

# NGOs as Agents of Global Justice: Cosmopolitan Activism for Political Realists

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Several decades of scholarship on international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have established their important role in leading cosmopolitan political projects framed around moral ideals of global justice.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s—the decade of liberal ascendancy that followed the end of the Cold War—many field-defining theoretical analyses of NGOs were produced depicting NGOs as advocates and enforcers of well-defined global justice norms.<sup>2</sup> In the decades since, however, the deep contestation of these norms has been brought into sharper focus, visible in the growing legitimacy crises within liberal domestic and international orders,<sup>3</sup> and the persistent challenges to liberal ideals of global justice across transnational civil societies.<sup>4</sup> These political challenges call for a reexamination of the contemporary political roles of NGOs in global justice activism: How should NGOs navigate the real-world moral contestations and shifting power dynamics that can sometimes impede their pursuit of justice in twenty-first-century global politics?

One compelling answer to this question has been suggested in recent work by deliberative-democratic theorists. These theorists have argued that NGOs (alongside other social actors) can help resolve disputes about global justice norms by facilitating legitimate communicative exchanges among the diverse political voices

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of subjected global communities on the correct interpretation and implementation of these norms.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the distinctively *political* values of democracy and legitimacy offer a procedural bridge between the substantive moral ideals of global justice endorsed by cosmopolitan activists and the global realities of moral contestation and struggles for power.

In this essay, we assess the scope and limits of this deliberative-democratic answer, arguing for an expanded account of the political roles of NGOs in global justice activism that reflects greater sensitivity to the multifaceted political dynamics through which power in real-world global politics is constituted and contested. While deliberative democrats capture some important roles that NGOs can play in supporting the legitimate interpretation of global justice norms under political constraints of moral disagreement, we argue that in some NGOs' real-world operational contexts, structural power imbalances and social division or volatility can undercut the operation of the ideal deliberative processes prescribed by democratic theory. Under these circumstances, successful NGO activism for global justice must sometimes prioritize work focused on mitigating power imbalances, building solidarity, and organizing power in parallel or as a precursor to the operation of deliberative-democratic processes.

We develop this argument by mapping the contributions of three distinct functional roles of cosmopolitan NGO activism, each of which is exercised through the mobilization and deployment of a different dimension of political power, operating in varying degrees of alignment with deliberative-democratic processes. In the first section, we examine NGO roles in mobilizing communicative power to shape the interpretation of global justice norms through processes inspired by and closely compatible with deliberative-democratic ideals. Here we illustrate some important NGO activities that perform these roles, but also highlight the obstacles that arise in many real-world operational contexts. In the following two sections, we examine the roles of activist NGOs in mobilizing other forms of political power to combat and circumvent obstacles to the deliberative interpretation and practical implementation of global justice norms: In the second section, we examine NGOs' exercise of counteractive power to resist background sources of political domination; and in the third section, we examine their exercise of constitutive power to build shared knowledges and problem definitions, to mobilize and broker relationships among actors and communities, and to develop organizational infrastructures. Here we show how these latter NGO roles are typically compatible with—supplying social and organizational preconditions for—their roles in supporting

deliberative-democratic norm interpretation. However, we also point out that strategic tensions between these roles can sometimes arise in contexts of deep social division or volatility, where direct action to counteract domination of oppressed communities is operationally incompatible with deliberative engagement, or where activist-driven debates over contentious issues may risk exacerbating the oppression of vulnerable groups and stalling progress toward just social change. Our development of this theoretical analysis is supported at each stage by empirical illustrations and evidence drawn from NGO work to advance human rights norms, since this is a well-established area of activist NGO practice at the core of cosmopolitan political projects framed around moral ideals of global justice.

### THE *COMMUNICATIVE* ROLES OF NGOs IN DEFINING GLOBAL JUSTICE NORMS

The post-Cold War liberal vision of NGOs as global justice norm entrepreneurs was influenced strongly by a recognition of the communicative power of their advocacy work in mobilizing the transformative impetus of political dialogue and persuasion to drive morally motivated change in a globalizing world society.<sup>6</sup> The substantial political influence of NGO advocacy across a range of political spheres has been widely studied in scholarship on NGO roles in driving normative change within local communities and domestic institutions,<sup>7</sup> and in representing value-based transnational constituencies in international decision-making processes.<sup>8</sup> But with this growing power has also come critical scrutiny, with many questioning the political authority of NGOs to speak on behalf of diverse communities about contested issues and norms. Central to these critiques has been a concern with the substantial power disparities between Northern NGOs and donors and stakeholders in the Global South, the latter often lacking the resources required to participate in transnational advocacy on equal terms.<sup>9</sup>

