

# Agenda-Setting in Transnational Networks:

Findings from Consultations with Human Security Practitioners

Anna Tomaskovic-Devey  
Charli Carpenter  
Kyle Brownlie

UMass Amherst  
**Political Science**

**QDAP-UMass** Qualitative Data Analysis Program  
*The Smart Way to Code Text*

The Center for Public Policy & Administration  
at the University of Massachusetts Amherst  
**CPPA** *Connecting Ideas with Action*



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SCHOOL  
TUFTS UNIVERSITY



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## **RESEARCH TEAM**

### **Principal Investigator**

Dr. Charli Carpenter

### **Graduate Research Assistants**

Kyle Brownlie

Nathaniel Develder

Şirin Duygulu

Anna Tomaskovic-Devey

Jason Wilson

### **Undergraduate Coders**

Meghan Boesch

Olivia Faulkner

Gabrielle Griffis

Solomon Heifets

Emily Jacobs

Kendell Johnson

Nicholas Losso

Brian Quadrozzi

Casey Reinhardt

### **Consultants**

Michelle Goncalves

Alexander Montgomery-Amo

Richard Rogers

James Ron

Stuart Shulman

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For more information on this project: <http://www.people.umass.edu/charli/networks/>.

## PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Amnesty International  
British American Security Information Council  
CARE USA  
Centre for International Governance Innovation  
Council on Foreign Relations/ U.S. Department of State  
Delegation of the European Union to the United States  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
Handicap International  
Human Security Report  
Institute for Security Studies  
International Action Network on Small Arms  
International Atomic Energy Association  
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New Partnership for Africa's Development, African Union  
Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development  
Organization of American States  
OXFAM America  
Permanent Mission of Japan to the United States  
Project Ploughshares  
The Fletcher School at Tufts University  
United Nations Foundation  
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs  
United Nations Children's Fund  
United Nations Development Program  
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
United Nations Environmental Program  
United Nations High Commission for Refugees



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why do transnational advocacy networks mobilize around some issues but not others? This is an important question because advocacy campaigns play a significant role in developing new global norms and galvanizing political attention to global social problems.<sup>1</sup> However, most scholarship on transnational advocacy networks has focused on their effectiveness in promoting global norm change, and ignored how actors in these networks determine which global norms to promote in the first place. This study sought to gain insight into these dynamics.

We explored this question through six focus groups with practitioners drawn from the network of human security organizations. Our sample included senior policy and management personnel from 39 international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, think-tanks, government agencies, and academic institutes working in the areas of human rights, humanitarian affairs, arms control, environmental security, conflict prevention, and development. The study was funded by the National Science Foundation and took place at The Fletcher School at Tufts University in the fall of 2009.

We found four general sets of factors influencing the likelihood that global civil society organizations will focus their attention on an issue: 1) the nature of the issues themselves, 2) the attributes of the actors concerned (both issue

entrepreneurs and those organizations they seek to court as allies), 3) the broader political context, and 4) the structural relationships within advocacy networks themselves—particularly between thematic sub-networks in broader civil society.

Additionally, the salience of these factors depended greatly on whether practitioners were being asked to talk abstractly or asked to evaluate actual candidate issues for human security campaigns. In the abstract, practitioners were much likelier to attribute inattention to issues to the broader political context, but in the concrete, organizational interests and intra-network effects were much more salient as explanations of why certain claims simply do not resonate with global agenda-setters.

We conclude that norm entrepreneurs new to the global advocacy arena should take such factors into consideration when seeking allies among more established organizations in networks and when framing their issues to attract coalitions and garner the greatest attention to the issues they champion. Our research also suggests that practitioners at the center of established global civil society networks themselves have considerable power to set or vet the agenda, irrespective of constraints by states or donors.

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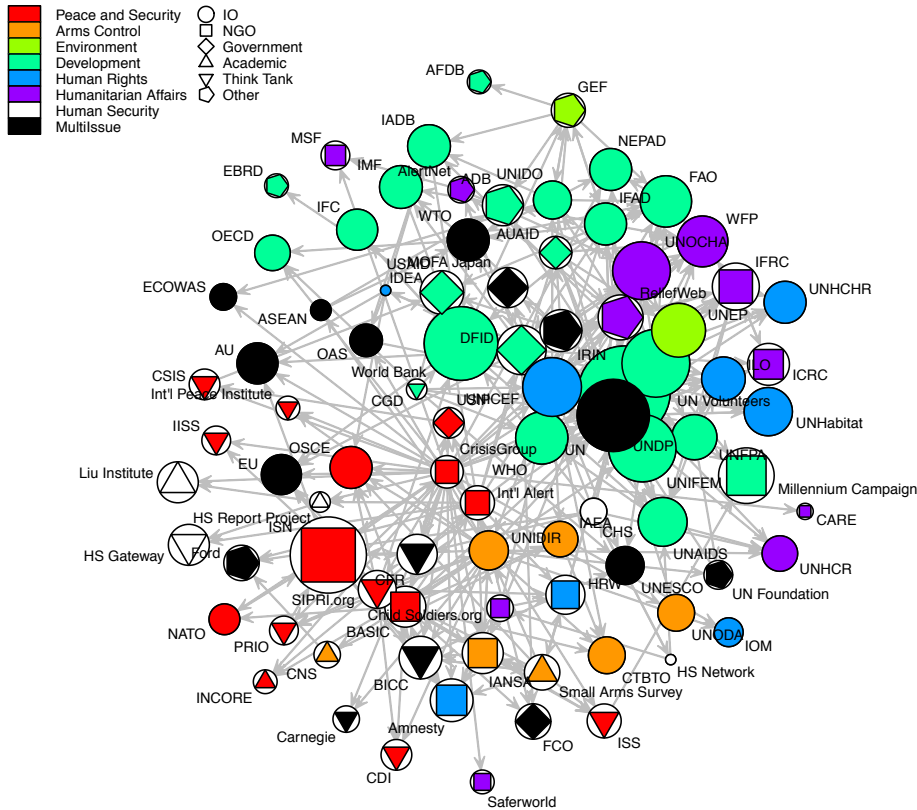
<sup>1</sup> Price, 2003; Keck and Sikkink, 1998.





FIGURE 2.

## HYPERLINKS BETWEEN “HUMAN SECURITY” ORGANIZATIONS ON THE WEB



## METHODOLOGY

We explored this question through an analysis of a specific “network of networks”—organizations working in the broad area of “human security.” Although the term has many meanings and is contested within global civil society, our research showed that the “human security” network is composed of several sub-networks and includes organizations working in the areas of human rights, humanitarian affairs, arms control or disarmament, environmental security, conflict prevention, and development (see Figure 2).

