

Chapter 2

Interest Groups

Abstract Interest groups are not like units; they have different characteristics and do not only involve themselves in domestic politics, but also international politics. There are various definitions of interest groups. I argue that there is a difference between a non-governmental organisation and an interest group. A non-governmental organisation performs a service, whereas an interest group influences public and private policies. When interest groups from one country influence the policies of another country's government or private institutions, they are acting in a transnational manner. In this chapter, I move away from the predominantly positivist paradigm and argue for an interpretivist stance towards researching interest groups. To do so, I employ analytic eclecticism as a point of departure. Doing research from an interpretivist stance promises a more nuanced understanding of the transnational role and involvement of interest groups in water engineering projects.

Keywords Conceptualisation • Interpretivism • Analytic eclecticism • Everyday international political economy • Paradigm

Introduction

The purpose of this section is, firstly, to outline the fundamental characteristics of interest groups and, secondly, to discuss the nature and extent of interest groups' transnational activities. Of importance in this chapter is not to debate which of the different conceptualisations is correct, but to investigate how interest groups stand in relation to states, their governing bodies and other non-state entities in society. To accomplish this, the chapter will define the concept interest group and related entities such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and pressure groups; provide a typology of interest groups; discuss these political entities as transnational actors; highlight their authority roles; briefly discuss a different perspective at investigating interest groups; and lastly draw a conclusion.

Defining Interest Groups

Various definitions of the concept interest group exist. Within the Political Sciences, researchers use these concepts in a confusing manner. For instance, not all scholars apply the same meaning to the concept *interest group*; they define it differently.

As a point of departure, throughout the twentieth century, studies on interest group politics were frequently conducted, and consequently, different terms to describe interest groups developed. Nevertheless, a generic definition would state that an interest group is a non-state entity that endeavours to influence government policy. In addition, in this book, the notion of 'interest' will be used to connote the pursuit of causes or the advancement and defence of particular interests, positions, and people in society (Grant 2000). Even so, phrases, other than *interest group*, include *pressure group*, *lobby*, *NGO*, and the variant of the latter *international non-governmental organisation (INGO)*. How have scholars defined these entities? In this book, I take the stance that *interest groups*, *pressure groups*, *NGOs/INGOs*, and *lobbies* are not identical. All interest groups are per definition NGOs, but not all NGOs are interest groups. Non-governmental organisations only present the interests of their members, but may not act to influence government policies. It is only when an NGO starts to influence governmental policies that it becomes an interest group. For instance, the Automobile Association (AA) is an NGO that provides a service to its members. That being said, when it starts to make statements on how the death toll on South African roads can be lowered, through 'better' governmental policies, it becomes an interest group. Similarly, all pressure groups and lobbies are interest groups, but not all interest groups are pressure groups and lobbies. Pressure groups and lobbies focus their activities mainly on governmental policies or the governmental process. Interest groups, on the other hand, attempt to influence government policies, the governmental process, and other organisations in society through various means. For instance, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) is an interest group, influencing the South African government to change its policies on HIV/AIDS-infected persons. At the same time, it also influences pharmaceutical companies to lower their prices on antiretroviral drugs.

All these concepts, except *NGO/INGO*, have been treated as something of a profanity in the scholarly discourse. Many scholars, members of interest groups, and government officials prefer one concept to the other because of the negative connotations that can be attached to some of the concepts. As far as Truman (1951: 38) is concerned, the concept pressure group invokes a sense of 'selfishness' and that 'special rights and privileges' are sought by these groups from other political actors. Similarly, Moulder et al. (1982) prefer to use interest group because pressure group implies negativity towards these organisations. One of the reasons for this negative image of pressure groups, as Mackenzie (1955) declares, is that pressure always invokes power politics. In contrast, diplomats and government officials prefer to use the concept 'NGO'. The reason for this is that ambassadorial representatives and politicians like to allege that they aspire to seek and represent the

national interest of a united society. Furthermore, they will not concede that they are standing in a relationship with interest groups (Willets 1997). Even so, over the years, the concept ‘interest group’ has been used with wantonness, which caused unnecessary disorder about its actual meaning (Geldenhuys 1998).

It follows then that a common denominator that is employed in almost all definitions is ‘influence on governmental/public policies’. Traditionally, influence is a component of power (Holsti 1995: 118) and is related to the actions of interest groups within their relationship with government or any other entity like an international organisation or financial institution.

