



Soft Power, Hard Data: How Emerging NGOs Lead Through Reciprocal Utility

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Abstract

As the United Nations (UN) navigates deep polarization alongside severe liquidity constraints, civil society's role has become critical yet contested. For emerging and small-scale non-governmental organizations (NGOs), institutional access remains structurally and politically restricted by established gatekeepers—powerful member states, committees, and super-NGOs controlling entry to political arenas and resources. Rather than treating the pursuit of relevance as a cynical competition, this paper investigates how emerging NGOs can leverage their moral identity to overcome these barriers. Bridging rationalist survival strategies with constructivist international relations theory, this study proposes a framework grounded in servant leadership and expressed through niche diplomacy and what it terms *reciprocal utility*: a strategy whereby actors accrue relational equity not by competing for status but by supplying indispensable technical, empirical, or coordinative capacity to resource-constrained institutions and established peers alike. The framework is tested through paired case studies of two Dutch peace organizations: PAX, which evolved into a nuclear-disarmament policy architect, and the United Network of Young Peacebuilders, a youth-led network that helped drive the advocacy producing the UN's Youth, Peace, and Security agenda. Despite structural differences, both achieved institutional standing through the same mechanism: translating normative commitments into the technical formats gatekeepers required. Austerity within the UN and

civil society fragmentation paradoxically widened the gaps this strategy is designed to fill. Aligning principles with actions is therefore not merely a moral ideal but a tactical necessity for relevance, providing the hard data and soft power crucial to closing the gap between abstract international mandates and local implementation.

Keywords: Niche Diplomacy, Non-Governmental Organizations, Peacebuilding, Reciprocal Utility, Servant Leadership, Soft Power, United Nations

1. Introduction

The last three decades have seen a massive expansion of the non-governmental sector, with 2021 estimates counting over 10 million non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating globally.¹ Yet, this growth presents a paradox in which the sheer volume of civil society actors has proliferated while meaningful access to international governance is restricted. As the United Nations (UN) struggles with relevance and multipolar gridlock amid shifting geopolitical dynamics and polycrises, pathways for emerging and grassroots NGOs to influence global policy have become increasingly crowded and heavily politicized. As the institution marks its eightieth anniversary, it faces a convergence of difficult realities: a fracturing geopolitical order, eroding norms, and severe liquidity shortages that threaten baseline operations.² While civil society engages with a variety of regional and international organizations (IOs), this paper focuses exclusively on the UN system. Since the UN functions as the central anchor of modern global governance, securing consultative status with its Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) remains the premier benchmark for NGO legitimacy.³ This makes it the ideal arena for evaluating strategies of institutional access. Consultative status grants the procedural rights—written statements, oral interventions, side events, and physical access to UN premises during key sessions—that convert civil society advocacy into formal institutional input, as without it, an NGO's substantive work has no codified channel into UN policy formulation.

Addressing these systemic failures requires a clear understanding of the specific non-state actors capable of intervening within the UN's legal framework. While the terms are often used interchangeably in casual discourse, NGOs are legally registered entities with formal constitutions capable of obtaining legal consultative status in furtherance of Article 71 of the UN Charter (1945), with its modern framework in ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31. They represent a specific, formalized subset of civil society, whereas civil society organizations (CSOs) serve as the broad umbrella term for all non-state actors, including social movements, informal groups, and ad-hoc coalitions.⁴ Within the formalized NGO category, influence is heavily stratified by scale and resources. At one extreme are dominant legacy actors, often termed super-NGOs, whose massive budgetary resources and institutional weight allow them to function as gatekeepers. Conversely, at the other extreme are emerging and small-scale NGOs—organizations entering the multilateral arena defined by severe constraints in funding, experience, and operational capacity. Since the formal NGO remains the primary, legally recognized vehicle for sustained institutional influence, this paper focuses strictly on this demographic. Therefore, while this paper draws upon broader sociological literature regarding movements and local actors, these terms specifically describe entities operating within, or attempting to formalize their access to, the NGO-UN ecosystem.

Even for formal entities, the path to institutional recognition is rarely as straightforward as the legal framework suggests. Instead, the landscape for emerging NGOs is becoming increasingly hostile. As Paul Kennedy notes, while nation-state structures are “palpably inadequate for the tasks ahead,” large member states often resist civil society integration until “sheer necessity forces a reconsideration.”⁵ This resistance is no longer just bureaucratic; it has become weaponized through institutional gatekeeping. In the multilateral context, “gatekeepers”—typically powerful member states, intergovernmental committees, or even dominant super-NGOs—control access to political arenas,

resources, and formal recognition.⁶ The Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, the gatekeeper for ECOSOC status, has evolved into a geopolitical theater where member states frequently use procedural deferrals to block accreditation for organizations working on sensitive issues such as human rights, transparency, and specific regional conflicts. Consequently, this presents a fundamental dilemma for emerging NGOs. They are essential to the solution of global problems yet structurally excluded from the venues where those solutions are debated.