This broad human security network (like others) includes many organizations that do work in more than one of these areas and many initiatives that cut across these specific communities of practice. It is also comprised of a range of actors: nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international

organizations such as the United Nations, international specialized agencies such as the World Health Organization, and various bodies, governments, academics, regional bodies, foundations, and think-tanks.<sup>3</sup>

A content analysis of websites from organizations in this area and survey responses from individuals associated with the network suggest a cluster of issues spanning these many thematic areas comprises the “human security agenda.”<sup>4</sup> (See Figure 3). It also suggests that some of these issues are more “salient” – appear more frequently across survey results and website content – than others (See Figure 1). We also asked survey respondents to list problems they knew of that were *not*

“There is considerable variation in the issues that get the most attention, those that get some attention and those that are largely neglected.”

3 We identified a population of human security organizations through two methods. First, we conducted an analysis of hyperlinks among human security websites using an online tool called Issue Crawler. The cluster of human security organizations connected to one another in cyberspace is presented in Figure 2. Second, we directed an online snowball survey in Spring 2008 using the Global Issue mailing list as a starting point. One of the questions asked respondents to name “three or more organizations that come to mind when they think of human security.” The responses to this question gave us a population of organizations cited and a frequency count that enabled us to identify the organizations most closely associated with the network by the most practitioners. Table 1 lists the top 20 organizations named.

4 Survey respondents were asked to “name three issues that come to mind when you think of human security.”

getting sufficient attention from the human security sector. In this way, we aimed to crowd-source knowledge on issues “missing” from the human security agenda. A non-exhaustive list of answers to this question appears in Table 2.

The data suggest that there is considerable variation in the issues that get the most attention, those that get some attention and those that are largely neglected. So how do global civil servants associated with organizations in this network (or set of networks) select issues on which to focus? We sought insight into this question through a series of focus groups with 43 senior officials from organizations central to the human security network. Our goal was to spearhead and analyze a discussion about why some issues gain attention within this network of networks, and why others do not.

*The Participants.* Participants were recruited based on their positions within organizations identified in both the surveys and hyperlink analysis.<sup>5</sup> We recruited from the most senior ranks in each organization in order to hear from individuals with influence over each organization’s internal agenda. We also aimed for thematic, organizational, and geographic representativeness across the entire sample of participating organizations, relative to the population in our network. Our final sample included practitioners from 18 nations, based in five world regions, with representation from most major thematic clusters and organizational types. Our goal was to create a diverse cohort of practitioners in each focus group, combining individuals operating in different thematic fields (human rights, humanitarian affairs, arms control, sustainable development, and conflict prevention) and hailing from different types of organizations (NGOs, international organizations, think-tanks, academic institutions, and government agencies).<sup>6</sup> Figure 4 presents a breakdown of the overall thematic expertise of the individual participants in the focus groups.<sup>7</sup>

5 Although all 110 organizations in the network received a letter of invitation and a follow-up phone call, we recruited most aggressively from organizations with the highest centrality scores in the network. This approach was informed by previous research showing organizations at the center of a network have the greatest influence over the network agenda.

6 Ultimately, however, we discovered that individual practitioners’ thematic expertise or professional “hat” did not in every case correlate to the specific organization for which they were presently working.

7 Despite thematic and organizational diversity, participants in the focus groups were more alike than they were different. Over 75% of the participants held graduate degrees, and over 70% held senior level positions at their organizations. All were fluent in English. Participants generally had worked at their organizations for several years. More than 70% of participants reported a mix of specializations within the organization, spending time on a combination of policy and planning, program management, research, public relations, and advocacy. Over half of the participants reported previously working at an NGO, while only one reported working previously at a foundation. Although our sample included participants currently based in Africa, South America, Asia, and the Middle East, over 80% of our respondents were currently based in North America or Western Europe.

**TABLE 1.**  
**MOST MENTIONED ORGANIZATIONS  
IN HUMAN SECURITY<sup>8</sup>**

ORGANIZATION	SURVEY CITES
Amnesty International	36
Canadian Consortium on Human Security	34
Human Security Report Project	31
United Nations Commission on Human Rights	31
Human Security Network	28
International Committee of the Red Cross	24
Liu Institute for Global Issues	23
Human Rights Watch	16
United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization	14
International Crisis Group	14
Doctors Without Borders	12
North Atlantic Treaty Organization	12
Center for Strategic and International Studies	11
Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada	10
Oxfam International	10
United States Central Intelligence Agency	10
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe	9
Canadian Foreign Ministry	8
United Nations Development Programme	7
United Nations	7
World Bank	7
United Nations Children’s Fund	7
World Health Organization	7

