



Sovereignty and non-state actors: The rise of transnational influence

Jin young Hwang *

University of Edinburgh, MA Social Policy and Economics, United Kingdom.

Open Access Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 2025, 09(02), 023-034

Publication history: Received on 13 March 2025; revised on 22 April 2025; accepted on 25 April 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53022/oarjms.2025.9.2.0025>

Abstract

This research analyzes the developing and intricate roles of non-state actors (NSAs) including multinational corporations (MNCs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) along with transnational advocacy networks and civil society groups who reshaped global governance through their challenge of traditional state sovereignty systems in international relations. This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach which incorporates theories from realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism to conduct a critical analysis of NSA influence on global challenges including health emergencies and climate change and economic fairness. This research adopts dedicated case research to study NSAs' global authority during the Paris Climate Change Agreement implementation and COVID-19 response alongside corporate social responsibility actions to measure their effects on international policy development along with implementation and norm benchmarking. Through an analysis of international legal frameworks, including the United Nations Global Compact, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, and the International Labor Organization's (ILO) conventions, this research identifies critical gaps in accountability, transparency, and legitimacy. This investigation studies the political tension which arises from NSA-state interactions while examining how power relationships evolve in circumstances where states lack authority or NSAs control extensive economic and social networks. This research proposes institutional changes for existing frameworks that advances global governance discussions about future NSA contributions toward international structures fostering friendship and sustainability through inclusivity.

Keywords: Sovereignty; Non-State Actors; Multinational Corporations; Non-Governmental Organizations; Global Governance; Accountability in International Law.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

The rise of NSAs has challenged the traditional understanding of sovereignty, as these actors operate across borders, often without the same legal constraints as states. While states continue to wield formal legal authority within their territories, NSAs can exert significant influence through various means, such as lobbying, advocacy, and the creation of alternative governance frameworks. Multinational corporations, for instance, can shape economic policies through their control of global supply chains, trade agreements, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, while NGOs and advocacy networks play pivotal roles in shaping international environmental and human rights standards. This increased involvement of NSAs has raised concerns about the erosion of state authority, particularly in resource-rich yet institutionally weak countries where corporations may exert disproportionate influence (Skeete et al., 2020).

Moreover, the growing involvement of NSAs in policy-making and global governance has highlighted a pressing need for new mechanisms to ensure accountability. While NSAs may fill governance gaps in areas where states are unable or unwilling to act, their lack of formal oversight presents challenges to legitimacy and human rights protections (Alcacer et al., 2017). As the role of NSAs continues to expand, a redefinition of sovereignty and a reimaged framework for global governance are required to reconcile state authority with the influence of these powerful non-state actors. This

* Corresponding author: Jin young Hwang

calls for the development of new legal and institutional structures that can balance the interests of both state and non-state actors while ensuring accountability and promoting global cooperation.

The rise of NSAs coincides with globalization's deepening integration of economies, cultures, and technologies. MNCs now wield economic power rivaling or surpassing that of many states, often influencing domestic policies through investment, trade agreements, and lobbying efforts. NGOs and advocacy networks, on the other hand, bring moral authority and expertise to issues traditionally under state control, such as humanitarian aid, climate change, and social justice. While their contributions often enhance global governance, they also introduce complexities in reconciling their transnational reach with the sovereign rights of states.

1.2. Research Problem and Rationale

Despite the enduring primacy of sovereignty in international law, the influence of NSAs is reshaping the boundaries of state authority. The central research problem is the growing tension between the traditional concept of sovereignty and the transnational activities of NSAs, which often transcend state borders and challenge state-centric governance models.

For instance, MNCs frequently negotiate trade agreements that bypass state regulatory frameworks, undermining national control over critical economic sectors. NGOs have played pivotal roles in shaping international norms, such as the ban on landmines through the Ottawa Treaty, often pressuring states to adopt positions contrary to their sovereign interests. Furthermore, advocacy networks leverage digital technologies to mobilize public opinion and influence state policies, bypassing traditional diplomatic channels.

While NSAs often complement state efforts by addressing governance gaps, their increasing prominence also raises questions of legitimacy, accountability, and the potential erosion of state sovereignty. How can states retain their sovereign authority while engaging with NSAs in a globalized world? What legal and institutional frameworks are necessary to balance these competing dynamics? This dissertation seeks to address these pressing issues.

