



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Boekbespreking van: The Political Influence of Global NGOs

Reinalda, B.

### Citation

Reinalda, B. (1998). Boekbespreking van: The Political Influence of Global NGOs. *Acta Politica*, 33: 1998(3), 329-332. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450571>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450571>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



notion of subsidiarity underlined the importance of intermediate units such as the family. In order to increase the family's independence Dutch Catholics and Protestants have preferred to support the family (i.e. the male breadwinner) by allowances. They have traditionally opposed initiatives to provide state services such as childcare. The Christian Democrats still prefer allowances to services, although they no longer promote the traditional family. The lack of success of a recent campaign to promote family policies along this line, in opposition to the government policy to stimulate childcare, indicates that in this respect the hegemonic position of the Christian Democratic organizations is on the wane.

It is amazing that this aspect of the Dutch welfare state is almost completely ignored in the two books. Protective labour legislation for women, family allowances, ideas about just wage levels, the exclusion of unmarried mothers from the Health Act, such aspects deserve more attention. The model of the male breadwinner/female caretaker has been one of the cornerstones of Christian democratic welfare policies, and it has been a characteristic feature of the Dutch welfare state. Many aspects of the Dutch welfare state, such as for instance the relatively generous social benefits, can only be understood within this context. It is regrettable that these characteristic aspects of Christian democratic welfare policies are neglected. It is quite well possible that in adding this aspect the history of the Dutch welfare state could have been seen from a different perspective. The decline of the traditional family and of welfare policies geared to this model indicate that the Christian Democrats had to concede ground. Although the Christian democratic legacy is still noticeable, the authors conclude too easily that their hegemony is still intact.

Apart from remnants of the male breadwinner regime, one of the other legacies of Christian Democracy is that labour and capital organizations still have a formal and institutionalized influence, even though the corporatist institutions have been under attack during the past decades. The privileged position of these interest groups is also reflected in these books. Apart from parliamentary politics, the focus is mainly on the role of unions and employers.

In relation to the latter aspect of the Dutch welfare state, the source book *Honderd jaar sociaal* is a very welcome addition. The book consists of a selection of 79 texts (or parts of these texts) that are regarded as significant for the development of the 'social movement' since 1891. With the term 'social movement' the editors refer to groups in general that were organized to influence welfare policies; however, they take it for granted that the labour union movement has been the main social actor. This is a rather narrow view that has been contested in various comparative studies. These have shown that other interest groups such as organizations of self-employed persons, of professionals (especially the medical profession), women's organizations, and organizations of veterans have played an important role in social politics, although their roles have varied according to national context and period. The editors are too presumptuous in claiming that *Honderd jaar sociaal* is representative for 'the social movement' as a whole. That does not alter the fact that the book is a fascinating

documentation of the history of the Dutch labour union movement. The texts are divided over three periods, each supplied with a general introduction. Every separate text also has a short, but very informative introduction. Moreover, the criss-cross references to other texts are very helpful as they make the book more coherent. The second part of the book consists of a calendar, which gives a very detailed overview of the development of the labour movement. Although the book is already voluminous, one wishes that more texts could have been included. For instance, the debates about corporatism in the thirties are hardly represented; the conclusions of the first Christian Social Conference in 1891 are not followed by those of similar conferences in later years, and so on. One wishes that a more luxurious publication of several volumes would have been possible.

To conclude, the three books are each very welcome contributions to the history of the Dutch welfare state, not in the least because they are excellently suited for use at graduate level courses. Yet, important aspects of the history of the Dutch welfare states are still missing in these books, such as an account of the role of interest groups other than that of employers and unions. Moreover, it is disappointing that these histories of the Dutch welfare state do not take account of the vicissitudes of the male breadwinner regime. Such a perspective might have thrown a different light on the central role of Christian Democrats in the making and restructuring of the Dutch welfare state.

Tjitske Akkerman

Bas Arts, *The Political Influence of Global NGOs: Case Studies on the Climate and Biodiversity Conventions*, International Books, Utrecht 1998, ISBN 90-5727-012-9.