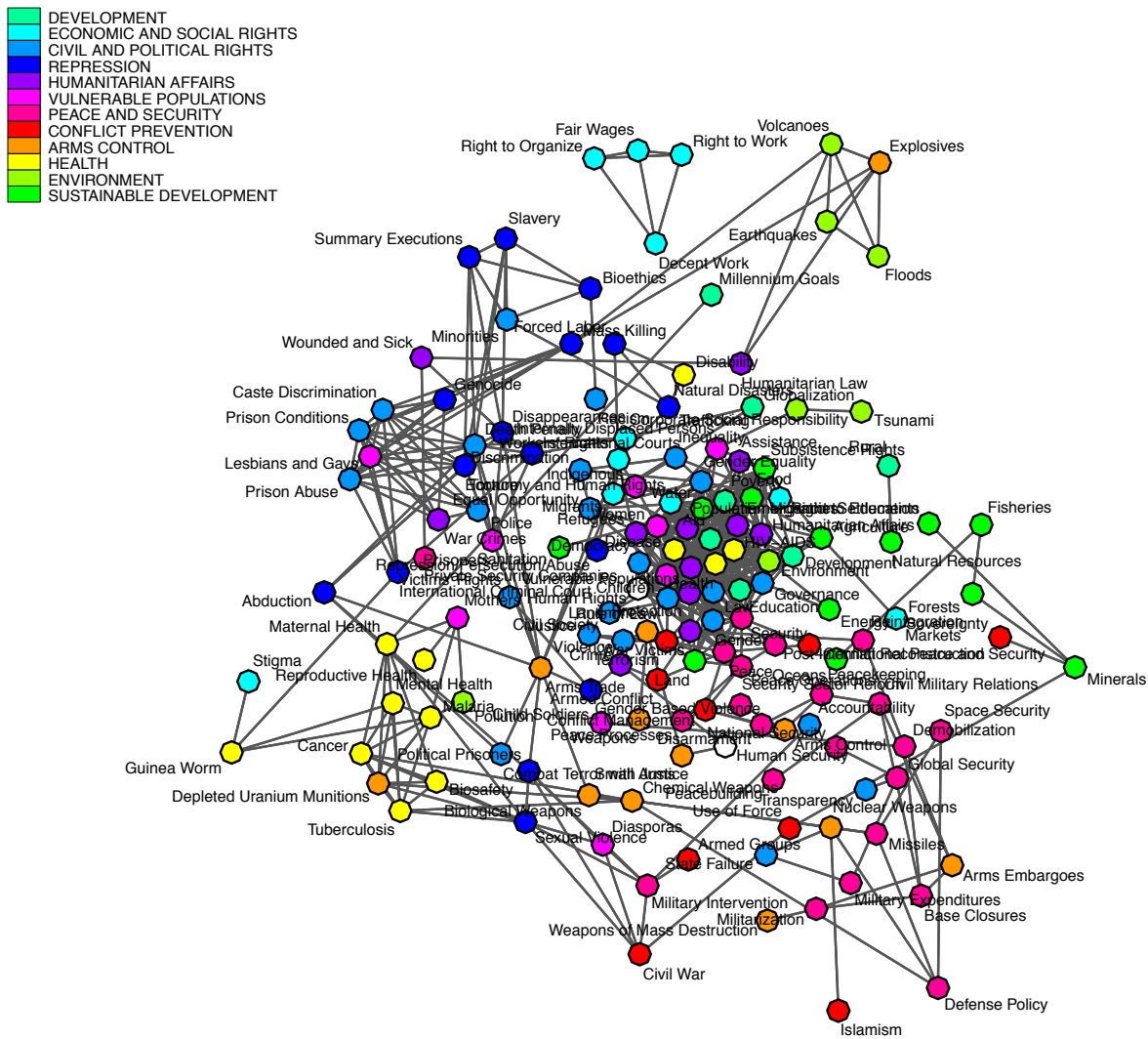
**TABLE 2.**  
**HUMAN SECURITY “NON-ISSUES”  
IDENTIFIED BY SURVEY RESPONDENTS**

Megacities	Resource Extraction
Nonlethal Weapons	Indigenous Land Rights
Aging of Northern Populations	Climate Refugees
Global Social Welfare System	Militarism
Recycling Exports	US Military Budget
Leprosy	Fetal Rights
Corporate Resource Plunder	High Sex Ratios
Family Integrity	Literacy
Safe Child-Bearing	Slums
Social Esteem Needs	Food Prices
Ophthalmic Care	Consumerism
Piracy	Coltan
Urban Insecurity	Safe Passage for IDPs
Civilian Men	Nuclear Weapons
Fighting Women	Hostages
Traffic Accidents	Developed World Poverty
Mercenaries	GMOs
Impunity For World Leaders	Sexual Orientation Persecution
Social Exclusion	Propaganda
Fundamentalism	Forced Marriage
Hijackings	Cyberterrorism
Protection for the Elderly	Familization of Governance

\*Issues identified through survey responses to the question: “Sometimes problems exist in the world that get little or no attention from transnational activists. What human security problems can you think of that are not very prominent as issues in the human security movement?”

<sup>8</sup> Responses to the survey question “Name three or more organizations that come to your mind when you think of human security.”

**FIGURE 3.**  
CO-OCCURRENCES BETWEEN ISSUES NAMED ON  
HUMAN SECURITY WEBSITES



Most participants reported expertise in more than one thematic issue-area, and most reported significant contacts with colleagues outside of their area of expertise. Certain types of thematic expertise seemed more closely related than others. For example, those reporting thematic expertise in “human rights” reported significant connections to colleagues in “development,” but weaker connections to those in “conflict prevention” or “arms control.” These relationships are shown in Figure 5. To some extent, this corresponds to network analyses of the wider issue distribution in the network, as portrayed in Figure 3.

*The Focus Groups.* Each focus group began with a brainstorming session on neglected issues. Similar to the survey, we asked participants to list as many issues as they could think of which they believed were not getting attention or were not getting *enough* attention in the human security network. This brainstorming session led into a larger discussion

on why certain issues make it onto the advocacy agenda and others do not. After a coffee break, the final segment of the focus group centered on thought-experiments. The moderator presented candidate human security problems that have not yet garnered significant global policy attention, and the participants were asked to analyze why these issues lack saliency, whether they deserved more policy attention or not, and if so which organizations ought to take the lead in promoting them. The discussion returned to the general theme of why some issues gain traction and others don’t at the end of the session.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Minor adjustments to the focus group protocol were made as focus groups progressed. We found early on, for example, that the discussion was limited if we encouraged participants to organize their brainstorming sessions around specific thematic areas like “human rights” or “environmental security” because so many issues are cross-cutting in nature. We also varied the specific “thought experiments” provided to the participants, retaining the ones that led to the liveliest substantive discussions and eliminating those that many participants considered to be “straw men.”



*among organizations in advocacy networks.* They suggested that the dynamics at play within transnational advocacy networks might support or detract from successful advocacy. Finally, factors relating to the external environment or *broader political context* – what social scientists refer to as the political opportunity structure – were mentioned by many participants.

## FINDINGS

We analyzed the audio transcripts of the sessions with a team at University of Massachusetts’ Qualitative Data Analysis Program coding lab.<sup>10</sup> We found participants stressed a range of factors when asked to think about agenda-setting in the abstract. We also found they gave somewhat different answers when asked to think about specific candidate campaigns than they did when asked to think in the abstract.

### ABSTRACT BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS

Our responses from the brainstorming discussions fell into four broad though inter-related categories. First, participants repeatedly argued that the *characteristics of issues* themselves made an important difference in whether or not they were selected for advocacy attention. Second, participants emphasized the *attributes of relevant actors*, particularly issue entrepreneurs who may be newcomers to the global advocacy arena and existing organizations in a position to validate a new issue by incorporating it onto their organizational agenda. It was argued that adoption of an issue by prestigious organizations is crucial for norm entrepreneurs, but that winning that validation is both a function of the entrepreneur’s credibility and of the interests and constraints of the adopting organization. Third, participants described a variety of factors related to *effects*

<sup>10</sup> Focus group transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti 6.0, a qualitative data analysis software package with which multiple individuals can analyze large amounts of text to find substantive themes or discursive properties. Inter-rater reliability for each code was measured using the Fleiss’s Kappa, and each code-list was refined at least three times to derive the maximum degree of reliability among the coding team.