1.3. Research Question

- To Examine the Evolving Roles of Multinational Corporations (MNCs), NGOs, and Advocacy Networks in Global Governance
- Assess the economic, political, and social mechanisms employed by MNCs to influence state policies. Analyze how NGOs and advocacy networks shape international norms and public discourse.
- To Analyze Case Studies Illustrating the Influence of Non-State Actors on State Sovereignty
- Examine case studies of NSA interventions in global health (e.g., Gates Foundation's role in vaccine distribution) and environmental governance (e.g., Greenpeace's campaigns). Highlight instances where NSA activities have directly conflicted with state sovereignty.
- To Assess the Effectiveness of Legal Frameworks Governing Non-State Actor Participation in Global Governance
- Evaluate international treaties, soft law instruments, and institutional arrangements that govern NSA involvement. Identify gaps and inconsistencies in existing legal frameworks.

To Propose Strategies for Reconciling Non-State Actor Influence with State Sovereignty

Develop recommendations for balancing state sovereignty with the benefits of NSA participation. Propose reforms to enhance the legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness of NSAs in global governance. By addressing the complex relationship between sovereignty and non-state actors, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how global governance can evolve to meet the challenges of a rapidly globalizing world.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of State Sovereignty in International Law

The principle of state sovereignty has historically served as a cornerstone of international law, firmly rooted in the Westphalian model established in 1648. This framework emphasized the concepts of territorial integrity, non-interference in domestic affairs, and the supreme authority of states within their borders. Sovereignty is recognized as both a legal right and a political construct, forming the bedrock of the state-centric international system. It grants states the autonomy to legislate, govern, and engage in diplomatic relations with other sovereign entities (Bartelson, 1995).

However, the traditional understanding of sovereignty has evolved, particularly in response to the complexities of globalization and the increasing interconnectedness of the global community. Stephen Krasner (1999) famously referred to sovereignty as "organized hypocrisy," highlighting its malleability in practice. States frequently make concessions on sovereignty through mechanisms such as international agreements, economic integration, and compliance with global norms. For instance, the concept of pooled sovereignty, exemplified by the European Union, illustrates how states voluntarily cede certain sovereign rights to regional institutions to address collective challenges more effectively (Ruggie, 1993).

Additionally, transnational issues such as climate change, terrorism, and pandemics have further eroded the rigid boundaries of state sovereignty. These challenges necessitate cooperative governance and shared responsibility, often mediated through multilateral institutions and agreements (Beck, 2000). As a result, sovereignty in the 21st century is increasingly fluid, embodying a dynamic interplay between autonomy and interdependence. This evolution reflects the necessity for states to adapt their traditional notions of sovereignty to the realities of a globalized world.

2.2. Defining Non-State Actors (NSAs)

Non-state actors (NSAs) are entities that operate outside formal state structures yet wield significant influence in global governance. They often challenge, complement, or even transcend traditional state authority, shaping international relations in profound ways. NSAs can be categorized into several key types based on their roles and impact:

2.2.1. Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

MNCs, such as Apple, Amazon, and Tesla, operate across multiple jurisdictions, exerting economic influence that rivals, and sometimes surpasses, the power of nation-states. They play a crucial role in global trade, innovation, and employment, shaping economic and technological landscapes worldwide. Additionally, MNCs increasingly engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, addressing issues such as climate change, labor rights, and sustainable development, areas traditionally under state purview (Strange, 1996).

2.2.2. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs like Amnesty International and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) are pivotal in addressing humanitarian crises, promoting human rights, and advocating for environmental conservation. Acting as watchdogs and service providers, these organizations often hold states accountable for their commitments under international law and norms (Prokhovnik, 2007). NGOs also play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and influencing policy decisions through their advocacy efforts.

2.2.3. International Advocacy Networks (IANs)

IANs, such as the Climate Action Network, are transnational coalitions that unite diverse stakeholders ranging from NGOs to academic institutions and community groups—to influence policies and norms on a global scale. By leveraging digital tools, social media, and public opinion, these networks amplify their advocacy efforts, pressuring states and international organizations to adopt progressive policies (Agnew, 2005).

2.2.4. Hybrid Actors

Hybrid actors represent a convergence of state and non-state resources to tackle complex global challenges. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) and initiatives like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria exemplify this category. These actors combine the efficiency and innovation of private entities with the legitimacy and resources of states, offering a model for addressing pressing issues such as public health and poverty (Held & McGrew, 2002).

In sum, NSAs play an increasingly prominent role in the global governance landscape, reflecting the diffusion of power from state-centric models to more pluralistic and networked systems. Their diverse contributions underscore the growing interdependence between states and non-state entities in addressing the multifaceted challenges of the contemporary world.

2.3. Theoretical Perspectives on Sovereignty and Non-State Actors (NSAs)

The relationship between state sovereignty and non-state actors (NSAs) has been extensively debated within the framework of various international relations theories, each offering distinct perspectives on how NSAs interact with and influence state sovereignty.