How influential are private actors in global politics? For instance, did non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have an impact on the International Climate and Biodiversity Conventions agreed upon in Rio de Janeiro at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)? Arts's answer is positive: NGOs did influence some policy outcomes of the two conventions although only to a limited extent. "Many topics remained unaffected by them, the level of goal achievement was generally quite low, and most NGO impact was indirect in nature, although some very relevant policy outcomes were nonetheless impacted." (p.302) Notwithstanding his restrictions Arts's positive answer is interesting for two reasons. First, in the field of international relations private organizations are attributed a rather small role given the fact that most approaches have been oriented towards interstate, i.e. intergovernmental, relations. No one will deny the existence of private organizations, and yet their involvement in global politics has been given little serious attention by the dominant approaches. Contrary to the conventional assumptions about the virtually exclusive role of governments in international politics, NGO activities have not been



"fully described nor adequately encompassed in theoretical approaches," according to Gordenker and Weiss in a well-known special issue on NGOs, the 'UN and Global Governance' (*Third World Quarterly*, September 1995). Arts does not mention this issue but his research results confirm Gordenker and Weiss's conclusion that NGO activity can be "recognised as a factor in global governance." (p.384) Second, the environmental NGOs' political influence may be limited, as Arts emphasizes, but a comparison of environmental NGOs with international workers' or women's organizations shows a striking difference. All three groups of global NGOs are private in form and public in purpose (in the sense that they aim to influence intergovernmental agenda-setting, decision-making and implementation). However, unlike workers' and women's NGOs, environmental NGOs do not have direct access to intergovernmental arenas. Since 1919, both workers and women have had access to various intergovernmental organizations with a political influence beyond their formally limited status. Hence, the lack of direct access must make it far more difficult for environmental NGOs to influence intergovernmental decision-making than it has been for workers and women. But even under such conditions private actors can be recognized as a factor, as is shown by Arts.

Within the sphere of the Economic and Social Council, the UN Charter legitimizes the consultative status of international NGOs. NGOs are allowed to participate in meetings, to circulate written statements, and, depending on their specific category, to make oral statements. However, not all UN members are in favour of NGO interference and for any new UN initiative the rules of procedure have to be readopted. At the first meeting of the UNCED Preparatory Committee, NGO participation was fiercely opposed. A compromise then explicitly stated that NGOs did not have a formal negotiating role but were granted an observer status. Within the context of the two conventions prepared for UNCED – the Convention on Biological Diversity [CBD] and the Framework Convention on Climate Change [FCCC] – practical opportunities for participation were greater than the official wordings suggest. The UN Environmental Programme, which prepared the Biodiversity Convention, accepted NGO interference anyway, and the first session of the FCCC Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee paved the way for continuing NGO participation. The Americans hosting the first FCCC session granted accreditation to all NGOs that wanted to visit the meeting. According to Arts, the regime was quite liberal which set a precedent for subsequent meetings (pp.108-9). His description of such a situation of tolerance, permitting NGOs to interfere, has been confirmed by other international negotiations. However, Arts's reference to the American liberal attitude towards pressure groups as an explanation of this permissiveness (p.254) seems rather doubtful since the Americans might have refused accreditation to NGOs nonetheless. The same liberal attitude did not prevent the Americans from refusing NGO participation in other instances.

The detailed descriptions of the negotiation processes of the two conventions underline the seriousness of activities undertaken by so many private organizations. More than one hundred organizations attended the meeting in the US mentioned above (one third was scientific in nature, one third of business origin and one third

environmental organizations). Just like NGOs in the field of human and women's rights, the environmental NGOs have been active by presenting to-the-point analyses and empirical data. They are co-drafters of legal text and act as important pressurizers. During the FCCC negotiations, NGOs successfully stimulated the small islands states to raise their voices, resisting the pressure of China and the OPEC countries in the G77; they stimulated the group of developing countries to refrain from subgroup action; and they undertook specific initiatives (p.136). At the end of 1994 NGOs did their own reviews of policies and measures in member states and included domestic targets besides the FCCC commitments. Several times they published and reviewed evaluations of national plans (p.145). In other words, these NGOs have been able to raise sufficient resources to participate persistently in rather complex political arenas and long-lasting procedures with meetings all over the world. Not everyone is aware of the fact that these international conferences and conventions demand extensive preparation and continuous follow-up. International conferences and conventions should not be seen as 'paper tigers', but as complicated and subtle policy mechanisms with many committees, special bodies and regular procedures that put great demands on governments and intergovernmental organizations as well as on private actors. Arts does not deny this fact but he does take the NGO capability to engage in them far too much for granted. Gordenker and Weiss, quoted above, show that the growing resources and professionalism of NGOs in the 1990s can be regarded as an important element of NGO salience in international policy-making and execution (p.365).