A new variable, however, has shifted this dynamic—the UN’s severe financial crisis. As of early 2026, the UN Secretariat faces a liquidity shortfall exceeding \$1.5 billion USD, leading to hiring freezes, post reductions, and curtailment of essential services.⁷ While devastating for the institution, this austerity presents a counter-intuitive opportunity for civil society. As the UN is forced to cut internal posts—particularly in research, communications, and field monitoring—it increasingly relies on external partners to sustain mandates. The “necessity” that Kennedy predicted has arrived, not through political will, but through financial imperative.⁸

Against this backdrop, how can an emerging NGO establish relevance? This paper argues the answer lies in the framework of servant leadership.⁹ By connecting moral identity and strategic utility, organizations can gain power not through aggressive competition, but through the alignment of stated principles and actions. By proactively filling critical gaps in technical expertise and public communication, small NGOs generate relational equity—an intangible form of institutional trust and social capital—required to bypass political gatekeepers.¹⁰ Therefore, commitment to genuine, non-transactional service is how emerging NGOs translate their technical work into the deep institutional trust needed for lasting political influence.

The subsequent analysis first evaluates the tension between formal ECOSOC status and the political barriers within the Committee on NGOs, before exploring the Department of Global Communications (DGC) as a service-oriented alternative. Next, paired case studies of PAX and the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY), supplemented by illustrative reference to the ICRC, HALO Trust, and ICBL where their longer institutional records illuminate the relational mechanics under examination, demonstrate that niche diplomacy translates into policy influence across markedly different resource conditions. The paper concludes by applying this servant leadership framework to the practical realities of NGOs navigating the current multilateral crisis.

2. The Normative Shift:

The Evolving Role of NGOs in International Relations

The rise of the non-governmental sector is widely recognized as a fundamental “powershift” in global governance.¹¹ As international challenges increasingly outpace the capacity of traditional state-centric mechanisms, NGOs have mobilized to fill the void, going so far as to being hailed as the “answer to war.”¹² While member states heavily rely on the self-mobilization of civil society to fill operational gaps on the ground, they remain highly protective of their decision-making authority. States naturally resist formal institutional integration with non-state actors unless forced by functional limitations. As institutional scholars such as Jonas Tallberg note, member states typically concede formal access only when they suffer from severe “information asymmetry” or operational deficits that they cannot resolve internally.¹³

Despite this political resistance, state reliance on civil society continues to grow because of the specialized knowledge, implementation capacity, and community networks these actors provide. Functioning often as the foremost experts in their fields, NGOs act as instruments of normative power. They do not just distribute aid where state mechanisms fail. As John Trent and Laura Schnurr argue, their influence is distinctively political:

[A] crucial factor in getting states to act is pressure from domestic private groups, foreign NGOs, and international organizations. Whether it is in a liberal democracy or in a repressive government, non-state actors often succeed over time in exerting influence on states to respect human rights.¹⁴

This ability to shame or persuade governments to alter policy direction validates the constructivist view that non-state actors are essential to norm formation. Since they are not constrained by the same diplomatic protocols as states, NGOs can tackle niche areas and raise awareness of such issues as landmines or environmental security that may otherwise be ignored in traditional statecraft.

The academic evaluation of this role, however, is not static. During the early 2000s, scholarship adopted a highly critical stance, frequently questioning whether NGOs were doing more harm than good or had any impact at all.¹⁵ Broader debates emerged regarding their lack of democratic accountability and legitimacy.¹⁶ Today, their systemic importance is largely accepted, with questions pivoting towards effectiveness, particularly in complex negotiations.¹⁷ Scholars now focus on the specific variables that allow NGOs to positively address challenges as well as alter state and IO behaviour.¹⁸

While existing scholarship extensively analyzes state-NGO relations, it tends to trap this dynamic within a strict binary of either “complementary partners or competitive rivals.”¹⁹ This rigid framework creates two significant theoretical blind spots. First, the literature is heavily skewed toward large, established incumbents. As Thomas Davies notes, “much of the existing literature has been compartmentalized” by issue-area or treats civil society as a monolith.²⁰ Existing studies frequently center on super-NGOs that already possess vast resources, creating a void regarding how small, emerging actors cultivate influence in an environment characterized by the incumbent dominance and rigid UN

gatekeeping.²¹ Second, when scholars do examine how emerging NGOs navigate this competitive civil society arena, they often apply a rationalist, materialist lens. Mainstream political science and institutional scholars, such as Jonas Tallberg, Clifford Bob, and Alexander Cooley, frame NGO strategy predominantly as a matter of Darwinian survival. In this view, NGOs are little more than interest groups lobbying for market share and resources. Institutional access is understood as a transactional trade based on information asymmetry whereby the UN lacks data, the NGO possesses it, and a deal is struck. As a result, if a movement adjusts its strategy to secure funding or access, rationalists frame the pivot as a surrender of authentic identity.²²