Such concerns about the legitimacy of NGOs' political advocacy work have recently attracted attention from deliberative-democratic theorists concerned with understanding how the communicative power of NGOs can be deployed in support of global justice norms on loosely democratic terms. In a departure from some "moralist"<sup>10</sup> global justice literature—which defines the content of norms through moral-philosophical analysis, and casts NGOs as vanguardist agents of their political implementation<sup>11</sup>—some deliberative democrats have argued that global justice norms must themselves be interpreted and justified

through legitimate and inclusive political processes. “Communicative power,” for deliberative democrats, consists not merely in a rhetorical capacity to persuade others to endorse and comply with predefined norms of human rights or social justice; it consists also in a political capacity to engage others in public reasoning about the justification of shared institutional norms, through processes of democratic deliberation among moral and political equals.<sup>12</sup> Following from this understanding, some deliberative democrats have argued, NGO activism can achieve the strongest forms of political legitimacy by supporting the communicative engagement of affected global constituencies in inclusive processes of political dialogue, through which global justice norms are not merely promoted but also jointly *defined*.<sup>13</sup>

This kind of NGO activist role is evident in a range of deployments of communicative power in the contemporary practices of human rights NGOs. One straightforward yet important way in which NGOs support the engagement of affected global constituencies in inclusive political dialogue about human rights is by serving a convening role, in which NGOs directly facilitate the identification and inclusion of diverse voices in interpretations of human rights and related social justice norms.<sup>14</sup> NGOs commonly assume leading roles in facilitating and monitoring participatory processes of multistakeholder dialogue surrounding issues such as the access of marginalized citizens to public services, the management of contested claims surrounding land and natural resource management, and the incorporation of social justice protections into the design of government budgets and economic policies.<sup>15</sup> In 2014 in Ghana, for example, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations concerned about the social impact of a new International Monetary Fund credit arrangement initiated a series of public forums to facilitate citizen input into the design of the IMF’s program.<sup>16</sup> The program granted a number of the requests generated through this process, including provisions relating to deepened accountability, transparency, and safeguards for pro-poor and social protection spending.

Another important way in which NGOs can support the communicative engagement of affected global constituencies in inclusive processes of political dialogue is through the active promotion of concepts and epistemologies designed to open discursive space for marginalized perspectives and voices. For example, in 2008 in Ecuador, an alliance of environmental NGOs and lawyers joined forces with indigenous organizations to challenge the dominance of colonial global rights discourses within dialogue surrounding the redrafting of Ecuador’s constitution.

This alliance successfully advocated for the incorporation of “rights of nature” into the Ecuadorian constitution as a way of bolstering legal recognition of indigenous Amazonian nature ontologies within Ecuador’s constitutional framework for rights protection.<sup>17</sup>

While such communicative NGO roles make important contributions to defining global justice norms in ways that are responsive to broader affected constituencies, such communicative strategies often encounter significant obstacles in the form of persistent background forms of political domination that undermine or threaten the deliberative interpretation or practical implementation of these global justice norms. Power disparities and political insecurities, linked to broader structures of socioeconomic or cultural exclusion, frequently obstruct inclusive and good faith deliberation surrounding norm interpretation—impeding the ability of marginalized groups to participate in deliberative processes on equal terms. Such challenges have been widely documented among NGOs attempting to support the local interpretation and implementation of human rights and gender equality principles within broader community development projects. For example, a local Cambodian NGO, whose work aimed to empower vulnerable women in poor urban communities to claim their rights through the promotion of participatory self-help groups, found in 2012 that their efforts to facilitate inclusive processes of political dialogue through which concepts of rights and equality could be jointly defined by affected people were persistently undermined by problems of unequal power relations, low trust, and competition for resources between women in different social positions.<sup>18</sup> Deliberative processes can be further distorted by a range of power imbalances within affected communities—for example, as a result of entrenched gender inequalities; unequal distributions of political power; or inequitable access to economic, epistemic, or organizational resources.<sup>19</sup>

