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Global Human Rights Organizations and National Patterns:

Amnesty International’s Representations of Darfur

by

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Abstract

This article investigates the contribution of International Non-Governmental Organizations to the social construction of knowledge about episodes of mass violence. The focus is on the dynamics between global and national forces, explored through a case study of Amnesty International and the mass violence that unfolded in the Darfur region of Sudan during the first decade of the 21st century. Interviews with Amnesty staff and volunteers, supplemented by an examination of Amnesty websites, suggest that the organization succeeds in generating a relatively unified representation, reflective of its goal to promote human rights, but that it can succeed only by granting leeway to workers at the national level. The underlying dynamic shows that the global and the national are mutually dependent. Tensions may develop nonetheless, and interviewees address strategies of managing them. Lessons for scholarship and human rights practice are substantial.
Introduction: Telling the Story of Mass Violence between the Global and the National

Examining interactions between a centralized international non-governmental organization (INGO) and its national sections, this article speaks to broader debates about the continuing weight of national forces in a globalizing world. On the one hand, we observe signs of globalization, for example the growing prominence of International Organizations and of INGOs, especially where Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) link them together (Keck and Sikkink 1998). In scholarship, schools that pay particular attention to these phenomena, such as the World Polity School (Boyle 2002; Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992), have been gaining traction, for good reason.

On the other hand, globalization approaches face challengers, for example in a prominent line of neo-Weberian work that is sensitive to historically rooted national particularities (Bendix [1949] 1974; Gorski 2003; Kalberg 1994; Roth 1987). These scholars insist that global impulses are filtered through national cultural sensitivities, institutional arrangements and structures. Some argue that global scripts are in fact rooted in local practices (Fourcade and Savelsberg 2006), while yet others note an interaction between local and international movements (Tsutsui 2017).

A recent empirical study of international and national responses to the mass violence in Darfur promises to shed light on this controversy (Savelsberg 2015). It includes an examination of the interplay between central organizations or headquarters of INGOs and their national divisions, including Amnesty International, a highly centralized global organization.

An overview of literature on the growing role of INGOs in responses to, and representations of, mass atrocities is followed by an in-depth discussion of Amnesty International. I introduce the reader to my data and methods, before spelling out Amnesty’s organizational goals and strategies. I proceed to examine how Amnesty staff perceive these goals and what representations of Darfur they generate. The analysis shows that the institutional logic of the legal field, with its focus on human rights, colors Amnesty actors’ narratives of Darfur, the suffering of Dafuris, responsible actors and appropriate frames. And yet, even in an international and highly centralized organization such as Amnesty, national contexts of sections and workers interpenetrate with, and at times weaken, the centralized discourse with its orientation toward the logic of the legal field. This is the subject of the final section, which also shows that for an international organization to function effectively, it must pay attention to national institutions, policy preferences and cultural and political sensitivities of potential supporters and volunteers. In this context, we learn about strategies used to bridge tensions between global strategies and nation-level activism before drawing conclusions.

INGOs: Growth, Centralization and Local Autonomy – What the Literature Says

Growth and the Global Level

International NGOs (INGOs) have been playing a growing role in responses to mass atrocities and their representation to a global audience. Their number has increased substantially in recent decades (Khagram, Riker, and Sikink 2002), and their presence is associated with greater respect for human rights within countries (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Tsutsui and Wotipka 2004). Importantly, INGOs draft human rights documents, advocate human rights, document abuses, conduct research, condemn or praise states and other actors, mobilize public opinion and public action, lobby governments, and provide humanitarian relief. Most specialize,
for example along the lines of human rights protection or humanitarian aid delivery. No matter their specialization, in all of their actions INGOs acknowledge and interpret violence. They frame it in various ways, in line with their central mission, and disseminate it to a broader public.

When violent conflicts occur, INGOs are among the first actors to respond. Interviews with Africa correspondents from leading European and North American newspapers suggest that journalists often rely on NGOs as one crucial source of information (Savelsberg 2015). Journalists who write essays on their response to crises confirm that assessment (several contributions in Thompson ed. 2007). Such patterns of communication are to be expected as major NGOs are represented in many parts of Africa, while even the most renowned newspapers typically have only one journalist on the ground, based in places such as Nairobi or Johannesburg, to cover the entire continent. Ways in which NGOs frame events may thus directly influence how news media across the globe report violence.

Scholarly literature highlights the importance of INGOs in the dissemination of knowledge. World polity theorists, for example, argue that INGOs and their branches reflect the expression of world society and operate as carriers of global models and ideas (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001). These scholars suggest that NGOs facilitate the global diffusion of a uniform narrative of events.