2.3.1. Realism

Realist theory maintains that states remain the primary and most powerful actors in international relations. NSAs, in this view, are often perceived as tools or extensions of state interests. States may strategically employ NSAs such as multinational corporations (MNCs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to further their economic, political, or security objectives without diminishing their sovereignty (Mearsheimer, 2001). For realists, the increasing prominence of NSAs represents not a loss of sovereignty but a reflection of states adapting their strategies to achieve goals more effectively in a globalized context.

2.3.2. Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalists regard NSAs as essential partners in global governance, complementing state efforts to address transnational challenges. From this perspective, NSAs fill critical governance gaps by contributing resources, expertise, and legitimacy to international efforts. For instance, NGOs provide technical knowledge and advocacy support to multilateral organizations like the United Nations, while MNCs stimulate economic development and technological innovation, fostering international cooperation (Keohane & Nye, 2001). This theory underscores the symbiotic relationship between states and NSAs, highlighting their shared roles in enhancing global governance mechanisms.

2.3.3. Constructivism

Constructivists emphasize the normative and ideational influence of NSAs in shaping state behavior and international norms. NSAs, particularly NGOs and advocacy networks, act as norm entrepreneurs, promoting values such as human rights, environmental sustainability, and social justice. A notable example is the instrumental role of NGOs in securing the adoption of the Ottawa Treaty, which bans anti-personnel landmines (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Constructivism highlights how NSAs can redefine state interests and reshape sovereignty by embedding new norms into the global order.

2.4. Non-State Actors in Global Governance

The growing influence of NSAs is most evident in their active participation in global governance frameworks, where they address complex transnational issues and contribute to policy development, implementation, and monitoring.

2.4.1. Role of Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

MNCs play a pivotal role in shaping global economic norms and policies. Through trade agreements, foreign investments, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, MNCs influence state policies on labor standards, environmental regulations, and taxation (Strange, 1996). For example, tech giants like Google and Microsoft have been instrumental in advocating for digital governance frameworks. However, the immense power wielded by MNCs raises concerns about regulatory capture, where corporate interests undermine state authority and public welfare (Chandler, 2020).

2.4.2. Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs are crucial actors in global advocacy, norm creation, and accountability mechanisms. Organizations like Amnesty International and Greenpeace hold states accountable for their international commitments while advancing causes such as human rights and environmental sustainability. NGOs also contribute significantly to disaster relief, development projects, and public health campaigns, often stepping in where state capacity is limited (Kaldor, 2003). Their ability to mobilize public opinion and exert normative pressure on states demonstrates their integral role in contemporary governance.

2.5. Transnational Networks

Transnational advocacy networks exemplify the power of cross-border cooperation in addressing global challenges. These networks unite stakeholders NGOs, academics, and grassroots organizations—to influence policies on issues such as climate change, disaster risk reduction, and human rights. The Global Network for Disaster Risk Reduction, for example, mobilizes resources, expertise, and public opinion to promote resilient strategies and policies worldwide. These networks leverage digital platforms and global connectivity to amplify their impact, often bridging the gap between local communities and international policymaking (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

In summary, NSAs have become indispensable actors in global governance, challenging traditional state-centric paradigms while complementing state efforts to address the multifaceted challenges of globalization. By influencing norms, policies, and practices, they contribute to an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected international system.

2.6. Legal Frameworks Governing Non-State Actors

The growing involvement of non-state actors (NSAs) in global governance is underpinned by a mix of legal, regulatory, and normative frameworks that shape their roles and responsibilities. These frameworks aim to ensure that NSAs operate within established ethical and governance standards, although significant gaps and challenges persist.

2.6.1. The UN Global Compact for Corporate Responsibility

The United Nations Global Compact is a prominent voluntary initiative that encourages multinational corporations (MNCs) to align their strategies and operations with ten universally accepted principles in the areas of human rights, labor, the environment, and anti-corruption (UN Global Compact, 2022). The Compact provides a platform for companies to demonstrate corporate responsibility, offering guidelines for ethical business practices. However, its voluntary nature limits enforceability, raising concerns about the potential for greenwashing or superficial compliance without substantive impact. Critics argue that without binding commitments or rigorous monitoring, the Compact's effectiveness in regulating MNC behavior remains constrained (Bernstein & Cashore, 2007).