Various scholars have defined interest groups around the notion of influence either very narrowly or to a wider extent. Petracca (1992) observes that, currently, academics are more likely to use concepts that are pertinent to their research endeavours. Baumgartner and Leech (1998: xxii) insist that: ‘When we refer to “interest groups” or “organised interests”, we mean not only membership organizations that do not accept members, businesses, and any other organisation or institution that makes policy-related appeals to government’. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) do not have a ‘strong preference’ towards one of a number of phrases. What is of more importance, than to argue over the different concepts, is to point to the role interest groups play in society and more appropriately their relationship with the state and government officials and other non-state entities.

For Baumgartner and Leech (1998: xxii), a concept makes no difference, for ‘we are pluralists on this score’. This sentiment is echoed in other studies as well. Smith (1993: 1) states that, ‘[t]he important variables in understanding decisions are the nature of the relationships that exist between groups and the state—the types of policy networks—and the interest and activities of state actors—the degree of autonomy’. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) and Smith (1993) therefore note that, rather than broaden the debate over concepts, the relationship that exists between interest groups, the state and government, their impact on state autonomy, and policy issues should be the focus.

In recent years, political scientists have moved away from the narrow thinking of interest groups, in the sense that they represent the interests of a specific group in society. Increasingly, interest groups have been defined with their actions towards the state and other organisations, with influence or advocacy playing a central role. The study of interest groups may bring scholars closer to answering questions concerning the relationship between the state and society (Wilson 1990). In this book, I will employ the concept interest group although there is a tendency in International Relations literature to use the phrase *NGO* more frequently. Taken a step further, some scholars do not grapple with the difficulty of the terminology. As has been indicated, they select a concept and look at the real issue in group politics, namely the role and purpose of interest groups, the processes involved, and the relationship of interest groups with the state and other governmental and non-governmental actors. With this in mind: how do scholars in the water discourse threat the concept interest group?

Within the water discourse, a number of scholars prefer to use the concept *NGO* or *stakeholder* when writing or referring to these organisations, for instance McCully (1996), Gleick (1998), Turton and Ohlsson (1999), and Turton (2000b). Is this wrong? Most certainly not. The scholars and practitioners in the water discourse refer to a broad range of organisations and not only to specific institutions when they write about non-state actors in water politics. It should also be kept in mind that not all these scholars are Political Scientists or International Relations specialists. Some analysts within Political Sciences are, like their non-Political Science colleagues, unfamiliar with the concepts such as *interest group*, *pressure group*, and *lobby*. They therefore do not present clear definitions within the rubric of their research. In addition, at times they do not focus on interest groups in water politics. Some are experts within the field of water politics and may not have come across these concepts in their work. Many practitioners and decision-makers are also not accustomed to the concepts used in the analysis of group politics. An example of this is the former director general of South Africa's Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) using the concept *NGO* in referring to entities lobbying against large dams (M. Muller, personal communication, 13 February 2001). Throughout the book when I talk about an interest group, I mean that it is a non-state entity that influences government policies and other non-state and intergovernmental institutions, in the national political and the international political domain.

Interest Groups as Transnational Actors

International Relations as a field of study is often understood to encompass the associations between states. Other actors in world politics such as economic institutions [that is multinational corporations (MNCs) and social groups] are in many cases given a secondary status as non-state entities in world affairs (Willets 1997). This is in line with the realist perspective of world politics, but not with liberal pluralism. This latter perspective suggests that non-state actors, like interest groups, also play roles in the international system, although they are confined to a second tier of analysis. Even so, interest groups play an important role within world politics when operating as transnational actors and should not be confined to a second tier of analysis.

In this regard, Archer (1992: 1) defines transnational relations as the 'activities between individuals and groups in one state and individuals and groups in another state'. Another definition is that it is the 'contacts, coalitions, and interactions across State boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of government' (Nye and Keohane 1971: 330).

Since interest groups do not confine their activities to one state or to domestic policy issues only, they play a transnational role by lobbying governments across state borders. An interest group from a particular state is able to cross political boundaries and start a lobbying campaign within another country. In this sense, interest groups can intervene in policy arenas at a transnational level, to promote the

interests of their members, provide assistance, and promote scientific and technological research and the communication and advancement of ideological, cultural, and religious ideas (Ghils 1992). Stated differently, interest groups, like states, can cross international boundaries, communicate with each other, and set up networks or even alliances through which efforts are coordinated. In effect, interest groups, as transnational actors, can be considered older than the modern state.

In this regard, before the formation of the Westphalian state, in 1648, transnational actors, like trading organisations such as the British East India Company, played a leading role in the spread of ideas and ideologies. The state was not the only independent actor in world politics. Because of the spreading of ideas and ideologies, social, political, economic, and cultural actors ‘had to be subnational, transnational or supranational’ (Stern 2000: 246). Regarding ideas, non-state entities always had a transnational character in terms of the spread and formation of non-state actors. Stated more precisely, whenever political actors interacted, ‘assumptions, concepts, creeds, doctrines and dogmas could always be transmitted from one to another’ (Stern 2000: 246).