Critical theorists who write about the role of INGOs agree with the suggested global character of NGO messages, while disagreeing with regard to their content. They insist that neo-colonial interests color rights-based INGO narratives and that notions of human rights are Western in origin, disguising interests of the Global North (Kennedy 2004). Stories of human rights abuses suggest clear dichotomies between virtue and evil, while ignoring the nuances and complexities of social situations (Matua 2002). In the case of Darfur, scholars such as Mahmood Mamdani (2009:149) reproach Western media of conducting a “moralistic discourse whose effect is both to obscure the politics of the violence and position the reader as a virtuous, not just as a concerned, observer.” Mamdani has in mind a wide variety of Western actors, from NGOs to writers such as Samantha Power, now past-US ambassador to the UN (also Mamdani 2009).

Constructivist traditions in political science similarly embrace the importance of cultural models and norms. However, they stress that NGOs are not just passive conduits of norms and ideas, but rather actors with their own interests and desires to shape behavior (Keck and Sikkink 1998), actors who operate against the background of nation states and their institutional environments, in which they originate and where they are headquartered (Stroup 2012). NGOs do not just disseminate global narratives about conflicts; they create, modify, and interpret them, and they do so in line with their respective missions. In the Darfur case, for example, humanitarian aid NGOs assess victimization and the role played by the Sudanese government more cautiously than rights-based NGOs, perhaps because they depend on the cooperation of the Sudanese Government to deliver aid (Hagan and Rymond-Richmond 2009; Savelsberg 2015).

National Conditions of NGO work

While INGOs are border-crossing organizations, and the focus of much related scholarship is on the global, this focus is not unchallenged. Much neo-Weberian work in comparative sociology generally and recent publications specifically on INGOs have highlighted the considerable weight of national context in the definition of situations. Most INGOs continue to be headquartered in countries in which they were founded, and they continue to receive a substantial portion of their funding from within these “home” countries. Providing an empirical
examination, Sarah Stroup (2012:3) argues convincingly, “While many NGOs are increasingly active in international arenas, I find that actual organizational structures and strategies are deeply tied to national environments.” Her detailed analyses confirm that this pattern applies especially to humanitarian, but also to human rights INGOs. Stroup focuses on regulatory frameworks, political opportunity structures, availability of resources, and social networks as features to which INGOs are exposed and that vary by country. She shows how such contexts color professionalization and management, fundraising, advocacy and research, and issue selection of INGOs. We shall see that they also color the representation of human rights violations.

Rights-based INGOs that Stroup examines include UK-based Amnesty International and, contrasting, Human Rights Watch (HRW), rooted in the US, and the Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l’Homme (FIDH), based in France. Compared to the latter two, and owing to donation patterns in the UK, Amnesty depends more on fundraising from many individual donors. Levels of professionalization differ as well. HRW, for example, depends on a high level of professionalization, a functional necessity due to its dependence on large-foundation donors. Consequently, HRW also relies more on insider strategies (e.g., links into the US government), compared to a preference for grassroots mobilization within Amnesty and, even stronger, in FIDH. In terms of issue selection, both HRW and Amnesty have been much more reluctant to address social, economic and cultural rights problems than the French FIDH. Stroup attributes this caution to the fact that the American and British constituencies are more attuned to free market and individual rights principles than are their French counterparts.

However, Stroup goes further. Beyond identifying differences across distinct human rights organizations, she also explores distinctions of national sections within INGOs. For Amnesty, for example, despite its high degree of centralization and the concentration of more than a quarter of its $200 Million budget with the International Secretariat in London, she finds significant national particularities. Among the 80 national sections, AI-USA more than others depends on large financial donations of less involved supporters, similar (albeit not as pronounced) as the funding patterns of HRW. National donation patterns thus matter at the level of sections as well. Further, while research at Amnesty is “in some ways a valuable end in itself,” the US section sets somewhat different priorities as a quotation from one staffer indicates: “We in the U.S. think in terms of timeliness and impact, but they (AI-IS) think in a way that is unhurried, more thorough, and these are cultural differences… To me, it sometimes feels like a group of people in universities in London, developing long, detailed documents” (quoted in Stroup 2012:160).

Country-specific opportunity structures that affect organizations and sections within organizations include not just state factors, on which Stroup focuses, but also societal forces such as nation-specific carrier groups, historical experiences and the distinct cultural sensitivities these evoke. Collective memories and cultural trauma, for example those pertaining to war and mass violence, and associated national identities take country-specific shape (Savelsberg and King 2011). The necessity to consider such society-level specifics is also highlighted by the various types of organization of civil society. Civil society is more easily mobilized in countries such as the US with its strong tradition of associational life and prominence of single-issue groups, but slower to move into action in others with more neo-corporatist arrangements. The organization of news media varies as well. Market-driven media, compared to publically funded ones, are more receptive to societal sentiments and prone to sensationalist reporting. The United States provides a good example. In addition, government institutions are more or less open to civil society input. Here too boundaries between civil society and the state are more porous in the US.
than in other Western democracies, as a long line of sociological work has shown (Bendix [1949] 1974; Gorski 2003; Kalberg 1994; Roth 1987; Rueschemeyer 1973; Savelberg and King 2005).

