

## FORUM

# Challenges and Opportunities for Transnational Advocacy

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Transnational advocacy scholarship has illustrated the power of activist networks in overturning Cold War logics; facilitating disarmament and weapons control; tackling climate change; and promoting human rights. Since the 1990s, scholars have demonstrated that non-state actors can shape international outcomes, including through boycotts, persuasion, and information politics. Given the rich research agenda that these scholars set out, what have we learned in the last 20 years? And how can transnational advocacy scholarship help us understand larger trends in international relations? This forum brings together leading scholars of transnational advocacy to unpack the key debates in three areas: 1) external challenges, especially shrinking civic space worldwide; 2) internal challenges to transnational advocacy networks; and 3) the challenges and opportunities afforded by implementing international norms and international

law at the domestic level. The forum brings together nine authors who have studied advocacy in Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Bolivia, Guatemala, United States, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom and a host of other countries across a wide range of issue areas. These scholars use a range of methods from qualitative to quantitative studies of advocacy. Collectively we illustrate how transnational advocacy matters for IR and chart a future research agenda.

En trabajo académico en materia de defensa transnacional ha ilustrado el poder que ejercen las redes de activistas para revertir las lógicas de la Guerra Fría, facilitar el desarme y el control de armas, abordar el cambio climático y promover los derechos humanos. Desde la década de 1990, los académicos han demostrado que los actores no estatales pueden influir sobre los resultados internacionales, a través de métodos tales como boicots, persuasión y políticas de información. Teniendo en cuenta la importante agenda de investigación que establecieron estos académicos, ¿qué hemos aprendido en los últimos 20 años? ¿Y cómo pueden los trabajos académicos en materia de defensa transnacional ayudarnos a entender las tendencias más amplias en el marco de las relaciones internacionales? Este foro reúne a los principales académicos del campo de la defensa transnacional con el fin de desglosar los debates clave en tres áreas: 1) desafíos externos, especialmente la reducción del espacio cívico en todo el mundo; 2) desafíos internos para las redes de defensa transnacional; 3) los desafíos y oportunidades que ofrece la implementación de normas internacionales y del derecho internacional a nivel nacional. El foro reúne a nueve autores que han estudiado la defensa en Brasil, Rusia, India, China, Sudáfrica, Liberia, Costa de Marfil, Bolivia, Guatemala, Estados Unidos, Australia, Alemania, el Reino Unido y una serie de otros países a lo largo de una amplia gama de áreas temáticas. Estos académicos utilizan una variedad de métodos que van de estudios cualitativos a estudios cuantitativos sobre la defensa. De manera colectiva, ilustramos cómo la defensa transnacional es importante para las relaciones internacionales y trazamos una agenda de investigación futura.

La recherche sur les plaidoyers transnationaux a illustré le pouvoir des réseaux de militants lorsqu'il s'agissait de réfuter la logique de la guerre froide, de faciliter le désarmement et le contrôle des armes, de s'attaquer au changement climatique et de promouvoir les droits de l'homme. Depuis les années 1990, les chercheurs démontrent que les acteurs non étatiques peuvent façonner les résultats internationaux, notamment par le boycott, la persuasion et la politique de l'information. Étant donné le riche programme de recherche défini par ces chercheurs, qu'avons-nous appris ces 20 dernières années ? Et comment la recherche sur les plaidoyers transnationaux peut-elle nous aider à comprendre les tendances plus larges en relations internationales ? Ce forum rassemble d'éminents chercheurs en matière de plaidoyers transnationaux pour décortiquer les débats essentiels dans trois domaines : 1) les défis externes, notamment le rétrécissement de l'espace civique à l'échelle mondiale ; 2) les défis internes pour les réseaux de plaidoyers transnationaux ; et 3) les défis et opportunités présentés par la mise en œuvre des normes internationales et du droit international au niveau national. Ce forum rassemble neuf auteurs qui ont étudié les plaidoyers au Brésil, en Russie, en Inde, en Chine, en Afrique du Sud, au Libéria, en Côte d'Ivoire, en Bolivie, au Guatemala, aux États-Unis, en Australie, en Allemagne, au Royaume-Uni et dans de nombreux autres pays concernant un large éventail de problématiques. Ces chercheurs emploient diverses méthodes, des études qualitatives aux études quantitatives des plaidoyers. Ensemble, nous illustrons dans quelle mesure les plaidoyers transnationaux importent pour les RI et ébauchons un programme de recherche futur.

**Keywords:** transnational advocacy, civil society, NGOs  
**Palabras clave:** defensa transnacional, sociedad civil, ONG  
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### Introduction

Transnational advocacy scholarship has illustrated the power of activist networks in overturning Cold War logics (Evangelista 1999); facilitating disarmament and weapons control (Price 1998); tackling climate change (Busby 2010; Hadden 2015); and promoting human rights (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Since the 1990s, scholars have demonstrated that non-state actors can shape domestic and international outcomes, including through boycotts, persuasion, and information politics (Klotz 1999; Risse 2000). They focused on how advocacy networks have shaped states' interests and behavior by reshaping their identities and interests (Risse-Kappen 1995). Given the rich research agenda that these scholars set out, what have we learned in the last 20 years? And how can transnational advocacy scholarship help us understand broader trends in international relations (IR)? This forum brings together leading scholars of transnational advocacy to unpack the key debates and illustrate how transnational advocacy matters for IR.

### Why This Forum?

There is a long list of important, recent works on transnational advocacy and hence a need to pool our collective knowledge, reflect on what we have learned, and what we still need to investigate (Jurkovich 2020; Medie 2020; Mitchell et al. 2020; Zvobgo 2020; Henry and Sundstrom 2021; Chaudhry 2022; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Sharman 2022; Hall 2022; Holzscheiter, Gholiagha, and Liese 2022; Reiners 2022). For this forum, we (Hall and Reiners) identified seven authors who have studied advocacy in Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Bolivia, Guatemala, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and a host of other countries across a wide range of issue areas. The collective knowledge they draw on relates to democracies and authoritarian regimes, spanning both the Global North and South. These scholars use a range of methods from qualitative to quantitative studies of advocacy.

In the "Introduction" section to this forum, Hall and Reiners start by describing how the actors and strategies of transnational advocacy have changed in the last 20 years. We then identify three areas for further investigation: (1) external challenges, especially shrinking civic space worldwide; (2) internal challenges to transnational advocacy networks (TANs); and (3) the challenges and opportunities afforded by implementing international norms and law at the domestic level. The contributors elaborate on each of these topics and in the forum's conclusion, we chart a future research agenda on transnational advocacy.

### New Actors

We now have an "unprecedented diversity" of actors involved in transnational advocacy (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Davies 2014; Bloodgood and Pallas 2022, 14), including civil society actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, public interest lawyers, media, individual representatives from government and opposition parties, businesses, and academia. Often grouped in collectives such as networks or coalitions united by a common cause, they work together across borders to advocate for change in policies, law, and practice. While conventional actors such as NGOs and advocacy movements continue to feature prominently among in advo-

cacy scholarship, IR scholars are also studying a host of new organizations that are increasingly engaging in advocacy. These actors include private law firms, digital advocacy organizations, and illiberal advocacy organizations (Bob 2012; Reiners and Vrålstad 2025). While not all of these actors are strictly speaking “new” advocacy actors, they have increased their power and influence thanks to geopolitical changes, competition among NGOs, and the emergence of digital campaigning platforms and corporate social initiatives (Wong 2012; Hall et al. 2020; Bloodgood and Pallas 2022; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2022; Hall 2022).

