

# Humanitarian NGOs as Norm Takers: Conceptualizing the Translation of Vague International Norms as an Expression of Organizational Autonomy

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*This paper conceptualizes NGOs as active norm takers on the basis of conflicts over norms—understood as standards of appropriate behavior—that become manifest in three recent rules and principles of humanitarian aid: responsibility to protect, resilience, and accountability. These are formulated by international organizations or by NGOs themselves, which are to enact and implement them. Before implementation, these rules and principles are (partly) rejected, adopted, specified, or adjusted within humanitarian NGOs during processes of norm translation. We argue that norm translation can be a fruitful avenue for analyzing the autonomy of humanitarian NGOs in relation to one another and in relation to norm-formulating donor institutions. Conceptually, this paper is situated between norms research (with its focus on norm contestation and translation) and organizational research (with its focus on internal organizational dynamics and organizational autonomy).*

## Introduction

One of the merits of the global governance literature and of constructivist norms research is to demonstrate that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play a major role in international and transnational politics. Studies in these areas consider NGOs as powerful actors, especially because of their discursive and communicative power (Arts 2003–4; Holzscheiter and Krause 2013). In this perspective, NGOs are often regarded as *norm entrepreneurs* that seek to make other actors—in most cases, international organizations (IOs) and states—aware of norms and persuade them to adopt and implement these norms. In many cases, such entrepreneurship of NGOs is studied in the context of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) (Keck and Sikkink 1999; Risse and Sikkink 1999; Wong 2012a; Zwingel 2012, 118). However, the prevalent view on NGOs as entrepreneurs in promoting and disseminating norms neglects the fact that NGOs are norm *takers* as well—a role that has long been ignored in the constructivist literature on norms (Rosert 2012, 604). NGOs must first adopt and internalize a norm and its corresponding principles, rules, and procedures before they can advocate it in negotiations with other actors or implement it themselves (Schneider 2017, 1).

In order to analyze how external normative change is dealt with in NGOs, we regard norms as “collective expectations for the proper behavior for actors with a given identity” (Katzenstein 1996, 5), which can take the form of rules and principles from which particular practices derive. When understood in this way, norms can have regulative and/or constitutive effects. Most norm researchers in IR agree that many, though not all, international norms are diffuse and vague (Krook and True 2012; Sandholtz 2008; Van Kersbergen and Verbeek 2007; Wiener 2004, 2009), thus allowing for different interpretations. This in turn makes it possible for actors to interpret a given norm according to their prevailing interests, ideas, and identities (Kardam 2004; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; Puechguirbal 2010). This may lead to conflict over

the content of that norm, not just among the actors involved but also within collective actors such as states or IOs (Joachim and Schneiker 2012). Nevertheless, this rich literature still mostly focuses on states and IOs but neglects the role of NGOs as norm takers.

We argue that it is worth considering NGOs as norm takers, because this perspective is useful for studying an NGO's autonomy. However, in doing so, we regard NGOs neither as passive norm addressees that just adopt proposed norms unchanged, nor as unitary actors. Instead, we assume that lively internal debates concerning a new norm can be observed within NGOs, because new norms "have to fight their way into institutional thinking" of NGOs (Elgström 2000, 458). These debates can be studied in terms of norm translation, with NGOs' freedom to reject, adopt, and change norms during translation being conceptualized as NGOs' autonomy in relation to norm-setting actors, such as IOs or even other NGOs.

We regard the autonomy of NGOs as having two interrelated features with respect to norm translation. The first of these features is the NGOs' freedom to interpret and translate norms according to their own interests, ideas, and values. As a result, the understanding of the norm that the NGO eventually adopts might be different from that proposed by the norm-giving actor(s). Here, our concept of autonomy draws on understandings of IOs' policy autonomy as a "freedom to maneuver" (Reinalda and Verbeek 2011, 88) and on conceptualizations of organizational freedom as the ability to refuse or change norms (or parts thereof) during the norm internalization process, as discussed in the literature on regional organizations (see Acharya 2011, 97). Second, we define autonomy as freedom from interference by political, economic, or military actors and objectives. This is in line with the understanding of autonomy as the ability of organizations "to decide and act without interference from other actors" (Koch 2009, 431). We thus contend that an NGO's formulation of its own understandings of a norm through related policies, rules, principles, and practices is an expression of that NGO's autonomy vis-à-vis norm-setting IOs and other NGOs.