Barriers to inclusive processes of political dialogue are significantly intensified in those cases where attempts to exercise constituencies’ voices within such processes of dialogue expose vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities, indigenous people, and other socioeconomically marginalized populations, to sometimes violent retaliation from a hostile government or corporate actors.<sup>20</sup> Such threats are experienced by human rights and environmental defenders with disturbing frequency: the NGO Global Witness, for instance, has in recent years documented a rising number of murders of land and environmental defenders, trade unionists, and other human rights activists around the world, alongside pervasive threats of violence, arbitrary detention, and criminal prosecution.<sup>21</sup>

Although such inequalities have long been recognized, many NGO efforts to bring affected constituencies into deliberative dialogues have persistently failed to incorporate concrete measures to counterbalance these inequalities or address their structural causes. For example, the widespread practice of using multistakeholder forums as a vehicle for managing contested rights claims surrounding land and natural resources has been afflicted by the tendency for multistakeholder dialogues to be framed and controlled by the very dominant political interests responsible for defending and reproducing resource inequalities in the first place. As a result, these forums, designed as means of facilitating inclusive dialogue, in fact have focused largely on securing the implementation of their organizers' ideas, while avoiding discussion of the deeper structural causes of inequitable and unsustainable natural resource use.<sup>22</sup> Making matters worse, inequalities are often exacerbated by power imbalances between affected people and the very NGOs seeking to bring these voices into processes of dialogue. Not only do NGOs and other intermediaries in communicative processes wield substantial control over information flows, they also derive significant power from their unique ability to mediate between local and global discourses and systems of knowledge.<sup>23</sup> These power imbalances often constrain and distort the expression of community voices and privilege some voices at the expense of others.<sup>24</sup>

In many cases, such barriers serve to limit and undermine the potential for deliberative processes to strengthen the legitimacy and successful implementation of human rights and related global justice norms, even where NGO activists are mindful of the difficulties and design their deliberative processes with a sensitivity to them. In less favorable cases—where these power relations are not attended to explicitly in NGOs' design and facilitation of their deliberative processes—the operation of these processes may even risk exacerbating existing patterns of domination by amplifying already powerful voices and legitimizing their ongoing dominance. Such unintended consequences have frequently been demonstrated in activist practices, such as in the multistakeholder dialogue processes discussed above. In addition to those distortions, further unintended consequences result when NGOs mediate deliberation between powerful corporate actors and more marginalized civil society and community organizations. For example, in the Colombian sugarcane industry, Bonsucro—a multistakeholder organization aiming to promote more socially and environmentally sustainable sugarcane production—has been shown to offer few opportunities for the inclusion of

marginalized voices, while helping to legitimize powerful networks of business and state elites, thus operating perversely to help these elites consolidate their control over contested land and water resources.<sup>25</sup>

## THE COUNTERACTIVE ROLES OF NGOS IN RESISTING BACKGROUND POLITICAL DOMINATION

Such real-world obstacles to legitimate deliberative processes of global norm definition can arise at a range of levels in the global political system—from the local dynamics of interpersonal power plays and historical group antagonisms to the global-historical structures of neocolonial, capitalist-economic, and patriarchal oppression. But while each of these obstacles may impede the operation by NGOs of fully legitimate deliberative-democratic processes, none is itself invulnerable to the transformative powers of activist political intervention. Rather, many NGOs have developed a parallel set of activist capabilities—operating alongside their advocacy activities—that target these background social obstacles directly. Activist work of this second kind deploys a distinctively “counteractive form of political power,” which has been described in republican theoretical traditions as “counter” power<sup>26</sup> or “antipower,”<sup>27</sup> by virtue of its *negative* orientation toward combatting background sources of domination that threaten the legitimate operation of political institutions.

Activist NGO efforts to combat political domination, and the associated forms of exclusion and inequality, are sometimes mobilized around articulations of positive normative commitments to specific human rights or wider global social justice ideals. But what distinguishes NGOs’ counteractive power from more positive forms of “power over”<sup>28</sup> global political institutions and agendas involved in norm definition activities is that the instruments of counteractive power typically lack the systematic capability to impose normative interpretations or agendas upon others. Instead, they operate through ad hoc instruments of political resistance,<sup>29</sup> or by structurally empowering disadvantaged groups and individuals,<sup>30</sup> both of which are conceptually and operationally distinct from the systematic capability to control others through imposing institutional norms.<sup>31</sup>