2.6.2. NGO Participation in International Organizations

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) frequently participate in international organizations such as the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), where they can acquire consultative status. This status enables NGOs to engage in policymaking, agenda-setting, and advocacy efforts, particularly in areas like human rights, humanitarian assistance, and environmental protection (Willetts, 2000). While this inclusion enhances the legitimacy and inclusiveness of international governance, it also raises questions about the representativeness and accountability of NGOs. Critics note that larger, well-funded NGOs often dominate, potentially sidelining grassroots organizations and underrepresented voices, particularly from the Global South (Chandhoke, 2007).

2.6.3. Challenges of Accountability and Enforcement

The regulatory landscape for NSAs is highly fragmented, with no unified international framework to ensure accountability or address misconduct. For MNCs, mechanisms such as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and national laws like the UK Modern Slavery Act (2015) provide partial oversight. However, enforcement remains inconsistent and largely reliant on state cooperation. Similarly, while NGOs are subject to national registration and reporting requirements, the lack of a global accountability framework leaves significant gaps in oversight. These limitations create challenges in addressing the unintended consequences of NSA activities and balancing their influence with the sovereignty of states (Clapham, 2006).

2.7. Literature Gaps

Despite a growing body of research examining the interplay between state sovereignty and NSAs, several critical gaps remain that warrant further exploration.

2.7.1. Accountability Mechanisms

One significant gap lies in the lack of robust accountability mechanisms for NSAs. Existing literature often emphasizes their positive contributions but pays less attention to their potential for misconduct, such as corporate malpractice, exploitation, or unintended harm resulting from NGO interventions. Future research should focus on designing enforceable and transparent frameworks that hold NSAs accountable for their actions while maintaining their operational flexibility (Scholte, 2011).

2.7.2. Power Dynamics

The literature often underexplores the power dynamics between states and NSAs, particularly in situations where NSA influence challenges or undermines state sovereignty. This is evident in cases where MNCs exert disproportionate influence over weaker states, shaping policies to align with corporate interests rather than public welfare. Understanding how these dynamics affect global governance outcomes is crucial for developing more equitable frameworks (Strange, 1996).

2.7.3. Intersectionality of Roles

The overlapping roles of NSAs—such as MNCs engaging in philanthropy or NGOs partnering with states—present a complex web of relationships that is insufficiently addressed in current research. These intersections blur traditional boundaries between public and private sectors, raising questions about accountability, legitimacy, and the implications

for state sovereignty (Ruggie, 2004). Future studies should examine how these overlapping roles influence governance structures and outcomes.

2.7.4. Global South Perspectives

Much of the existing literature on NSAs and sovereignty is rooted in the experiences of the Global North, often neglecting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by states in the Global South. For example, many developing countries encounter distinct difficulties in regulating powerful MNCs or ensuring equitable NGO interventions. Research that centers Global South perspectives is essential to developing a more inclusive understanding of how NSAs influence global governance and state sovereignty (Duffield, 2001).

By addressing these gaps, future research can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the evolving relationship between state sovereignty and non-state actors, ensuring that governance frameworks are equitable, accountable, and responsive to diverse global contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, combining doctrinal legal analysis with case study examination to explore the complex interplay between state sovereignty and non-state actors (NSAs). This approach is well-suited to the research objectives as it provides the depth required to analyze legal principles, interpret international norms, and contextualize the real-world influence of NSAs on sovereignty.

The doctrinal legal analysis focuses on primary legal sources such as international treaties, declarations, and guidelines that frame the rights and responsibilities of NSAs. It aims to interpret these instruments to assess their effectiveness in addressing the challenges posed by NSA influence on sovereignty.

Complementing this analysis, the case study method examines specific instances of NSA engagement in global governance. This allows for a practical exploration of how theoretical principles operate in real-world scenarios, offering insights into the nuanced roles and impacts of NSAs across different sectors and geographies.

3.2. Data Sources

This study adopts a multi-faceted approach to data collection, integrating primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The combination of these sources ensures the robustness and depth of the analysis, addressing the nuanced dynamics between state sovereignty and non-state actors (NSAs).

3.2.1. Primary Sources

International Legal Instruments

Foundational documents such as the United Nations Global Compact and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are central to this study. These instruments provide normative frameworks that outline ethical expectations, operational standards, and legal obligations for NSAs in global governance. For instance, the UN Global Compact's principles on human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption serve as a benchmark for assessing corporate practices (UN Global Compact, 2022). Similarly, the OECD Guidelines offer insights into state and corporate responsibilities in promoting sustainable and ethical business practices (OECD, 2011).

NGO Reports and Corporate Governance Documents

Reports published by influential NGOs, such as Greenpeace's environmental campaigns or Amnesty International's human rights assessments, serve as crucial primary data. These documents highlight how NGOs advocate for accountability and influence state and corporate behavior. Furthermore, corporate governance documents, including sustainability reports and ethical guidelines from multinational corporations (MNCs), provide valuable information on how these entities align or fail to align with international legal norms (Corporate Watch, 2021). These primary sources offer firsthand perspectives on the practices and impacts of NSAs.