In order to illustrate the benefit of such a perspective for future research, we carry out an explorative study in which we focus on humanitarian NGOs as norm takers, because their autonomy is very important to them while also being contested. Autonomy is constitutive for humanitarian NGOs, in that the humanitarian principles of impartiality, independence, and neutrality require humanitarian action to "be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented" (UN OCHA 2012). However, the autonomy of humanitarian NGOs appears to have come under siege given the increasing competition, marketization, security threats, and constant attempts by a variety of other actors to manipulate and politicize aid (e.g., Cooley and Ron 2002; Donini 2012; Heins, Koddenbrock, and Unrau 2016; Hwang and Powell 2009; Krause 2014; Schneiker 2015). Some authors have stressed that humanitarian NGOs become increasingly dependent on other actors, especially donors, and, therefore, adapt their activities to the economic structures and processes set by IOs or states (Cooley and Ron 2002; Krause 2014). A conceptualization of humanitarian NGOs as norm takers, by contrast, allows for a more differentiated approach to studying humanitarian NGOs' autonomy. Although we lack systematic data that would enable us to determine humanitarian NGOs' degree of autonomy, our examples suggest that NGOs do not just adapt to new norms, nor do they merely focus on how to implement them in practice. Rather, NGOs—or, more precisely, actors within the organizations—translate normative policies and principles in a particular way, which we take as an indicator of their efforts to demonstrate, maintain, or even increase their organizations' autonomy.

The field of humanitarianism currently is characterized by normative change (Barnett and Weiss 2008). Normative changes have induced new policies and principles over the past fifteen years that seek to regulate how humanitarian aid should be carried out in a changing environment, including resilience, accountability, and the responsibility to protect (R2P). While they all result from particular standards of appropriate behavior and are contested to varying degrees, their normative status and origin are different. R2P was formulated by states

in the context of the UN and is commonly regarded as a norm whose purpose is to help protect people from atrocities and crimes against humanity. Resilience is a principle and strategy devised to prepare societies and individuals for disasters, which the European Union (EU) currently strongly supports. Accountability is the broadly shared, voluntary self-commitment of humanitarian NGOs for ensuring certain aid standards.

In the following, we will first elaborate on the benefit of studying NGOs as norm takers by reviewing the literature on norms and NGOs. Based on the examples of accountability, R2P, and resilience, we will then illustrate that norm internalization processes take place within NGOs and that it is plausible to assume that humanitarian NGOs are active norm takers that seek to secure, maintain, and even extend their autonomy through norm translation processes.

### **NGOS: From Norm Entrepreneurs to Norm Takers**

Conceptually, our study falls between norms research and organizational research. It contributes to the recent literature on norms, which is becoming increasingly attentive to the confusing and dynamic processes of contestation (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2018; Wiener 2004), translation (Elgström 2000; Schneiker 2017; Zimmermann 2016; Zwingel 2012), localization (Acharya 2004), bottom-up norm formulation (Acharya 2011), and resistance to norm diffusion (Bloomfield and Scott 2017). It is to this body of literature that we contribute the understanding of NGOs as active norm takers. Initially, research on norms was concerned primarily with NGOs as norm *entrepreneurs* that act as “agent[s] of social change with an ability to shape the collective behavior of others” (Björkdahl 2002, 45; see also Nadelmann 1990). Because NGOs lack the power to set and enforce rules hierarchically, they cannot force actors that resist norms—states, IOs, or businesses—to adopt a norm, so they try “to convince other actors that they should engage in this sort of desirable behavior” (Elgström 2000, 459), usually based on discursive arguments. However, a rarely asked question is, where do the norms that NGOs advocate come from and how do NGOs themselves adopt them? We argue that considering NGOs as norm takers is a promising perspective for those seeking to study the autonomy of NGOs.

