Introduction

The only ice-cream shop in Butare, Rwanda, is the offspring of a chance encounter at the Sundance Institute. The leader of a women’s drumming group from East Africa fell into conversation with two restaurateurs from Brooklyn who had recently opened an ice-cream shop that was winning the hearts of New York’s foodies. In the space of a few months, the plan emerged for Inzozi Nziza: an ice-cream parlor in a Rwandan university neighborhood, funded by the Brooklyn restaurateurs and staffed by the young women who played in the drumming group. The young women would receive training in English and business management, while the appeal of ice cream on hot East African afternoons would eventually make the project self-sustaining. The three partners hired a former Peace Corps volunteer to oversee the training and launch of the shop in Butare, and in January 2011 the new organization was registered with the IRS as Blue Marble Dreams. Suddenly the Brooklyn foodies were the heads of a nongovernmental organization (NGO).

Blue Marble Dreams is one of more than 10,000 new international aid organizations founded by Americans since 1990. Thanks to the world-shrinking power of globalization, Americans find themselves connected to distant communities in the poor regions
of the world. Beneath the global exchanges of trade and the movements of a cosmopolitan elite, American citizens are more quietly forging global ties through immigration, tourism, volunteering, study, work, and adoption. These ties have made possible a new wave of grassroots development aid. In 1990, there were just over 1,000 international aid organizations registered with the US Internal Revenue Service. Over the years the numbers have grown, such that more than 1,300 new organizations were established in 2010 alone. By the end of 2015, a total of 13,030 aid organizations were active. They are now based in one out of every three US counties. These groups signal a transformation in the way Americans engage in global activism and charity.

Organizations focused on international issues are a small part of the US nonprofit sector, but they have been growing much more quickly than other types of nonprofits in the last three decades. The number of new international aid groups registering annually with the IRS quadrupled from 2000 to 2010, compared with only 19 percent growth for other 501(c)3s (see figure 1). Charitable giving echoes the story: Americans gave $23 billion to internationally focused organizations in 2017. Giving to such groups grew faster between 2010 and 2016 (roughly 8% per year) than giving to education, health, the arts, or religion.¹

To make sense of this organizational expansion, we have to understand that most of the ten thousand new organizations resemble Blue Marble Dreams more than well-known international NGOs like CARE or World Vision. These new groups rely largely on volunteer labor and individual donations rather than contract revenue or foundation grants. IRS records show that the median organization has an annual budget of $25,000 or less, and three-quarters operate on $134,000 or less annually. Only the top
8 percent of US-registered international aid organizations draw annual revenue of $1 million or more.\(^2\)

These groups are typically personal projects launched by Americans with a college degree but no professional experience in international development. Adoptive parents want to provide extra help to their child’s native town; MBA students want to try out an idea for improving small-scale farming; an immigrant wants to set up a school in his home country; a pastor wants to dig wells in arid African villages. The people who initiate these projects are rarely development experts or seasoned activists. They are more likely teachers, accountants, or IT specialists who cut their teeth on church work or volunteer service. Work and leisure travel takes

**Figure 1.** New international aid organizations registered annually with the IRS, 1970–2015. *Source: National Center for Charitable Statistics Master File and IRS Business Master Files.*
them to developing countries, where they forge relationships that inspire aid projects. But these American volunteers cultivate the projects while they remain embedded in their careers and communities in the United States, unlike full-time, trained aid workers whose orientation is to the professional field of development. Because they are largely self-financed and separated from the professional development field, and because they emerge from personal relationships, these organizations reject expert prescriptions in favor of aid approaches that are more expressive and personal.

I refer to these new organizations as grassroots international nongovernmental organizations. The name acknowledges their similarity in purpose to well-known international nongovernmental organizations, or INGOs, while distinguishing their crucial differences in size, scale, geographic reach, budgets, and international visibility. The adjective grassroots signals these organizations’ small scale and do-it-yourself flavor, and emphasizes that they typically work directly with recipients rather than transmitting aid through a long chain of organizations. (For brevity’s sake I will use the term grassroots INGO in this book. When discussing ideas or research projects that do not distinguish between local or international NGOs, I will simply refer to NGOs. I discuss these terms in greater detail in appendix 1 on my methodology.)

