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**The External Performance of  
Non - Governmental Organizations:  
A conceptual and analytical framework**

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# **The External Performance of Non - Governmental Organizations:**

## **A conceptual and analytical framework**

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## **Executive Summary**

In this paper an attempt will be made to capture an innovative concept of NGOs external performance and articulate a framework for NGOs external performance analysis. Our approach reflects an eclectic analysis as it crosses different disciplines reflecting research that spreads across different fields, such as non-profit sector studies, management organizational studies as well as international relations studies with emphasis on scholarly research on the performance of international institutions. Our analytical framework identifies three different performance perspectives, the so called three different level of analysis, looking at the output, outcome, and impact of NGO's external activities and the parameters affecting them. Analytically, they constitute three distinctive steps in a causal chain of events that determine the external performance of NGOs.

## Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have become a significant part of political landscape, no matter whether they operate at a national level, either alone or jointly with other local NGOs or non-state actors from a country, or in a transnational manner, as International NGOs (INGOs).<sup>1</sup> As nonprofit entities they offer a wide range of social services at the national and transnational level including the promotion of sustainable development, democratization, human rights, racial equality, tackling issues of social and economic justice, monitoring national and international commitments, mobilizing public support for policies in a certain issue and many other activities. Being concerned with public welfare aims NGOs are self-governing organizations associated with people (individual citizens) and institutionally separated from the state (Otto 1996). They are not endowed with governmental authority, act largely independently from governments while their structure is 'separate from the instrumentalities of government' (Salamon *et al* 1999). As such they do not constitute parts of the government but are essential agents of state or international-global governance.<sup>2</sup> This of course does not mean that they do not interact in many ways with the governments. They are often supported politically and/or financially by the governments and often play a subsidiary role in a wide spectrum of activities supplementing the governmental authorities or even substituting them when governmental action is not adequate or lacking.

In this paper an attempt will be made to capture an innovative concept of NGOs external performance and articulate a framework for NGOs external performance analysis. Our approach reflects an eclectic analysis as it crosses different disciplines reflecting research that spreads across different fields, such as non-profit sector studies, management and organizational studies, as well as international relations studies with emphasis on scholarly research on the performance of international institutions, especially international regimes and intergovernmental organizations. Capturing the relevant interdisciplinary literature, specific or more general, is essential for the scholar who would like to take the lead in the future to offer an eclectic analysis based on a converged research agenda for the issue under discussion. Turning to intergovernmental organizations literature for guidance and insights, for instance, is more than essential for one more profound reason. NGOs possess some of the intergovernmental organizations' traits as they are voluntary organizations having a 'non-profit aim'; a legally recognized personality; an

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<sup>1</sup> According to Martens (2002) NGOs 'are formal independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level'. Reinalda (2001) makes clear the distinction between national and international NGOs. According to him NGOs 'are domestic actors when they confine their activities to their national political systems. They become transnational actors as soon as they operate across national boundaries, for instance, by establishing a relationship with a similar NGO in another country. When various NGOs from three or more countries establish an international non-governmental organization (INGO) to serve as a mechanism for co-operation among national NGOs in international affairs, NGOs through their INGO become international actors'.

<sup>2</sup> Government is a more encompassing concept embracing not only governmental institutions but also non-state actors including NGOs. See Rosenau (1992:4-5)

institutional presence and structure; full-time employed staff; a legal charter as a document showing intent of the entity to continue its existence for a long time in the pursuit of certain goals.

The contemporary interdisciplinary literature on NGOs has accepted the notion of actorness for the NGOs (non-state actors) in the sense that are entities not merely present but capable of acting and intervening in politics. This literature takes for granted the NGOs deliberative and active functioning in politics and has elaborated the concept of NGOs external actorness as one that relates to their capacity to act, whereas NGO presence simply indicated a function of being rather than acting in. The concept of external actorness entails a degree of independence from the external environment, i.e. no full subjection to another actor, but also a degree of autonomy from its members and stakeholders, thus indicating a political entity capable of formulating purposes, reaching decisions, and engaging in purposive action. Thus, internal and external delimitation is crucial in the understanding of the concept. The second important point is that NGOs external actorness is a relational concept, in the sense that its attribution to any political unit is an intersubjective process not only based on their own perceptions but also requiring the recognition of the other units or actors involved in any political process either at the national or international level. In the international context, it does not suffice for an NGO to claim external actorness, it also needs to be recognized by states, other non-state actors, and international institutions like international organizations as an actor in the world stage.