Constructivist scholars such as Margaret Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, and Martha Finnemore offer the inverse perspective, rightfully emphasizing the principled, norm-driven nature of transnational advocacy. However, this framework often obscures the adversarial mechanics required for an emerging NGO to secure a seat at the table. By framing civil society actors as “norm entrepreneurs” who build networks based on shared ethical values, constructivism persuasively explains *why* NGOs mobilize, but it frequently understates the tactical realities of *how* they navigate heavily guarded institutions.²³ The constructivist reliance on moral persuasion and “information politics” assumes a relatively open space for ideas from civil society, overlooking the procedural obstruction and severe resource deficits facing organizations today.²⁴ This leaves the literature in a theoretical deadlock. Rationalists map the brutal mechanics of organizational survival but ignore the moral soul of civil society, treating principled advocates as mere lobbyists. Constructivists champion the moral identity of NGOs but fail to offer a pragmatic roadmap for bypassing political gatekeepers.

What both perspectives miss is the structural source of NGO authority. Thomas Ward argues that NGOs constitute “the moral high ground” of the third sector, differentiated from business and politics “by their

commitment to values,” such that “their institutional core values may be their most important ‘commodity.’”²⁵ Whereas self-interest motivates markets, “the starting point in the political economy of NGOs... is identifying a problem and then ‘feeling the call’ to work toward its resolution.”²⁶ This distinction is not decorative. An NGO’s structural power derives not from coercive resources or market position but from the perceived consistency between its stated principles and its actions, which means that strategic adaptation and moral identity cannot be analytically separated in the way the rationalist-constructivist split implies.

To resolve this deadlock, this paper argues that the very behaviours observed by rationalists—the exchange of data and adaptation to institutional needs—can and should be viewed through a normative, ethical lens. When an emerging NGO fulfills, or helps fulfill a state or IO’s objective, it is not necessarily executing a cynical, transactional trade. Rather, it may be making a principled, restorative choice that generates the relational equity required for long-term influence. By reframing this exchange as what this paper terms *reciprocal utility*, it bridges the theoretical gap between survival and morality.

To test this framework, this paper examines two distinct non-governmental actors, PAX and the UNOY, both peace organizations based in the Netherlands. These two cases sit in disconnected scholarly conversations. PAX is most extensively analyzed within the literature on humanitarian disarmament and the *UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW), while UNOY’s role in *UN Security Council (UNSCR) Resolution 2250* has been treated within the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda. Pairing them here is therefore a deliberate cross-sectoral test of whether a single strategic logic, a reciprocal utility, operates across markedly different organizational types and resource conditions. Before demonstrating how these two organizations synthesized strategic survival and moral identity in practice, it is first necessary

to examine the institutional battleground they both navigated: the pursuit of formal consultative status with ECOSOC.

3. The Institutional Architecture: Gatekeepers and Pathways

For NGOs, connecting to the UN is often considered crucial, providing far more than a badge of legitimacy. It offers a global platform for advocacy and direct access to the intergovernmental sphere.²⁷ The UN itself recognizes its own reliance on civil society, acknowledging in numerous resolutions that the implementation of internationally agreed development goals is functionally impossible without the technical capacity and local reach of civil society.²⁸ Indeed, increased participation of NGOs at the UN has been argued to enhance the legitimacy of the institution itself.²⁹ However, the mechanisms for this connection are complex and bifurcated. To navigate this system, emerging NGOs must understand the stark divergence between the legal rules of accreditation and the political realities that functionally govern them.

Under Article 71 of the UN Charter, ECOSOC serves as the primary entry point for NGOs seeking to shape policy formulation, hosting over 6,600 organizations with consultative status as of early 2026.³⁰ The architecture of this system heavily favors specialization with General Consultative Status reserved for large, international NGOs capable of covering the full ECOSOC agenda. Special Consultative Status is designed for actors with specialized competence in a narrowly defined field.³¹ This distinction indicates that small actors gain relevance by deepening their specific technical value rather than by broadening their scope.

