 at the urging of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to facilitate cooperation between national governments and disseminate research about conservation. One of its most important products was the "Red List of Endangered Species" that helped set global priorities for conservation work.[88]

The increased ecological consciousness of the 1960s led to the founding of WWF (originally named the World Wildlife Fund) to capitalize on public interest and raise funds for IUCN projects. WWF quickly opened chapters in different countries, including the United States (WWF-US), to channel money to the international office. Its initial impulse was cooperative, as founder Max Nicholson described in 1961: "What is needed is not a new organization to duplicate and compete with the work of existing bodies but a new co-operative international project to make their efforts effective by providing them with adequate resources."[89]

As briefly discussed in Chapter 3, although the US conservation landscape had many important players by 1961, WWF-US was one

[86] Brulle (2000).
[87] Carmichael, Jenkins, and Brulle (2012, 431).
[88] Boardman (1981).
[89] Quoted in Schwarzenbach (2011, 19).

of the first groups with an explicitly international focus. Most NGO action was organized through WWF or species protection programs based in US zoos. WWF-US believed it was operating in "an expanding market" in the 1970s and thus was keen to take on projects with other groups, reflecting its cooperative ethos.[90] In its first ten years, WWF International supported 550 conservation projects in 59 countries, including an anti-poaching unit in Kenya and an education campaign in India.

Although WWF-US held a virtual monopoly on international conservation for many years, other significant organizations entered the market in the 1980s. The intra-population dynamics were initially cooperative and supported collaboration on projects within the same countries. The Nature Conservancy – the largest and richest conservation NGO in the United States – launched its international program in 1980 with support from a $500,000 WWF-US grant. Conservation International was founded as a spin-off of the Nature Conservancy in 1987 and quickly became a major player by promoting the concept of "biodiversity hotspots" and specializing in the tools of "Rapid Assessment Programs."[91] Other INGOs welcomed these developments, and cooperation among these three organizations yielded major successes in the 1980s and early 1990s such as the protection of Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica.[92]

There was a steady increase in resources for conservation until 2008 (see Chapter 3), paralleled by a boost in attention to related issues. But the conservation INGO sector had become much more competitive by the 2000s.[93] For instance, WWF-US began to gradually move away from funding other organizations. As former WWF-US President Russell Train recalled in his memoir, the competitive dynamic was driven home when a foundation suggested the organization's funding for other groups and its lack of distinct programming made it hard to justify support.[94] There was also a prominent intra-INGO conflict in 2004, when the leader of a smaller INGO accused Conservation International, WWF, and the Nature Conservancy of undermining the

[90] Schwarzenbach (2011, 73).
[91] Seligmann (2011).
[92] Boza (1993).
[93] See Balboa (2016, 111) for a similar assessment.
[94] Train (2003, 244).

land rights of indigenous peoples, leading to a greater interest in the intersection between conservation and human rights.[95]

5.6.2 Resources for Conservation

There are four main sources of funding for international conservation. The first is international aid, as in other sectors. Multilateral donors are especially important. Daniel C. Miller, Arun Agrawal, and J. Timmons Roberts found that spending by the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility comprised 59 percent of all conservation aid reported in the AidData database from 1980 to 2008.[96] Bilateral donors are also important contributors, including the United States (7 percent of total aid), the Netherlands (4 percent), and Germany (4 percent). Regional organizations including Inter-American Development Bank, European Communities, Asian Development Bank, and African Development round out the top ten donors. Second, American conservation INGOs receive a great deal of funding from private foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation, the Moore Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Third, corporate donors such as Coca-Cola and Disney fund many conservationists. The fourth funding source is (small and large) individual donors. For example, WWF-US received 31 percent of its budget from individuals in 2022.[97]

Despite the diverse funding sources, there is still considerable competition. Consistent with our arguments about density dependence, conservation INGO founders after 2000 reported that they attempted to respond to the sector's density and concentration by locating a distinct resource niche. As one founder explained in an interview with us:

[W]e developed a business plan [in 2009], and a big part of it was to target a sector of resources and support that we thought was relatively untapped. But it didn't stay that way for long, because as soon as we got off the

[95] Chapin (2004). See also Dowie (2009).
[96] Miller, Agrawal, and Roberts (2013, 14).
[97] WWF-US, "Annual Report," 2022. Available at https://files.worldwildlife.org/wwfcmsprod/files/FinancialReport/file/257wfcvxs7_AR2022_FINALPAGES_1_25_FPO.pdf?_ga=2.65143086.1605632995.1676493924-215408302.1676493924 (last accessed August 1, 2023).

ground other organizations figured out where the money was coming from and began to move in as well.[98]

When we asked what advice they would give others in the sector, another post-2000 INGO founder replied, "you better make sure you have your own source of funding, or that you're doing things better than everyone else. Because every nonprofit is competing with every other nonprofit, essentially."[99] As we argue in the next section, locating these distinct resource niches often involves strategic geographic choices.