In light of such nation-specific state and societal forces, it is thus not surprising when Wong (2012) finds that INGOs that choose to centralize agenda-setting, but decentralize the implementation are more likely to succeed when they attempt to affect international politics (on conditions of effectiveness see also Checkel 2005).

The Case of Amnesty International, Methods and Data

Amnesty International’s (AI) history is well known. Founded in 1961 by British lawyer Peter Benenson, Amnesty today is the best-known and largest human rights NGO. London is the seat of its headquarters, the International Secretariat. Here the organization maintains its research office, initially with the intent to identify and gather information on individual “prisoners of conscience” and to distribute such knowledge worldwide (on Amnesty’s history see Hopgood 2006; Neier 2012:186-203; on Amnesty’s information politics Ron, Ramos, and Rogers 2005). Amnesty’s success was partly based on its strict political impartiality. It took on cases under right and left wing abusers alike. It refused to accept government funds, instead relying on donations from small private donors and members alone. Its highly qualified researchers, writing reports in its London office, strictly avoided sensationalism (on internal tensions over the strict observance of such principles see Hogwood 2006). The resulting moral authority contributed to a membership base of 160,000 in 107 countries by the mid’ 1970, that further expanded to above 500,000 in 160 countries after AI was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977. Its credibility in the academic world is such that researchers use its reports as a measuring rod to evaluate potential biases in human rights reports of the US Department of State (Poe, Carey, and Vazquez 2005). Over the years, however, Amnesty expanded its reach beyond representing interests of individual political prisoners. One central mission became the mobilization of public opinion and of government policies when massive violations of human rights occurred anywhere around the globe. Darfur became one of those cases.

Despite Amnesty International’s highly centralized organization and the clear and guiding definition of a human rights-based philosophy, it is a living organization. It is composed of human actors of diverse nationalities, genders and educational and occupational backgrounds who operate in varied national environments (I focus here on the latter feature). The organization recognizes these conditions as it leaves room for a somewhat decentralized implementation of its agendas (Hopgood 2006; Wong 2012).

Thus, to learn about Amnesty’s involvement in the case of Darfur and about ways in which it narrated the events, I turn to a set of ten interviews, conducted in 2011 in five countries. I conducted nine of these interviews in person, one over the phone (Dublin). Sites of in-person interviews included the International Secretariat in London and national offices (staff), homes and one university seminar room (volunteers) in Paris, Washington, Berlin, Bielefeld, Vienna, and Bern. All but the phone interview lasted between one and one and a half hours.

Seven interviewees were staffers, three volunteers. Staff respondents were placed at different levels of the organization’s hierarchy, from the Secretary General of a national section to theme or country specialists at the level of national sections. Four had academic backgrounds in political science and international relations; four in law, including international human rights and criminal law; one volunteer had an engineering background (one unknown). Half had some additional educational degree, from anthropology to advertising. Most respondents had reached
their current position after journeys through a variety of appointments. Yet, none left any doubt about their identification with the pursuit of human rights as the organization’s central mission.

I secured permission to conduct these interviews from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota. I will not name any of my interviewees as I assured them of anonymity. Efforts to trace individual respondents by identifying the names of position holders at a particular time would be substantial and, even if successful, would not cause harm due to the non-personal and non-sensitive nature of the interviews.

The interviews were transcribed. I read each transcript multiple times, highlighting segments that speak to those analytic categories that my research focused on. They include the organization of work, education and professional socialization of interviewees, the place within the organizational structure of Amnesty, the understanding of the Darfur conflict, and strategies used in the respective countries in response to Darfur.

To supplement perceptions expressed by interviewees, I also examined selective web sites. While the latter are more likely to portray the organization’s official line, interviews are especially well suited to understand individual perceptions and strategies as practiced at the local level where actors may at times take liberties vis-à-vis the central organization. In Bourdieu’s terms, the habitus acquired in the context of the structure of the (here organizational) field allows for some degree of improvisation, which personal in-depth interviews are well suited to capture.

How then did Amnesty respond to Darfur? How did its agents live up to expectations and prescriptions formulated in the International Secretariat, and what liberties did they take? What did they do to accommodate to local and national conditions within which they had to operate?

**Amnesty International’s Involvement in Darfur**

Amnesty was intensely involved in the Darfur conflict. Its actions and information strategies were highly coordinated, and its focus was on the goal of justice. Accordingly, representations of the conflict also showed a relatively high degree of homogeneity as this section shows.