NGOs’ exercise of counteractive power can sometimes support efforts to engage the deliberative voices of affected constituencies by directly counteracting background structural obstacles to democratic inclusion and equality. For instance, in the above example of a Cambodian NGO working to empower the voices of

vulnerable women, direct efforts to facilitate the women's voices through inclusive processes of dialogue were underpinned by a range of interventions oriented toward meeting their immediate subsistence needs and strengthening social safety nets. Examples include setting up savings initiatives and loan schemes to support the women's income generation, and activities to support their healthcare, land security, and an upgrade in basic community infrastructure. Such strategies oriented toward countering background inequalities reflect recognition that the capacity to engage effectively in deliberative processes often depends critically on underlying access to basic services and livelihood opportunities.<sup>32</sup>

NGOs can also act directly to constrain or counteract power imbalances that distort processes of deliberation between parties—for example, by tactically employing social mobilization or advocacy to strengthen material pressures on powerful actors to engage in good faith dialogue with marginalized participants.<sup>33</sup> Such efforts to strengthen sources of grassroots social power can also receive support through grassroots organizing activities and the promotion of alliances with more economically or politically powerful actors at domestic and international scales.<sup>34</sup> For instance, in the above example of the Ghanaian IMF program, alliances between local and international NGOs were used to strengthen the visibility and legitimacy of the deliberative forum and create meaningful opportunities for Ghanaian civil society organizations to engage in dialogue with senior IMF officials. These networks were then also used to pressure IMF executive directors from the United States, Germany, France, the U.K., China, and Japan to add their weight to requests for the civil society platform's policy recommendations to be included in the IMF's final agreement.<sup>35</sup>

Another counteractive role performed by NGOs involves the mobilization of social resistance against dominating forms of power. This entails promoting direct social action in support of more formalized accountability mechanisms. For example, to protect the rights of vulnerable communities in the face of adverse human rights impacts associated with large-scale business operations or infrastructure projects, NGOs have often sought directly to support social empowerment activities designed to enable affected people to access formal accountability or grievance mechanisms.<sup>36</sup> In the Indonesian palm oil sector, where marginalized communities were engaged in protracted land disputes with powerful palm oil companies, the ability of communities to access human rights accountability mechanisms has depended crucially on the roles played by NGOs to support the livelihoods and community organizations of affected people, bolster



community awareness regarding their rights under applicable local laws, support community capabilities for self-representation in dispute resolution processes, and build coalitions of supporters among more powerful government and business actors at national and international scales.<sup>37</sup> Such counteractive forms of power can thus help combat those background sources of domination that undermine the operation of deliberative processes. To the extent that they do, they can work in tandem with—by, for example, supplying social and organizational pre-conditions for—NGOs’ communicative roles in supporting deliberative-democratic norm interpretation. Yet as Iris Marion Young observed, while reflecting on the role of deliberative-democratic processes in social justice activism, there can also be operational tensions between deliberative processes and those “tactics of activism . . . [that] confront rather than engage in discussion with” people who disagree.<sup>38</sup> In part they are grounded in incompatible logics that define specific organizations. On the one hand, there is a “deliberative logic” that seeks shared understanding, and, on the other hand, there is an “antagonistic logic” that is framed with reference to concepts of injustice that places a corresponding focus on assigning culpability. Antagonistic mindsets may undermine the motivation of adversarial organizations and their constituencies to engage in deliberation because of the way they demonize or recriminate adversaries, or because their rigid diagnostic and prescriptive analyses lack openness to opposing perspectives.<sup>39</sup> Such logics are often deeply embedded in the identities and purposes of both organizations and their leaders and supporters, making it difficult for a given civil society organization to switch readily between antagonistic and deliberative modes of engagement. These tensions can be exacerbated by different kinds of organizational competencies and external relationships oriented toward the exercise of counteractive or communicative power.<sup>40</sup> These results can lead NGOs to confront stark trade-offs between support for deliberative processes and the pursuit of alternative political accountability activities (such as confrontational protest or appeal to legal sanctions), which require “picking sides” in political disputes and working directly to counteract the force of repressive power.