Norms are often considered controversial issues that provide scope for action and interpretation: “norms are what actors make of them” (Wiener and Puetter 2009, 4; see also Krook and True 2012, 104; Van Kersbergen and Verbeek 2007, 221). This is particularly true of vague norms, such as those that guide the implementation of gender policies (Joachim and Schneiker 2012; Kardam 2004; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009; Puechguirbal 2010). Research has shown that norms are the subject of conflictual negotiation processes (known as “norm contestation”) during both formulation and implementation. In addition, various studies on localization have presented cases in which norms that were formulated on the international level were then contested and interpreted on the regional or local level (e.g., Acharya 2004; Bonacker, von Heusinger, and Zimmer 2017; Caballero-Anthony 2008; Capie 2008). However, it should be noted that processes of negotiation over norm-related issues occur not only among collective actors but also within them (Schneiker 2017), which is what we are concerned with in this article. Because of the vague character of some norms, collective actors must negotiate the meaning of new norms and of the policies, principles, and strategies that are adopted to implement the new norms, before behaviors are internalized “and achieve a ‘taken-for-granted’ quality that makes conformance with the norm almost automatic” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 904; see also Risse and Sikkink 1999).

This resonates with our additional theoretical foundation in organizational research, with its focus on internal dynamics within NGOs and on organizational autonomy. Studies increasingly show that NGOs are not heterogeneous actors but rather consist of various divisions, each with its own interests, ideas, and resources (e.g., Hopgood 2006; Suzuki 1998; Wong 2012b). This also suggests that there may be different understandings of a given norm and the resulting principles and policies within NGOs, as well as conflicts over which interpreta-

tion the organization should adopt. Research has highlighted this for humanitarian NGOs in particular, in which distinct approaches exist and in which the resulting differences in values and (power) resources are reflected in tensions between management at the headquarters and local offices or staff in the field (Heyse 2006; Krause 2014; Roth 2015, 92; Suzuki 1998, 1). Whereas the latter focus mainly on their target groups—usually populations in need—the various divisions at the headquarters are concerned primarily with project funding, maintaining relationships with donors, public relations, and human resource management (Suzuki 1998, 4–5). Humanitarian organizations also face a particular kind of competition for donor money and projects, which make conflicts among different divisions more likely as well. Processes of marketization and professionalization of NGOs (see, e.g., Cooley and Ron 2002) have created a situation in which many activities of particular organizational units are guided by cost-benefit considerations and entrepreneurial principles. Yet, the engagement of individual staff members can often be attributed primarily to moral values (du Gay, Salaman, and Rees 1996; Heins 2008, 2; Hwang and Powell 2009; Lindenberg and Bryant 2001, 50; Stroup 2012).

This might explain conflicts over different interpretations of norms within humanitarian NGOs. However, given that NGOs also seek to maintain a consistent image and present themselves as unitary actors to the outside world (Steffek 2013, 994), it can be assumed that they also have internal processes in place to resolve existing conflicts in order to establish and implement the disputed norms. On the other hand, it is almost impossible for aid NGOs to enforce rules, principles, and norms hierarchically, because offices in the field are far away from the headquarters, which makes controlling them very difficult. Conversely, actors on the field level rarely have the means to establish or enforce particular norm interpretations at the headquarters of their organization. We look at how new normative principles are discussed and established within NGOs and how norms are translated in the process.

The norm translation perspective highlights that it is not only the norms, ideas, and practices they involve that may change but that the actors who translate and adopt them may change as well (Czarniawska 2012; Czarniawska and Joerges 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón 1996). Hence, not only the meaning of humanitarian norms and resulting policies, principles, and strategies may change, but internal and interorganizational relations of humanitarian NGOs may change as well in the process of norm translation. This is another reason why the concept of translation appears to be very useful for studying questions of NGO autonomy.