Given the range of potential funding sources, we might expect a high degree of heterogeneity in donors' geographic preferences. But there does tend to be a "center" of the market; certain countries consistently receive more conservation aid than others. Between 1980 and 2008, ten countries received roughly 40 percent of all bilateral donor contributions of biodiversity aid – India, Brazil, China, Mexico, Indonesia, Colombia, Kenya, Philippines, Madagascar, and Tanzania.[100] Benjamin Halpern et al. examine a dataset of conservation spending in 2002 by international organizations and large INGOs (the World Bank, Global Environment Facility, Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, and IUCN), and find a similar geographic pattern in the Global South; they also note large amounts of spending in the United States.[101]

Yet there is a positive but weak correlation between biodiversity need and conservation spending at the country level.[102] Halpern et al. find that simply regressing the amount of land area identified in the INGO conservation priority models on conservation

[98] Interview, Don Church, Co-Founder, Global Wildlife Conservation, by telephone, October 24, 2016.
[99] Interview, Suzanne Braden, Founder, Pandas International, by telephone, October 5, 2016.
[100] Miller, Agrawal, and Roberts (2013, 14).
[101] Halpern et al. (2006, 59).
[102] Miller, Agrawal, and Roberts also find that about 30 percent of the variation in foreign aid allocation can be explained by regression models that include the number of threatened species in a country, governance indicators, GDP per capita, population size, country area, and year (Miller, Agrawal, and Roberts, 2013, 18).

spending by major INGOs and IGOs can explain 37 percent of the variation in country-level spending.[103] This suggests that there is a significant amount of unexplained variation in how conservation work is targeted.

One possibility is that some of this mismatch may be because donors prefer to support conservation work in specific countries due to factors beyond need. But Halpern et al. further explain this divergence between need and spending by hypothesizing that INGOs have an organizational motive.[104] Their analysis identified "little overlap in the spending patterns of the five conservation organizations evaluated, suggesting that informal coordination or segregation of efforts may be occurring."[105] In an argument that is similar to ours, Halpern et al. indicate that this pattern suggests "many conservation organizations may be acting strategically in allocating conservation money to avoid spending where other organizations work."[106]

The dynamics of conservation efforts in sub-Saharan Africa also illustrate facets of niche finding.[107] For example, Dan Brockington and Katherine Scholfield conducted a census of conservation organizations working in sub-Saharan Africa from 2004 to 2006 and identified 281 organizations.[108] American groups constituted the largest share of INGOs in these data. Consistent with Halpern et al.'s global analysis,[109] they found that NGOs tended to avoid overlap in their project areas, with the exception of some very popular places that attracted many groups (e.g., Kruger in South Africa, Tsavo East in Kenya, and West Amboseli in Kenya).[110]

[103] Halpern et al. (2006, 61).
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid. (56).
[106] Ibid. (62).
[107] For more on conservation NGO decision-making in this region, see Ryan Pike, Sarah Bush, and Jennifer Hadden, "Protecting Giants: NGO Decision-making for Elephant Conservation," Yale Case 23-014, January 18, 2023. Available at https://shopcases.som.yale.edu/products/protecting-giants-ngo-decision-making-for-elephant-conservation (last accessed July 10, 2023).
[108] Brockington and Scholfield (2010).
[109] Halpern et al. (2006).
[110] Scholfield and Brockington (2009, 17).

5.6.3 Density and Geographic Choices

Our interviews and other qualitative materials provide organization-level evidence that conservation INGOs respond to a rise in density by trying to find less dense geographic niches. We observe that density seems particularly important to the decisions of smaller specialist groups and mid-sized generalist organizations. One example is the mid-sized generalist organization Re:wild (formerly Global Wildlife Conservation), an INGO based in Austin, Texas, with a budget of about $45 million that directly engaged in 33 countries in 2020 and provided support to another 56. Re:wild seeks to do at least 80 percent of its work in biodiversity hotspots, which still leaves "thousands and thousands of sites, and even if you try and focus on non-protected KBAs [Key Biodiversity Areas] within those, you're still looking at the low thousands."[111] As one staff member explained in an interview, a core part of the organization's strategy is to find distinct niches in terms of species and locations:

> One of our guiding principles as an organization is we want to work on things that other organizations are ignoring. So from the species perspective, we don't work on elephants and tigers. There are loads of organizations doing that. We work on freshwater fish and frogs because the big groups aren't focusing on them and they need help. And it's the same with sites.
>
> We don't want to go in and fight over Kruger [in South Africa]. There's enough people caring for Kruger. We want to go after these areas that might be Key Biodiversity Areas because of a rat. It's still really important. It might be an Alliance for Zero Extinction site for a spiny rat. We want to save that and so, we'll find partners locally that are keen to work in those areas. And lots of the places we work are not the big sexy areas, but from a preventing extinction point of view, they're critical.[112]

Re:wild currently has programming in KBAs in Vietnam, the Philippines, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, all of which are less dense countries for conservation INGOs.[113]

[111] Interview with Barney Long, Senior Director of Conservation Strategies, Re:wild, by Zoom, July 15, 2022.
[112] Ibid.
[113] See Re:wild, "Key Biodiversity Areas." Available at www.rewild.org/get-to-know/key-biodiversity-areas (last accessed September 8, 2023).