Research shows that advocacy organizations are adapting to business logics to secure funding, relevance, and legitimacy. Often summarized as the sector’s turn to professionalization, this can come at the expense of actual advocacy, as NGOs spend more time and staff on the administration of their work and are inclined to moderate their demands, rather than asking for radical reforms (Stroup and Wong 2017; Mitchell et al. 2020). In addition, private actors such as consultancies, corporations, and private law firms have entered the advocacy ecology with financial resources, well-trained staff, and professional networks spanning major global companies and the world’s best law and business schools. Private law firms, for example, are engaging in human rights advocacy work around the globe (Cummings, e Silva, and Trubek 2022). Voluntary legal services for marginalized or resource-poor groups or individuals—services collectively known as pro bono advocacy—have come to involve powerful resources, including lawyers who attended prestigious schools, ever-increasing revenues, and highly influential networks. Pro bono work now allows private law firms to collaborate with United Nations agencies and NGOs to provide access to justice for individuals and organizations all over the globe (Reiners and Vrålstad 2025). As private actors, they are not affected by the shrinking space observed for traditional human rights defenders (Chaudhry 2022; Chaudhry and Heiss 2022), and they are both more accustomed to, and better equipped for, navigating democratic backsliding and authoritarian contexts (Solomon 2010; Moustafa 2014; Stern and Liu 2020).

Alongside the rise of private actors, a range of new actors have harnessed digital technology to advocate on domestic and transnational issues. Digital advocacy organizations, for example, use digital analytics to test their messages and campaigns, and identify which campaigns are most popular among their members (Karpf 2016). They can rapidly launch new campaigns—thanks to the ease of setting up online petitions and campaigning on social media. There are now over twenty permanent digital advocacy organizations around the world, such as AHung (Hungary), MoveOn (the United States), Avaaz (international), GetUp (Australia), and Amandla.Mobi (South Africa). These organizations have made membership simple and cost-free—you simply sign-up online—and have attracted over 18 million members worldwide. Importantly, these organizations do not seek access to international organizations (IOs). Rather, they pursue an outsider strategy: exercising influence by mobilizing their members to pressure national politicians (Hall 2022). Many digital advocacy organizations champion progressive values, and have campaigned for climate action, refugee protection, and women’s rights.

We also see more NGOs promoting illiberal norms and “dark-side” coalitions promoting the regressive development of international law, for example, with regard to reproductive rights (Guns 2013; Voss 2018; Reiners 2022). IR scholars have, until recently, largely ignored the growing number of illiberal organizations that seek to influence states’ foreign policies and international issues (Bob 2012). Some IR scholars are starting to correct this bias by examining how right-wing actors have contested liberal norms, and often doing so by emulating similar organizational forms and strategies as progressive actors (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Hall 2024; Hall et al. 2024). Ayoub and Stoeckl, for instance, examine the emergence of a moral conservative TAN that has campaigned against “gender ideology” and LGBTIQ rights. Much like their liberal counterparts, they have coalesced and coordinated at inter-

national summits (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). There are also right-wing “copycats,” such as CitizenGo, that have emulated progressive, digital advocacy organizations (Hall 2024; Hall et al. 2024). CitizenGo now has 18 million members, campaigns in over a dozen languages, and contributed US\$32.7 million to anti-gender activities in Europe between 2008 and 2018 (Datta 2021, 47). Understanding when and why these illiberal actors shape public and elite opinion, and transnational outcomes, is vitally important as they are opposing the advocacy of liberal NGOs and actors, who have been the focus of the transnational advocacy literature for decades. Scholars of transnational advocacy have much to learn about the power, and strategies of these new actors, and if and how they collaborate with, or undermine, the traditional advocates IR has focused on.

### New Strategies

Advocates are also experimenting with new strategies and tactics to exercise influence. Two major explanations for the rise of new tactics are the expansion of international law and new digital technologies (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Sharman 2022; Hall 2022; Reiners 2022).

Regarding transnational advocacy for international lawmaking, IR scholarship has begun to explore how transnational advocates work with and through international institutions to generate change in international law (Haddad 2018; Lohne 2019; Reiners 2022). Scholarship on international organizations has demonstrated that this interest is mutual, and international organizations regularly invite transnational actors to provide expertise or services and publicly communicate their efforts in this regard (Tallberg et al. 2013; Carayannis and Weiss 2021). With regard to strategies, we find that transnational advocates are increasingly seeking to shape the development of rules themselves, rather than lobbying governments to do so. For example, in human rights advocacy, one major shift among advocates is the turn away from targeting governments and diplomats in the intergovernmental UN bodies, and toward realizing the potential for norm development in the independent expert bodies. This turn came with advocacy strategies that were less dependent on public-facing campaigns and instead aimed at informal coalition-building with the independent experts to collaborate on interpreting human rights law (Reiners 2022). This strategy was facilitated by direct access to the decision-makers, independent experts, based on established professional relationships before they were elected to the treaty bodies (Reiners 2024).

Such advocacy strategies based on interpersonal relationships with decision-makers in international institutions are taken place in informal settings and pose therefore challenges to our methods and the way we can study transnational advocates. In domestic contexts, however, we find individuals whose strategies are successful precisely because they engage in public campaigning: celebrities enjoy influence by virtue of their popularity, not their expertise (Budabin and Richey 2021). They can often access decision-makers, and influential institutions, such as the US Congress, with greater ease than many NGOs; and mobilize funding from wealthy individual donors due to their name recognition. Yet, tensions arise given that celebrities are influential, but do not necessarily help the causes and people they represent (Budabin and Richey 2021).

The second transformative development in strategies comes as a result of digital technologies. Twenty years ago, advocacy actors reached the public via phone, TV, radio, email, and/or canvassing on the street (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Today, most NGOs and advocacy organizations use social media—Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok, to name just a few—to petition, fundraise, and campaign (Hall et al. 2020). Advocacy actors often use digital technology to complement offline actions such as mobilizing people on social media to take to the streets. Digital technology has lowered the cost of reaching thousands, if not millions, of people and made

it faster, and arguably easier, to launch new campaigns (Karpf 2012). Some have raised concerns that these new tactics are simply “slacktivism” and “clicktivism,” encouraging people to engage in easy online actions, and rely only on “weak ties,” that do not challenge decision-makers (White 2010). However, others have demonstrated that these actions can broaden advocacy networks based on “strong ties” and enable movements to quickly scale up their activities (Hall 2022). Advocacy actors can harness digital technologies to supplement (rather than replace) conventional strategies such as lobbying states at IOs or mobilizing people on the streets.

Importantly, NGOs are not only using digital technology to “broadcast” their campaigns and mobilize the public. In some cases, they distribute power to members to initiate campaigns, contribute to advocacy efforts, and monitor international agreements. Some advocacy organizations, such as Greenpeace, encourage members to start their own online petitions (Hall 2022). Climate activist organizations, such as 350.org, FridaysforFuture, and Extinction Rebellion, encourage people to set up their own local chapters and organize actions under the broader organizational banner. Human rights groups such as Amnesty International have teams of students who help to verify video material for human rights abuses. Meanwhile, environmental groups are using satellite data and drones to monitor deforestation and illegal fishing in remote areas (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Sharman 2022). Earlier scholars of transnational advocacy were well aware of how communication technology could lower the cost of communication, and facilitate more frequent transnational conversations between advocacy networks, but were not attuned to how digital technologies could reshape advocacy actors themselves (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hall 2024). Recent scholarship has therefore drawn on population ecology to reveal why we see more “niche” organizations than “generalist organizations” forming today (Bush and Hadden 2019; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2019).

### **The Contributions to the Forum**

The contributions to the forum examine the challenges and opportunities for transnational advocacy from three distinct perspectives: In the first part, Chaudhry, Sundstrom, and Henry reflect on global trends and external challenges to advocacy. There is a clear need to understand the challenges and threats civil society face from governments, as 130 countries have placed restrictions on NGO access to foreign funding (Chaudhry 2022); and many governments are using digital surveillance to monitor and even suppress activists (Gohdes 2020).