### ISSUE ATTRIBUTES

In considering why an issue may or may not succeed in gaining salience in TANs, participants discussed how attributes of the issue itself might encourage or discourage success. For example, participants suggested that an issue is more likely to succeed if there is an obviously vulnerable victim and an obviously guilty perpetrator. Issues that are “too complex” are thought to be less likely to gain advocacy attention, as are issues which seem to have impossible or unachievable solutions.

*“You have to be able to get your message in a series of single sentences. You’ve got a millisecond of time when your press release goes across the editor’s table.”*

*“People need to be able to feel like they can make a difference.”*

*“The attention disappears from the issue just because it seems like there’s nothing that can be done.”*

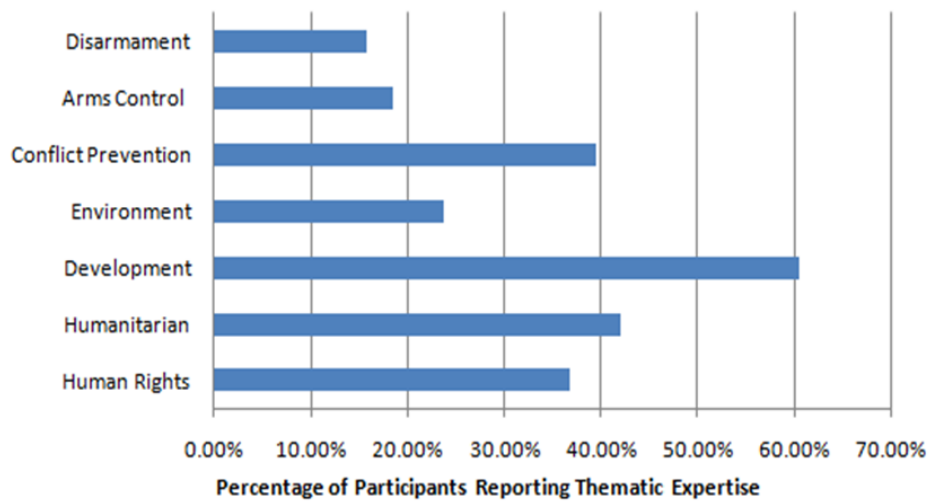
Issues that are “scary” or that “tug at heartstrings” are more likely to be picked up by advocates; emotional appeals are often helpful when marketing issues to NGOs or to a given constituency.

*“If you can’t make an emotional connection of the issue to the proposed solution, you’re not likely to get substantial public win.”*

**“Characteristics of the issue itself might encourage or discourage success on the global agenda.”**

**FIGURE 4.**

**THEMATIC EXPERTISE OF PARTICIPANTS**



*“Nuclear terrorism gets a lot of attention because it combines two things people are really frightened of.”*

The scope of a problem also matters: the more people affected and the more widespread the problem, the greater the attention. Also important is the ability to measure the extent of the problem. Participants repeatedly mentioned how important empirical evidence is: problems not amenable to scientific measurement are more problematic from an advocacy perspective, because it is data (combined with personal stories) that give advocates a means to pitch their issue to the media and the public. Participants suggested that issues are more likely to succeed when it is possible to link them to either other issues already firmly on the international advocacy agenda or to existing international humanitarian or human rights laws. Finally, participants suggested some issues were just too “toxic” or too taboo and that pursuing such topics creates too much discomfort, leading to a lack of advocacy.

**ACTOR ATTRIBUTES**

A second cluster of factors centered on the character of the actors involved in pressing for an issue. Organizations in advocacy networks vary in terms of the prestige and credibility they bring to a new issue; they also vary in terms of their interest and capacity in championing a new issue.

Our analysis suggests two key types of actors are responsible for setting the agenda for TANs. First, the *issue entrepreneur* promotes a new idea within a network. Second, the interests and decision-making processes of *existing organizations* in a position to adopt an emerging issue on their internal agenda affects

**“Issue entrepreneurs are not all equal.”**

whether or not an issue proliferates within established transnational networks.

Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of issue entrepreneurs – skilled and dedicated sponsors who initially advocate for new ideas.<sup>11</sup> For example, it was a few individuals working with NGOs in Cambodia in the early 1990s who championed the anti-landmine campaign and convinced others to join.<sup>12</sup> In the case of the child soldiers movement, it was two individuals within the Quaker UN office who pushed the idea and sold it to larger organizations.<sup>13</sup>

Yet issue entrepreneurs are not all equal: personal charisma, credentials, financial backing, an extensive personal network, Internet and social media skills, advocacy skills, and a mastery of the English language were all discussed as attributes of a successful entrepreneur. An extensive personal network allows the entrepreneur access to influential actors, such as governments, celebrities, or religious leaders who may be able to “adopt” the issue and promote it among other advocates. Additionally, a perceived connection to the community of victims on whose behalf they are advocating increases the likelihood that they will be seriously listened to. Participants suggested that the actual geographical location of the entrepreneur matters; it is easier to advocate for an international issue in New York, Geneva, or Washington D.C., than it is in Auckland, New Zealand. A few comments suggested that an unlikely leader provides additional likelihood of success; the recent promotion of the cause of nuclear disarmament by

former Cold War hawks was mentioned as an example.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, it seems that an unexpected leader may be a unique way to attract attention to a cause.

*“I think it’s that combination of who the champions are that make a big difference in whether it goes forward or not.”*

*“It took a very small number of very influential, powerful people right at the heart of the elite,*

11 Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998.

12 Price, 1998.

13 Tomaskovic-Devey and Carpenter, 2011.

14 Another example might be the embrace of the Jubilee 2000 campaign by former foreign-aid skeptic Jesse Helms, as documented in Busby, 2010.

*seen as credible, right wing and therefore surprising, that had experience right at the heart of the political establishment.”*

Importantly, however, the issue entrepreneurs and existing organizations cannot work in isolation if they want their causes propelled onto the larger transnational advocacy agenda. To build coalitions, entrepreneurs must approach potential issue adopters who generally hold a respected and powerful position in the advocacy community and whose endorsement could greatly increase the salience of the issue.<sup>15</sup>

*“It’s very important to form unusual alliances right at the start.”*

Without major organizations signing onto a campaign, the issue may fail to gain salience regardless of how tirelessly the initial advocates work. Some issues are fortunate to have an insider in a major advocacy organization as the entrepreneur. When that is not the case, established organizations must carefully weigh whether or not to adopt a new issue. Participants suggested that potential issue adopters either explicitly or implicitly conduct cost-benefit analyses when deciding whether or not to add new issues to their advocacy agenda. Organizations consider whether or not there is space on the organizational agenda for an additional issue, if the issue fits the mandate and programming culture of the organization, and if funding exists.