The purpose of the three exploratory empirical examples on which we will draw in what follows is to demonstrate that norm translation processes do indeed take place within NGOs, and they can be a way to study NGO autonomy. Our examples will show it is plausible to assume that certain actors and divisions within NGOs exhibit autonomy 1) if they are able to pursue their own specific understanding of a norm, especially if their understanding is different from that of the norm-setting IO or from a prevailing understanding among other NGOs (*freedom to*), or 2) if norm translation serves to guard the humanitarian NGOs' independence from political, economic, or military objectives (*freedom from*).

## **R2P, Resilience, and Accountability as Examples of Contested Normative Change**

The delivery of humanitarian aid follows the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. First formulated in the 1960s by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), these humanitarian principles have since become the constitutive elements of humanitarian aid. They continue to be widely recognized reference points for humanitarian NGOs and donor institutions alike and cannot simply be replaced. Not only are they constitutive for the self-understanding of humanitarian NGOs and a source of their legitimacy, they are also assumed to enable humanitarian work in the first place, in that they promise to provide secure access to people in need who are affected by wars, conflicts, or natural disasters (Bernard 2016, 16). However, although these traditional humanitarian principles continue to play major roles, they were contested and questioned for their state of implementation from the

start and have been increasingly challenged since the 1990s (Smillie 2012, 40–41).

During the post–Cold War era, humanitarian actors faced mounting pressures to reconcile the ethical principles of their work with processes of professionalization, militarization, commercialization, and marketization—for example, because of the changing environment in which aid takes place. They continue to face such pressures today as well (e.g., Barnett and Weiss 2008, 2011; Cooley and Ron 2002; Donini 2012; Macrae 2002; Terry 2002; Weiss 2016). Among other things, this has increased the pressure to consider alternative normative values and ideas—that have to be reconciled with the traditional principles—to guide humanitarian aid, such as those expressed in terms of *accountability*, *R2P*, and *resilience*. The R2P norm and the strategy of resilience were formulated by IOs and then diffused to NGOs, whereas the prevalent commitment to accountability standards resulted from negotiations among NGOs. All three have been, and continue to be, discussed controversially within and among NGOs. These debates not only have regulatory effects, in that they concern technical issues related to implementation, they also touch on the self-understanding of humanitarian organizations as neutral, impartial, and independent actors and therefore, also have constitutive effects. Which interpretation is eventually established is also politically relevant, because it determines which type of aid does or does not reach whom.

While conceiving of resilience, accountability, and R2P as expressions of the normative changes going on in the humanitarian sector, we will discuss how some humanitarian NGOs deal with them in order to illustrate and give plausibility to our main conceptual claims concerning NGOs as norm takers. We analyzed the NGOs’ own documents and reports, as well as studies on the organizations’ work, to establish how new normative ideas and interests fight their way into the institutional thinking of humanitarian NGOs. Our analysis gives reason to assume that some actors within humanitarian NGOs interpret, adopt, and distance themselves from the new normative ideas and resulting principles and policies, mainly because humanitarian NGOs seek to secure their autonomy, regardless of whether these principles and policies are formulated by the EU, by the UN, or by the NGOs themselves.

### **Translation from the EU to NGOs: Resilience**

Resilience has been propagated as a new principle for disaster management by a variety of actors, including the European Commission (EU 2012, 2013, 2017). The commission defines resilience as “the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country, or a region to withstand, adapt [to], and quickly recover from stresses and shocks” (EU 2012, 5). In a recent communication related to this issue, entitled “A Strategic Approach to Resilience,” the high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy specified this definition by explaining that resilience of states and societies would be achieved through “democracy, trust in institutions and sustainable development, and the capacity to reform” (EU 2017, 3). The purpose of strengthening resilience is to enable individual and collective actors to withstand the adverse effects of major disasters more easily and to recover from extreme events more quickly. In addition, disasters are regarded as development opportunities for communities or states, which is succinctly expressed by the phrase “to bounce back better” (DFID 2011). To achieve this more effectively than in the past, the root causes of potential major manmade or natural disasters must be identified as early as possible (EU 2012, 5), preventive measures should be taken, and a comprehensive strategy is required to coordinate the activities of humanitarian and development policy actors (EU 2013, 4). Thus, resilience is also a new normative principle for the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Because the European Commission does not carry out aid programs on the ground itself, it seeks to ensure that its implementing partners (including humanitarian NGOs) adopt and implement the norms the EU wants to disseminate, as well as any resulting principles, such as resilience. The Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) has made efforts in this regard to ensure that humanitarian NGOs