In the second part, Vilán and Zvobgo examine how TANs navigate internal tensions and conflicts. Transnational networks often deal with challenging power dynamics: Who sets the agenda and decides on strategies and tactics (Mitchell et al. 2020)? Who is included and who is excluded? TANs may be united around a common cause but often have different visions of how to advance that cause and may not always collaborate well (Stroup 2012; Wong 2012).

Finally, Medie and Basu investigate the process of implementing international norms and laws. International legal norms require translation into local contexts, and asymmetries in power between local and international actors can shape implementation (Merry 2009; Zwingel 2016).

Collectively, our contributions chart out a future research agenda for scholars drawing on a range of disciplines—not only IR but also sociology, social movement studies, international law, and comparative politics—to better understand transnational advocacy.

# Global Trends and External Challenges to Advocacy

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The latest annual report from CIVICUS Monitor, which assesses the state of civil society worldwide, paints a grim picture. As of 2024, 72.4 percent of the world's population now lives in countries where the space available to civil society organizations (CSOs) is closed or repressed (CIVICUS 2023). Human Rights Watch's Executive Director Kenneth Roth claims that civil society is under more aggressive attack than at any time in recent memory. In this forum contribution, we first provide an overview of the extent of closing civic space. We then describe how NGOs and TANs have adapted to shrinking space. We conclude with a discussion of transnational repression.

## Shrinking Civic Space—Global Trends and Drivers

Scholars and policymakers have made numerous recent advancements in conceptualizing, measuring, and explaining the challenges and threats civil society and transnational advocacy organizations face from democratic and authoritarian governments (Christensen and Weinstein 2013; Dupuy et al. 2016; Bakke et al. 2020; Bromley et al. 2020; Glasius et al. 2020). This phenomenon of closing or shrinking civic space—including limitations on institutional channels available for contestation, public and official discourse about CSOs, and CSOs' capacity to maintain and create new operational space (Van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012; Buyse 2018, 969)—has many global and domestic drivers.

What is especially striking about this wave of government attacks against CSOs is the move away from violent repression. More than 130 countries have increasingly repressed NGOs in the last three decades—a majority of these efforts have been through non-violent strategies (Chaudhry 2022). Many governments, despite growing illiberal or authoritarian tendencies, still provide an illusion of civic pluralism, but aim to suppress NGOs through legalized repression, also known as administrative crackdown. Such crackdowns can attack the operations of TANs by imposing legal barriers to entry, funding, and advocacy. These barriers differ from standard NGO regulations in a few ways—namely, that they are not grounded in international legal principles that give CSOs the right to freedom of association, and the ability to freely access human, material, and financial resources (UNSR 2023). Unlike regulations that set standards for NGO accountability, prevent malfeasance, and provide access to the policymaking process (North 1990; Teets 2014), administrative crackdowns use laws that are not proportional, are discriminatory, and constrain the work of NGOs in violation of international legal principles. For instance, in 2012 Russia

passed the infamous “foreign agent” law (Federal Law No. 121-F2), which forced organizations receiving foreign funding and engaging in political activities to register as foreign agents, a term critics argue is intended to stigmatize NGOs (Tysiachniouk et al. 2018). In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that this law violated the freedom of assembly and association (Robinson 2023, 12).

While democracies are generally less likely than autocracies to limit foreign funding for NGOs, this trend reverses for barriers to political activities and entry (Chaudhry 2022). Democratic societies have been found to restrict NGO activities disproportionately when NGOs target government accountability in human rights violations and corruption, and in natural resource access disputes (Van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012); groups working in elections, and media freedom also may be targeted. For instance, in 2010, India amended its Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, targeting NGOs receiving money from foreign sources, to prohibit those engaging in “political” activities. However, the word “political” is intentionally left vaguely defined; even the Indian Supreme Court highlighted that it could be susceptible to misuse or abuse (The Wire 2020). In a period of democratic backsliding between 2014 and 2019, the Indian government banned 14,500 NGOs from receiving money from abroad, including INGOs such as the Ford Foundation and Greenpeace (Press Trust of India 2019). In 2020, the government also froze Amnesty International’s bank accounts in India, forcing it to halt its work in the country (Amnesty International 2016). More open democratic regimes have tended to be more careful in distinguishing between NGOs and political candidates or parties in implementing restrictions on foreign-funded “political” activities. In Australia and Canada, for instance, NGOs receiving foreign donations have won legal challenges launched by critics, with courts and electoral commissions ruling that their campaigns do not violate electoral laws restricting foreign campaign donations (Hall 2022, 30–1).

Democracies may have legitimate reasons to close their civic spaces if these restrictions reflect the will of their constituents concerned about foreign interference in national elections (Tomz and Weeks 2020). However, public opinion on NGO restrictions has received little study. Recent research from Israel finds that while citizens perceive foreign-funded NGOs as slightly more threatening than domestic counterparts, they are not more likely to support restrictions on these groups. Rather, citizens are more likely to support restrictions on NGOs representing the opposing political positions, which enables leaders to exploit such partisan-motivated reasoning to silence civil society (Efrat and Yair 2024). While more research is needed to assess if similar results play out elsewhere, government restrictions may be top-down rather than a reflection of popular will. Over time, government anti-NGO rhetoric and smear campaigns have the potential to influence broader support for closing civic space (Brechenmacher 2017; Hollerbauer et al. 2024).

More broadly, data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) civil society indices show that CSO restrictions are increasing at a greater rate than other indicators of democratic backsliding and autocratization; in fact, CSO repression was one of the top three most declining indicators of democracy in 2024 (V-Dem Institute 2023). Between 2013 and 2023, repression of CSOs worsened substantially in forty-four countries; in forty countries, government control over the entry and exit of new CSOs in their territories moved in an authoritarian direction, with repression of CSOs worsening in thirty-seven countries (V-Dem Institute 2023). While governments erode the rule of law and the quality of elections, the data show that autocratizers target rights and freedoms first and more rapidly, and that media censorship is not far behind. Civil society and media have the capacity to mobilize people against the ongoing backsliding by governments; democratic institutions may constrain against erosion, but do not actively mobilize people against it.

There is growing interest in explaining these trends toward administrative crackdown. While violent repression can have punitive and deterrent effects, it can also backfire. Violence can lead to widespread protests, decrease leaders' legitimacy, increase their criminal liability, and provoke international condemnation. As a result, governments have increasingly sought non-violent strategies that seem ordinary, routine, and apolitical. These laws also rarely elicit international condemnation or threats of aid withdrawal (Chaudhry 2022). But the growing web of bureaucratic practices that NGOs must navigate renders their collective action vulnerable to state pressure.

Moreover, there is evidence that restrictive laws are diffusing internationally and that governments are learning how to navigate potential threats (Glasius et al. 2020). For instance, leaders in Central and Eastern Europe "learned not only from countries that experienced one, but also from countries that avoided having a Color Revolution" (Gilbert 2020, 309). Digital technologies also provide new tools to governments, enabling surveillance, online harassment, and disinformation against hostile activists and organizations (Michaelsen 2020).

### NGO Adaptation

How do NGOs respond to the contraction of civic space? Legal constraints and funding restrictions may force NGOs to adapt their strategies and structure across all regime types. While domestically rooted NGOs participating in TANs are most vulnerable to pressure, the creation of INGOs, so prevalent in the 1990s (Boli and Thomas 1999), has plateaued and diminished across the Global North due to organizational crowding and competition that deters the creation of new organizations (Bush and Hadden 2019). Recent research has highlighted inequality within TANs (Hanegraaff and Poletti 2023) and the role of "South-South" TANs that rely less on INGOs based in the Global North (Moreira et al. 2019). The global backlash against certain liberal norms—whether feminism or LGBTQ+ rights—also is beginning to foster new TANs in which actors coordinate to promote conservative values (Velasco 2023; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024).