Additionally, global civil society organizations appear more constrained by governments and donors than has previously been acknowledged by the literature. Organizations may be more interested in adopting issues that will increase the prestige of the organization within the network or with governments; for instance, an issue which is successfully advocated and ends with a ratified treaty may lend some glory to the organization that initially adopted and promoted it. Therefore organizations attempt to gauge the likelihood of success prior to determining whether to pursue an issue. Moreover, if the organization is constrained by the preferences of funders, they may be limited in what issues they consider adopting, and, as a corollary, they may be wary of adopting issues that might cost them donors.

Along these lines, organizations decide whether or not they have the material and personnel needed to initiate a new campaign or to contribute to the advocacy of a new issue. If an organization feels it does not have the procedural expertise necessary to champion an issue, it may decide it has little value to add to issue advocacy. All of these factors contribute to the analysis organizations conduct about whether or not adopting a new issue will bring in greater benefits than costs in terms

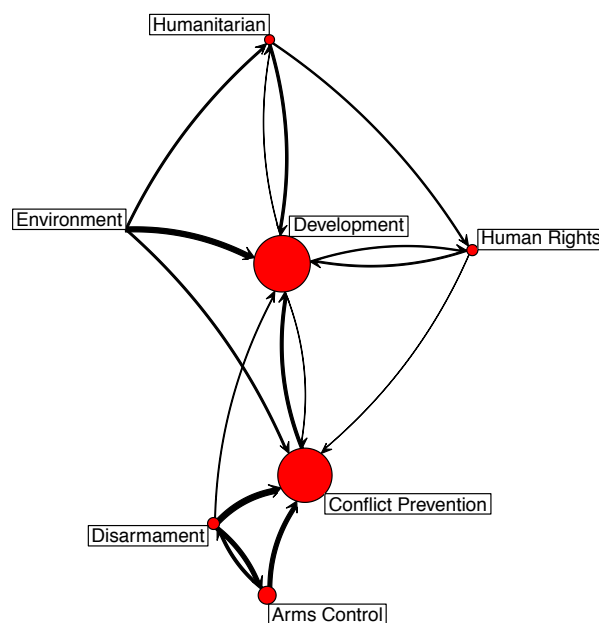
of their organizational interests. Participants emphasized that factors such as mandate, resources, and the donor community shaped their decisions as much as the merit of issues. For example, when referring to an interview with the head of a particular organization, one participant reported:

*“He leaned forward and in a totally untypical, candid moment, and said ‘What I should really be doing in this country is organizing revolution, but it falls outside my mandate.’”*

Other respondents spoke about the way in which estimates of the likelihood of success or funding considerations come into play when existing organization consider alliances with new issue entrepreneurs, confirming the view that organizational survival and prestige is a significant determinant of outcomes in the transnational sector:<sup>16</sup>

*“Really, all actors are trying to basically figure out what’s going to give you the biggest bang for the buck.”*

**FIGURE 5.**  
STRENGTH OF REPORTED TIES BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS AND OTHER THEMATIC ISSUE AREAS<sup>17</sup>



<sup>16</sup> For example, see Cooley and Ron, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Participants had identified themselves as having expertise in specific thematic clusters. They were then asked to respond to the following question: “Please describe the number of professional or personal connections you have to people working in different thematic clusters within the human security network. For each cluster, write whether you have ‘a great many, some, very few or almost no’ contacts in those areas. Please check only one category for each cluster.” The visualization demonstrates the strength of reported ties from self-identified thematic clusters to other clusters. In this graph, only ties occurring more often than the median are visible.

<sup>15</sup> Bob, 2009.

“Without major organizations signing onto a campaign, the issue may fail to gain salience regardless of how tirelessly the initial advocates work... such organizations conduct cost-benefit analyses when deciding whether or not to add new issues to their advocacy agenda.”

## NETWORK EFFECTS

In addition to organizational factors, respondents stressed that the dynamics within advocacy networks may constrain advocacy choices. These included connections and alliances between organizations, as well as fit among issues on existing agendas.

Speakers often discussed the limited space for advocacy, both within an organization and in the broader networks. As such, issues often compete for attention, and support for existing issues is continually threatened by the addition of any new issues. Organizations may be limited in adopting new issues because of their commitment to these existing issues. Beyond this, there may be times when a new potential issue might actually conflict with issues already on the agenda.

*“I think, what all of us in the field feel, [is that] we don’t want more issues. You want to push them out, keep them away because we’ve got enough to work on already. We will only take them on if we see the possibility of them helping the issues that we already have, rather than seeing them as competing issues that draws away from our pet issues that we’ve been working on. So I think there’s a real challenge for new issues because that novelty isn’t strong enough.”*

Further, it appears that members of the TAN relate certain issues to certain organizations. There may be a sense of which organization, or which type of organization, an issues “belongs” to, and other organizations may not pick up an issue if they feel it has a better home elsewhere (See Figure 4). This buck-passing dynamic arises from the compartmentalization of issue turf within the network, or what respondents referred to as the “problem of the silos”:

*“The mandates are giving us problems rights now... they make us work in silos and the communications are not very good. There was a food conference recently. Not one word about climate or environmental change was mentioned in the food conference. And the people who are going to meet in climate are not going to talk about food prices and oil prices and all these things, yet increasingly they impact forced migration. And what we are not*

*finding right now is what is the right form to start putting the dots in between these-these silos.”*

There are reported to be interesting contagion effects at work within advocacy networks. For example, a band-wagoning effect appears when certain powerful and well known organizations adopt an issue: under such circumstances the issue quickly proliferates within the network.

*“I mean climate change, not many people were doing it a few years ago. Now everybody’s got it somewhere in their agenda because it’s, you know, the talk of the day, the buzzword.”*

*“There is this group think idea, you know, that think tank is doing a security and development program -- we have to do security and development. That’s the new thing. And then it’s no longer a post-conflict reconstruction, it’s now security and development. And you know in a few years it will be something else.”*

Additionally, participants suggested that organizations often consider their existing coalitions when determining whether or not to sign onto a new campaign or adopt a new issue. They are less likely to adopt an issue if it would compromise existing alliances with other organizations. They may also look to the size of the existing network around an issue as a measure of potential success before they sign onto a campaign.