Being a biologist by origin and working in a faculty of policy sciences (at the University of Nijmegen) Arts regards policy sciences as the disciplinary background of his study. But given his aim to produce knowledge on the political influence of NGOs in international environmental policy-making (p.30) he leans heavily on political science. References to policy sciences are his focus on both policy formation and implementation (along the various phases of the policy cycle: issue-raising; agenda-setting; policy formation, implementation and evaluation) as well as his chapter with recommendations for NGOs on how to increase their political influence. References to political science are his definitions of *arenas* ("formal meeting places of political players who struggle, debate, negotiate and decide on policy issues and, in doing so, are bound by given rules." [p.55]); *political influence* ("the achievement of [a part of] one's policy goal with regard to an outcome in treaty formation and implementation, which is [at least partly] caused by one's own and intentional intervention in the political arena and process concerned." [p.58]), and *international regimes*. Arts has adapted Krasner's definition of a regime slightly to become: "a set of rules – principles, norms, regulations and procedures – which frame the (common) actions of states and non-state players in a specific issue-area in international relations." (p.65). Arts rejected the *policy networks* vision since he is interested in NGOs influence on states rather than the reciprocal relations between public and private actors (p.56). To assess political influence Arts designed an EAC-method (Ego-perception, Alter-perception, Causal analysis), using respondents' perceptions (both NGO and government representatives) and his own



assessment of NGO claims. He reduced his original plan to assess the UNCED process as such to the two mentioned treaties, and instead of studying the process as a whole he studied aspects of it. He selected 18 subcases; eight on the Climate Convention and ten on the Biodiversity Convention. What are his main conclusions on the 18 cases? For both conventions he found that NGOs exerted process influence and, in general, 'some' political influence. However, in two cases there was 'substantial' political influence: a small islands states' protocol to the Climate Convention and the preamble of the Biodiversity Convention (p.156; p.228). The general view in academic literature that NGOs are mainly influential in the policy phase of agenda-setting (p.38) was rejected, since NGO impacts were found during the implementation phases of both conventions. The combination of perception and causal analyses proved to be useful since NGO representatives definitely overestimated their own political influence. Only 50% of their claims could be confirmed on the basis of further assessments (p.156; p.228).

After his assessment on a case-by-case basis, Arts presents a comparative case analysis to find explanatory factors. This chapter presents 23 conclusions. That is a considerable number, and they are not all particularly interesting or relevant. Because in NGO circles it is said that the co-writing of text elements is 'the' way to exert political influence, Arts' conclusion number four is important. This holds that the direct impact of NGOs on policy outcomes, for example through the drafting of legal text, is not a necessary or a sufficient precondition for political influence (p.234). His final conclusions show that the two most important factors which enable NGOs to exert political influence are the quality of their interventions (in particular based on their knowledge and skills) and the similarity between NGO demands and existing regimes (which increases the legitimacy of these demands). The most important factors which constrain NGOs from exerting political influence are the use of a 'wrong' approach; the presence of like-minded but dominant states (the dominance of a topic means that they are not dependent on any NGO input); and negotiations based on traditional block politics of North and South (p.266). My problem with this concluding chapter (and the one with 19 recommendations) is that one cannot see the wood for the trees. More and less relevant elements are given the same attention. In a certain way the two chapters are a bit 'autistic'. Instead of recommending that environmental NGOs increase their expertise or continue the critical monitoring of the policy performance of governments (p.270; p.273), it would have been more relevant to debate the research results in the context of international relations theories. Given the fact that Arts's basic assumption about NGOs has been affirmed, it would have made sense to discuss his results with dominant realism and the regime approach or compare it to other private actors. His basic assumption that "NGOs are able to impact policy outcomes in principle, but that they, in doing so, are either constrained or enabled by other players (e.g. states, firms, international bodies) as well as by contextual factors (e.g. rules of the game, regimes, distribution of resources)," deserves such a discussion (p.73).

Bob Reinalda

## Contributors

*Dr. Tjitske Akkerman* is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam.

*Peter Castenmiller* is affiliated with SGBO, the research and advisory department of the Association of Dutch Municipalities.

*Meindert Fennema* is a senior lecturer of Political Theory at the University of Amsterdam.

*Ernst M.H. Hirsch Ballin* is a senator and professor of International Law at the Catholic University of Brabant, Tilburg.

*Henk van der Kolk* is a lecturer on Political Science in the Department of Public Administration and Public Policy at the University of Twente.

*Mark Minkman* is a senior consultant at KPMG.

*Peter Neijens* is affiliated with the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCOR) at the University of Amsterdam.

*Kees Niemöller* is a senior researcher in the Department of Methodology at the University of Amsterdam.

*Hans Oversloot* is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and the Institute of East European Law and Russian Studies at Leiden University.

*Rob Reinalda* is a lecturer of Political Science at the School of Public Affairs at the University of Nijmegen.

*Willem Saris* is a professor in the Department of Methodology at the University of Amsterdam.

*Jeroen Slot* is research manager at the survey research organization O+S: het Amsterdams Bureau voor Onderzoek en Statistiek.