respect and enact the commission's resilience approach. For example, humanitarian NGOs that implement programs for the commission must sign a "Framework Partnership Agreement" in which resilience takes a center position as one of the basic principles that should be implemented.<sup>1</sup> The commission further introduced "resilience markers" (DG ECHO 2016, 26–27) as guidelines for humanitarian NGOs to self-assess whether their projects do indeed contribute to building resilience and reducing future risks. The EU can terminate such partnerships and withdraw grants if the implementing partners do not comply with the partnership agreements, which shows that humanitarian NGOs that implement programs for the EU have financial incentives to demonstrate that they are implementing the EU's resilience approach.

For these reasons, humanitarian organizations have largely been reluctant to voice strong criticism of the EU's resilience strategy in a consultation process organized by the commission (Dany 2015, 434). This is not surprising given the organizations' dependence on EU funding. Furthermore, most humanitarian NGOs declare that they welcome resilience as a strategy that might make humanitarian aid more effective. Those who promote this principle find that resilience is compatible with their own work. These norm supporters argue that adopting resilience might strengthen local actors in the areas in which they operate. Improved ability to self-organize and gain resilience would enable them to play an important role as observers monitoring the activities of their governments in cases of humanitarian disasters and to organize both themselves and the village communities and neighborhoods in cases of emergency (see Füllkrug-Weitzel 2015, 2, for Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe). According to this line of arguing, resilience should be supported, because it contributes to the formation of states and communities in the long run, although this might imply working with governments and even terrorist organizations (Harvey 2014a, 2014b).

However, this example shows that humanitarian organizations do not just adopt the EU's notion of resilience unchanged. While some reject this principle altogether, others discuss how exactly resilience should be defined and implemented, how it could be used to strengthen their own approaches, and what this would mean for their work in a variety of contexts (Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe 2014; IFRC 2008, 2014). For example, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) published a new framework paper to guide its implementation of the resilience strategy on the community level. In this paper, the IFRC emphasizes that it is still in the process of adapting the resilience strategy to further its own goals: "This current framework will evolve dynamically as we collectively learn to improve our programs and scale up our contributions to community resilience. The sharing of experiences and lessons learned will help to maintain the IFRC's currency and relevance" (IFRC 2014, 18).

Yet, some humanitarian NGOs or, rather, individuals within NGOs—who might be called "norm resisters"—even opposed resilience and questioned its usefulness for their own work. For example, the most outspoken critics of resilience are staff members of Doctors Without Borders (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, MSF), an organization that is largely financed by private donations and comparatively independent from the EU; it might be argued that they resisted resilience to demonstrate their autonomy vis-à-vis the EU as a norm-setting IO. A programmatic blog entry by executive staff members of MSF that sparked a lively debate within the organization is indicative of such norm resistance. In this blog entry, the MSF staff members had argued that resilience is "at odds with a core humanitarian approach to crises" (Whittall, Philips, and Hofman 2014), because resilience involves greater commitment to long-term development policy and contradicts short-term humanitarian aid. Hence, according to the norm resisters within MSF, resilience is in conflict with traditional humanitarian values, principles, and the resulting self-image of MSF (and its allies), if not of humanitarian organizations in general (Gebauer 2015b; Whittall, Philips, and Hoffman 2014). Resilience is even regarded

1. Framework Partnership Agreement with Humanitarian Organizations, January 1, 2014, represented on the part of the EU by the director-general of the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), [www.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/\\_media/fpango\\_en\\_131211.pdf](http://www.dgecho-partners-helpdesk.eu/_media/fpango_en_131211.pdf).

as incompatible with the fundamental character of humanitarian aid, which is defined by its distinctiveness from other types of aid such as development aid, as was emphasized by the managing director of the German section of MSF during a hearing at the German Bundestag in 2015 (Westphal 2015, 2).