**Information Strategies and Goals of a Centralized Organization**

Amnesty International, together with organizations such as Human Rights Watch, the International Crisis Group and the Enough Project, played a crucial role among INGOs in mobilizing world opinion and government action on behalf of Darfur. In 2013, for example, on the 10th anniversary of the mass killings in Darfur, Amnesty International issued a report to update the public. The following short excerpt illustrates its position well, highlighting its concern with the massive violation of human rights of the local population and with the impunity of leading political actors alike:

Civilians continue to face attacks by government forces, pro-government militias, and armed opposition groups... The government in recent years has continued to carry out indiscriminate aerial bombardment and deliberate attacks against civilians. In addition, security services carry out torture and other ill-treatment against detainees and, alongside the police, use excessive force against peaceful protesters. And impunity reigns. Government officials, including President Bashir
and a leader of the ‘janjaweed’ pro-government militia Ali Kushayb, indicted by the International Criminal Court on counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide remain at large and there is little or no accountability for these crimes.²

The on-line publication cited here lists 17 previous reports Amnesty issued over the preceding decade on the violence of Darfur. A first alert was issued in February 2004 during the second peak of mass killings (Darfur: "Too many people killed for no reason", February 2004).³ An early example of intense field-research, conducted by experienced research staff, appeared five months later under the title “Darfur: Rape as a weapon of war: sexual violence and its consequences, July 2004.”⁴ Reports and statements cited here illustrate well Amnesty’s focus on the safeguarding of human rights. Means are not limited to criminal justice interventions, but they decidedly include them. Behaviors are referred to as crimes. Some of the evidence gathered in Amnesty reports is in fact suited for use by the ICC prosecutor.

Reports, issued by Amnesty’s International Secretariat in London, are delivered to the national sections. There, country and theme specialists on Amnesty’s staff use them to collaborate with volunteer groups on various campaigns, seeking to inform a broad public and to pressure policy makers to act on behalf of human rights.

The nature of Amnesty International as a formal and centralized organization, with a guiding philosophy and crucial case-specific information, passed down from the International Secretariat in London, is expressed consistently throughout the interviews. In an interview conducted in Amnesty’s Paris office, a respondent sheds light on the highly formal and centralized nature of his organization:

In general, we depend strongly on Amnesty Londres... [London in French]. For example, Amnesty Londres said [to] us all the sections have to work on Sudan and Darfur and the arrest of Omar al-Bashir, because we have [a] strategic date in [a] couple of months to make pressure on [the] international community. So during six, seven months you have to concentrate… and… organize the pressure in France to push France in [the] UN Security Council to push Sudan to arrest Omar al-Bashir and render Omar al-Bashir to the ICC…[I] in general I am waiting for the strategy of Amnesty Londres.

This interviewee is also mindful of a multitude of countries in which the Amnesty strategy is to be pursued, further supporting his recognition of the need for centralized coordination. When asked about the most important source of information they rely on when seeking to understand a situation like that in Darfur, Amnesty staff and volunteers first refer to Amnesty’s own reports. Most mention other sources only once prompted. Asked what sources of information are most important to him when familiarizing himself with a case like Darfur and the indictment against Bashir, one interviewee answered:

Amnesty Information. The [strength] of Amnesty International is the fact we have our own research... If I have information, which is not checked by my researcher in London – I have a problem… We are unique in the world in this respect, because our research is reliable. It is serious.
In short, Amnesty’s development of a strategy on Darfur was highly centralized, and information from the AI International Secretariat fared prominently in national sections. This is supported by a strong identification of interviewees with Amnesty’s goals regarding Darfur to which I now turn.

Respondents are quite homogeneous when they speak about goals to be pursued. Each respondent subscribed to the goal of achieving justice. Three in fact stated justice to be the only objective or declared that other goals (e.g., a lasting peace) could only be achieved if justice was served. All three were lawyers, leaving only the fourth lawyer with a more varied portfolio of purposes. Four respondents wanted the pursuit of justice to be combined with the goal of helping the affected population survive. One of these declared that survival was one side effect of the pursuit of justice. Seven pleaded for peace or peace keeping as goals in addition to the pursuit of justice; one of these cautioned, however, that the establishment of peace must not occur at the expense of justice. One respondent expected that justice served would lead to peace. Throughout, international rule on behalf of human rights clearly trumps national sovereignty.

When asked about potential conflicts between justice and aid delivery, one interviewee responds:

When we, in the case of Sudan, negotiate with the foreign ministry, jointly with colleagues from other NGOs, then that [the topic of cooperation with the government in Khartoum on humanitarian aid] will pop up. That, however, is not a point of contention within Amnesty, as we simply have a very clear position in favor of prosecution. Amnesty continues to be part of the grand coalition in favor of the ICC, and that can be summarized in the words: “no peace without justice.” There our position is very clear.

In short, not just official proclamations and representations of the Darfur conflict by the International Secretariat in London, but also goal setting as articulated by interviewees from Amnesty across a diversity of countries, place the organization unmistakably in the justice field. Indeed, affiliation with Amnesty appears to color the habitus of its members and their identification with an institutional logic that corresponds with the pursuit of justice by means of criminal law.

**Unified Representations of Darfur by Amnesty Activists**

How does such centralized information strategy and focus on the justice goal correspond with representations of violent conflict? I identified interview statements regarding the dimensions of suffering and victimhood; origins of the conflict, time dimension, and causes; actors-perpetrators; and frames applied. Seven out of nine Amnesty interviewees, representing the International Secretariat in London and five countries (US, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland), provided substantive answers to most themes covered here.