Beyond formal rights, this status unlocks what scholars term “corridor diplomacy.”³² Informal interactions at the UN frequently yield more substantive results than official plenary speeches.³³ As one NGO representative noted, “discussions in the coffee lounges and corridors are as important as, if not more important than, the official speeches.”³⁴

Physical access to these spaces allows emerging organizations to organically expand their networks and forge high-level partnerships.³⁵

Although the accreditation framework appears strictly legal, the actual execution and approval is fiercely political. The process is not managed by independent experts, but by the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations—a subsidiary body comprising 19 member states that convenes twice per year, elected to rotating four-year terms based on regional distribution.³⁶ The Committee has been widely criticized for devolving into a geopolitical theater where state interests routinely override civil society engagement. Eleanor Openshaw from the International Service for Human Rights captures this dynamic clearly: “[A]ll of the states in the committee are playing the game. They have an interest. Some, however, are much, much more obviously operating through political interest to keep independent organizations out.”³⁷

The primary weapon of exclusion within this committee is the deferral tactic. While the Committee technically operates on majority votes, its preference for consensus allows a single member state to indefinitely block an organization by asking endless procedural questions (e.g., inquiries regarding funding sources).³⁸ Since outright rejection votes are rare, the Committee defers, trapping an application in legal limbo for years without ever forcing a formal decision. Any single member can unilaterally stall an application.³⁹ The data underscores the severity of this bottleneck: during the early 2025 regular session, the Committee approved just 27.6% of total applications—marking a modest increase of 6% from the preceding year—with the approval rate for already-deferred organizations plummeting to a mere 8.9% compared to 55.8% for new applications.⁴⁰ Geopolitical rivalries dictate these outcomes far more than NGOs’ actual qualifications. In the absence of Russia on the committee—voted out in 2022⁴¹—China, Pakistan, and India are now responsible for initiating nearly 50% of all deferral questions.⁴² Specifically, “Pakistan regularly blocks Indian NGOs” while “India blocks their own NGOs and Pakistani NGOs.”⁴³ China routinely defers groups

working on human rights issues, particularly those related to Tibet or the Uyghurs. Therefore, organizations focused on what is framed as “non-human-rights” issues have roughly “double the chance of being accredited on any given day.”⁴⁴

When the front door of ECOSOC is blocked by such political gatekeeping, NGOs can pursue association with the DGC which offers a backdoor. Unlike ECOSOC status, which is policy-oriented and controlled by member states, DGC association is communication-oriented and granted by the UN Secretariat. Through this pathway, NGOs provide a technical service as information multipliers, disseminating UN messaging to the public. In exchange, associated NGOs receive institutional access and grounds passes through the Secretariat, effectively bypassing member state committee procedural gridlocks.⁴⁵ However, while the DGC pathway successfully circumvents political gatekeeping and grants physical UN access, it does not grant the right to submit written statements, intervene in formal debates, or directly influence negotiations. Therefore, for emerging NGOs whose objective is systemic policy change rather than public advocacy, the DGC association alone is insufficient. Securing influence at the level of international policy still requires navigating ECOSOC’s politicized accreditation process.

When institutional backdoors are insufficient, NGOs can leverage what Keck and Sikkink notably term the “boomerang pattern.”⁴⁶ This model describes how local actors seek out international allies who can apply pressure to their state externally when blocked or actively repressed by their government.⁴⁷ Kerstin Martens notes that this dynamic provides a precise model for how NGOs use IOs as a “detour” to bypass repressive state gatekeepers. A prime example is Human Rights in China (HRIC), an NGO founded by Chinese scholars in 1989. As HRIC sought to monitor the implementation of international human rights standards, China voted against the organization in the Committee on NGOs when HRIC applied for consultative status. Instead of accepting exclusion,

HRIC became a member of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) in 2001, an international organization that already held General Consultative Status. By attending UN meetings as part of FIDH's delegation, HRIC successfully bypassed China's blockade to deliver its reports.⁴⁸ Beyond bilateral partnerships, the UN provides codified pathways for structural access, most notably the Major Groups and Other Stakeholders (MGOS) mechanism. Mandated by General Assembly Resolution 67/290, this architecture allows CSOs to participate through designated umbrella constituencies without independent accreditation though its functional entry points remain limited.⁴⁹ The critical, strategic lesson for small NGOs is that when an organization cannot secure an independent seat at the table, it can exercise influence by serving as a resource for a larger umbrella organization. Concurrently, it demonstrates how these alliances allow emerging NGOs to utilize the institutional weight of established partners to exert pressure on repressive states.