This is still the case in the contemporary era with relations between non-state entities driven by the process of globalisation.¹ Globalisation ‘refers to processes whereby social relations acquire relatively distance-less and borderless qualities, so that human lives are increasingly played out in the world as a single place. Social relations—that is, the countless and complex ways that people interact with and affect each other—are more and more being conducted and organized on the basis of a planetary unit’ (Scholte 1999: 14–15). Globalisation therefore has the effect that social relations are to an increasing extent conducted at a broader level than at the time before the Westphalian state. Thus, and because of globalisation, the world has become a relatively borderless social environment in which interest groups are operating (Scholte 1999).

Interest groups have also stake a claim in their dealings with the so-called main actors in world affairs—states. In this regard, Heywood (1997: 265) asserts that ‘in the closing decades of the twentieth century, interest group activity has increasingly adjusted to the impact of globalisation and the strengthening of supranational bodies. Amongst the groups best suited to take advantage of such shifts are charities and environmental campaigners (such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth) which already possess transnational structures and an international membership’. One of the possible reasons why interest groups, with an environmental agenda, are so adept to conform to globalisation trends is the nature of environmental problems facing humankind. Environmental problems are not localised to a single country. Many environmental problems cross state boundaries affecting regions and even the entire globe. To confront these transnational problems, interest groups have opted for the transnational approach to deal with these issues. So, it is a matter of fit for

¹Globalisation and internationalisation are two distinct processes. Internationalisation denotes ‘a process of intensifying connections between national domains’. The two activities are summarised as follows: ‘the international realm is a patchwork of bordered countries, while the global sphere is a web of transborder networks’ (Scholte 1999: 15).

purpose. In effect, the degree and nature of the problem influence the degree and nature of the proposed solution. Stated differently, the form of the problem follows the function of the interest group to tackle the problem.

Thus, in any event, the actions of interest groups *vis-à-vis* a number of institutions and governments included are becoming more transnational in magnitude (Ghils 1992). For instance, in 1992, Wolfgang Pricher² gave the following warning to the British Dam Society (BDS). He cogently notes that ‘a serious general countermovement...has already succeeded in reducing the prestige of dam engineering in the public eye, and it is starting to make work difficult for our profession’ (Pricher 1992). The ‘countermovement’ Pricher was referring to, consists of a number of interest groups, operating not only within state borders, but also transnationally. That being the case, interest groups have ‘global policy goals’ to conciliate (Payne 1996: 171). Thus, as one observer aptly puts it, ‘[i]n contrast to “interstate relations” taking place between the governments of two or more states, transnational interactions involve at least one party that is not governmental in character. In the process, the government of at least one of the interacting countries is bypassed’ (Soroos 1986: 13–14).

Stated in another way, interest groups do not only forge links with each other but at an increasing rate with other entities as well. Interest groups are energetic in a large variety of activities at the local, national, transnational, and international levels. They perform functions in all the various issue areas and especially in human rights, humanitarian, and environmental domains, to name but a few (Mingst 1995). Notwithstanding the nature of their interaction with other organisations, the transnational character of interest groups takes on a meaningful significance when the levels of interaction between them and other actors in domestic and international affairs are considered. At least three levels are identified: between interest groups themselves, between interest groups and intergovernmental organisations or agencies of these organisations, and between interest groups and governments. At all three levels, interest groups have put a considerable amount of global pressure on a wide range of issues and platforms by way of transnational campaigns and lobbying (Krut 1997).

Towards a Different Perspective on Interest Groups in Water Politics and Governance

Water resources management, in South Africa, in general, and the Orange-Senqu River, in particular, is consequently a tall order, with climatological, hydrological, and ethical considerations intersecting to make water resources management in this context quite a unique experience not only from an institutional, but also political, scientific, and ethical point of view. A concept or idea that plays an important role

²Former president of the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD).

in these dimensions is the water–energy–food security nexus. The concept has become somewhat ‘voguish’³ since researchers link the concept to consideration to meet increasing demand for these resources in a transparent and equitable manner (Lele et al. 2013). Researchers also point to the interdependent relationship between the three resources; if, for instance, the price of energy increases so too will the price of food rise (Gulati et al. 2013). The Lesotho Highlands Water Project is a manifestation of the water–energy–food nexus. Not only is the Project delivering more water to an expanding population and economic base in South Africa’s Gauteng Province, it is also generating much needed electricity for Lesotho. From an ethical perspective, many interest groups have voiced their concern that the displaced people will be worse off because of the project, since the reservoirs have flooded pastures and agricultural land.