In response to questions about suffering and victimhood, all seven interviewees speak about victimhood and the suffering of the population of Darfur. Specifically, six interviewees address killings and deaths, one executions and disappearances. Six address rapes (including “mass rapes” and “mass rape as an instrument of ethnic cleansing”), and six displacements (including “irreversible” displacements). Torture, looting, destruction and violations of human rights are also mentioned. Obviously, suffering and victimhood is foremost on the minds of individuals.
Amnesty interviewees, and they describe it primarily in terms of criminal offending, in line with the institutional logic of criminal law.

When asked about causes and origins, Amnesty interviewees, while also speaking to long-standing conflicts in Darfur, especially old conflicts between ethnic groups and between pastoralists and farmers, focus on present-day conditions. A major concern is with government policies that “discriminate” and “marginalize.” Respondents thereby attribute responsibility to the Government of Sudan for creating background conditions that foster violent conflict. However, they go further as they also identify government action as a direct cause of the violence. They speak to the “ politicization of old conflicts” or to the “instrumentalization” of tensions in the region by the Bashir government and to the government supplying “Arabs” with weapons. Such focus on the present is in line with the criminological representation of the Darfur conflict by Hagan and Rymond-Richmond (2009). It approximates judicial narratives.

Yet more specifically, seven interviewees name actors whom they deem responsible for the suffering of the Darfuri population. All but one mention the Government of Sudan, five refer explicitly to al-Bashir, the “Bashir regime,” or government actors “up to the Presidential level.” Four point at the Janjawid or “Arabs, supplied with weapons” and two see “rebels” or “opposition groups” as bearing some responsibility for the violence.

Finally, inquiring into the appropriate frame through which the Darfur conflict should be interpreted, I offered interviewees four options: a rebellion or insurrection frame (understanding government action as counter-insurgency); a civil war frame; a humanitarian emergency frame; and a state crime frame. In their responses, only one respondent supports the insurgency frame (engineer-volunteer), one rejects it explicitly (general secretary, lawyer) and three subscribed to it either hesitantly or by stressing that the insurgency by rebel groups was a response to governmental repression. Only one respondent accepts the civil war frame, three reject it explicitly and one accepts it only under the condition that civil war in Darfur would be interpreted as resulting from previous criminal state action. Almost all respondents accept the label of humanitarian catastrophe, while one of these insists that it should only be considered such if one recognizes that it results from criminal aggression by the state. One respondent hesitates using the label of humanitarian catastrophe as it omits, in his opinion, its human made character (general secretary, lawyer). Yet, in line with the narrative described here along four analytic dimensions, all respondents but one wholeheartedly embrace the state crime frame.

In short, interviewees among Amnesty staff and volunteers are largely in line with the guidance provided by the International Secretariat in London. They are determined that the pursuit of human rights is of the utmost importance, that criminal law and justice should play the central role in response to mass violence, and that impunity must be avoided by all means. Some also insist that pursuing justice will eventually serve other goals such as the survival of the affected and the establishment of peace. Importantly, representations of the Darfur conflict are relatively homogeneous across national sections.

National contexts of NGO work, and the Need for Improvisation

Despite the observed relative homogeneity, I observed patterns of distinction, even within the small sample of interviewees, especially along lines of professional socialization and national background. I here focus on national particularities. Interviewees at Amnesty were clearly sensitive to the state- and society-based contexts within which their sections have to operate. They know, for example, that their governments are more concerned if the issue at hand
concerns former colonies, especially if the country hosts refugees and expatriate organizations from those former colonies. In the words of a respondent at the International Secretariat in London, an energetic person of French descent, who had experienced part of her academic education in the UK:

I think, obviously because we are based here, you know we do have more regular access to UK diplomats, but I think I am also maybe more aware of the role that the UK plays on Sudan, on Darfur, because they played a very important role in the North-South peace process. They are the former colonial power and because of their seat at the Security Council… [Y]ou will hear a lot more talking about Sudan and former British colonies in the UK. And, if you are in France you will hear a lot more about Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia etc., etc. There is very little coverage here for instance. There is a lot more awareness… I think it is often because there is a lot of Sudanese refugees in the UK, there is a lot of refugees and migrants from North Africa in France…. [W]e have to try to take advantage of all this attention to try to push for our human rights agenda.

Two French Amnesty interviewees strongly confirm the weight that status of a former colony has for their national government, and they draw conclusions for their strategizing.

Another country-specific feature that Amnesty workers have to be mindful of, if they hope to communicate effectively with their governments, is the history and status of a country’s neutrality. Asked if Switzerland’s position vis-à-vis the Darfur conflict differs from that of other countries, an Amnesty staffer in Bern argued:

I think it barely does with regard to the evaluation of the Darfur conflict. In terms of practice, I’d say ‘yes,’ first because Switzerland almost never, as a matter of principle, participates in UN peace keeping missions. [JJS: No humanitarian interventions?] No, or if ever just as an alibi, two, three officers or such.