4. Overcoming Fragmentation through Complementarity

While UN institutional barriers represent the external challenge to access, emerging NGOs also face the internal challenge of a crowded civil society marketplace, where a growing number of actors compete for limited resources.⁵⁰ This expansion has created a dynamic where the proliferation of actors can dilute collective impact. As Alexander Cooley and James Ron argue in their analysis of the "NGO Scramble," intense competition for limited donor funding and institutional contracts creates a political economy of "organizational insecurity."⁵¹ In this hyper-competitive environment, reactionary institutional survival often takes precedence over strategy, forcing emerging NGOs to navigate a two-front battle: they must view peer organizations as economic rivals in a zero-sum game for resources, while simultaneously contending with member states as political gatekeepers.⁵²

This dynamic generates a perpetual coordination crisis. Although NGOs may appear "informally cordial in public," the reality is frequently

characterized by “signs of competition and rivalry in the background.”⁵³ When transposed into the resource-constrained UN where funding and institutional recognition are zero-sum games, NGOs routinely duplicate activities rather than coordinate them. Shammi Ahmed identifies this rivalry as the “main obstacle to effective coordination,” noting that information sharing is viewed with suspicion:

[S]ome NGOs are thought not to be open, they fear to be accountable to others, because they could be having something to hide. It is also thought that mistrust of others is a kind of survival instinct. The NGOs offer jobs and survival to people, who view coordination as working oneself out of the job. The other obstacle to effective coordination lies in the fact that coordination is viewed as some form of control. This then implies some form of leadership, which could be either imposed or volunteered. If it has to be volunteered by one member, then others have to accept and legitimize it. Therefore coordination has to do with power relations, and some members may either refuse to be controlled or not accept the legitimacy of the leadership in the coordination.⁵⁴

This internal fragmentation severely reduces the leverage of civil society relative to member states. When a multitude of NGOs compete to speak on the same broad, normative issues, their advocacy can dissolve into institutional noise. When they fail to coordinate, they become highly susceptible to state actors who can easily divide, dismiss, or ignore them. Furthermore, perceptions that NGOs are competing with the state for service delivery or moral authority trigger a defensive reaction from governments, reinforcing the political environment in which gatekeeping tactics like those deployed by the UN Committee on NGOs can persist.

Reciprocal Utility as a Strategic Framework

To enhance effectiveness in this saturated environment, emerging NGOs must pivot from a strategy of competition to a framework of niche diplomacy and complementarity. This approach directly resolves Ahmed's coordination dilemma through a sequential, two-step maneuver. First, by adopting what Andrew F. Cooper terms niche diplomacy—a concept developed to describe how middle-power states generate disproportionate influence by concentrating resources on defined policy specialties rather than competing across the full diplomatic spectrum—this paper extends that logic to the NGO context.⁵⁵ The underlying mechanism is identical: a small actor that cannot match the breadth of larger incumbents can nonetheless achieve outsized relevance by becoming indispensable within a narrower domain. Applied to civil society, this means a small NGO removes itself from the crowded generalist competition. It no longer fights for the same broad funding pool. Instead, it provides a specialized asset that others lack, such as a specific perspective, data on a micro-region, or technical expertise.

Second, this specialization enables true complementarity, representing the operational application of what this paper proposes as *reciprocal utility*. This paper defines reciprocal utility as the strategic yet ethically grounded mechanism through which resource-constrained actors secure institutional access by providing indispensable technical, empirical, or coordinative capacity to gatekeepers facing deficits. In this sense, *utility* refers to the practical expertise or local connections an NGO offers to a gatekeeper facing resource limits or operational constraints. The *reciprocal* element means that, in exchange for these vital services, the gatekeeper grants the NGO the formal access and political standing it needs to be institutionally credible. Unlike Keck and Sikkink's "information politics," which relies on moral persuasion and public shaming, or Cooley and Ron's account of NGO behavior driven by competition for donor funding and institutional contracts, reciprocal utility operates at a different register. It secures standing not through

moral pressure or market competition, but through the provision of targeted expertise.

Instead of replicating the broad mandates of well-funded super-NGOs or challenging the sovereignty of states, emerging actors identify and occupy specific niches where established actors lack capacity or credibility. This specialization naturally lowers the defenses of potential rivals because it appeals to institutional needs rather than moral abstraction.⁵⁶ Therefore, while advocacy articulates normative goals, specialized utility provides the institutional foundation that makes advocacy credible. For emerging NGOs, then, the path to influence lies less in competing on the breadth of established actors than in cultivating irreplaceability within a narrowly defined domain. By positioning themselves as indispensable knowledge brokers and technical partners rather than ideological critics, emerging NGOs can transform the dynamics of rivalry into synergy.

While this paper primarily serves a theory-building function—bridging rationalist mechanics with constructivist ethics—relational equity is not purely abstract. Although fundamentally an intangible form of social capital grounded in trust and mutual obligation, it can be empirically observed in multilateral settings through distinct institutional indicators.⁵⁷ For an emerging NGO, the accumulation of *relational equity* is measurable through the frequency of its inclusion in closed-door committee consultations, explicit citation of its technical data in UN reports, and the successful navigation of alternative access pathways, such as securing association with the DGC when formal ECOSOC routes are blocked.

