The Credibility of Transnational NGOs

We rely on NGOs to monitor the ethical practices of governments and for-profit firms, and to undertake many humanitarian tasks that public and private actors will not do. While we are critical of public and private sector failures, we do not reflect enough on the credibility of the NGOs which take their place. Can we be sure that products NGOs label as child-labor free are in fact so, that the coffee labeled as “fair trade” is farmed in sustainable ways, or that the working conditions monitored by NGOs are safe and that the wages are reasonable? Can we know that humanitarian organizations are, in fact, using our donations to alleviate human suffering rather than pursuing other goals? This book explores the problems of establishing the credibility of NGO activities as they monitor working conditions, human rights, and elections, and provide finance through microcredit institutions, development aid, and emergency assistance.

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The Credibility of Transnational NGOs

When Virtue Is Not Enough

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This book arose from a shared commitment to the importance of norm enforcement. Governments and firms fail to do many important things, and non-governmental organizations around the world have stepped in to fill the breach. While the public and private sectors are subject to criticism, often withering, NGOs generally do not have to meet the same standards; evaluation is sympathetic and often uncritical. How do we really know that salmon is wild, that a soccer ball was made without child labor? How do we monitor the quality of production processes (invisible in the final product), rather than the use value of the final, visible output? These questions blend into a wider set of theoretical concerns in international relations and comparative political economy, including the impact of global supply chains, the challenges of norm enforcement, and the role of non-state actors.

The authors discovered they shared these concerns at a chance meeting over coffee at the 2008 International Studies Association meeting in San Francisco among Janice Gross Stein, Peter Gourevitch, Susan Hyde, Carew Boulding, and Wendy Wong. In making introductions, we became aware that we shared a common interest in an analysis of NGO efforts to monitor compliance with norms. The opportunity to collaborate was visible and compelling. Off we went, initially through the creative exchange of emails, memos, and drafts that modern technology makes possible. We quickly drew in David Lake at UC San Diego, where Hyde, Boulding, and Wong had recently finished doctorates on topics of importance to our themes. We then added Michael Barnett, working with Stein on Islamic charities, and his student Laura Thaut. We involved Irfan Nooruddin, whose work on child labor was familiar to several of us, and he drew in his student Sarah Sokhey.

In September 2008 we held a planning meeting at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto where we sketched ideas for further work. We held a larger workshop at UC San Diego
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importance of the topic: the sense among all three of us that virtue is
not enough, that transnational organizations which monitor the pub-
lic and the private sector themselves have to meet standards of trans-
parency and performance if we are to believe the claims they make.
We hope that this volume starts a conversation and stimulates others
to continue the work on a subject that we believe will only grow in
importance in a more tightly interconnected global system.