For NGOs located in countries where foreign agent legislation targets and stigmatizes transnational connections, open participation in a TAN can present more risks than opportunities. Governments may charge that NGOs participating in TANs are undermining national sovereignty in order to justify repression, as in the case of anti-dam advocacy in Cambodia (Young 2023). A hostile political environment thus may make NGOs less likely to use a boomerang strategy or a shaming approach against the state (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022). In countries where space for activism is contracting, domestic NGOs may benefit less from TANs as the network provides less leverage over their government at home (Bob 2005; Cloward 2016). Instead, NGOs may be more inclined to try to reconcile policies and mediate norms across international and local scales, in part by participating directly in global governance institutions with state membership (Dellmuth and Bloodgood 2023). For example, Russian and Chinese climate advocacy NGOs attend annual UNFCCC summits to exert pressure on their governments, even while facing different policy contexts at home (Henry and Sundstrom 2021).

In cases of decreasing civic space in both democratic and nondemocratic regimes, NGOs may be less likely to employ the protest strategies of the past. Recent research indicates that many NGOs find ways to continue their work in unfavorable contexts through new cooperative "insider" strategies of domestic policy advocacy such as "tactful contention" (Grömping and Teets 2023; Yabanci 2023), contentious "outsider" strategies like legal mobilization (Van der Vet 2021), or divergent strategies in a polarized context (McMahon et al. 2024). Under pressure, NGOs may operate as a government-controlled NGOs (GONGO), acquiescing to a degree of government cooptation in pursuit of their goals (Hasmath et al. 2019). Earlier distinctions

between advocacy NGOs and service-provision NGOs also may be outdated. For instance, recent research on service NGOs in the Middle East shows that they simultaneously assist clients in representation and assertion of rights (Herrold and AbouAssi 2023).

In some cases, advocates may abandon the NGO model altogether (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash 2015). Some, as in China, may individualize complaints to disguise collective action (Fu 2018). In other cases, such as Russia, former NGO representatives may choose to work without legal registration or adopt a for-profit commercial structure to avoid restrictive laws on foreign funding, setting up private consulting firms to continue advocacy in a new form (Tysiachniouk et al. 2018). In extreme cases, state repression of NGOs and advocacy may become so great that advocates choose to go into exile, leaving their previous organizations (Henry and Plantan 2022). Migration to escape a repressive context may open up opportunities for NGO activists to continue to participate in TANs, yet it also may undermine the ability to influence politics at home (Moss 2022).

One recent adaptation that has emerged in transnational NGO networks is the creation of new organizations, knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and strategies to protect activists and NGOs under threat (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project 2013; Nah 2020). NGOs that specialize in “defending rights defenders” through physical security, legal, digital, and mental health support strategies—such as DefendDefenders, Frontline Defenders, and Protection International—have become more common in recent years. They work at the intersection of advocacy for human rights and meta-advocacy for civic space. Niche organizations have also emerged that focus on self-protection strategies for activists. For example, Citizen Lab or Access Now advises groups on digital surveillance and online threats. These relatively few organizations working on advocacy for civil society broadly are likely to support each other; however, as organizational density increases, they are likely to compete for scarce resources (Bush and Hadden 2019).

### **The Rise of Transnational Repression**

As some activists exit hostile domestic political systems and migrate to new countries, even as they retain their original advocacy goals, the distinction between domestic and transnational mobilization blurs (Quinsaat 2019). However, governments may still view them as a threat due to their ongoing naming and shaming activities, which may result in sanctions, reduced aid, and isolation from the international community.

As a result, governments may seek to repress these activists even after they have exited the country. Transnational repression encompasses a variety of tactics—surveillance, detention, mobility restrictions, assault, physical intimidation, unlawful deportation, rendition, kidnapping, and assassinations. While governments can attack a range of citizens abroad through transnational repression, activists are some of the most frequently targeted individuals. The Authoritarian Actions Abroad Database dataset extending from 1991 to 2019 documents 390 cases of transnational repression of activists in exile, which comprises a third of all cases in the dataset (Dukalskis 2021, 75). We know that instances of transnational repression are becoming more frequent, with more governments engaging in these tactics more often over time (Anstis, Al-Jizawi, and Deibert 2022). Campaigns of domestic repression also can increase international linkages between domestic and international activists, making the latter fair game as well (Dukalskis et al. 2023). Moreover, attempts to silence critics abroad often involve threats and punishments levied against relatives remaining at home (Moss et al. 2022). For instance, between 2016 and 2019, twenty-nine Egyptian journalists and human rights activists living abroad had family members in Egypt who were targeted by the regime (Human Rights Watch 2019).

The nature of the host state impacts the choice of repressive strategy—to target activists and dissidents in autocratic host states, perpetrators rely on the cooperation of authorities, resulting in deportations and renditions. However, in democratic host states, perpetrators resort to direct repression, including assaults and assassinations (Michaelsen and Ruijgrok 2024). In 2023, for example, an Indo-Canadian pro-Khalistan Sikh leader was assassinated in an incident that the Canadian government accused the Indian government of orchestrating (Tasker 2023).

Overall, research on transnational repression finds that it is not a substitute for domestic repression, but rather, complements such acts at home (Dukalskis et al. 2023). The dynamics of transnational repression is an area ripe for research. Given that existing data on this phenomenon has been limited, numerous questions remain. These include the conditions under which diaspora or exiled activists decide to organize against their home state, the logic of different repressive tactics used by various regimes, and the conditions that help facilitate transnational repression or could help prevent it.

### Conclusion

Data from numerous sources have registered persistent declines in civic freedoms and space available to CSOs and TANs, including in democracies. Post-Cold War optimism about the expanding capabilities of NGOs to change repressive regimes may have been temporally bounded. At the same time, recent research attests to NGOs' ability to innovate new forms of advocacy and adaptations within TANs to address these new threats. As NGOs face shrinking space at home and confront threats of transnational repression, important questions arise for scholars of transnational advocacy. How can we better understand the conditions under which adaptations by organizations and activists lead them to continue effective advocacy? How can INGOs and allies in TANs work to build the resilience of their partners at home and abroad? Does competition among organizations in a particular issue advocacy space deter effective collective responses to closing civic space? As NGOs and their networks become targets of increased state scrutiny and pressure, will TANs continue to be among the more prominent modes of mobilization, or will we see new forms of advocacy that are less visible and more dynamic?

## Internal Dynamics of Transnational Advocacy Networks

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Chaudhry, Henry, and Sundstrom highlight important external challenges facing advocacy groups. But groups must also navigate internal challenges to advancing their causes. We identify a number of issues for scholars to take up to progress scholarship on TANs, with particular attention paid to internal dynamics.

First, we consider unequal or asymmetric partnerships within TANs. Unequal or asymmetric power and influence can raise representational dilemmas and create tensions and conflicts over whose ideas should be pursued and whose ideas should be set aside. And yet, as we will discuss, marginalized groups have historically found ways to nevertheless meaningfully influence agendas and policy.

Second, we address differences in values, strategies, and tactics among TAN members. Intra-network tensions and conflicts are sometimes, but are not always, resolved. Yet in many areas, settling disagreements may prove necessary to countering right-wing TANs whose goal is to undo the change progressive TANs have labored for decades to achieve.

Third, we draw attention to individuals, network actors that scholarship to date has only minimally addressed. Networks are comprised of groups, which are comprised of individuals. Individuals possess moral authority, technical expertise, and power and influence in their own right. And as they operate within, across, and outside advocacy groups, they can amplify TAN messages and advance TAN goals. But studying individuals poses multiple theoretical and empirical challenges, which we outline.

Fourth, scholarship sometimes assumes that “everyone knows everyone” and that all potential partners come together and collaborate. But some potential partners may be unaware of a network and therefore do not join it, while others may intentionally not join it. Others, still, may be excluded from a network, while yet others may strategically hide their connection to a network. These issues raise conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and inferential challenges for advocacy researchers.