In addition to being sensitive to their government’s position when they launch campaigns, Amnesty respondents appear to be especially attuned to their constituents’ sensivities and motivational forces. A sense of historical obligation, for example, resulting from their country’s execution of the Holocaust, resonates from my interviews with German Amnesty staffers and volunteers alike. One volunteer, head of Amnesty-Germany’s impunity group, illustrates this historically grounded sense of commitment well, while simultaneously indicating that such commitment may be associated more with a leaning toward humanitarian than penal responses to mass atrocities:

The churches are very much engaged in this respect, partially out of humanitarian concerns, but also with a view at our own past, and the churches do have substantial influence in Germany – still… And, they just have strong roots in the bourgeois middle classes… Many people are engaged in humanitarian charities. I would always look at things from a criminal law perspective, but only few do so. Most see this as a humanitarian catastrophe with immense consequences.
Clearly, carrier groups and the strong position of churches in Germany’s neo-corporate
make-up matter for the reception of the Darfur issue in that country. Another factor is the
institutionalization of the theme of genocide in German school curricula. The same interviewee
speaks to the resulting responsiveness of the public to genocide issues, exemplifying it with her
own experiences:

I think many Germans easily understand, as genocide and our history are being
taught in school. One is able to draw parallels quickly, when one begins to engage
with the conflict. I certainly experienced that with Rwanda. I was still young back
then, but both Rwanda and Yugoslavia were prominently reported in the news
media… That was 1994, and I was 15 years old, in tenth grade, so this was a topic
[in class], also at home, and these two conflicts had a strong influence on me.

Again, historical experiences and their processing into collective memory create public
sensitivities that sections of INGOs such as Amnesty have to take seriously in order to act
effectively toward their domestic constituents. The last interview segment illustrates further that
it matters which organizations and carriers dominate in the processing of history and its
application to current situations of mass violence. The respondent’s perception is obviously not
based on social science analysis. However, what matters here is the perception of an Amnesty
member as it colors the representation of the Darfur conflict by the organization.

Other historical legacies also create country-specific sensitivities that INGOs have to take
seriously if they want to function effectively in a given country. These include devastating
experiences with aggressive militarism. Interviews with Amnesty staff in both Germany and
Austria indicated that such experiences have generated pacifist leanings, especially among those
segments of the population that may be attracted to human rights organizations. Such leanings
affect the discursive range available to their respective sections. A German Amnesty volunteer,
head of the Sudan group speaks to this:

Yes, but in 2006, we had the big issue here at Amnesty, when the UN was
supposed to receive a stronger mandate… Then we had a major debate, especially
here in Germany, because we have many Amnesty members from the peace
movement, who rejected that, when the word intervention was articulated and
‘intervention’ is always associated with the use of military force in the back of
one’s mind.

Another domestic force made itself known in my interviews, specifically in my interview
with the Secretary-General of AI-Austria. This force is the entanglement of a country’s industry
in mass violence abroad, and the response that the discovery of such involvement may evoke. In
the Austrian case, it became a motivating device, without which the section, small and thus
selective by necessity, may not have addressed the Darfur conflict. The story began with an
American journalist who found a brand new “Glock” pistol, made by the renowned Austrian
producer of firearms, in the hands of a Darfuri rebel. The journalist was able to note the
weapon’s serial number, Amnesty was informed, and it began to question Glock and the Austrian
government:

How can that get there? Darfur is a weapons embargo zone, for both the UN and
the EU. There are of course millions of old weapons, hundreds of thousands of
old weapons, but a recognizably brand new Glock pistol, for which you can still trace how the embargo was broken…

Amnesty-Austria began to investigate and Glock responded, irrationally in the judgment of my interviewee, by suing Amnesty as an organization and its General-Secretary personally. The criminal court process before the district court for defamation was accompanied by a suit in trade court for damages amounting to 200,000-300,000 Euros. The trials, which the company eventually lost, lasted three years and caused much publicity. It obviously intensified the intensity with which Amnesty-Austria pursued its investigation, finally to document the paths along which the weapons had been smuggled.

The situation of Amnesty International in the United States provides a particularly interesting example for the needs of the national section to navigate between directives set by the International Secretariat and specific national conditions. Prominent among these conditions was the need to operate in the context of the massive Save Darfur movement, umbrella over some 200 civil society organization, reaching from conservative to liberal and from secular to religious. My interview with an American Amnesty activist did not just reveal resulting tensions; it also displayed organizational and rhetorical strategies that helped the national section function effectively between its international obligations and its domestic environment.

Amnesty International wanted a Darfur coordinator… I volunteered to do this, but I recognized that there was a lot more with this than report to the group what Amnesty was doing and have them sign letters. I saw what the interests were of the group members. Somebody was very interested in violence against women, so I connected that [Darfur] to violence against women in armed conflict…. I created a yearlong panel series on violence against women in armed conflicts… And it was very successful.