## THE *CONSTITUTIVE* ROLES OF NGOs IN BUILDING COSMOPOLITAN ACTIVIST COMMUNITIES

Notwithstanding the operational tensions that sometimes arise between the communicative power of deliberative-democratic engagement and the counteractive

power of activist resistance to background inequality and domination, we do not suggest that NGOs always face zero-sum choices between them. Rather, there is a third crucial area of activist NGO work that supports the operational preconditions for activities of both other kinds and helps to harmonize and prioritize the alignment between them in complex and dynamic operational environments. This involves the deployment of what can be described as “constitutive power,” understood as the capacity to build and sustain the collaborative political constituencies and robust organizational infrastructures that are required for sustained and effective action in support of global justice norms.

The idea of constitutive power functions here as an umbrella concept that subsumes modalities of power that are sometimes distinguished by political theorists as “power with” and “power to.” The idea of power with has been invoked by republican,<sup>41</sup> democratic,<sup>42</sup> and feminist<sup>43</sup> theorists to capture those dimensions of constitutive power that are exercised through building and sustaining the right qualities in social relationships for collaborative political action, including common problem frames, values, identities, and solidarities. The idea of power to has been invoked by theorists of social and economic empowerment<sup>44</sup> to capture those dimensions of constitutive power that are exercised through harnessing and deploying resources, alongside technological and institutional infrastructures, in the service of advancing global justice norms.

One important expression of constitutive power associated with NGO activities takes the form of NGO roles in building shared problem frames, identities, and solidarities within wider activist communities. To some extent, such contributions can occur through conventional repertoires of issue framing and grassroots consciousness raising.<sup>45</sup> But where constituencies of affected people are forming around emerging global problems and associated justice norms, NGOs also frequently take on additional roles as brokers and translators in interpretive processes through which global concepts and discourses can be translated into locally meaningful forms, and local responses fed back into global discourses. For example, in 1993, women’s rights activists within a social movement opposing male-only inheritance of family land in Hong Kong translated global norms on women’s rights in ways that connected with local cultural norms surrounding appropriate treatment of women by their male kin.<sup>46</sup> By acting as brokers and translators in these interpretive processes of cross-cultural translation, these non-governmental organizations supported local women in voicing their grievances concerning exclusion from rights over houses and land more effectively within

local political forums, and helped people to interpret their experiences in ways that lent themselves to the development of wider shared identities and problem definitions with regard to women's rights.<sup>47</sup> In some cases, such processes are grounded in deeply rooted shifts in collective subjectivities,<sup>48</sup> while in others solidarities are constructed through more strategic efforts to reframe problems in ways that support collective identity formation and associated forms of collective action.<sup>49</sup>

To enable such solidaristic identities to translate into operational forms of power to or power with that support both communicative and counteractive power, constitutive power also requires the development and deployment of a range of technological and institutional infrastructures and resources. At the core of such infrastructures are horizontal self-organizing capacities among affected constituencies. NGOs can support the development of these organizational infrastructures by directly supporting marginalized constituencies in accessing information, refining their analytical and communicative capabilities, and building appropriate deliberative venues and mechanisms.<sup>50</sup> These may take the form of public service users' groups,<sup>51</sup> worker- and community-based organizations, and more ad hoc coordinating infrastructures oriented toward specific dialogue or claim-making processes.<sup>52</sup> For example, an NGO working in Nepal from the early 1990s onward to promote access to natural resources for marginalized, landless communities eschewed established approaches focused on providing service to marginalized "beneficiaries" in favor of efforts to support the knowledge, skills, and political awareness of marginalized "rights holders." As a result, they enabled local people to self-organize and demand changes in state policies in support of more equitable access to and control over natural resources.<sup>53</sup>

NGOs can also help link these horizontal infrastructures to organizational infrastructures that track the social geographies of transnationally dispersed constituencies. Activist NGOs working across a range of labor rights, land rights, indigenous rights, and climate justice issues have often used strategies of "translocal activism" to support material organizing infrastructures that connect geographically dispersed constituencies. For example, NGOs commonly play a central role in brokering transnational civil society networks and facilitating processes of information and experience sharing within these networks through activities such as study visits to facilitate peer learning among community leaders, as well as through ongoing support for learning and experience sharing at the community level.<sup>54</sup> In these ways, NGOs can play important roles in providing the

resources, technologies, and skills required to bridge geographical and social distances and connect different groups experiencing parallel challenges in various parts of the world.<sup>55</sup>

Through both fostering solidaristic social relationships and constructing material organizational infrastructures, the development and deployment of constitutive power can in turn help to facilitate both communicative and counteractive forms of power. Constitutive power can provide important preconditions for the exercise of counteractive forms of power by helping to build shared identities, develop a critical collective consciousness, and strengthen organizational resources that can be used to resist and contest dominating forms of power. These forms of constitutive power can also provide important preconditions for the operation of communicative power by supporting communities in formulating collective positions as inputs to deliberative processes and providing material infrastructures that support the voices of marginalized constituencies in reaching global audiences.