When we consider just these aspects of TAN internal dynamics, it is clear that this is an area ripe for continued scholarly investigation and growth.

### **Unequal Resources, Unequal Influence?**

Asymmetry between and among organizations in advocacy networks is an internal challenge that has attracted sustained scholarly attention for decades. Scholars have, for example, explored how unequal material resources shape TAN agendas, activities, and, ultimately, policy outcomes. An illustrative finding from research on the international women’s movement is that resource-rich organizations based in the Global West continue to dominate their resource-poor counterparts in the Global East and South (e.g., [Hughes et al. 2018](#)). But organizations with fewer material resources (see, e.g., [Hertel 2006](#)) and marginalized groups can nevertheless influence domestic and international policy agendas in the United States (see, e.g., [Gause 2022](#)) and elsewhere (see, e.g., [Pallas and Bloodgood 2022](#)). In Bolivia, for instance, organized working children persuaded policymakers to lower the effective minimum age of employment, in defiance of international treaty standards ([Vilán Forthcoming](#)).

Inequalities in networks may emerge for non-material reasons, too. Advocates operating on a more local and informal basis may have a harder time influencing international actors and, thus, remain subordinate to their more professionalized and institutionalized counterparts ([Hughes et al. 2018](#), 15). A prior history of mobilization may also strengthen some network members’ position relative to others’ ([Zvobgo Forthcoming](#)). The literature on “gatekeepers” has proposed that besides organizational attributes (like budgets and staff), credibility also gives some partners power over others ([Bob 2009](#), 6). In this vein, [Carpenter \(2011\)](#) has argued that organizations’ structural position within a network can give some the power to set the advocacy agenda. Combined, these factors determine which partners are influential, with implications for network cohesion and success.

Asymmetries and inequalities in networks invite renewed conceptual and theoretical discussions of network power, cohesion, longevity, and impact. We encourage

scholars to continue exploring the connection between resources and influence over TAN agendas, activities, and policy outcomes, disentangling what types of resources and power (e.g., material, symbolic, representational, or normative) matter more and under what circumstances, and what explains marginalized groups' influence in some cases but not in others. Moreover, who should play what roles in a network? In the transitional justice field, for example, some scholars view the trustee role of international experts positively (Zvobgo 2020, *Forthcoming*), while others regard it with skepticism (Lundy and McGovern 2008) or negatively (Madlingozi 2010). Attempts to bridge outcomes, cases, and methodologies, while considering authors' positionality, could be tremendously fruitful, with scholars more systematically assessing the practical benefits and costs of particular divisions of labor among network actors and recommending how benefits can be increased while costs are decreased.

### Different Values, Strategies, and Tactics

TAN members may have different values and ultimate goals, even as they work together. In the movement to end child marriage, for example, some advocates believe that addressing the issue of sexuality is key to eradicating the practice, while other advocates—especially those with a child protection background—emphasize less contentious issues such as education (Barney et al. 2022; Vilán 2022). This difference has practical implications: It affects how advocates frame the need to reform the legal minimum age of marriage. Do advocates emphasize children's inability to consent to marriage, even if it also suggests that children might not be able to access reproductive healthcare or consent to receiving medical treatments? Or do advocates emphasize the need for girls to stay in school, even if doing so fails to address the root causes of child marriage?

In the United States, advocates collaborated to develop a messaging strategy that did not infantilize minors and was acceptable to all partners (Vilán 2022, 238). But disagreements are sometimes irresolvable, as our fieldwork has revealed. In the transitional justice field, for example, some network actors prioritize trials over other forms of accountability that they see as second-best alternatives (e.g., truth commissions). Others, by contrast, prioritize truth commissions, or want to sequence or complement trials and commissions (Zvobgo *Forthcoming*). When are internal disagreements on goals and values resolved? And if disagreements are not resolved and lead to less cooperative outcomes, and some members have more power and influence, how does this affect advocates' effectiveness?

Beyond values and goals, activists' preferences over strategies may not always be aligned (Stroup 2012; Wong 2012). The competing logics of strategic complementarity and strategic substitution are one case in point. Whereas a logic of strategic complementarity would expect international members of the network to focus their advocacy on countries where domestic civil society is already strong and making an impact (Keck and Sikkink 1998), a logic of strategic substitution would predict international members of the network to focus their advocacy where domestic groups are weak (Murdie and Urpelainen 2015). It is rare that scholars explicitly address which model(s) should operate and under what circumstances, yet this is highly consequential for research design, analysis, and inference.

TAN members may also employ different tactics to achieve their goals. Hadden (2015) has shown that some network members have adopted a contentious approach to climate justice (e.g., protest actions), while others maintain a more conventional lobbying approach. The current advocacy landscape has introduced new challenges, too, requiring that advocates select tactics to operate in closing civic spaces, manage backlash from opponents, and adapt to digital technologies, as discussed in the forum's "Introduction" section. As an illustration, progressive activists may disagree about whether reclaiming a "family values" frame is the best tactic to

counter transnational resistance to LGBTI rights (Ayoub and Stöckl 2024). Scholars have the opportunity to investigate how activists navigate disagreements and how this shapes advocacy success.

### The Role of Individuals

Scholarship on transnational activism tends to focus on groups or organizations, but individuals working in, with, and separately from groups also matter. No one could deny, for instance, Greta Thunberg's impact on the climate justice movement. Moreover, individuals within established networks can themselves possess important moral authority and expertise that can shape advocacy campaign success. Independent consultants, as an example, can offer governments some (if not most) of the evidence-based policy advice a full-fledged organization could offer. Charismatic leaders are also well positioned to effectively amplify network messages and demands (Brysk 2013). There is a great potential in bridging the literature on TANs and the literature on leadership.

Opportunity and potential notwithstanding, it is challenging for scholars to map individuals in networks across time and space. Even if organizations have a web presence, they rarely list all members on their websites or maintain publicly available archives of former personnel because this could endanger them. Individuals are also always moving in and out of jobs in the NGO sector, government, and IOs (Zvobgo Forthcoming), whereas organizations represent a more fixed target for researchers to study.<sup>1</sup> Some systematic data on individuals does exist; the *Yearbook of International Organizations* produced a volume titled "Who is Who in International Organizations" from 2007 to 2017, but to our knowledge this resource has been underutilized. In addition, mapping relationships among individuals can demand multiple sources of data and different methodologies, including process tracing, discourse analysis, and biographical research—all of which are resource intensive (Reiners 2024).

Surmounting these data challenges, however, could lead to interesting theoretical breakthroughs. What factors give individuals influence over the advocacy agenda? How do TANs respond to the emergence of charismatic and/or well-connected leaders? When someone moves out of an NGO and into government, do they cease to be a part of the network, even as they advance network agendas? And if they return from government service to the NGO sector, are they "back in" the network? Lessa (2022) provides compelling evidence of "justice seekers" inhabiting more spaces than those advocacy scholars typically examine.

Lastly, how does the revolving door we describe affect the relationship between TANs and other actors such as the state? Of course, lines must be drawn somewhere, but scholarship's focus on organizations potentially obscures many other important sources of pressure for human rights and justice. We invite fellow advocacy scholars to consider what we gain and what we lose when we count some actors and actions but not others, and to challenge our core concepts to understand TAN internal dynamics.

### Network Membership

In theory, joining an advocacy network can help "multiply the channels of access to the international system" by linking actors in civil societies, states, and IOs (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 1). But sometimes domestic and international groups working on the same issue do not collaborate. The case of transitional justice in the United

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<sup>1</sup>Individual experts also produce manuals and guidelines across myriad topics, like how to design an effective truth commission (González and Varney 2013), which other actors can use without ever directly engaging the experts or the organizations in which they work.

States helps animate some of these ideas. Posthumus and Zvobgo (2021) find that key international NGOs working in the transitional justice space, notably the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), have historically not been involved in the adoption, design, and operation of US truth commissions.