We can identify a set of four mutually interdependent criteria of NGOs external actorness: the capacity to function independently from other state or non-state actors, an autonomous decision-making power (in order to maintain its institutional distinctiveness), continuing functions with an impact on the society at the national level or, put it broader on the transnational level, and an acknowledgement of the importance of the would-be non-state actor by its members and other actors involved in domestic or international politics. The impact criterion is the only one that explicitly associates NGO's actorness with effectiveness in its external interactions. However, while considering it one of the prerequisites for non-state actor capacity, the impact criterion is rather vague and, even more, is problematic, simply because a political unit in lack of a positive impact may still be an international actor albeit an ineffective one. However, purposive actors such as NGOs do engage in external interactions in pursuit of own goals and objectives and effectiveness is attained on the basis of achieving these objectives (Etzioni 1964).

A new generation of studies, including books and a stream of a large number of journals has moved beyond actorness, taking up issues of NGO's effectiveness and *performance* (for instance Newcomer et al 2013; Lecy et al 2012; Kelly 2011; Baruch and Ramalho 2006; Poister 2003; Spar and Dail 2002; Fowler 2002 and 1996; Herman and Renz 1999; Kruse 1999; Edwards 1999; Najam 1998; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Kushner and Poole 1996; Kaplan and Norton 1996; Williams and Kindle 1992; etc) In general, performance of NGOs has emerged as a key concern for two main interrelated reasons. Because of the growing NGOs involvement and the mounting

recognition of their importance in politics and society in the past two decades or so, the issue of NGOs external performance as a measure of success has taken on additional urgency among scholars working in the field. Secondly, the growing scholarly attention to the study of NGOs was accompanied or followed by a widespread criticism towards them that they are undemocratic and lack accountability and transparency mechanism in their functioning and, therefore, legitimacy (Ebrahim and Weisband 2007; Brown 2008; Aldrich 1999: 228-334). In that respect a trend emerged in the literature to view NGO's external performance as a sustained source of legitimacy for them (Lecy et al 2012: 450). The relevant argument that finds support in the literature is that good performance may justify the existence of an otherwise undemocratic and unaccountable-NGO, under the assumption that as long as an NGO delivers on the allocated tasks and functions, issues of its, let's say, democratic governance may be downplayed and marginalized. NGOs external performance, good or bad, the argument in the literature goes, comes to either perpetuate or make up these deficits because it greatly shapes the perception of NGOs' legitimacy prevailing in a given community/society at a given time, thus conferring it the ability to operate constantly in it. Thus, understanding and assessing NGOs performance is crucial.

## **The Conceptualization Framework**

In contrast to effectiveness, which is associated with an NGO's ability to achieve certain outcomes, the concept of performance is not only about the achievement of agreed-upon objectives.<sup>3</sup> It goes deeper by taking into consideration the underlying, intra-organizational, agreement-reaching processes. It assesses implicitly the content of these objectives and addresses issues of how they are defined. In that respect, an NGO may well meet the agreed objectives –i.e. be effective - even when its overall performance is not very impressive. This may be an indication of low organizational standards of success, lack of ambition, or simply awareness of internal and external constraints that impede an NGO from delivering on the objectives. By the same token, a positive performance in terms of activation and external engagement may not be judged effective because the original goals are very ambitious and difficult to achieve in the first place or are incongruent with the scarce organizational resources and its capacity to meet them (Gutner and Thompson 2010: 231-232). This point invokes the well-spotted 'capacities-expectations gap' that has dominated a large part of the academic and policymaking analysis of intergovernmental entities like international organizations. The implication is that effectiveness is only one possible indicator -among others- that can be used to evaluate the external performance of an NGO and that relying on effectiveness exclusively may be misleading regarding the external dimension of an NGO performance (Jørgensen and Oberthür, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> For the conceptualization of the concept of performance as effectiveness see approaches taken from the literature on organizational performance (for instance, Lusthaus et al 2005), management (Cambell et al, 2007) and international relations (Groen and Niemann 2013; Van Schaik 2011, Young 2011; Karns and Mingst 2010: 247-248).