As the above shows, the MSF staff's main argument against resilience is that it blurs the lines between humanitarian aid and development aid, which is regarded as a danger to the independence of humanitarian organizations. Those who support resilience, however, consider it to be flexible enough to allow NGOs to combine resilience with other organizational goals. Both translations of resilience—as something that either impedes or facilitates humanitarian assistance—and the subsequent adoption or rejection of this principle could be indicators of NGOs' efforts to demonstrate and secure their autonomy as humanitarian actors vis-à-vis the norm-setting international organization. However, to what extent they will be able to maintain this autonomy remains to be seen. It will depend on the degree to which humanitarian NGOs will implement resilience in the future and on what interpretations they will pursue. The particular vagueness of the EU's concept of resilience appears to present a good opportunity for NGOs to interpret this principle according to their own interests, thus providing them with room to maneuver. Even if NGOs are not (fully) in accordance with the EU's resilience approach, they do not have to reject it to pursue their own interests given its vagueness. Yet, considering that only MSF voiced resistance to resilience can mean that the possibilities for NGOs to express their autonomy does not only depend on the vagueness of the normative principle but also on an NGO's relation to the norm-setting IO. To give another example, R2P is not only more established as a norm but also much less vague and lends itself less to the NGOs' own interpretations, as will be shown in the following section. Nevertheless, the example of R2P also indicates that the ways in which NGOs deal with it not only has to do with the normative content of R2P but also with the NGOs' concerns regarding their autonomy.

### **Translation from the UN to NGOs: The Responsibility to Protect**

By accepting the R2P on the UN's world summit in 2005, states have agreed on a norm that is supposed to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. The summit's outcome document has made it clear that this responsibility lies primarily with states and involves the responsibility to prevent such crimes, to react appropriately when such crimes occur, and to rebuild. However, if a state on whose territory such crimes are committed is unable or unwilling to accept the responsibility to protect, it is delegated to the international community (UN 2005, paras. 138–9; UN 2009, 8–9; on the academic debate, see Bellamy 2009, 2015). Although it is mainly a norm that guides states' activities, NGOs discuss R2P with regard to its role in the work of humanitarian organizations.

Among and within humanitarian NGOs, R2P is resisted more often than resilience is, but it is not resisted in general. In the beginning, some NGOs were in favor of R2P, arguing that it could be combined with underlying principles of humanitarian action, with Oxfam being the most prominent norm entrepreneur in this case. Oxfam supported R2P, because the latter seemed to pursue goals that were similar to Oxfam's—most notably better protection of vulnerable people from atrocities (Cairns 2014, 150). However, Oxfam did not manage to establish its interpretation of the R2P. R2P was a fig leaf for some states to pursue their particular interests and thus primarily became a justification for military interventions (Cairns 2014, 152–3). Consequently, humanitarian NGOs overall rejected this norm. For example, Fabrice Weissman, a former general coordinator for MSF in Darfur who also worked as the director of a research department of that organization, rejects and resists R2P because it is often equated with military interventions and the idea of a just war. Weissman has stated that MSF distances itself “from the politics of force acting under the banner of humanitarian universalism,” also noting that, “if the purpose of humanitarian action is to limit the devastation of war, it cannot be used as a justification for new wars” (Weissman 2010).

Moreover, humanitarian NGOs are afraid that R2P might affect their work in the field. There is a widespread belief among humanitarian NGOs that they should publicly dissociate themselves from military actors and missions as much as possible. Being associated with them is considered a cause for targeted violent attacks on humanitarian workers and key infrastructures (e.g., hospitals) (Bellamy 2015, 160–1; Gebauer 2015a, 2015b; VENRO 2013, 4–5) and is said to increase the distance between humanitarian actors and the populations in need (Duffield 2015; Smirl 2015; Vaughn 2009). For this reason, resisting R2P serves to secure the autonomy of humanitarian NGOs from political actors such as states and the UN. The speech of the MSF delegate to the UN Catherine Dumait-Harper, held when the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) launched its report “The Responsibility to Protect,” can be regarded as an expression of such efforts to secure autonomy:

Such activities [impartial humanitarian aid] should be kept separate and independent from the kind of armed intervention, often labeled humanitarian intervention, carried out by political and military bodies.