The following case studies of PAX and UNOY demonstrate this trajectory in practice. While PAX illustrates how a grassroots movement transitioned over half a century from the politics of protest to the architecture of policy, UNOY reveals the same strategic logic operating under resource constraints within a five-year timeline.

5. Paired Case Studies: PAX and UNOY

To establish the empirical reach of reciprocal utility, this section proceeds through a paired comparison, analyzing two distinct Dutch civil society peace movements across different eras, resource capacities, and policy domains. The first case, PAX, traces how a faith-based European peace movement evolved over half a century into an architect of nuclear disarmament policy. The second, UNOY, follows how a small, under-resourced global youth network helped secure the unanimous adoption of UNSC Resolution 2250 in less than five years of focused advocacy.⁵⁸ The two cases differ in era, sector, and institutional resources, but share a strategic sequence. In each, the organization secured access by performing functions the institution could not, or would not, perform itself.

PAX is included not as a model that emerging NGOs can replicate wholesale, but because its trajectory demonstrates the strategic mechanism over a long-time horizon. Embedded within the institutional, financial, and moral infrastructure of the Catholic Church, PAX entered the multilateral arena with reservoirs of legitimacy that contemporary peers cannot expect to draw on. What the case nonetheless shows is that even with these legacy advantages, moral standing alone did not produce policy change. Influence followed the strategic transition from advocacy to technical service. UNOY, by contrast, faced the structural conditions most emerging NGOs continue to confront: minimal funding, no inherited platform, and an increasingly unsympathetic institutional climate. Its case tests whether the same strategic logic remains effective once the legacy resources are stripped away.

The Historical Precedent: PAX

PAX traces its origins to a radical act of postwar reconciliation. The organization was founded in 1945 as Pax Christi by French Bishop Pierre-Marie Théas, who had preached “love your enemies” while imprisoned by the Nazis, together with the schoolteacher Marthe

Dortel-Claudot.⁵⁹ Initially focused on Franco-German reconciliation, the movement mobilized 25,000 youth to cross the border in 1949—a display of solidarity predating formal European integration by years. Yet, as the Cold War intensified, the organization concluded that moral witness alone could not constrain industrial-scale violence. During the 1960s, Pax Christi adopted what it called a “broader approach,” supplementing its marches and prayers with institutionalized conflict research and the founding of the Inter-church Peace Council (IKV) to engage policymakers directly.⁶⁰

This pivot deepened the activist tradition rather than abandoning it. By 1983, IKV-Pax Christi had leveraged its dual capacity to co-organize an anti-nuclear demonstration drawing 550,000 participants in The Hague.⁶¹ The organization expanded operationally into conflict zones, contributing technical support to peace processes including the Juba talks on South Sudan.⁶² In 2006, Pax Christi Netherlands and IKV merged to form PAX. Its current portfolio—disarmament advocacy, conflict-zone documentation, and legal support for victims—mixes grassroots mobilization with technical research. This hybrid model contributed materially to the negotiation of the TPNW and to the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), in which PAX served as a coalition steering member.⁶³

Two features of this trajectory bear directly on the present argument. First, PAX secured institutional access through ECOSOC consultative status, granted in 1979 via Pax Christi International, and through the technical credibility of its reporting infrastructure rather than through the size of its mobilization base.⁶⁴ Second, PAX recognized the strategic risk of overextension and disciplined its scope accordingly. In its own historical reflection, the organization noted that “the broadening of our scope that began in the 1960s has taken us in many directions. We are many things. So a little more focus would not hurt.”⁶⁵ The eventual concentration on three pillars—safeguarding civilians, stopping armed

conflict, and stimulating peaceful societies—functioned both as a moral commitment and as a survival mechanism in a crowded NGO advocacy market. PAX expressed the pragmatic logic underlying this concentration in its own terms: “you cannot always stop wars, but you can prevent arms trade with countries that violate human rights.”⁶⁶

PAX’s faith-based infrastructure also provided what most emerging NGOs lack: a transnational membership base, established donor pipelines, and moral standing that predated any UN encounter. Even with these advantages, however, moral standing alone did not produce the TPNW. The treaty followed the *Don’t Bank on the Bomb* reports, which translated normative opposition against nuclear weapons into the financial data through which institutional investors could be publicly identified and pressured to divest.⁶⁷ What is replicable in the PAX case, then, is not the resource base but the strategic posture: a willingness to translate moral commitments into technical formats that policymakers can use.