Fifty years ago, a few of these groups’ intrepid founders would have set off as Peace Corps volunteers or missionaries, but most of them would have just sent checks to large NGOs. Why so many groups like Blue Marble Dreams now? The emergence of grassroots INGOs is part of the broader story of “the rise and rise” of NGOs as actors in international affairs. But NGOs’ rise had been accompanied—inextricably, it seemed—by their professionalization. Like other nonprofit organizations, NGOs have increasingly
become guided by manager-experts, making them look more like
government agencies and corporations than fluid expressions of
civic energy. NGO scholar-practitioners Shepard Forman and
Abby Stoddard wrote of NGO work in 2002 that “the era of well-
meaning amateurs has given way to an epistemic community of
well-trained professionals.” So how do we get ice-cream shop
owners starting an NGO with Rwandan musicians? How do we find
a self-described Baptist “cowboy-pastor” at the head of an NGO
that operates schools and clinics, and volunteers from Texas who
describe their work in Bosnia as a “transatlantic barn-raising?” In
short, globalization has transformed the way people can organize,
and has put NGO work back in the hands of amateurs.

How Did We Get Here?

The “Rise and Rise” of NGOs . . .

Nongovernmental organizations have played a role in relief and
development aid for at least seventy years. The first baby boom of
American NGOs came in the wake of World War II, when the US
government leaned on CARE, Lutheran World Relief, Catholic
Relief Services, and their ilk to provide relief to a devastated Europe
after the war. With this task complete by the 1950s, these organiza-
tions turned toward Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and Northern
governments began to distribute bilateral aid for development.

The US government became increasingly disgruntled with for-
eign aid in the 1970s. The Senate Foreign Operations Subcommittee,
which held the foreign aid purse strings, expressed frustration at
the lack of fruit borne by aid sent directly to governments of less-
developed countries. The result was a plan in the 1973 Foreign
Assistance Act to channel more aid through nongovernmental organizations rather than through receiving-country governments. The 1950s and '60s approach to development had centered on technical assistance and developing infrastructure. The idea was that in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, as in reconstructed Europe, (capitalist) industrial development would generate a rising tide that would lift all boats. The shift toward NGOs in the 1970s thus also entailed a switch in tactics toward meeting the basic needs of the poor for food, water, health, and education.

Two political developments in the 1980s catalyzed the growth of NGOs. The first was Reagan-Thatcherist politics, which whittled away at the role of the state in providing social services. Nongovernmental organizations were increasingly relied upon—by design or default—to carry out the tasks that until recently had fallen to government. The second catalyst was the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the perceived role of civil society therein. Western leaders were encouraged by the success of the nascent civil society in Eastern Europe and eagerly donated millions of dollars in an attempt to establish the organizations they believed were crucial for stable democracy. Donors’ enthusiasm for civil society as a path to both democratization and development once again carried over from Europe to the global South. NGOs became an institution that both the political left and right could embrace. For the right, they were a means of keeping governments small; for the left, they were a political force that could challenge existing power relations. NGOs also expanded their roles in response to humanitarian crises. Media coverage of the 1980s Ethiopian famines was a turning point, as the graphic images of children’s suffering broadcast on the evening news brought public outcry and support for humanitarian action. Forman and Stoddard note the role relief
organizations took on in civil wars and other unstable situations in subsequent years. They argue that citizens of wealthy countries had little taste for casualties in peacekeeping or humanitarian emergencies, and so giving aid via NGOs became the “weapon of first resort” in these situations.11

Huge sums of money now flow through nongovernmental organizations. In 2011, $19.3 billion in official development aid was budgeted to or through NGOs, or about 15 percent of all official aid from OECD countries.12 For the United States, 23 percent of official aid went to NGOs. This excludes private charitable donations, which in 2010 totaled another $14 billion for US NGOs and in 2011 $32 billion for NGOs based in all OECD member countries.13 In other words, nearly half of all public and private US dollars for relief and development now go to NGOs.

NGOs rose to prominence in no small part because of political opportunities. The governments of less-developed countries came to be seen as unsavory partners, state provision of social services fell out of favor as neoliberal politics ascended, and NGOs were envisioned as the catalyst for civil society and thus for democracy outside of the West. Yet NGOs have been able to exploit these opportunities because of their particular cultural status.14 As Dorothea Hilhorst argues, the title “NGO” is a “claim-bearing label.” NGOs are part of a lineage of charitable organizations in the Anglo world that goes back to the Elizabethan Statute of Charitable Uses. For more than four hundred years, groups that aid the needy and keep no profit have enjoyed special legal recognition and public legitimacy. When someone undertakes international development work under the aegis of an NGO, she benefits from that legacy; as Hilhorst points out: “The label has a moral component. Precisely because it is doing good, the organization can make a bid
to access funding and public representation.”\textsuperscript{15} This moral legitimacy and favorable legal treatment have bolstered NGOs into the twenty-first century.