But while constitutive and communicative power are in these ways closely interlinked and often mutually reinforcing, they remain distinct forms of power that can sometimes pull in opposing directions. Not only do NGOs need to make strategic choices about how to allocate scarce resources between different kinds of relationship building and deliberative activities; there can also be direct tensions between these distinct interventions in contexts of deep social division and volatility. Here, *communicative* activist efforts to foster public deliberation about contentious issues may risk exacerbating social hostilities, oppression, or violence toward vulnerable groups, and undermining longer-term constitutive political projects of social solidarity building and cultural and institutional change. Such risks, for example, underpinned the concerns raised in recent years by LGBTQI+ activists about the socially polarizing effects of certain Western-funded NGO contributions to public international debates about human rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). While the appropriate role for public deliberation in international SOGI human rights advocacy is itself a controversial issue among LGBTQI+ communities and activists, some have argued that activist efforts to foster public debate on SOGI human rights can, in states where sexual and gender minorities remain targets of deep social discrimination and oppression, risk political backlash that entrenches instead of alleviates injustices against these vulnerable minorities.<sup>56</sup> In such cases, activists confront difficult normative dilemmas, weighing the democratic value of public deliberation as a political vehicle for assessing controversial human rights claims against the prospect that less politicized

and contentious forms of solidarity and relationship-building activity may provide more robust (in the long term) and less harmful (in the short term) transformative pathways to human rights protection.

## CONCLUSION

The democratic image of NGOs' global justice activism as operating through inclusive deliberative processes of norm interpretation is morally appealing, and a salient guiding ideal for NGO roles that are performed through the deployment of communicative power. As we have illustrated here, NGOs can make many important contributions to the legitimacy and effectiveness of contemporary global justice activism by engaging their stakeholders in processes inspired and shaped by deliberative-democratic theories. But alongside their work to foster inclusive political discussion for those subject to injustices, NGOs must grapple seriously with the tensions and trade-offs that can arise between these democratic aims and the need for direct counteractive power and constitutive community- and infrastructure-building activities to manage the background dynamics of power in global politics. Deliberative democrats are right that moral philosophers of global justice should show epistemic modesty in deferring to the local political understandings that can be harnessed through democratic practice. But democrats, in turn, should show parallel modesty by acknowledging the political fragility of their own procedural ideals and the need to temper these ideals with a realist sensibility that permits a nuanced and contextually sensitive navigation of the obstacles to justice and legitimacy that arise from nonideal facts about global political power.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Here we take "global justice" agendas to incorporate the advancement of human rights, alongside a wider range of issues concerned with the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of cooperative activities on a global (as distinct from national or more local) scale. We use the label "cosmopolitan" in a very broad sense—to denote those forms of NGO activism that are framed in terms of global justice concepts and ideals, as distinct from the many other NGO activities worldwide that are directed toward diverse local values and projects, and are unengaged with global justice norms.
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Abstract: Several decades of scholarship on international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have established their important role in leading cosmopolitan political projects framed around moral ideals of global justice. But contemporary legitimacy crises in international liberalism call for a reexamination of NGOs’ global justice activism, considering how they should navigate the real-world moral contestations and shifting power dynamics that can impede their pursuit of justice. Recent work by deliberative-democratic theorists has argued that NGOs can help resolve disputes about global justice norms by facilitating legitimate communicative exchanges among the diverse political voices of subjected global communities on the correct interpretation and implementation of global justice norms. In response, this essay argues for an expanded account of the political roles of NGOs in global justice activism, which reflects greater sensitivity to the multifaceted political dynamics through which power in real-world global politics is constituted and contested. It is shown that in some NGOs’ real-world operational contexts, structural power imbalances and social division or volatility can undercut the operation of the ideal deliberative processes prescribed by democratic theory—calling for further attention to work focused on mitigating power imbalances, building solidarity, and organizing power in parallel or as a precursor to deliberative-democratic processes.

Keywords: global justice, deliberative democracy, realism, power, NGOs