In addition to strategies to broaden the campaign and to bring it in line with diverse strains of American civil society engagement, Amnesty activists had to manage divergences between Save Darfur and AI-USA strategies. One example is Save Darfur’s demand for divestment, a method Amnesty did not support. Faced with this dilemma, the activist “created an economic activism campaign, centered on the oil industry. So that way, people who wanted to do Amnesty, and who were interested in divestment… could do stock and stake holder engagement. It gave them a way to try to impact the oil industry…”

Such organizational inventiveness, a skilled effort to maneuver between American activism and the international and centralized NGO of Amnesty, is supplemented by rhetorical strategies. Again, a conflict had to be resolved, this time conflict over language. The Save Darfur movement insisted on calling the violence of Darfur a genocide, a position Amnesty rejected. In the words of the volunteer interviewee:

I had to work with a lot of people who thought we should… call it a genocide. I spoke to a lot to groups, gave a lot of talks. And I would always say, whether you call it genocide or crimes against humanity, we know there were mass atrocities, and that the government is targeting its own civilians. And whatever we want to call it, the response is the same.
Working in the context of the larger U.S. movement, Amnesty activists thus became organizationally and rhetorically innovative. This allowed them to operate effectively in the United States, another illustration of the fact that national conditions matter even within international NGOs, and an observation in support of Stroup’s (2012) findings about the weight of national contexts in INGO work. However, these adaptive strategies also show that contradictions between international and national strategies can be managed. IA-USA is Amnesty’s largest national section, and American activists are aware that size matters, that it provides them with strength within the larger organization, despite the formal leadership of the International Secretariat: “Well, the U.S. section is the largest… I was learning that European sections were coming to the U.S. website and using our materials... The reason I bring this up is that the U.S. section was driving more of the Darfur campaign. We wanted more… We wanted to push the envelope.”

This comment is significant as it illustrates how activists within a national section do not just have to engage in organizational and rhetorical maneuvers between contending forces in their home country, vis-à-vis the discipline demanded by their international headquarters. To bridge the gap, they actually may seek to pull the INGO over to their national campaign strategy, at least when representing a powerful country such as the United States. Yet, the effect of such strategies is always limited. National sections continue to be bound by the organization’s agenda as defined, in the case of Amnesty, by the International Secretariat.

In short, my interview with an American Amnesty activist about her organization’s operation in the context of the Save Darfur campaign illustrates how Amnesty volunteers, despite Amnesty’s centralized organization, manage to adapt to national environments through organizational and rhetorical strategies on the ground. This adaptability may be considered a strength or a weakness. In the case of Amnesty it certainly did not weaken the INGO’s unifying message as represented in official outlets such as Amnesty-USA web sites, but it allowed for the organization of a campaign and the importation of Amnesty messages into a broader movement environment. These observations should in any case direct our attention to ways in which national sections of INGOs are embedded in, and interact with, other civil society and government actors in specific national contexts. More broadly, they tell us about the interdependencies between globalization and nation-level adaptations to local circumstances (also Tsutsui 2017). Effects of local conditions in the organizations’ home countries and of the weight of the American section, just due to its size, speak to the fact that the local matters in the global (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Savelsberg 2006).

Interviews and Websites: Commonalities and Differences

Interested in effects that the tug of war between national movements and INGOs has on the representation of Darfur, I worked with collaborators to analyze web sites of Save Darfur and Amnesty-USA. Methodological and substantive details of this study are reported elsewhere (Zacher, Nyseth Brehm, and Savelsberg 2014), and a summary of findings has to suffice here: Our analysis of web sites shows that representations of the Darfur conflict differ indeed between AI-USA and Save Darfur as an American broad-based civil society campaign. Amnesty’s web sites engage in a more detailed depiction of different types of victimization. They display rapes much more frequently than Save Darfur and somewhat more often killings and the destruction of livelihood through looting, the burning of villages and crops, and the poisoning of water sources. Amnesty web sites also refer more often to categories of international criminal law, depicting the
violence as a violation of international humanitarian law and human rights offenses. Save Darfur web entries, on the other hand, use simpler and more dramatic vocabulary. As opposed to specifying types of crimes, they more often simply refer to the violence as “criminal violence” (85% compared to Amnesty’s 31%). Most importantly, while Amnesty-USA web entries almost completely avoid reference to genocide, in line with the international organization’s policy, Save Darfur sites – in line with the central message of the campaign -- insist on calling the violence just that: genocide (more than 70% of all Save Darfur entries).