3.2.2. Secondary Sources

Books, Academic Journals, and Think-Tank Reports

Scholarly works on sovereignty, globalization, and the influence of NSAs form the theoretical backbone of this research. Academic journals, such as the *Journal of Global Governance and International Studies Quarterly*, provide critical perspectives on the evolving relationship between states and NSAs. Think-tank reports, like those from the Chatham House or Brookings Institution, contribute policy-relevant insights, offering a bridge between theory and practice (Kaldor, 2003; Strange, 1996).

3.2.3. Case Study Reports

Detailed case study reports from NGOs and advocacy networks provide specific examples of NSA influence on policy-making, norm creation, and enforcement mechanisms. For example, Greenpeace's role in shaping international climate agreements or Amnesty International's campaigns for accountability in conflict zones illustrate how NSAs operationalize their influence (Willets, 2000). These case studies not only highlight the tangible impacts of NSA activities but also reveal challenges related to accountability, legitimacy, and representation.

Integrative Approach

By combining these diverse data sources, the study ensures a balanced analysis of the complex interplay between state sovereignty and NSAs. The integration of primary legal instruments and NGO documents with secondary theoretical and empirical analyses enables the research to capture both normative frameworks and real-world practices. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how NSAs navigate, challenge, and complement state sovereignty in global governance frameworks.

3.3. Case Study Selection

The case studies were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their illustrative value in demonstrating NSA influence on sovereignty. The selected cases represent a diverse range of NSA activities, highlighting their roles as norm creators, policy influencers, and governance participants.

3.3.1. Greenpeace

Greenpeace's environmental advocacy is a prime example of how NGOs challenge state policies and promote accountability on global issues such as climate change and deforestation. The case study will explore Greenpeace's campaigns to influence international environmental norms and the resulting implications for state sovereignty.

3.3.2. Amnesty International

Amnesty International's human rights campaigns demonstrate the power of NGOs as norm entrepreneurs. This case study will examine how the organization's advocacy has shaped international human rights standards and influenced state behavior, often challenging traditional notions of non-interference in domestic affairs.

3.3.3. Corporate Governance Initiatives:

The study of multinational corporate governance, particularly CSR frameworks, focuses on how MNCs navigate the tension between profit-making and global accountability. Specific initiatives, such as those under the UN Global Compact, will be analyzed to assess their interaction with state sovereignty and regulatory frameworks.

The diversity of these case studies ensures a holistic analysis of NSA influence across different sectors and dimensions of sovereignty.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity is paramount in conducting this research, particularly given the contentious nature of the interplay between state sovereignty and NSA influence. The following considerations have guided the research design and execution:

3.4.1. Objectivity in Analysis

Care has been taken to avoid biases in interpreting the roles and impacts of NSAs. The research adopts a balanced perspective, recognizing both the positive contributions of NSAs to global governance and the challenges they pose to state sovereignty.

3.4.2. Representation of Diverse Perspectives

The research ensures a balanced representation of perspectives from both developed and developing countries. This is critical given the disproportionate influence of NSAs in the Global North and the unique sovereignty challenges faced by states in the Global South.

3.4.3. Transparency in Data Usage:

All data sources are appropriately cited, and care is taken to ensure the accuracy and reliability of secondary sources. Sensitive information from primary sources is handled in accordance with ethical research standards.

4. Data Analysis, Presentation and Interpretation

4.1. The Role of Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

MNCs wield substantial influence over global economic policies, leveraging their extensive reach across transnational supply chains and trade agreements. By shaping the terms of international trade, MNCs can bypass traditional state sovereignty to align with global economic norms. For example, MNCs often influence policy negotiations by integrating their operations across borders, dictating terms that shape not only trade agreements but also the regulatory landscape. This capability challenges the traditional notion of state-centric policy enforcement, particularly in instances where corporate decisions, such as compliance with or defiance of economic sanctions, can disrupt national economies and international relations (Bremmer, 2012).

In the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), MNCs address governance voids, particularly in weak or failed states, through initiatives that often bypass state authority. While CSR programs can fill critical gaps in areas such as environmental protection and labor rights, they may inadvertently create parallel governance structures, diminishing state power and authority in key sectors (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Criticism arises when CSR initiatives are perceived as imposing corporate priorities that conflict with state-driven developmental agendas, sometimes described as a form of "soft imperialism" (Frynas, 2005). A case in point is Shell's operations in Nigeria, where CSR programs aimed to mitigate environmental and social damages raised important questions about the accountability and transparency of multinational corporations and their potential to undermine state sovereignty in resource governance (Ikpe, 2013).