UNOY and the YPS Agenda

If PAX demonstrates the mechanism under favorable conditions, UNOY demonstrates it under unfavorable ones. Founded in 1989 as the United Nations of Youth Foundation and renamed the United Network of Young Peacebuilders in 2003,⁶⁸ ECOSOC conferred UNOY with consultative status in 2010.⁶⁹ UNOY had, at the time of its 2012-2015 advocacy push for what would become UNSCR 2250, a network of roughly 40 youth-led member organizations operating from a small secretariat in The Hague.⁷⁰ It held no diplomatic platform, sent advocacy delegations of three to five young people to New York at a time, and operated under the resource constraints typical of the youth-led peacebuilding organizations.⁷¹ Drawing on interviews with members of the advocacy coalition pushing for a Security Council resolution on youth and peacebuilding, including those from UNOY, Helen Berents documents that UN interlocutors repeatedly dismissed advocates of what would become the YPS agenda by warning that the UNSC was “tired” of

thematic resolutions and that any youth-focused resolution was “never going to fly.”⁷²

The structural problem facing youth advocates was not absent normative content but absent strategic relevance as actors rather than as threats. Through the early 2000s, member states framed youth either as passive victims of conflict or, more frequently, as a “youth bulge” demographic threat—a category that had returned to prominence amid the policy panic over violent extremism triggered by the rise of ISIS in 2013.⁷³ Youth were thus already legible to the UNSC under its hard-security mandate, but only as a problem to be contained, not as agents capable of contributing to peace. Conventional rights-based advocacy that argued youth had a “right” to participate⁷⁴ failed to change this narrative because it did not address the security fears that already animated member states’ engagement with youth issues.⁷⁵

UNOY’s advocacy succeeded by reorienting around those anxieties rather than against them. Working as a leading youth-led member of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding from 2013 onwards (the body was formed in 2012 and renamed the Global Coalition on YPS in 2018), UNOY supplied the youth-led leadership and credibility that the coalition’s advocacy required, while drawing on the Working Group’s pre-existing expertise and institutional access. The Working Group brought together more than forty UN bodies, NGOs, donors, and civil society actors, allowing UNOY to extend its reach without competing for resources against larger incumbents. Critically, advocates strategically engaged the counter-violent-extremism (CVE) agenda already prioritized by UNSC members, at times exploiting it, at times contesting it. This allowed them to introduce a youth-as-positive-actors framing to enter formal discussions under cover of the security concerns its members already were prepared to address.⁷⁶ This is the reciprocal utility logic at its most direct application. The technical and analytic content the advocates supplied was content the gatekeepers themselves sought to legislate on a problem they had already prioritized.

This alignment found its diplomatic vehicle in Jordan. In April 2015, with Jordan in the UNSC presidency, the Council held an open debate on “The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace.”⁷⁷ The debate was followed in August 2015 by the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security in Amman, co-organized by Jordan, the UN, and civil society partners including UNOY itself.⁷⁸ The Forum produced the *Amman Youth Declaration*, which supplied much of the operational language for the eventual resolution.⁷⁹ Unlike typical UN youth conferences where outcome documents are negotiated by government officials, the Amman Declaration was drafted by a youth-led team including UNOY members, reflecting the depth of institutional integration advocates had achieved.⁸⁰ On December 9, 2015, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2250, the first thematic resolution to recognize youth as positive contributors to peace and security and to codify five operational pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration.⁸¹

The reciprocal utility loop did not close with adoption, but rather deepened. UNSCR 2250 itself mandated an Independent Progress Study on youth’s contributions to peacebuilding, and the resulting institutional demand for evidence directly elevated UNOY’s role. Between 2016 and 2017, UNOY and Search for Common Ground administered the Global Survey on Youth, Peace and Security, generating the first dataset on youth-led peacebuilding organizations.⁸² The resulting publication, *Mapping a Sector*, supplied a key empirical input to *The Missing Peace*, the first Independent Progress Study commissioned under the resolution and presented to the UNSC in April 2018.⁸³ The subsequent adoption of UNSCR 2535 in 2020 mandated biennial Secretary-General reports on YPS implementation, further institutionalizing the data-supply role the Global Coalition performs.⁸⁴ UNOY remains a co-chair of what was renamed the Global Coalition on YPS in 2018, a position it has held continuously since 2013.⁸⁵ Like PAX, UNOY translated this access—initiated by ECOSOC status in 2010—into a position of institutional architecture rather than marginal observation.

Cross-Case Analysis

The two trajectories differ in nearly every empirical respect: confessional versus secular, multi-decade versus compressed, nuclear disarmament versus youth security. Yet they share a strategic sequence. In both cases, the organizations achieved institutional standing not solely by relying on normative advocacy, but by coupling principled engagement with the production of knowledge or coordination capacity that the institution required. PAX, for example, supplied financial data on nuclear weapons financing that no state actor was equipped, or politically willing, to compile. UNOY supplied the demographic and organizational mapping that the UNSC, the Peacebuilding Support Office, and the Progress Study process required to translate the abstract category of “youth” into a workable policy priority. In each case, the asymmetry between what the organization could offer and what the institution lacked converted into political access.