Some of this lack of engagement is attributable to the ICTJ's historical interest in supporting transitional justice efforts in more conventional transitional (i.e., post-conflict or post-authoritarian) settings in the Global South and collaborating with domestic NGOs in those contexts.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, US activists have often referenced Argentina and South Africa when framing transitional justice as a worthwhile policy agenda, even though these cases are geographically and temporally distant from, and potentially less relevant than, precedents in the United States itself. Still, TANs often reconstitute, and the case of US transitional justice shows this well; since 2020, the ICTJ has gotten involved in US transitional justice processes (e.g., in Maryland), in part because of the growing US racial justice movement.

But local advocates may not always be brought into the global network's fold. How do activists decide whether to join an existing network? Conversely, how does a network bring in new players? What types of groups do they admit? What benefits (and costs) do they weigh? Different advocacy groups might not agree on who belongs in the network. Some actors advancing the network's agenda may also not see themselves as part of it and, indeed, may not be acknowledged by others as belonging in it. Moreover, some actors might not be aware of the network, though their efforts undoubtedly help realize its agenda. Others, still, may strategically hide their connection to a network, especially amid shrinking civic space and government crackdowns on domestic–international advocacy partnerships.

### Conclusion

We conclude by acknowledging that research on TAN internal challenges and opportunities requires scholars to understand network structure more deeply. However, mapping TANs is not a straightforward or easy process. Sometimes data availability and coverage may lead scholars to overemphasize one set of actors while de-emphasizing another. Scholars who study INGO naming and shaming, for instance, more often analyze efforts by Amnesty International than Human Rights Watch because more data has been collected on Amnesty and it works in many more countries (Hendrix and Wong 2014). But this does not necessarily mean that Amnesty is more important or more effective in advancing network agendas than are other organizations.

Moreover, cross-national and time-series data tend to leave out relevant groups that perhaps are less institutionalized, less centrally located, and that possess fewer material and organizational resources. In their study of the international women's movement, Hughes et al. acknowledge that the *Yearbook of International Organizations*—which pathbreaking studies have relied on to estimate the number of organizations within a country (e.g., Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Smith and Wiest 2005)—is likely to systematically underreport organizations “that are small, have fewer resources, and existed for only a short time” (2017, 1).<sup>3</sup>

Mapping the dynamic elements of a network might be particularly difficult. As an example of scholarship making strides toward mapping networks in multi-stage political processes, see Zvobgo's (2020, Forthcoming) mixed-method research on the transitional justice network and different members' activities at different stages of the transitional justice life cycle. An alternative is to rely on qualitative approaches

<sup>2</sup>See the ICTJ's “Our Work” web page: [ictj.org/where-we-work](https://www.ictj.org/where-we-work).

<sup>3</sup>Depending on the research focus, this might not be a major problem for inference; scholars studying the influence of activists on policymakers might rightly focus on larger organizations. But data from the *Yearbook* may be less appropriate for measuring the advocacy landscape more generally or when assessing organizations' influence on service provision rather than advocacy. See also Bush et al. (2024).

such as interviews, participant observation of international meetings, and analysis of reports and organizational documents from TAN members (e.g., [Hadden 2015](#); [Vilán 2022](#)). But these resource-intensive data collection and analysis efforts are not often feasible for all scholars, especially those at an early career stage or those employed at more teaching-oriented institutions.

Researching TAN internal dynamics could raise further challenges for scholars. We may not always be able to detect inclusion and rejection of potential network members. Scholars doing archival work may find it increasingly difficult to find evidence of disagreements if, as some activists told us during our fieldwork, they sometimes adapt to inhospitable environments by not leaving evidence of network ties. Furthermore, advocates could be reluctant to explicitly say to researchers why they do and do not work with certain groups. Advocates may also hesitate to share disagreements they have with colleagues in the network out of a concern that it will undermine the authority or moral standing of their partners and their larger cause. Discussing disagreements with scholars could draw attention to fragmentation and limit the TAN's effectiveness. Speaking out about internal challenges might be especially risky for groups more reliant on external funding, as losing it might compromise their survival. One strategy would be for scholars to pose questions on internal challenges to better-resourced groups that can better withstand the risks and consequences of disclosure.

We hope scholars will continue these conversations and suggest best practices for advancing this research agenda. We believe overcoming the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological challenges we outline will improve the state of knowledge on activism.

## Transnational Advocacy Networks and the Domestic Implementation of International Norms

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TANs are deemed significant for their role in advancing international norms and standards. For these norms to make a meaningful difference in people's lives, domestic implementation—implementation at the national and sub-national levels—is imperative. However, there is often considerable deviation between conceptualization and implementation of norms. This implementation deficit is observable in many issue areas, including the implementation of norms relating to civilian protection ([Jose and Medie 2015](#); [Hofmann and Suthanthiraraj 2019](#)), transparency in extractive industry ([Tskhay 2020](#)), and a range of women's rights. In the case of international norms addressing gender-based violence, for instance, state implementation may be limited to policy development and adoption of relevant legislation, without necessarily being translated into actions in the implementing institutions or in the beneficiary communities ([Medie 2020](#)). Reasons for this implementa-

tion deficit may include norm contestation, including pushbacks from conservative forces, as well as a lack of political will and resources.

CSOs shape both local and international dialogue around norms and how they are implemented (Pallas and Bloodgood 2022). They can participate in resisting the adoption of international norms and can be significant barriers to implementation (Lake 2018; Auethavornpipat 2022). Concurrently, in many countries in the Global South, CSOs have been key to reducing the implementation deficit; some of them are members of TANs. Vilán and Zvobgo in this forum discuss the ways in which asymmetry between organizations within TANs impacts advocacy strategies and outcomes. These dynamics carry forward into the implementation stage as well. Yet, the influence of TANs (and CSOs) on domestic implementation is not well understood and undertheorized (see Henry and Sundstrom 2021, 4).

We focus here on the importance of CSOs from the Global South vis-à-vis the domestic implementation of global norms. For these actors, working within TANs is particularly useful for international advocacy. Even at the time of domestic implementation, resources and technical expertise from the larger network can help buttress their influence on state policymaking and execution on the ground. Conversely, association with international actors can lead to “administrative crack-downs,” as discussed by Chaudhry, Henry, and Sundstrom in this forum.

We identify three ways in which CSOs in the Global South influence the domestic implementation of international norms. They do so by (1) contributing to the development and adoption of policies and laws; (2) contributing to the reform of existing institutions and programs and the creation of new ones; and (3) monitoring implementing institutions and related programs. We then argue that the agency of CSOs in domestic implementation can be better understood if seen in light of the networks of power within which they are embedded. Internally, dynamics such as the hierarchical nature of state-civil society relations and divisions within social movements can weaken CSOs’ influence on implementation. Externally, the asymmetrical relations within TANs, due to the concentration of informational and material power in the Global North, also affect how CSOs can impact the domestic implementation of international norms. For illustrations, we draw primarily on the work of CSOs in South Asia and West Africa in the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda that is associated with the United Nations Security Council Resolutions on women and armed conflicts. We also demonstrate how these dynamics are present in other issue areas.

### Role of Civil Society in Domestic Implementation

Implementation is “the process of putting international commitments into practice” (Raustiala and Slaughter 2002, 539). It describes “the passage of legislation, creation of institutions (both domestic and international), and enforcement of rules” (539). Actors from the Global South have played key roles in the creation of international norms in a variety of issue areas (Basu 2016b). Yet, there is a tendency to conceive of the Global South as a norm-taker or recipient in scholarly literature and policy spaces (see Basu 2016a; Bode 2019). This extends to the implementation process, where the role of Global South actors in domestic implementation is undertheorized. Indeed, the domestic dynamics of international norm implementation does not receive adequate attention in the literature, with most studies focusing on the adoption of policies at the national level as a measure of implementation. This research gap needs to be addressed, particularly in light of evidence that CSOs operating locally and others that are part of regional and global advocacy networks shape implementation, especially in the Global South (Horst 2017; de Almagro 2018a; Medie 2020).