*“Well, to some degree, [you] always want to be the first one out there, the first one to touch on an issue. At the same time, you don’t want to be the only one doing it, because then you lose your credibility as well.”*

Ultimately, the interpersonal networks between individuals across various different organizations in a network may matter most of all:

*“Usually there is a small network of people in these organizations that are really moving things... people move around and they have their networks and they work together regardless of the organization they’re in. I think that works sort of across the issue spaces and geographically as well. So, I mean, I think the interpersonal nature of these networks is a lot more important a lot of times than sort of the abstract calculations like who you know who’s in power versus what’s actually going on.”*



## BROADER CONTEXT

Although attributes of issues and actors can make or break an issue, and coalitional factors within networks play a role, the political and social context in which advocacy occurs is perceived to be another significant factor in determining if an issue will make it onto the TAN agenda.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, by far, ***the most frequent response to the question about why things do or do not get on the agenda was the broader political context in which global civil society organizations operate.***

Respondents suggested that the state of the economy may make a difference in advocacy work:

*“I wonder whether at particular moments in time if there’s a feeling of economic well-being, there’s more capacity to be concerned about other people than myself.”*

Additionally, it was often mentioned that issues have “life-cycles”; sometimes enough time has to pass before people will understand the urgency of an issue. In other words, the political climate will only be receptive when an issue is “ripe.”

Affecting such “ripeness” are outside trigger events which bring widespread attention to a problem. Such events might include natural disasters, war, genocide, an industrial accident that causes acute environmental degradation, or other specific events that cause a focusing moment for the issue. Similarly, an issue may be advocated for more effectively if there is an upcoming forum that will allow for a discussion on the issue. Reports produced on the topics, a political campaign that mentions the issue, or a piece of legislation passed may galvanize public attention and provide a receptive moment or “policy window” for advocacy. Additionally, organized events, such as an international conference or meeting may provide a political opportunity for advocacy.

*“I mean, ideas will percolate for decades before the moment arrives.”*

*“I think a lot of issues come onto the agenda because they’re a reaction to a crisis.”*

There were many discussions on how the advocacy agenda is driven by the demand of certain key actors *outside* the advocacy network. Many suggested that various powerful groups drive issue advocacy, whether they are domestic lobbying groups,

corporations, elite social classes, or other groups.<sup>19</sup> It was also argued that certain groups, especially socially powerful elite, corporations, or powerful governments can hinder the progress of an issue if it goes against their interests.

*“I know probably it’s so obvious we don’t say it, but things that go against the interests or the opinions of the powerful really have farthest of chances to move up.”*

Some participants argued that donors set the agenda, hand picking which issues will be funded, and which will not.

*“If the donors are not interested in any given activity, it is extremely difficult for us to do anything about it.”*

Others argued that governments play a leading role in setting the global advocacy agenda, and that the most powerful states play the most powerful roles.<sup>20</sup>

*“There are governments and there are governments. I mean you cannot compare the influence of the US government vis-à-vis the Haitian government in tackling international issues.”*

Beyond governments, donors, issue entrepreneurs, and organizations, other actors participating either directly or tangentially in advocacy work are part of the political context and can influence an issue’s success or failure. Academics and experts can lend both credibility to the issue and empirical evidence that helps to define the extent and severity of the problem. Many participants mentioned how celebrities, such as Bono and Angelina Jolie, have used their influence to bring more attention to certain issues.<sup>21</sup> Above all, the media can determine the salience of an issue:

*“Why are these organizations, like my own, paying attention to this? Why? Because it’s sexy for the moment and somebody can compartmentalize it in a column in the Wall Street Journal.”*

**“The political context in which advocacy occurs is perceived to be a significant factor in determining the selection of issues for advocacy.”**

**“Dynamics among organizations in advocacy networks may constrain advocacy choices.”**

18 This argument is similar to the concept of “political opportunity structure” as understood by theorists of transnational social movements. See for example Joachim, 2007 and Tarrow, 2005.

19 However, as noted above, some respondents suggested that issues are more likely to be seen as legitimate and to receive attention when the people who have been affected by the problem are the ones lobbying for change. Further research is needed to determine which of these hypotheses most closely fits the widest number of outcomes.

20 Don Hubert, 2007

21 See Busby, 2010.

*“The funders then pick that issue up and they have their funding streams and you’ve got to fit your applications into that funding stream.”*

*“It comes back to funding, funding, funding.”*

## CONCRETE EXAMPLES AS THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

In addition to collecting practitioners’ insights in the abstract, we also asked them to react specifically to several cases of issue entrepreneurship that as yet had not resulted in widespread attention by organizations central to the human security network. The moderator provided brief descriptions of issues for which individuals or small organizations are attempting to gain global attention. These included compensation for collateral damage victims, the eradication of infant male circumcision as a cultural practice, a ban on forced conscription, regulation of autonomous weapons, the provision of universal internet access, and a ban on foreign military basing.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Each of these issues was selected because of its comparability in scope and complexity with an issue already salient on the human security agenda. For example forced conscription is analogous to forced labor and to child soldiering; infant male circumcision is analogous to other sensitive issues related to gender, religion and body modifications; compensation for collateral damage victims is similar to reparations for war crimes; autonomous weapons are similar in different ways to landmines and/or blinding lasers, respectively.

Each problem was presented in the same way in which the entrepreneur had framed the issue. Participants were asked to discuss reasons why agenda-setting around this issue might not have been successful as of yet, whether or not it was likely to ever be successful, and whether or not the entrepreneur’s idea even had merit as an issue. Additionally, participants were asked to discuss what larger organizations would be likely to pick up the issue, if any.

We coded these “thought experiments” according to the levels of enthusiasm or skepticism expressed. We paid particular attention to the types of explanations given to argue that an issue was or was not a good candidate for transnational advocacy and global policy attention.

Many of the factors mentioned in the responses dove-tailed

**“Participants gave somewhat different answers when asked to think about specific candidate campaigns than they did when asked to think in the abstract.”**

## CASE IN POINT: WHY BAN BLINDING LASERS AND LANDMINES BUT NOT AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS?

It has been projected that roughly one third of military weapons could be robotic by 2015, a shift in military technology with significant moral implications for implementing the laws of war. A growing community of researchers and activists has formed the International Committee on Robot Arms Control, calling for a global ban on the deployment and use of autonomous weapon systems until more is known about their potential side effects. So far, this campaign has not been joined by organizations in the human security network concerned with controlling the technologies of violence.