When humanitarian action is coopted or subsumed into broader military and political intervention, it may be perceived as interference. This is precisely what made us hostages in the Northern Caucasus, targets in Burundi, and undesirable in Belgrade during the Kosovo war. (Dumait-Harper 2002)

As for Oxfam, when offering its own interpretation of R2P, which sought to combine R2P with the humanitarian principles, it did not allow the organization to distance itself from the norm-setting states. It soon changed its position on R2P from trying to incorporate it into its policies to rejecting it.

The example of R2P suggests that the NGOs’ rejection of a norm formulated by states can be an indicator of the organizations’ attempts to maintain their autonomy vis-à-vis states. It also suggests that individual NGOs have limited autonomy when it comes to translating a norm differently than the majority of the other NGOs in a particular policy field. This might be because R2P is more codified than resilience or accountability are, and because it is more contested among states for political reasons.

Looking at debates about accountability among NGOs (our third example) is interesting because they show that some humanitarian NGOs even contest norms that the NGO community generate and widely accept as shared standards. This is another indicator that norm translation is an expression of NGO autonomy.

### **Translation from NGOs to NGOs: Accountability**

The call for accountability results from the devastating experiences of the states and humanitarian organizations’ failures in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s. They revealed that humanitarian aid in war zones could have extremely harmful effects, such as when aid resources are used to prolong a war. “Do no harm” (Anderson 1999) has since become a key principle for the work of humanitarian organizations. It requires actors to assess the possible consequences of their actions and minimize any negative effects. The purpose of accountability then, is to document effectiveness by providing accounts of the nature and effects of their activities—a development that has been reflected in an ever-growing demand for reporting and documentation (Stein 2008). To meet this demand, humanitarian NGOs launched numerous initiatives to develop standards for increased accountability in humanitarian work, such as the Sphere standards.<sup>2</sup>

These standards generally are regarded as a success story, because they have been widely adopted since the early 2000s and have become a major point of reference for the work of many humanitarian organizations. In contrast to resilience and R2P, the commitment to accountability originates from within the NGO community, and the Sphere standards were for-

2. The Sphere Project: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, [www.sphereproject.org](http://www.sphereproject.org).

mulated by the NGOs themselves. The most prominent norm entrepreneurs were Peter Walker and Nick Stockton, two high-ranking officials at the ICRC and Oxfam, respectively: “They both played a key role in the development and implementation of Sphere, and in promoting ownership and buy-in within the NGO community” (Buchanan-Smith 2003, 19). They used a “window of opportunity” to promote their position and to convince others of it. Although the Sphere Project had been initiated earlier, it was not until an evaluation of the international response to the genocide in Rwanda was to be published—the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR)—that Sphere gained more momentum and “turned [ . . . ] into a system-wide collaboration” (Walker and Purdin 2004, 105). DANIDA, the aid organization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, initiated this evaluation and the ministries of development of several other countries subsequently supported it. Walker and Stockton, “who knew how critical the forthcoming Rwanda evaluation was going to be about NGO performance, used the threat of heavy-handed donor action to generate support within SCHR [Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response] for their quality and accountability proposal” (Buchanan-Smith 2003, 15).

However, not all humanitarian NGOs always supported this process and many humanitarian organizations discussed how exactly accountability could be achieved (Hilhorst 2002, 199). Some still complain that highly political questions regarding accountability remain unanswered—namely, “to whom it is owed, by whom, how can it be achieved, and, most crucially, what would amount to substantially meaningful accountability?” (Sandvik 2016, 106).