The contributions of CSOs to the process can be seen in the adoption of policy, the creation and strengthening of implementing institutions and programs, and

the monitoring of these institutions and programs. This is observable in the implementation of the WPS agenda, which came into the international policy lexicon with the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2000 and reflected decades of advocacy by CSOs, including those from the Global South. The WPS agenda is anchored by 10 UN Security Council resolutions and rests on four pillars—prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery. The pillars center on preventing violence against women and girls in conflict-affected contexts, recognizing and promoting participation of women in conflict prevention, peace-making, and peacebuilding, and addressing specific needs of women and girls in relief and recovery efforts. CSOs have been key actors in the implementation of the norms that originate in this agenda.

Implementation includes the development and adoption of relevant policies and laws, and this is one area in which CSOs have been active. They have been essential to the drafting and adoption of WPS national action plans (NAPs) in some countries. Working independently, and in movements, they have employed a range of strategies, including protests and lobbying, to exert pressure on the state to draft and adopt NAPs and related WPS laws and policies. In principle, and often in practice, this advocacy by CSOs is built not only upon their normative commitment but also their in-depth understanding of the issues on the ground and the ability to translate international norms into context-specific policies. For instance, the Bangladesh WPS NAP, which was drafted following substantive consultations with CSOs, expands the scope of the agenda to consider “violence that women migrant workers face abroad” (Government of Bangladesh 2019, 10). The Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia worked closely with other CSOs, IOs, and the state to amend, and thus strengthen, the country’s rape law (Medie 2013). The expertise of its members was crucial to drafting the text of the legislation and pushing it through the legislature. Their expertise also informed the creation of implementing institutions within the criminal justice sector.

Indeed, since norm implementation does not end with policy adoption; creating new institutions and programs, and reforming existing ones, is another way in which CSOs influence implementation. Medie’s (2020) comparative study of the establishment of specialized police units to address gender-based violence in post-conflict Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire underlines the importance of CSOs in this regard. It revealed that while pressure from the UN was sufficient for the creation (on paper) of these units, a combination of push from women’s organizations and favorable domestic political conditions led to a faster institutionalization of these police units in Liberia. Some of these organizations were members of the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WIPNET), and they participated in the training of police officers of the specialized unit and in drafting the training manual used by the police force. Walsh (2008) explains how CSOs in Guatemala pressured the state to create specialized institutions to address violence against women and shows that the political opportunity structure and coordination with IOs favored their efforts. While some elements of their activities preceded the WPS agenda, they fall within its normative framework.

This contribution to implementation extends to the programs that CSOs operate either independently or in collaboration with other organizations and the state. Relatedly, many organizations run programs that operationalize elements of the normative framework. Asante’s (2024) study of Nigerian CSOs’ activities to counter terrorism and violent extremism in the framework of Resolution 2242 identifies a range of programs that they implemented. They include the provision of mental health services and facilitating women’s involvement in peace dialogues with community leaders. Sometimes, CSO programming is in collaboration with state agencies and in support of their initiatives. Such civil society involvement also lends legitimacy to the issue area in domestic contexts, particularly if governments are

concerned about international norms being vehicles of Northern imperialism and a threat to state sovereignty.

Another area in which CSOs are active is in monitoring state behavior and holding them accountable. The creation of NAPs in some countries has followed from CSOs' identification of policy and programmatic gaps. Beyond policy adoption, they also observe the behavior of implementing institutions such as the police and courts, identify weaknesses and gaps, and use strategies such as lobbying and protests to pressure the state to address these gaps.

Without CSO contributions in many countries, norms that have been institutionalized internationally would not necessarily result in (effective) implementation within states. In their 2020 study on "Twenty Years of Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans," Hamilton et al. note that "a large percentage of NAPs fail to allocate a specific budget for WPS activities" (2020, 13). While this trend is seen across the world, government fund allocation for policy initiatives on gender-based violence is particularly challenging in countries of the Global South that have to contend with severe resource constraints and do not necessarily prioritize women's issues. Against such barriers to implementation, the role of CSOs in monitoring and seeking state accountability is crucial. Though with "shrinking civil spaces," they have to be careful about positioning themselves in relation to the government as well as international actors.

This importance of CSOs in implementation is not limited to the WPS agenda. Their impact can also be observed in other issue areas. Restroy and Elbe (2021) show community-based organizations in Uganda, Ukraine, and El Salvador influencing the implementation of international HIV/AIDS norms. In El Salvador, CSOs and activists mounted a legal challenge to compel the state to provide free antiretroviral treatment. And, in an example of CSOs' involvement in establishing programs that implement the norm, in Uganda, a community-based organization opened a clinic in Kampala to "provide HIV and sexually transmitted diseases services to LGBT people" (2021, 5). In Bangladesh, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Fund for Children selected NGOs on the basis of their expertise and capacities and contracted them to implement activities around child rights norms—the right to basic education and health care and protection from the worst forms of child labour (Jenichen and Schapper 2017). The strategies adopted by the CSOs and the stages at which they are able to impact implementation depend on a multiplicity of factors, including the political climate, CSOs expertise, as well as how they are situated in TANs. And just as their actions can promote norm implementation, they also can block it, sometimes through contestation. While contestation can be productive (Hofmann and Suthanthiraraj 2019), it can also serve to hinder the implementation of a norm. Therefore, CSOs can boost as well as undermine norm diffusion.

### Asymmetry and Implementation

Norms are not implemented evenly in domestic contexts. This can be explained, among others, by the degree of international attention garnered by particular states and issues. Norm implementation, as has been discussed above, also depends on advocacy, operationalization, and monitoring by CSOs in domestic contexts; state-civil society relations as well as differences within CSOs can impact these processes. In "bringing global governance home," Henry and Sundstrom categorize the challenges faced by NGOs as dilemmas of representation, autonomy, and flexibility whereby actors in civil society seek to respectively balance the local and global dimensions of their identity, secure their agency to act vis-à-vis the state as well as international actors (e.g., donors), and advocate for or contribute to implementation mechanisms that reflect both local interests and global policies (2021, 25–7).

In practice, international and domestic factors intertwine to create and reproduce power asymmetries in implementation.

In the case of the WPS agenda, adoption of NAPs is widely considered to be a significant step toward localization and implementation. The first two WPS NAPs in South Asia were adopted in countries—Nepal (2011) and Afghanistan (2015)—that hosted UN political missions and were relatively more open to international involvement. Subsequent adoption of NAPs by Bangladesh (2019) and Sri Lanka (2023) was made possible by support from UN Women and the governments of Norway and Japan, respectively. Complicating the international-local dynamic in Nepal's WPS NAP, Lyytikäinen and Yadav conclude that “neither international capital nor the capital of proximity [of domestic civil society] on their own is sufficient” (2022, 137). They suggest that “non-state actors—whether labelled CSOs, NGOs or networks—seem best able to draw on processes of localization and internationalization simultaneously” in policy development, but caution that the actors and interpretations that dominate these processes limit the transformative scope of the WPS agenda (Lyytikäinen and Yadav 2022). Thus, for instance, Yadav (2020) notes that WPS implementation in Nepal was driven by the “WPS club” that included international and certain local NGOs, donors, and UN agencies and excluded or marginalized many grassroots organizations. In a different context of WPS implementation, Onyesoh (2018) writes about the Women's Situation Rooms that were created to implement the election-related components of the WPS agenda in Nigeria and Liberia, underlining—at the same time—the silencing of certain narratives, relating—for instance—to disability, in implementation.