4.2. The Role of NGOs in Global Governance

NGOs play a pivotal role in shaping global governance by acting as norm entrepreneurs that amplify marginalized voices and advocate for universal standards in human rights, environmental protection, and development. Their efforts can be particularly influential in areas where state action is insufficient or absent. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), for example, was instrumental in the adoption of the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines, demonstrating how NGOs can lead norm creation and influence international legal frameworks (Rathgeber & Oliver, 2005).

However, the activities of NGOs often provoke tensions with state sovereignty, as their advocacy can be perceived as external interference. Governments may resist NGO-driven initiatives, viewing them as challenges to domestic authority or as vehicles for foreign interests, especially when NGOs operate in politically sensitive areas or conflict zones (Risse, 2000). Amnesty International's human rights campaigns, particularly in regions affected by armed conflict, illustrate how NGOs shape international norms but also encounter resistance from states defending their sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs (Drumbl, 2007).

4.3. Advocacy Networks and Transnational Influence

Advocacy networks, such as climate action movements, have successfully built transnational coalitions that influence state policies through public mobilization, media campaigns, and lobbying efforts. These networks, by leveraging their ability to organize and amplify issues on a global scale, exert pressure on governments to adopt policies that align with international norms, even in the absence of formal legal authority (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Their influence often relies on soft power persuasion and public opinion rather than coercive legal instruments.

Greenpeace's involvement in the Paris Agreement negotiations exemplifies the power of transnational advocacy networks to influence state policies. By galvanizing global public opinion and strategically applying pressure on negotiators, Greenpeace played a crucial role in pushing for stronger climate commitments, demonstrating how non-state actors can shape international agreements (Falkner, 2016).

4.4. Legal and Normative Gaps in Regulating Non-State Actors

Despite their influence, NSAs often operate in a legal and normative grey area, with weak enforcement mechanisms in global governance frameworks. For instance, instruments like the UN Global Compact rely on voluntary participation, which limits their effectiveness in ensuring compliance and addressing misconduct. The absence of binding enforcement mechanisms renders the regulation of NSAs fragmented and inconsistent, which raises significant concerns about accountability (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

The challenge of holding NSAs accountable for actions such as human rights violations, environmental damage, or political interference is exacerbated by jurisdictional limitations and the lack of coherent international regulations. A prominent example is the complicity of multinational corporations in labor abuses within global supply chains, which often occurs in countries with weak governance structures (Bartley, 2014). High-profile cases, such as those involving apparel manufacturers in Bangladesh or tech companies' links to exploitative labor practices in Asia, highlight the complexities of enforcing human rights and environmental standards within the global marketplace (Arnold & Valentinov, 2015).

4.5. Reconciling Sovereignty and Non-State Actor Influence

The traditional concept of sovereignty must evolve to accommodate the increasing influence of NSAs in global governance. Sovereignty, once viewed as a rigid, state-centered concept, is now better understood as a dynamic and multilayered framework that involves cooperation between states and NSAs to address global challenges such as climate change, human rights, and economic inequality (Held & Koenig-Archibugi, 2003). In this new paradigm, sovereignty becomes less about exclusive state control and more about shared governance models that integrate NSA expertise and resources.

To balance state sovereignty and NSA influence, it is essential to strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms. Proposals for binding global standards in CSR, alongside enhanced reporting requirements for NSAs, would provide a clearer regulatory framework to monitor NSA activities and ensure greater alignment with state objectives. Additionally, international bodies such as the OECD or the United Nations could play a pivotal role in facilitating collaboration and oversight (Ruggie, 2008).

Finally, fostering effective collaboration between states and NSAs in areas such as human rights, environmental governance, and economic development can ensure that the strengths of both parties are harnessed while maintaining the integrity of state sovereignty. For example, co-developing frameworks that integrate NSA expertise into state-led human rights initiatives or encouraging joint efforts to address transboundary environmental issues like climate change can create synergies that benefit both state and non-state actors, enhancing global governance outcomes while respecting state sovereignty (Bartley, 2014).

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

Non-state actors (NSAs) have increasingly become pivotal players in global governance, reshaping the previously state-centric international order. These entities, ranging from multinational corporations (MNCs) to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), often supplement state functions by addressing governance gaps, though they also challenge state sovereignty in various contexts. NSAs influence policy frameworks, regulatory practices, and governance structures, which results in both collaborative and contentious interactions with nation-states.