A second point to be made is that the performance of NGO in general is extremely prone to the “eye of the beholder” problem, in the sense that the assessment depends a lot on the evaluator (Gutner and Thompson 2010: 233-234). NGO’s members and stakeholders may have different preferences and different perceptions of what the NGO is about, how and what it should do in society. Given that the NGOs often serve multiple functions and have broad mandates that do not offer specific evaluation criteria, the constituent principals differ in what they consider success and failure. It might even be the case that a poorly-performing NGO is desirable for a critical number of members, especially those that are dragged in a contractual agreement for setting up an NGO by fear of exclusion without fully abiding to its rationale or guiding principles (Lipson 2010). The same differentiation vis-à-vis performance holds for members and non-members of an NGO, be they the state, other NGOs and other non-state actors, citizens, outside stakeholders of an NGO etc. This is again due to different perceptions or simply due to the awareness of the ‘insiders’ of the difficulties to overcome recalcitrant members and stakeholders and improve an NGO’s performance. Both dimensions are relevant in the case of an NGO: the heterogeneity of NGO membership guarantees internal differentiation in the evaluation of its goal attainment and external performance. At the same time, widespread criticism may be voiced about engagement of an NGO in external activities from units of the outside community (the state, other NGOs, advocacy groups, lobby groups, foundations, and other national groups etc), or the society at large which ignore the inherent difficulties of an NGO to intersect with other societal units, no matter whether the particular NGO acts alone or together with other units (state institutions or non-state actors) in networks for ideas- information- and task-sharing or for promoting common goals.

### **The Analytical Framework: Three Levels of Performance Analysis: Output, Outcome, and Impact**

The two points mentioned above suggest that the external performance of an NGO, which constitutes in a positivist language the ‘dependent variable’ of this research project<sup>4</sup>, needs to be clarified as to what exactly we are trying to analyze and evaluate. This may sound a trivial question but it is not. It brings in the foreground two important issues: *focus* and *level of analysis* (Underdal 2002: 5-7). By focus on an NGO, we refer to whether our object of analysis and evaluation is the external dimension of the NGO *per se* or whether we are taking into consideration before the final verdict any positive or negative side effects that may derive from the external activities of the particular organisation. Even if performance may be found lagging behind expectations with occasionally impressive failures, external as well as intra-NGO interactions are more often than not continuous and/or repetitive games rather than one-off ones. This suggests a gradual buildup of learning and socialization processes that may have a more important and far reaching impact than any formal outcome of an NGO initiative (Edwards 1997: 248-249). Process-generated costs and benefits that derive from external engagement have a longer

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<sup>4</sup> The Thales Programme on ‘Evaluation of the NGO Sector in Greece’.



time horizon and are more difficult to capture, let alone be integrated in any performance analysis of a short- to medium-term nature.

In terms of the level of analysis, we can identify three different performance perspectives, looking at the *output*, *outcome*, and *impact* of the NGO external activities. Analytically, they constitute three distinctive steps in a causal chain of events (Underdal 2002: 6). At micro-level, the *output* perspective is related basically with the intra-NGO process of policy-formation, focusing on the deliverables of internal political, managerial and institutional dynamics that inform the NGO's external engagement. This output could be a formal or not formal decision of an NGO decision-making body on an intended course of external action. It could be very narrow-focused or it could take a more abstract form in the sense of outlining general norms, principles and rules of action or engagement. No matter what form it could take, the policy-output should reflect agreement reached by the NGO on a plan design for NGO's societal- external engagement. It should set priorities for external action; determine ways and strategies of implementing the plan and means of monitoring the implementation of priorities into action, allocate financial and other resources that should be employed for such implementation and make strategic choices of partnerships from the existing web of state agencies and not-for-profits peers working in the same field of action. Such policy-output constitutes the starting point of the outcome and impact analysis and offers a benchmark for their assessment (Lecy et al 2012; Underdal 2002: 6).