What is more, from a research perspective, the water research community has a particular outlook on the problems facing South Africa, in terms of the above-mentioned aspects. The biophysical profile of the river basin highlights the natural variables influencing water resources management as well as the strategic importance of water resources in the Lesotho and South African economies. It also gives a first impression of the actors involved in its management: states. It is not wrong to devise such a profile and initial description of the Orange-Senqu River basin. Hydrology, for instance, is an important scientific discipline that is advancing human understanding of surface and subsurface water resources to such an extent that irrigation schemes and their impact on food production would not have been possible. Said differently, it would not be possible to debate the water–energy–food nexus without hydrology to guide us. Describing a river basin as consisting predominantly of states has the potential to instil a predominantly positivist paradigm, with the potential of placing more emphasis on biophysical processes and state actors in the political economy of a river system and the security considerations accompanying such economic aspects (e.g. Meissner 2013a, b, 2014a, b, c). This could blind us to the finer nuances of the individual Lesotho Highlanders’ water–energy–food nexus. Said differently, the water–energy–food security nexus is not only important from a macropolitical and economic perspective, but also from a human or individual security perspective. From a rational cost-benefit analysis, it is important to look at the river basin from such a perspective. It is also equally important to consider the human security needs of the Lesotho Highlanders, something rational choice would find difficult to explain because of its cost-benefit calculations.

A dominant positivist paradigm drives water resources management and the research thereof in South Africa (Meissner et al. 2012), especially when looking at water supply influenced by strategic considerations and biophysical elements. It is possible that the social or political scientists mentioned above, myself included, tried to emulate their colleagues from engineering, hydrology, and botany, such as Conley (1995, 1996), Basson et al. (1997), and Ashton (2000) to map the political and social dynamics of the Orange-Senqu River basin and in so doing try to get as

³I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this idea.

full a grasp of these dynamics of the river basin as possible. We therefore had a purposive goal in mind, to explain, albeit in a positivist manner, to the uninformed decision-maker that it is not only biophysical aspects that matter, but also political. Alas we have succeeded and failed. Political scientists have succeeded to explain why states do what they do (e.g. the signing of treaties) and how they interact with one another outside the realm of their treaties and the institutions they create and the nature and extent of the strategic importance of a river, like the Orange–Senqu, in the political economy of South Africa, its neighbours and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Be that as it may, we have also failed—we have not come out very strongly on the part of an alternative paradigm such as post-positivism and focussing on non-state actors as well as the framing of our questions in a different manner. Our questions were always framed in the ambit of the state as the ‘Supreme Being’ on the international stage and even the river basin. We cannot wish the state and its role in water politics and governance away, and this is certainly not my intention. On the contrary, the state must be kept inside our sphere of analysis, but our organising questions need to be different if we want to progress in our understanding of social phenomena in a natural scientific setting. If not, we will fail further and be kept from gaining in our understanding of agents in water politics and governance.

It is here where Hobson and Seabrooke’s (2007) notion of everyday international political economy (EIPE) and Katzenstein and Okawara’s (2001/2002) and Sil and Katzenstein’s (2010) idea of ‘analytical eclecticism’ start to play an important role.

If we should frame questions regarding governance, politics, and management outside the ambit of the dominant theoretical stances mentioned above, it will reveal ‘information at the local and transnational levels that tell us how the actions of the key players are contested [or supplemented] by everyday actions’ (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007: 10). It could also install a mode of thinking whereby different views from different theories and paradigms are amalgamated (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). In other words, it will broaden the research domain and we will ‘discover information about how everyday actions inform the dominant processes of [governance, politics, understanding and management]’, highlighting transformative moments and processes. This will sketch a more complete vista and move away from distortions (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007: 6) of how governance and politics operate in a multi-varied and complex social and natural environment. It is here where Hobson and Seabrooke’s (2007) notion of everyday international political economy juxtaposed with regulatory international political economy becomes appropriate. Table 1.1 summarises these.

The table is informative since it indicates a progressing of International Relations theory, which is applicable to governance and politics within the domestic and transnational domains (see Meissner 2001a, b, 2004a, b, c, 2012; Meissner and Jacobs 2014; Meissner and Ramasar 2014). This is an important observation. As mentioned earlier, progressive development of theory in any scientific discipline is necessary not only to broaden our understanding of reality but also to inform research agendas. In effect, theoretical progression begets policy progression and vice versa.