**“You’d have to know more about these weapons and what they could possibly do, because otherwise people will say it is science fiction. And then perhaps you need some actually abuse happening before the whole thing picks up speed, unfortunately.”**



Why not? After all these are the same organizations that have participated in widespread and successful campaigns against cluster munitions, landmines and blinding lasers in recent years. Indeed in legal terms autonomous weapons are comparable to landmines. Like landmines that sense targets and detonate according to pre-programmed criteria, autonomous weapons are designed to identify targets independent of a human in the loop. And like landmines, whose effects were deemed indiscriminate and uncontrollable after deployment precisely because one could not be certain whom they might hit after a war ended, autonomous weapons cannot be programmed to distinguish civilian from combatant targets with any certainty.

When asked why there had been so little attention to autonomous weapons so far, human security experts stressed a number of different explanations. Significant concern was expressed over the difficulty of crafting a credible advocacy frame

with the earlier brainstorming section. However, we also observed a shift in the emphasis placed on different factors between these two sections. During the brainstorming session, the greatest number of comments about barriers to agenda-setting referenced the broader political context. In other words, in the abstract respondents mentioned the constraints of governments, donors, the media, the public, and world events more than they mentioned the character of issues themselves or the preferences of the advocacy community.

However in the thought experiments, references to the broader context did *not* constitute the majority explanation when respondents expressed skepticism about candidate issues. Instead, most concerns centered around poor fit to organizational mandate, conflicts with other issues, and the nature of the issue itself (for example, how measurable or solvable it was) (see Figure 6).

### ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

The thought experiments also enabled us to identify a number of additional factors that seemed to come into play in practitioners' assessments of potential transnational "causes."

These included norms among transnational advocates to respect

given the sensationalist depictions of "killer robots" in the media and entertainment industry [a "broader context" factor]; and over the connection of anti-warbot activists to the anti-war movement, a concern for mainstream humanitarian law organizations [a "network effect"].

But the most significant factors driving weapons norm advocacy in the human security area are practitioners' estimate of the normative and political attributes of weapons issues. Weaponized robots may be similar to landmines in function, but in political terms they are different in an important respect: they are perceived to be a relatively "new" or "up-and-coming" technology by organizations central to the human security network. It is not therefore possible to document existing humanitarian harms caused by these weapons (as with landmines). Rather, advocates believe they would be in the position of promoting a *preventive* ban on the basis of very little data.<sup>1</sup>

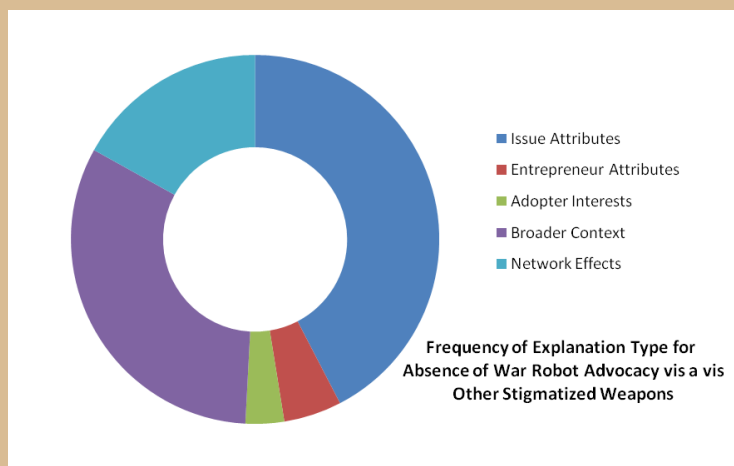
Yet certain weapons *have* been banned pre-emptively: a ban on blinding lasers was promoted by humanitarian law authorities like the International Committee of the Red Cross before the weapons were widely deployed. But according to our informants, advocates see an important difference between lasers and robots: blinding lasers are designed specifically to produce superfluous injury; autonomous weapons are being designed partly in the hope of reducing humanitarian law violations. Thus, to human security experts in the weapons area, government intent matters alongside evidence of humanitarian harm. This difference in the *attributes* of

1 This perception is not wholly accurate: South Korea and Israel have already deployed robots in border areas with the capacity to make independent targeting decisions, and while in South Africa a number of casualties have already occurred as a result of armed robots 'going haywire.'

cultures and sovereignty, disagreements over the concept of human security, and demographic homogeneity of the global elite.

*Cultural Imperialism/Sovereignty.* Participants claimed that some issues fail to gain saliency because practitioners are afraid that they will be labeled cultural imperialists if they pursue the issue. They fear that promoting "Western" or "Northern" ideals will hurt them in the eyes of an international community sensitive to the legacies of colonialism. This normative concern is coupled with a pragmatic desire not to alienate the populations with whom they work directly. Additionally, participants often voiced concern if pursuit of an issue would violate state sovereignty. Participants repeatedly mentioned how states are inherently more powerful than advocacy organizations and, as such, have the power to make or break a campaign. If an issue appears too consequential to state sovereignty, human security practitioners are likelier to assume that a campaign will fail and view contributing to it as a poor use of resources. This narrative is interesting insofar as it flies against the conventional wisdom about advocacy networks: that their greatest power is precisely in helping states reconstruct their interests in line with humanitarian principles. To some extent, members of global civil society view this power as more fleeting and fragile than scholars of advocacy networks have assumed.

the specific weapons and issues they create may explain why human security organizations worked to ban landmines and blinding lasers but have not yet developed a consensus against lethal robots, depleted uranium, fuel-air explosives, or other harmful technologies of war.



### FURTHER READING:

Krishnan, Arman. 2009. *Killer Robots: Legality and Ethicality of Autonomous Weapons*. London: Ashgate Press.  
 Singer, Peter. 2009. *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.  
 Noel Sharkey. "Grounds For Discrimination: Autonomous Robot Weapons." Royal United Services Institute *Defence Systems*, 2008.

*“Human Security”: A Contested Framework.* The thought experiments brought up another interesting theme: whether or not the human security network should be involved in an issue depends a great deal on one’s definition of human security. Participants presented four frameworks for defining human security. First, some respondents described human security in comparison to traditional “security:” a focus on individual as opposed to state security where the protection and security of individuals takes prominence over state sovereignty. Second, many tended to view human security as defined in terms of human rights. This pattern was especially prevalent and at times explicit: “In my mind, human security is another way of framing ‘human rights.’” Third, others presented a view of human security using the terms, “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want.” Interestingly, some participants said both are part of human security, while others argued that “freedom from want” detracts from the human security movement. Finally, some participants tended to use language similar to Harvard economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen to discuss human security: human security is about providing the means for individuals to “realize the full potential of their capabilities,” or to “enjoy their development potential (however they choose to define that).” While our empirical analysis of the human security network suggests it is a master frame that ties together all these different ways of thinking about global social justice,

contestation over terminology itself may sometimes be an impediment to successful agenda-setting.