\textbf{. . . And Their Professionalization}

The story of the “rise and rise” of NGOs over the last four decades, as Edwards and Hulme characterize it, has involved the professionalization of NGOs.\textsuperscript{16} Historical, theoretical, and empirical accounts have all described the increasing rationalization and professionalization of the nonprofit sector, of which NGOs are part.\textsuperscript{17} Hwang and Powell carried out a major study in the San Francisco Bay area to learn about the operations of a random sample of nonprofit organizations. They found that the use of consultants, strategic planning, independent financial audits, and data for program evaluation—techniques ubiquitous in the for-profit (and in some cases the government) sector—had become common. These strategies were more likely to be used when the nonprofits were funded by foundations, had full-time staff, and had executives with professional degrees (particularly MBAs or other training in management). In other words, being a full-time, “professional” organization, rather than a part-time, volunteer-driven group, means relying on data and expert advice and using formal processes for planning and evaluating outcomes. Hwang and Powell saw professionalization infiltrating a range of social domains, including those that were once homely and intimate; even “the sage advice of grandmothers has been supplanted by a wide array of child development experts and agencies.”\textsuperscript{18}

Forman and Stoddard argued that this trend was a dominant force in the field of international NGOs and predicted a “homog-
enization” of NGOs driven both by professional norms and stiff competition among NGOs for external funds. Their story is consistent with the trajectory of the major American NGOs that emerged during and just after the World Wars. A host of religious and ethnically oriented NGOs were founded during this period to provide relief, including the American Friends Service Committee, the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Church World Service, Lutheran World Relief, CARE, and Catholic Relief Services. World Vision was founded in 1950 to provide direct aid to missionaries and orphans in Asia. All of these organizations remain major providers of relief or development services today, with Catholic Relief Services and World Vision among the top contractors for the US Agency for International Development (USAID), wielding a combined $300 million in annual government funding.

One telling fact of professionalization is that religious organizations create ways to compartmentalize their religious expression in order to maintain legitimacy in the field of aid organizations. Agensky describes both the structural constraints (i.e., donors’ rules) and normalizing forces (i.e., professional practices) that integrate large religious NGOs into the mainstream aid field. He finds that evangelical Christian aid workers “described themselves as being professional relief workers first.” Listening to aid workers’ complaints about religiously motivated “amateurs” working in the same region, Agensky notes the “tension” that exists “between professional and informal organisations that exemplify different modes of humanitarian imaginaries. Ideologically driven groups, as well as inexperienced ‘do gooders’ and ‘well wishers’. . . pose a large problem for all professional faith-based relief workers.”

The NGO employees shared religious commitments with the “ideologically driven groups,” but their primary identification was
with fellow professional aid workers. This story is consistent with the depiction of NGO workers as an “epistemic community of well-trained professionals.” Ethnographers studying NGO workers have characterized the NGO scene as “Aidland”; they describe a circuit of aid workers moving among NGOs, government agencies, and for-profit contractors. This easy movement is possible because the professionalization of NGOs has made public and private aid organizations isomorphic—they operate in similar ways and demand the same qualifications of their employees. Monika Krause has shown how both competitive and normative pressures shape the professional field of humanitarian organizations. She found that while the desk workers of large NGOs did hold high ideals, in day-to-day reality their work was shaped by the need to produce “good projects” that could meet the demands of funding agencies. NGOs, in this portrayal, make sense not when we view them as pure do-gooders but as actors operating within an organizational field shaped at once by ideals, competition for resources, and shared assumptions about the appropriate ways to do development.

Globalization Intervenes

This professionalization of NGOs has rightly attracted a good deal of attention from social scientists. But meanwhile globalization has been transforming the way that everyday citizens of developed countries encounter the Global South. Global changes in transportation and electronic communication have simultaneously created new social problems (or made old ones newly visible) and provided novel tools to confront them. The result is new forms of organizations and activism that are driven more by networks than membership, and more by personal tastes and talents than by col-