To play this benchmarking role, we first need to examine whether the internal policymaking process is effective, in other words whether there is a collective output to start with. Obviously, this is a *sine qua non* condition, in the sense that without an output it is very difficult to make a case about performance at all. Once there is an output, performance indicators comprise clarity, meaningfulness, relevance to the NGO's members and stakeholders with the latter, being inside or outside the NGO, to be interested in understanding the outcome of their investments. In general, all four indicators have a positive relationship with output performance and increase performance perspectives also vis-à-vis the outcome and impact ones. The common intervening variable through which this positive relationship materializes is the underlying and implicit policy convergence within an NGOs' management team/board of directors that paves the way for cohesive action and in that respect increases the outcome and impact potential of its external activities. Output clarity suggests that the NGO's management teams have a clear view on what needs to or can be done and how to do it. Meaningfulness and relevance reflect the degree of NGO responsiveness to the issue in question. Meaningful outputs entail an NGO response fine-tuned with the actual problem. Both for the clarity and meaningfulness indicators, an output can be deliberately blunt or hazy just for the NGO to save face and mask the underlying differences between its decision-makers. Relevant to the NGO's members and stakeholders inputs curtail autonomous or centrifugal/divergent or even unilateral action on their part when they think that the NGO fails to respond appropriately to a social problem or challenge. Finally, inclusiveness is linked with relevance and ensures the synthesis of divergent views rather than the marginalization and alienation of NGO members and stakeholders.

At meso-level, the **outcome** perspective shifts attention to the implementation of the output and the deriving behavioral adjustment of an NGO. It refers to the NGO external activation along the output lines and captures how it takes this output to the societal level. It may take the form of active external engagement in the society in the pursuit of a given objective, like the handling of a social development problem or the combating of an identified social threat, such as racism or poverty. Additionally, it may comprise initiatives of adjusting existing national policies or creating new ones. These outcomes do not necessarily lead to problem solving, neither the NGO's external-societal engagement suggests that a problem will be solved or a social threat will be eradicated nor that its efforts will bring about a new policy formulation or deliver a more functional NGO. The emphasis of the outcome perspective is on the NGO efforts and actions and whether they carry out the agreed outputs and *not* on their impact.

At this level, we can identify three performance indicators, namely cohesion and continuity, proper use of available instruments, and supply of leadership. The first two link the outcome with the output perspective, examining to what extent there is an NGO behavioral change as a result of the agreed output. The last two mostly refer to how the NGO seeks to realize the output, whether it makes full use of the available resources (including of course funds) and instruments and adopts a leadership profile. Both are indications of decisiveness and reveal the NGO's intention to become a more substantive societal actor. Needless to say, there is again a positive correlation between these indicators and outcome performance.

Finally, at macro-level, the **impact** perspective assesses performance on the basis of the effect of the NGO (external) outcomes, that is the result of its activities either in handling crises and issues or in the broader process of policy order formation. Methodologically speaking, the challenge and eventually the great difficulty encountered in this perspective is to establish causality between the NGO actions and the changed environment in order to credit the former with developments and establish solidly any claims about its performance record. The underlying counterfactual question that we should bear in mind and seek to address is what would have happened if the NGO in question had not intervened (Fearon 1991).

There are three types of standards that have been proposed to assess the impact dimension of NGOs performance: goal attainment, problem solving and collective optima (Mitchell 2008: 87-90). Goal attainment entails an assessment on the basis of the formal NGO's goals identified in the output. Presumably, as mentioned above in the output criteria of clarity and meaningfulness, the output is often unambitious or hazy, which enables an NGO and/or its members and stakeholders to claim success and good performance in any case. Often, to avoid reputational costs of 'bad performance', goals are intentionally low-level and thus easily achieved. A problem-solving approach is a more ambitious standard of impact performance that associates performance with the progress toward resolving an issue as defined by the NGO. In an NGO ambit, members and stakeholders (which may or may not be included in the NGO's membership or in the Board of Directors) or the Board of Directors or Trustees in itself as an agent may well know what they want to achieve

but acknowledging the difficulties, they produce a far less ambitious output that constitutes their formal performance benchmark. Finally, the collective optima standard is even more ambitious than the former two, raising further the threshold of 'good performance' by selecting a more holistic approach to what constitutes the solution to a problem. For example, for an NGO, brokering a provisional agreement between the government and an association of poor people over wages - or even managing to limit the crisis that has erupted in a given time in a region due to a human rights violation - may be an indication of successful intervention but does not produce a comprehensive solution to the problem or crisis.

Regardless of the chosen standard of assessment, effectiveness and efficiency are the two main indicators to evaluate the impact perspective of an NGO external performance. Effectiveness captures primarily the degree of its goal attainment, whoever defines the goal and whatever its content might be (Groen and Niemann 2011: 7). Efficiency captures the ratio of used resources to their actual impact, implying that given the scarcity of NGO resources, their marginal utility should be also taken into consideration when evaluating the impact performance of an NGO (Jørgensen and Oberthür, 2011).