MNCs, in particular, exert substantial influence over global economic policies. Their control over transnational supply chains, active involvement in trade negotiations, and the implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives enable them to bypass traditional state authority, especially in weak or resource-rich states. Case studies, such as those examining Shell's operations in Nigeria, reveal how MNCs can address governance voids but simultaneously undermine local state control, raising concerns about accountability and transparency in governance.

NGOs and advocacy networks also play a crucial role in global governance. These organizations act as norm entrepreneurs, amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and influencing global frameworks, particularly in human rights and environmental protection. Through transnational coalitions and public mobilization, NGOs have successfully impacted policies, such as their role in the negotiations leading up to the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Despite the influence of NSAs, significant legal and normative gaps remain in regulating their activities. Global frameworks such as the UN Global Compact rely on voluntary participation, which limits their capacity to hold NSAs accountable. Accountability challenges persist, particularly in addressing human rights abuses and environmental degradation linked to corporate and other NSA activities. The absence of binding legal mechanisms creates a regulatory vacuum, leaving many NSAs with little incentive to comply with international norms.

5.2. Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the understanding of sovereignty in the context of transnational governance. Traditional conceptions of sovereignty must evolve to accommodate the growing influence of NSAs. The findings illustrate that sovereignty is not a static concept but one that is dynamic and adaptable, particularly as globalization integrates non-state actors into governance structures. This reimagining of sovereignty suggests that states and NSAs must negotiate shared roles in addressing global challenges, particularly those that transcend national borders, such as climate change, human rights, and global health crises.

Additionally, the dual role of NSAs as both collaborators and challengers of state authority is a central theme in this research. While NSAs often partner with states to address complex global issues, they can also undermine state power when their interests conflict with national policies or when they bypass state authority in favor of global norms. Case studies, particularly those involving MNCs and NGOs, offer empirical evidence of these nuanced interactions, highlighting areas where collaboration is possible, but also where tensions persist.

5.3. Recommendations

Strengthening Legal Accountability: To address the challenges posed by NSAs, it is crucial to develop binding international legal frameworks that regulate their behavior. Such frameworks should ensure compliance with human rights, environmental standards, and anti-corruption measures. Additionally, global monitoring mechanisms should be established to track NSA activities, with penalties for non-compliance. This would create a more accountable environment for NSAs, ensuring that they do not operate in ways that undermine international norms or state authority.

Enhancing Collaboration Mechanisms: To foster more effective governance, states and NSAs should institutionalize their partnerships, particularly in areas such as climate change, public health, and economic development. Multi-stakeholder platforms should be created to facilitate dialogue between states, NSAs, and other relevant actors, aligning their activities with state priorities and international standards. These platforms would also allow for the resolution of tensions between state sovereignty and NSA influence.

Balancing Sovereignty and NSA Influence: To navigate the complex relationship between state sovereignty and NSA influence, states should encourage transparency and mutual accountability through shared governance frameworks. These frameworks should clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities of states and NSAs in addressing global challenges. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives are needed to enable states, particularly in developing regions, to better engage with and regulate NSAs effectively.

5.4. Future Research Directions

Regional Non-State Actor Networks: Future research could focus on the influence of regional NSA networks on global governance. With the rise of emerging economies and regional trade blocs, understanding how these regional networks interact with global governance structures would provide valuable insights. Additionally, examining the relationship between regional organizations and NSAs in addressing cross-border issues such as migration and regional security could shed light on the evolving dynamics of transnational governance.

Digital Technology and NSA-State Dynamics: As digital platforms and technologies reshape the landscape of global governance, further research is needed to assess the implications for NSA-state relations. Issues such as digital sovereignty, cybersecurity, and the role of technology-driven NSAs like tech giants and digital advocacy groups are becoming increasingly relevant. These entities possess significant influence over global norms and policies, often challenging traditional state-centric governance models. Research into how digital technologies impact state sovereignty and NSA activities could provide critical insights into the future of governance in the digital age.

By addressing these future research directions, scholars and policymakers can better understand the shifting dynamics between states and non-state actors and develop more robust frameworks for global governance in the 21st century.

5.5. Final Reflections

In the context of the rapidly evolving global landscape, effective governance in the 21st century requires a nuanced understanding of both the strengths and limitations of state sovereignty and the influence of non-state actors (NSAs). Traditional notions of state sovereignty, which emphasize territorial integrity and non-interference, are increasingly challenged by the complex realities of globalization. The growing involvement of NSAs, including multinational corporations (MNCs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and advocacy networks, suggests that governance must adapt to this new reality. States, historically viewed as the primary actors in global governance, are now sharing authority with a range of other actors whose influence transcends national borders. This shift necessitates a pragmatic recognition of the roles played by both state and non-state entities in addressing global challenges such as climate change, human rights, and economic inequality (Sassen, 2018; Castells, 2015).