State's capacity for implementation as well as regime type are important factors in the role that CSOs are able to play in domestic implementation. Lake (2018), in her comparative study of the implementation of gender justice norms in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa, notes that civil society's influence was limited in the latter case due to the presence of a “strong state.” In the Global South, international actors often become part of these fraught power dynamics. Paucity of resources and lack of access to state institutions lead to CSOs relying on international actors that are not only better funded but, in certain cases (e.g., UN agencies, friendly states, donor organizations), potentially enjoy more open channels of communication with policymaking bodies. To the extent that CSOs are able to exert their participation in implementation, their priorities and programming can be dictated by those who provide the resources. Relatedly, international and national actors that serve as conduits for funding domestic implementation are first accountable to their donors and not the target populations. For example, Asante in her study of the implementation of Resolution 2242 in Nigeria also notes how CSOs' reliance on international funding contributed to the prioritization of funders' objectives over “local women's needs” (2024, 4).

In her discussion on the localization of human rights norms in post-conflict Guatemala, Zimmermann (2016) points to contestations between the international community and urban NGOs, on the one hand, and their detractors, on the other, who pushed forward differing interpretations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC). For instance, the former highlighted children's agency, while the latter interpreted children's rights as family rights in the case of CRC. These differences were accommodated within domestic legislation, which nevertheless did not translate into robust mechanisms (Zimmermann 2016, 109–110). The differences within civil society in Guatemala as well as in Nepal, as discussed above, point to the power asymmetries between domestic CSOs that shape domestic implementation.

Indeed, there is a diverse array of actors whose actions impact implementation, and some of them are not given due consideration in the TAN literature. For example, Cloward (2016) shows that Masai chiefs significantly shaped the impact of transnational activism on female genital mutilation. These and other examples dis-

cussed here demonstrate how norms are not fixed and the local contestations that occur are integral to the implementation process. They also show that Global South actors are critical to the domestic implementation of international norms and that the influence of the Global North might even be overestimated in some cases. Consequently, the study of TANs and norms needs to extend to the intricacies of the domestic implementation process.

### Conclusion

Scholarship on TANs and their influence on international norms has not always recognized the complexity of the diffusion and implementation processes. The overwhelming influence of powerful states and organizations in the Global South has often been assumed, and the differentiated implementation practices that emerge are viewed as deviations from an ideal. However, the examples demonstrate that norms continue to be renegotiated at the implementation stage. When we recognize the asymmetry within TANs and its impact, the importance of Global South actors and the complexity of the implementation process, new and exciting research questions relating to TANs and norms scholarship and, more broadly, IR emerge. For Global South actors, especially CSOs, what are the benefits and drawbacks of associating with TANs at the implementation stage? How do these vary across national contexts, norms, and issue areas? In what ways might TANs impinge on domestic civil society dynamics and, consequently, their role in a norm cycle? How do domestic dynamics of norm implementation impact future advocacy of TANs in an issue area? How does the degree of involvement in TANs determine the effect that CSOs have on the implementation process? Amidst these complexities, which actors are best suited to assess the effectiveness of international norms? Responses to these questions would bring us closer to accurately mapping the life cycles of norms and to understanding the conditions under which they are translated into action.

## Conclusion: A Future Research Agenda on Transnational Advocacy in International Relations

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AND

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In this forum, we started out by examining how the actors and strategies of transnational advocacy have changed in the last 20 years. The contributions highlighted three areas for future research: (1) external challenges, especially shrinking civic space worldwide; (2) internal challenges to TANs; and (3) the challenges and opportunities afforded by implementing international norms and law at the domestic level. We collectively hope to advance research in IR on advocates and advocacy by exploring conditions for adaptation and resilience amid repression, being open to go beyond traditional advocates such as NGOs and TANs to grasp new forms of advocacy, understanding network structures more deeply, and recognize the complexity of the diffusion and implementation processes. Reflecting on avenues for innovation and groundbreaking findings in the past 20 years, we en-

courage IR scholars to draw on concepts, methods, and approaches from other disciplines and subfields, especially sociology, social movement studies, international law, and comparative politics.

Drawing from the contributions to this forum, we highlight the following findings on transnational advocacy. Firstly, even in authoritarian contexts, NGOs can carve out spaces to influence governments (Henry and Sundstrom 2021). Chaudhry, Henry, and Sundstrom highlight in their contribution that civil society actors are responding to shrinking civic space, including by changing legal form and even abandoning the NGO form. This may mean de-registering or becoming unregistered social movements; and/or moving overseas into exile. Their research points to the ability of NGOs and advocacy actors to adapt, even in difficult circumstances. While repression, including digital repression, may restrict, or undermine advocacy efforts, advocacy actors can also learn and adapt, and over time may outmaneuver the state (Earl et al. 2022).

Secondly, Vilán and Zvobgo point to the internal challenges of advocacy networks and the power of individuals. Asymmetries in networks can be measured, but we need further exploration of whether they represent a challenge or an opportunity and how resources may influence TAN agendas, activities, and policy outcomes. We also need to know more about how advocates resolve internal conflicts and about the career trajectories of individual activists as they move in and out of formal advocacy networks.

Thirdly, Medie and Basu demonstrate the importance of domestic CSOs in the implementation of norms. They also point to the asymmetries of power in transnational networks, where advocates in the Global South often rely on funding from the Global North, and thus are vulnerable to donor capture. There are also asymmetries within domestic CSOs, as some women gain influence on international networks, but others are silenced or sidelined.

Given these new actors, strategies, and challenges, what factors explain advocacy success? Past IR scholarship suggested success was determined by the strength of a TAN (Keck and Sikkink 1998); whether norms were linked to bodily harm or legal equality (Keck and Sikkink 1998); whether there was an alignment between advocacy messages and “gatekeepers” (Busby 2010); the grafting of norms and framing of a campaign (Price 1998); and/or some combination of all these factors with the policy environment (Shiffman et al. 2016).

In addition, this forum has underscored that scholars of transnational advocacy need to study contestation, opposition, backlash, and repression to understand advocacy success. After all, NGOs face backlash from ideological opponents—be it political parties, social movements, or illiberal CSOs and networks. Campaigns can get nasty and personal—including doxing, smearing, and tarring—leading to the argument that the stronger the opposition, the less likely an advocacy actor is to achieve their goals (Bob 2012). IR scholars have thus turned to studying norm contestation, rather than norm lifecycles. After all, even if a critical number of states accept a certain norm, and implement it domestically in legislation, we are seeing backlash, and regression (cf. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

In addition, IR scholars could enrich their analysis of counter-mobilizations and backlash by drawing on sociology and social movement scholarship, which focuses on civil society contestation (della Porta and Steinhilper 2021). This scholarship points to the importance of political opportunity structures for protests and counter-protests to emerge. IR can also turn to the wider literature in political science and political communications, where scholars are examining the organizational forms, strategies, and tactics of right-wing and morally conservative actors and how they collaborate transnationally (Caiani and Kroell 2014). This will help IR understand how illiberal actors exercise influence, and when they are successful. For instance, we need to look at how opposing groups learn, and even emulate, each other to win their campaigns (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Hall et al. 2024). Overall,

we have learned that it is difficult for scholars and activists alike to identify when advocacy success is final and complete. Hence, we need to get better at understanding these dynamics of backlash and repression in advocacy.

Amid the current political barriers for and structural changes in advocacy, this forum has brought together scholarship that provides in-depth empirical analyses of challenges and suggests methods, mechanisms, and concepts to push the research agenda on transnational advocacy forward. There are many remaining questions for scholars to consider: To what extent will private actors transform future advocacy and in what relation to civic actors? How will digital advocacy tactics and strategies complement, and compete with traditional tactics and strategies? And how will counter-movements evolve and engage in norm contestation? We hope to have provided a broader umbrella under which scholars of advocacy in IR and adjacent disciplines can continue the conversation.

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