Another example is the Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN), a mid-sized organization with a budget of around $40 million. In 2020, WCN supported work in forty nine countries. As one staff member explained, the WCN has to evaluate its opportunities in countries carefully to determine if its engagement would add value; its strategy is both reactive and proactive:

> In some cases, if a donor comes to us and says, "I'm really interested in this species, and I can bring a lot of resources to it," this is an opportunity. We would then conduct due diligence to find out if in fact WCN can bring added value to an issue or a landscape or a group or something like that . . . in other cases, we look more strategically and say, "Okay, there is an abundance of resources going to, let's say, African conservation." And what we want to see more of are projects in areas that lack conservation coverage currently. So in places in Southeast Asia or Latin America, we might go looking intentionally to find opportunities, to bring some additional resources and help cultivate conservationists in those areas. That's when it becomes a dual track of being reactive to opportunities presented to us as well as being more intentional and strategic in the direction we go.[114]

In this way, WCN looks for "gaps" where the need is high but the conservation sector is not paying sufficient attention. Similar to Re:wild, much of WCN's strategy hinges on having effective partners available to implement the work. As our interviewee explained, "If we identify a conservation need in a specific place . . . we have to consider, is there an effective partner on the ground or not? Because if there's not, we are more limited in what we can do."[115] Thus, a high density of existing INGOs working in the area could further constrain the organization's ability to work in countries if it exhausted the supply of potential partners. But, consistent with our theory, a very low level of density might also be problematic since it may contribute to – or indicate – a lack of available partners.

Similar to organizations in most INGO populations, conservation INGOs often receive restricted funds tied to particular geographic areas. A review of a range of independent auditor statements from

[114] Interview, Paul Thomson, Senior Director of Conservation Programs, Wildlife Conservation Network, by Zoom, May 25, 2022.
[115] Ibid.

conservation organizations in our population reveals that the majority of INGO funds are donor restricted for a specific purpose, which could include geographic restrictions. This may be particularly true for some of the larger groups in our population. But larger organizations also typically operate with budgets that include some unrestricted funds. As one staff member explained to us, many organizations allow staff members to solicit funds for campaigns they consider high priority.[116] This solicitation process may give INGOs more autonomy over their campaigns and programmatic foci than the figures on unrestricted funds suggest.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that INGOs' organizational incentives regarding density shape their geographic choices. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, we show that organizations often seek to find geographic niches for their work due to competition. For this reason, INGOs are crowded out of some highly dense national environments as they seek distinct locations for their work. Contrary to some prior findings, we do not consistently observe that INGOs "chase aid" or media attention. But we do find evidence that organizational-level motivations related to competitiveness and survival are an important driver of geographic choices.

Geographic niche finding relies on longer time horizons: Organizations must have time to observe the environment and craft their best strategy in response to present levels of density. As a result, this geographic niche-finding dynamic may be less prevalent in the crisis-driven relief sector than in other areas of activity, suggesting future research opportunities for cross-sectoral comparisons. We expand on this topic in Chapter 6.

INGOs' need for differentiation is likely increasing geographic dispersion over time. We suggest that this dispersion has nuanced implications for global governance. On the one hand, the global spread of INGOs may equalize access to technical expertise and make aid delivery more efficient and equitable. On the other hand, organizational need for differentiation may be less appropriate in sectors where

[116] Interview with conservation INGO senior staff member, by Zoom, June 13, 2022.

demand is concentrated in some locations, leading to inefficiencies. For example, in the conservation sector, it may arguably be ecologically desirable for a large number of INGOs to concentrate in highly vulnerable biodiversity hotspots, yet organizational incentives pressure them to differentiate by spreading into other geographies and ecosystems. For example, geographic diversification is helpful if it leads to more organizations working in lesser known biodiversity hotspots, but perhaps less beneficial if it motivates organizations to focus their efforts in "cold spots" for the sole purpose of diversification.[117] In Chapter 6, we will reflect further on how funders may play a role in promoting helpful geographic dispersion while making sure areas of acute need remain well served.

[117] But see Kareiva and Marvier (2003).