*The Global Elite.* Throughout the thought experiment concluding sections of the focus group, participants engaged in unprovoked self-reflection on their belonging to an elite global class. Indeed, although our participants were diverse in country of origin and expertise, many attended the same elite schools and network in the same circles. Participants acknowledged this homogeneity and spoke directly about how this might affect the selection of issues within global civil society networks:

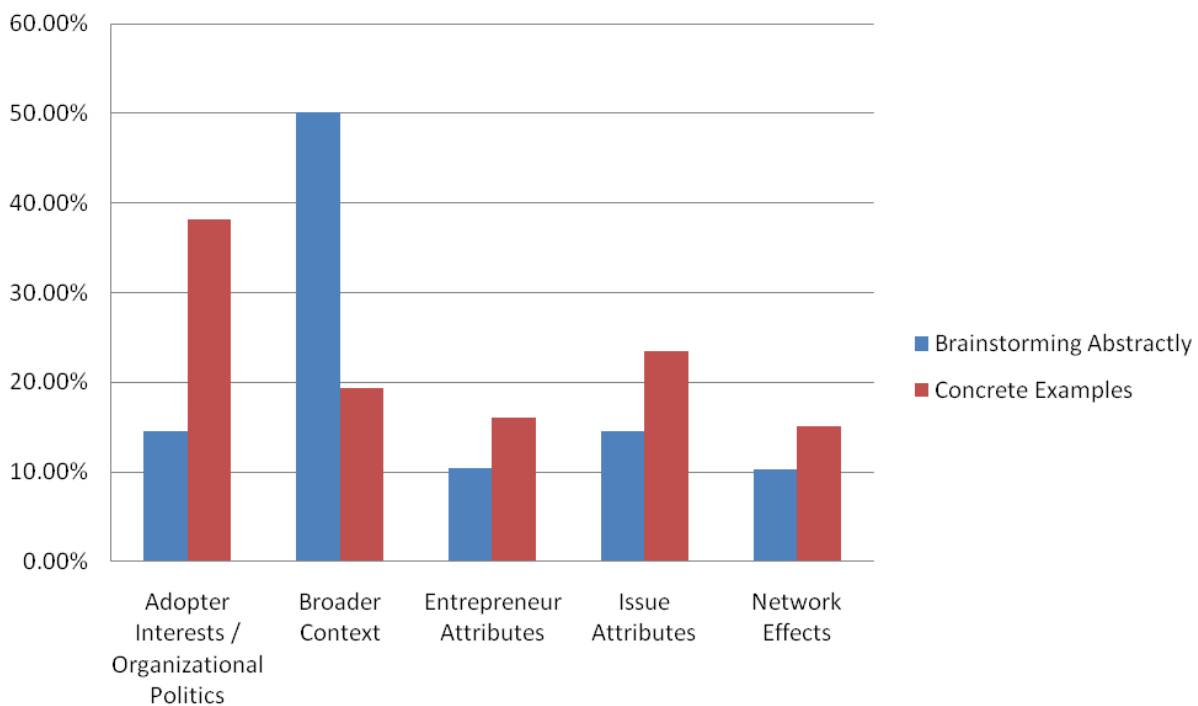
*“I mean, our staff are from all over the world, but they’re all educated in the US Ivy League schools. They are all a product of that socializing environment.”*

*“... this global upper-class to which we all belong, the class who does the talking and the meeting and who defines what’s to be the agenda for the remaining 90 percent of the world: what is convenient to us and understandable to us, legible to us, has a far higher chance; what challenges us as individuals and our own values and our own sense of goodness will not move so far at all.”*

This insight needs more scholarly exploration, as do the motivations of specific individuals embedded within networks of organizations. What prompts certain *people* to champion certain issues and not others?

**FIGURE 6.**

**REFERENCES TO EXPLANATIONS IN DIFFERENT SECTIONS**



## SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Our dialogues with practitioners resulted in a broad set of hypotheses about why some issues are more neglected than others: the nature of issues, the attributes of entrepreneurs and policy gatekeepers within networks, the relationships among advocates, and the broader political agenda. Practitioners were likelier to describe the broader context as a constraint on agenda-setting in the abstract, but likelier to invoke factors related to the issue or their organization in expressing skepticism about concrete candidate issues.

The implications of these findings for issue entrepreneurs are many. Importantly, careful thought must be given to framing and pitching issues if one is to build successful coalitions within global policy networks. Practitioners in such networks care deeply about social change but are selective and strategic in attending to different issues. While issue entrepreneurs may have little control over the attributes of the issue they are promoting, they may be able to affect the perception of those attributes with careful framing and reviewing of their information strategy. In particular, measurable indicators and testimonial evidence from claimants are important factors in generating appeal. Additionally, issue entrepreneurs should carefully consider the organizational interests of those with whom they seek coalitions and be aware that these interests are constituted as much by relationships with the rest of the advocacy network as by the organizational culture and broader political environment. They should also focus on developing the skills, alliances, and professional profile that will lend them credibility among the wider global advocacy community.

Our study suggests insights for organizations in a position

to accept or “vet” advocacy claims as well. We identified a perception among practitioners, particularly in the abstract, that their hands are largely tied by states, donors, and the media. Yet this perception flies in the face of many successful advocacy campaigns in recent years, documented in an extensive scientific literature. However the perception itself may be an impediment to advocacy on certain issues where advocates anticipate push-back from governments.

Moreover, within these networks, certain civil society organizations play a larger role than others. As one respondent stated, “There are NGOs and then there are NGOs.” Some studies show that organizations at the center of issue networks have a powerful legitimating effect on new issues or a dampening effect if they choose to ignore them. And organizations operating at the intersection of networks or ideas have the ability to bridge the distance between “silos” in new and synergistic ways.

Finally, scholars of advocacy networks should conduct further research testing the relationship of these different factors to actual cases of advocacy success. While this study reports on the perceptions and narratives of advocates themselves, it cannot conclusively show which of these factors correlate most closely to the emergence of campaigns. Practitioner insight confirms some findings of older research (like the importance of issue attributes) and casts doubt on others (like the deterministic effect of the political opportunity structure), but also suggests a number of new hypotheses - such as intra-network dynamics - that should be studied more closely by scholars of transnational campaigns.

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