In one respect, however, AI-USA (in line with the International Secretariat’s policy) and Save Darfur agree. Both urge for interventions by the ICC. Even if Save Darfur sites explicate such support somewhat more frequently (35%), it certainly fares prominently on AI-USA sites as well (25%). On February 1, 2005, after the delivery of the Commission of Inquiry report to the UN Security Council, Executive Director of Amnesty-USA, Dr. William F. Schulz, was quoted as saying: “Given the scale and sheer horror of the human rights abuses in Darfur, anything less than immediate action on the report's findings would be a travesty for the people of Darfur. The International Criminal Court should be given jurisdiction to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity that have taken place in Sudan...” In the United States such demand is backed by Save Darfur, the movement within which AI-USA was only one among almost 200 constituent organizations. For instance, in an article written on April 27, 2007, the day on which an arrest warrant was issued against Ahmed Harun and Ali Kushayb, two leading perpetrators in Darfur, Save Darfur’s Executive Director stated, “We welcome the ICC’s continued efforts to ensure accountability for the genocide in Darfur. This important step by the court sends yet another message to the government of Sudan that the international community will bring to justice those responsible for these horrendous crimes.”

Clear statements are accompanied by massive demonstrations and demands for justice.

While interview statements illustrate how activists of national sections of INGOs (here AI-USA) seek to build organizational and rhetorical bridges to domestic political movements (Save Darfur in our case), public representations of massive violence as displayed on web sites of the national section remain distinct from national contexts and in line with the INGO’s central policies. With regard to the perceived necessity of ICC interventions, however, both organizations agree. They strongly advocate criminal justice intervention by the International Criminal Court against those responsible for the mass violence in Darfur. In their general assessment of the situation, as a campaign of criminal violence, and in the conclusions drawn for judicial intervention, NGOs in the United States were much in line with other segments of American civil society, as a large-scale media analysis documented (Savelsberg 2015; Savelsberg and Nyseth Brehm 2015). In addition, they finally shaped the rhetoric of the U.S. government.

**Conclusions: Mutual Dependencies between the International and the National**

This analysis of Amnesty International’s representation of the mass violence in the Darfur region of Sudan illustrates the organization’s unified fight to represent the violence as a form of criminal violence and to end impunity. Its narrative, coordinated by the International Secretariat in London, resembles that of actors in the criminal law and justice field. Support of ICC intervention is unwavering. Interviewees insist that justice, once achieved, will help reach other goals, or that other goals cannot be reached if justice is not served.
The focus on a due process-oriented justice model provides some support for post-colonialism scholars, when they argue that INGOs in the human rights field pursue a Western model of thought (e.g., Mamdani 2009). It should be noted though that many Global South countries have ratified the Rome Statute, the basis for the ICC, and almost all support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Relative unanimity across interviewees from several distinct countries also provides some support to a recent scholarly focus on globalizing forces in the formation of norms and scripts and their potential effect on local and national practices, for example by the world polity school (e.g., Frank et al. 2000; Meyer et al. 1992; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001). Yet, caution is warranted. The case of Amnesty shows that -- despite its hierarchical organization -- conditions of national sections matter. National sections of INGOs have to be mindful, first of their domestic governments’ priorities if they seek to affect government policies, and secondly of public sentiments if they hope to mobilize followers and secure donations. While strongly oriented toward the International Secretariat, staff and volunteers at Amnesty’s national sections were mindful of specific domestic opportunities and constraints.

Dimensions identified in this analysis include a government’s power position in the international community, for example its representation on the UNSC. Another dimension is a country’s colonial history and the representation of expatriate communities, as illustrated by the relationship between the UK and Sudan and between France and Chad. Links between local forces, such as industries, with the conflict zone also matter, as illustrated by the Austrian Glock story, as do the collective memories and resulting sense of obligation, illustrated for memories of the Holocaust and militarism in Germany and Austria. A country’s dominant carrier groups are also part of the cultural environment within which Amnesty has to operate, as illustrated for churches and humanitarian aid organizations in Germany. In addition, the context of much larger movement organizations with partially different strategies and language rules warrants consideration (U.S.). Finally, features of the national section also matter; the section’s size, for example, affects the number and selectivity of issues addressed, and the section’s influence across national boundaries.

These findings about national differentiation within a relatively unified international representation of the Darfur conflict by Amnesty, is in line with recent literature about national contexts of INGO work (Hogwood 2005; Stroup 2012; Wong 2012). While previous literature has focused on movement strategies, however, I here extend the argument to the representation of mass violence, or – in other words – to the construction and diffusion of knowledge about the conflict. More broadly, these findings are in line with a long tradition of neo-Weberian scholarship that focuses on nation-specific carrier groups and institutional arrangements (Bendix [1949] 1974; Gorski 2003; Kalberg 1994; Roth 1987; Rueschemeyer 1973; Savelberg and King 2005). They are finally congruent with recent scholarship on the filtering of the spread of global norms through cultural specifics at the local level and a country’s power position within the international community (Boyle 2002; Halliday and Carruthers 2010). Mindfulness of national conditions certainly appears to be a precondition for effective work at the local level, even among INGOs (see also Wong 2012). Here we see limits to overly streamlined globalization and post-colonialism arguments.

Empirical information provided here allows for the generation of theoretical ideas, not their testing. However, it does suggest and allows for challenges to overly streamlined theories. Future comparative work, across organizations, for example, and hypothesis testing work, using larger data sets, is desirable.
ENDNOTES

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