MSF, and most notably its French section, was again the main norm resister (in addition to a small group of francophone NGOs, the *Groupe Urgence Réhabilitation Développement*) when the Sphere standards were developed. MSF even withdrew from the process that led to the formulation of these standards in 1998, although the decision to withdraw was by no means unanimous. On the contrary, “the decision not to remain involved was [made] after internal debate with some dissension” (Tong 2004, 182). Within MSF, it was the headquarters level, and not so much the field workers, that promoted the idea of withdrawing from the Sphere process (Buchanan-Smith 2003, 15, FN 26). Those who opposed the process objected that donor governments could use the Sphere standards to expand their control over humanitarian NGOs, thereby compromising these organizations’ freedom from political interference. The Sphere standards were regarded as a means to be “locked into ever-closer relationships with donor governments” (Buchanan-Smith 2003, 15). This was considered problematic, because these governments “may be pursuing political rather than humanitarian objectives” (Buchanan-Smith 2003, 15). MSF headquarters also feared that Sphere would overemphasize technical standards at the expense of humanitarian principles and the resolution of pressing political issues (Buchanan-Smith 2003, 15). A former research director at MSF expressed concern that such a technical discourse might prevent organizations from discussing the political and ethical implications of their work (Terry 2000, 20; see also Tong 2004, 182).

The above discussion shows that, as with resilience and the R2P, humanitarian NGOs can translate accountability in different ways. Some regard accountability, as it is incorporated into the Sphere standards, as a commitment to enhancing the effectiveness of aid, whereas others (MSF headquarters staff) consider this type of accountability to be too technical and believe that it neglects the humanitarian objective of helping those most in need. In addition, the dissent within MSF regarding the withdrawal from the Sphere Project illustrates that different views on whether or not to adopt certain standards exist not only among but also within NGOs.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was twofold. Based on the empirical examples we give in the text, we seek to show: 1) We can observe processes within NGOs that justify considering them as norm takers, and 2) it is plausible to assume that norm translation by and within humanitarian NGOs

is an expression of their autonomy.

In our discussion of autonomy as *freedom from political interference*, we highlighted the motivation behind norm translation. Our research suggests that new normative principles were assessed with regard to how they interfered with, and potentially challenged, established humanitarian principles, in particular independence and a traditional (rather than preventive) reactive and needs-based approach to humanitarian assistance. The empirical examples suggest that a major reason why humanitarian NGOs resist and translate norms is that they seek to secure their independence from political, economic, or military interference, regardless of whether the norms that challenged the humanitarian practice were formulated by the EU, the UN, or from within the NGO community itself. We argued that by translating norms, humanitarian NGOs demonstrate autonomy vis-à-vis these norm-giving actors.

The empirical examples further illustrated that the role of new norms and their value for the work of NGOs are indeed a subject of considerable debate among and within humanitarian NGOs. This illustrated our second concept of autonomy as *freedom to translate norms*, and hence a condition for norm translation. The organizations, or individuals and divisions within them, resisted or supported particular understandings of accountability, resilience, and R2P and were more or less successful in establishing a new norm understanding or challenging an existing one.

Whether an NGO adopts a different understanding of a new normative principle or whether it outright rejects it, might depend on how vague or concrete it was formulated by the norm-setting actor and on the NGO's relation to the norm-setting actor. Furthermore, how a norm is translated within an NGO might tell us something about which department or individual plays a crucial role in how the NGO positions itself in relation to other actors. This highlights the relevance of studying the "inner workings" of NGOs and the different positions and ideas of relevant stakeholders in the organizations to understand which norm understanding prevails. Further research will have to investigate in more detail how some actors within NGOs actually persuade others to accept a particular norm understanding, and under what conditions they are successful. Future research will also have to show whether the interpretation that is accepted at the policy level is implemented at the field level as well or whether staff members at the field level demonstrate their autonomy from headquarters by implementing their own (possibly different) interpretation. Gaining relevant knowledge on NGOs as norm takers is not only important considering their role as implementing actors for governmental donors but also considering their role as norm diffusers.

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