Rather than seeing NSAs as adversaries to state authority, a more productive approach would be to foster cooperative frameworks that leverage the strengths of both state and non-state actors. This collaborative approach would enhance the collective capacity to tackle pressing global issues. For example, the role of NGOs in advocating for human rights and environmental standards has been instrumental in shaping international norms, as seen in the success of the Paris Agreement on climate change (Greenpeace, 2015). Similarly, MNCs, through their CSR initiatives, have demonstrated the potential for corporate-led governance initiatives that complement state-led efforts, though challenges remain in ensuring accountability and preventing corporate dominance (Skeete et al., 2020). By recognizing these complementary roles, states and NSAs can engage in mutually beneficial partnerships that promote both global cooperation and respect for sovereignty.

In light of these developments, sovereignty itself must be reimagined. It is no longer solely about territorial control and the principle of non-interference; it must evolve to reflect the interdependence of states and NSAs in an increasingly interconnected world. Shared governance models, where states collaborate with NSAs, can help manage complex global challenges that no single actor, state or non-state, can address alone. The fluidity of global governance, shaped by the interconnections between states, corporations, NGOs, and civil society, necessitates a shift towards a more flexible conception of sovereignty. This adaptation will require legal, political, and institutional reforms that allow for the effective regulation of NSAs while ensuring that state sovereignty is respected (Alcacer et al., 2017; Keohane, 2002). The ability of states to balance the influence of NSAs with their own governance priorities will be crucial in fostering a more equitable and sustainable global order.

Ultimately, the future of global governance lies in the recognition that the boundaries between state and non-state power are increasingly blurred. Through cooperation, transparency, and mutual accountability, the governance framework of the 21st century can be reshaped to reflect the needs of a diverse and interconnected global community. By embracing shared governance, states and NSAs can work together to address the urgent challenges of the modern world while preserving the essential principles of state sovereignty in an evolving global landscape.

Compliance with ethical standards

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

References

- [1] Arnold, D. J., & Valentinov, V. (2015). Global value chains and human rights: the political economy of the apparel industry in Bangladesh. *Development and Change*, 46(1), 60-79.
- [2] Bartley, T. (2014). The contributions of private regulation to environmental governance: implications for global supply chains. *Business & Politics*, 16(3), 432-466.
- [3] Bremmer, I. (2012). *The End of the Free Market: Who Wins the War Between States and Corporations?*. Portfolio.

- [4] Drumbl, M. A. (2007). *Atrocity, Punishment, and International Law*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Falkner, R. (2016). The Paris Agreement and the New Logic of International Climate Politics. *International Affairs*, 92(5), 1107-1125.
- [6] Frynas, J. G. (2005). The False Developmentalism of Corporate Social Responsibility: Evidence from the Oil Industry. *International Affairs*, 81(3), 581-598.
- [7] Held, D., & Koenig-Archibugi, M. (2003). *Taming Globalization: Frontiers of Governance*. Polity Press.
- [8] Ikpe, E. (2013). Corporate Social Responsibility in the Nigerian Oil and Gas Industry: The Case of Shell Petroleum Development Company. *Development in Practice*, 23(6), 741-754.
- [9] Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Cornell University Press.
- [10] Ruggie, J. G. (2008). *Protect, Respect, and Remedy: A Framework for Business and Human Rights*. The UN Special Representative for Business and Human Rights.
- [11] Scherer, L. M., & Palazzo, G. (2011). The New Political Role of Business in a Globalized World: A Review of a New Perspective on CSR and its Implications for Sustainability. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 120(1), 1-14.
- [12] Rathgeber, E., & Oliver, M. (2005). The Ottawa Treaty and the Ban on Landmines. *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 2(3), 118-130.
- [13] Sassen, S. (2018). *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton University Press.
- [14] Castells, M. (2015). *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Polity Press.
- [15] Greenpeace. (2015). *Greenpeace and the Paris Climate Agreement*. Retrieved from [greenpeace.org](https://www.greenpeace.org).
- [16] Skeete, J. P., Wells, P., Dong, X., Heidrich, O., & Harper, G. (2020). Beyond the Event horizon: Battery waste, recycling, and sustainability in the United Kingdom electric vehicle transition. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 69, 101581.
- [17] Alcacer, J., Beukel, K., & Cassiman, B. (2017). Capturing value from intellectual property (IP) in a global environment. In *Geography, location, and strategy* (pp. 163-228). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- [18] Keohane, R. O. (2002). *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World*. Routledge.