Table 1.1 Aims and approaches in regulatory and everyday IPE

	Regulatory IPE	Regulatory IPE	Everyday IPE
Organising question	Who governs?	Who benefits?	Who acts and how do their actions enable change?
Epistemology	Positivist/rationalist or interpretivist	Positivist/rationalist	Post-positivist/interpretivist and rationalist
Theoretical tradition	Neorealism/neoliberalism/systemic constructivism	Classical structuralism	Sociological/complexity/social constructivism
Unit of analysis	Great powers (e.g. USA), other states, international regimes, and ideational entrepreneurs	Capitalist world economy, structures of rule	Everyday actors interacting with elites and structures
Prime empirical focus	Supply of order and welfare maximisation by leaders	Maintenance of the powerful and the unequal distribution of benefits	Social transformative and regulatory processes enacted or informed, by everyday actions
Locus of agency	Top-down	Top-down	Bottom-up

Source Hobson and Seabrooke (2007: 6)

The rationale behind analytic eclecticism is to avoid paradigmatic compartmentalisation since this leads to a disjunction between the researcher and what he or she can offer the decision-maker. Arguing from a particular paradigm can become an obstacle of understanding even if it gives powerful insights. Analytic eclecticism does not discard established paradigms or traditions instead ‘it explores substantive relationships and revealing hidden connections among elements of seemingly incommensurable paradigm-bound theories, with an eye of generating novel insights that bear on policy debates and practical dilemmas. This requires an alternative way of thinking about the relationships among assumptions, concepts, theories, the organization of research, and real world problems’ (Sil and Katzenstein 2010: 2).

One argument would be to put forward complexity theory as the all-encompassing theory that explains all or at least many aspects found in nature and society. Even so, such an argument is bound to run into trouble because of the mere fact that complexity is considered superior or parsimonious for explaining and solving all problems. As such, it contains a high degree of error when relying on only one theoretical lens (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). Sil and Katzenstein (2010: 2) maintain that ‘...we can and should do a better job of recognizing and delineating relationships between concepts, observations, and causal stories originally constructed in different analytic perspectives’. This means that complexity would be limited in scope for it would be only one analytic perspective. A researcher, arguing from a complexity stance would ‘miss’ other perspectives because of the perception that complexity is all encompassing in explaining issues and phenomenon. What is more, complexity might be useful in explaining many elements at work in social-ecological systems, but it has little to offer decision-makers interested in bringing about change in society. Complexity is not a reliable blueprint and can

desensitise us to the possibility that the theory is wrong (Hirschman 1970; Tetlock 2005 in Sil and Katzenstein 2010). Furthermore, complexity is a theory and not a paradigm.

Analytical eclecticism tackles the issue of paradigmatic eclecticism at the ontological and epistemological levels. What divides paradigms are not the substantive claims about phenomena but their metatheoretical assumptions regarding 'how such claims should be developed and supported' (Sil and Katzenstein 2010: 4). It does not slice up complex social phenomena just for making them simple and easy to analyse. In other words, reductionism is not an underlying premise. Important substantive questions with relevant real-world application are in the offing by integrating empirical observations and causal stories. This brings about the 'promise of richer explanations' (Sil and Katzenstein 2010: 3). In other words, it facilitates the quantum leap from singular explanations of real-world problems to fuller explanations, alternatives, and solutions to such problems. Where paradigms have blind spots, they have, at the same time, useful insights into issues, challenges, and opportunities. There are therefore connections and complementarities between paradigms to exploit. This could lead to a situation where more useful theoretical and empirical insights could be generated (Sil and Katzenstein 2010).

Conclusion

The conceptualisation of non-state entities, as *interest group*, *pressure group*, *lobby*, and *NGO/INGO*, has a long history. Many scholars studying these entities usually define them within the subject matter they are examining. No matter what, I show that there are a number of definitions in Political Science and International Relations to describe them. The different conceptualisations of the terms *interest group*, *pressure group*, *lobby*, and *NGO/INGO* have caused considerable confusion within Political Sciences on what exactly an interest group is. In this chapter, it was shown that to argue over different definitions of these entities is not important. What is of essence is their role and activities in society. Of special importance is their relationship with the state, government, and international institutions, and their impact on state autonomy, and the governmental policy process. Following from interest groups' relationship with governments and other private sector actors, analytic eclecticism and the framing of problems from a non-state centric perspective, holds the promise of a more nuanced understanding. The study of interest group involvement in the Lesotho Highlands Water Project is an attempt at giving credence to the idea and practice of analytic eclecticism.

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