### **Parameters Conditioning NGO's External Performance**

Different parameters condition each level of analysis of NGO's external performance. Starting from the output perspective, endogenous factors primarily cast their effect, most importantly the heterogeneity of NGO's constituent parts and their preferences as well as the institutional modus operandi of an NGO. An NGO as an organization constitutes an arena for the articulation and projection of the particularistic interests of its constituent parts - be they simple members or funders, stakeholders, employees, volunteers and boards of directors. These boards often comprise academics, experts, community leaders, government officials, politicians and the like who acting within an NGO with the intention to gain publicity or recognition, they follow attitudes serving their own interests or views. Thus, unsurprisingly, NGO's external performance is subject to the degree of preference heterogeneity among its constituent parts in the first place and whether the aggregation function operates smoothly. Considerable congruence of the constituent parts in the first place -or goal cohesion - clearly adds to the NGO external performance, allowing a clear, meaningful, and inclusive output that testifies to the NGO's relevance for the members and stakeholders. Internal ruptures that prove impossible to bridge create either inaction or at best rather obscure outputs that undermine the NGO's external performance perspective.

The second important parameter that affects the output perspective is the IO's institutional modus operandi. The degree of fragmentation and the set of rules that defines the policymaking mode have a strong effect on the capacity of an NGO to produce policy outputs. In NGO's realm, the question which arises is whether their policymaking system by enabling or constraining decision-making rules with the latter case to touch upon NGO's external dimension make life hard as it makes difficult for its policymakers to get an output. Furthermore, once an output emerges

as the end product of a protracted and painful internal process, it is often locked in, curtailing the NGO's flexibility in its external interactions and subsequently affecting negatively performance.

As regards the outcome perspective, we can identify human and material resources perceived in a wider sense, as the most important parameter that delimit an NGO's external activity and determine in a large extent its leverage. It comprises the available NGO's arsenal in terms of means of engagement in external action. The existing resource reservoir of an NGO plays a key role for NGO's drive for forming or joining coalitions, participating in networks of peer groups and mobilizing other actors with a view to achieving its objectives. This, in turn, could lead to further resource acquisition by an NGO and to an improvement of its bargaining position and influence in the external environment thus increasing its chance for better performance (Sowa 2009; Betsill and Bulkeley 2004; Yuchtman and Seashore 1967). There is a positive association between this parameter and the outcome performance of an NGO, in the sense that the more available resources there are, the better the NGO should be expected to perform.

Finally, at the impact level of performance, we need to consider the political and social context of the outside environment as an important parameter. The outcome of NGO's endeavors and subsequently its impact performance are not solely dependent on the NGO's inputs in the external action process. NGOs function in environments that are politically charged with their own characteristics and dynamics. Thus, any account of an NGO's intervention should be heavily contextualized, looking at the structure and the features of the specific political and/or social environment in which an NGO is engaged. Depending on the features of the political environment, an NGO face low or high or entry barriers in any given policy arena, which may encourage or discourage it from taking external action or may affect its impact level of performance. For instance, high entry barriers are encountered by NGO that are called to operate in political systems wherein the central and/or local government enjoy increasing responsibility over policy formation, development and implementation. Low barriers are faced by NGOs in political systems that leave enough political and social space in the policy formation and implementation to be fulfilled by NGO and other relevant actors. Furthermore, in such political environments an NGO's impact also depends from the social and political space occupied by other and often competitive NGOs and other non-societal actors. This, in turn makes rather difficult to assess the impact dimension of a particular NGO's external performance in its all three types, goal attainment, problem solving and collective optima.

## **Conclusions**

Drawing insights from the literature on the performance of international institutions, this piece attempted to capture an innovative concept of NGOs external performance and develop a framework for NGOs external performance analysis. Combined with the existing NGOs performance analysis viewed from the angles of the non-profit sectors literature, management and organizational studies, it may lead to further debate towards producing more interdisciplinary and synthetic scholarly accounts of NGO performance.

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The Jean Monnet Papers on Political Economy welcomes solicited and unsolicited papers on all aspects of political economy with at least a partial focus on European integration. An ideal size should be around 5,000 words. References should follow the Harvard system. Submissions must include an executive summary. Authors must also include, separately, a curriculum vitae statement of 70 words. All submissions undergo rigorous peer review by at least two peer reviewers. The editors maintain final discretion over publication of all papers. Correspondence address: [jmonnet@uop.gr](mailto:jmonnet@uop.gr)