The cases also share a willingness to align tactically with concerns that fell outside the organizations’ core normative commitments. PAX engaged with private-sector divestment campaigns—a market mechanism alien to its theological starting point—because divestment data could exert pressure in a way that prayer could not. UNOY accepted the proximity of the YPS framing to the CVE agenda, despite the analytical risks of that proximity, because the CVE entry point was the only one open in 2015. In both instances, the organizations preserved their normative commitments while accepting the institutional language and entry points necessary to be heard.

What the comparison establishes, beyond what either case could establish alone, is that the strategic logic of reciprocal utility is not an artifact of legacy resources. PAX achieved its policy influence with substantial institutional inheritance. UNOY achieved comparable influence with almost none. The strategy of aligning organizational expertise with institutional gaps and accepting the partial reframing

this requires operates across resource conditions. The next section examines the strategic implications of that mechanism.

6. Strategic Implications

The trajectories of PAX and UNOY translate into a set of practical lessons for emerging NGOs navigating the competitive UN landscape—namely, deliberate specialization, principled alignment with state interests, and the construction of a localized empirical foundation that can be scaled into global policy. Just as middle-power states like Canada and Norway generate influence not through raw material power but through technical specialization, emerging NGOs cannot effectively compete in broad, generalized advocacy against established super-NGOs.⁸⁶ They must instead identify and occupy the niches that resourced incumbents have left exposed.

Operationalizing Niche Diplomacy

In both cases, the move toward strategic specialization, the first lesson, was not an abstract design choice but a survival adjustment. PAX narrowed its focus deliberately and reflectively, recognizing that the post-1960s expansion of its mandate had diluted its political traction. UNOY arrived at a similar destination by a different route: a sustained period of rhetoric arguing that broad, rights-based youth advocacy was politically unviable which led the organization into tighter alignment with the security concerns Council member states were already prepared to act on.⁸⁷ Whether disciplined from within or compelled externally, the result was the same. Each organization came to occupy a defined micro-niche—nuclear weapons financing in PAX's case, the operational architecture of youth participation in UNOY's—and stopped competing in the crowded marketplace of generalized peace advocacy, a posture both organizations sustained through, and which in turn deepened, their ECOSOC standing.

The strategic insight runs in both directions. PAX's experience indicates that an organization with substantial inherited resources still benefits

from voluntary self-restriction in narrowing its mandate. UNOY's suggests that for organizations without those resources, restriction is not so much a strategic choice as the only viable entry point available. Within the nomenclature of niche diplomacy, the second case is the more instructive. It demonstrates that scarcity can be converted into specialization, and specialization into influence, without the prior accumulation of legitimacy that PAX enjoyed.

Principled Alignment with State Interests

The second lesson concerns posture toward states. Both organizations declined the adversarial framing that would have rendered them politically illegible to the institutions they sought to influence, and both did so by identifying specific points at which states' existing interests intersected with their normative goals. PAX recognized that the Dutch government's status as a major global trader gave it unusual leverage over arms transfers, and channeled its advocacy toward the use of that leverage rather than against the principle of trade itself.⁸⁸ UNOY recognized that the UNSC's preoccupation with CVE and concerns over youth as potential violent actors—however awkward a fit with the youth-as-positive-actors framing—served as the primary entry point through which youth participation could become an international peace and security matter rather than a question of domestic social policy or foreign policy concern.⁸⁹ Both moves illustrate Cecilia Albin's observation that NGO involvement is favored by gatekeepers when it appeals to:

...interests of participating governments, possession of needed expertise, effective lobbying, framing of issues as wider global or human concerns and public mobilization over these, and plentiful funding.⁹⁰

Albin's last factor, "plentiful funding," is the one on which the two cases diverge sharply.⁹¹ PAX possessed it; UNOY did not. The fact that UNOY nonetheless secured policy outcomes commensurate with PAX suggests

that funding, while able to lower the cost of the reciprocal utility strategy, is not strictly necessary to it. The other four elements—appeal to government interests, technical expertise, effective lobbying, and capacity to frame an issue as a global concern—are reproducible by organizations operating at much lower resource thresholds, provided they are willing to translate their concerns into the language gatekeepers respond to.

The Local-Global Nexus

The third lesson concerns the empirical foundation on which global advocacy rests. Both organizations built their influence at the multi-lateral level on a basis of localized research, and their effectiveness at the global level was inseparable from that base. UNOY's case is the more evident illustration as the *Mapping a Sector* survey reached 399 youth-led organizations generating the first systematic dataset on a population the UN system had previously discussed only in conceptual terms.⁹² PAX operated across a longer time horizon and a broader range of sectors, but the same principle held in its disarmament work: the *Don't Bank on the Bomb* reports succeeded politically because they translated localized financial-research findings into a format that could pressure named institutional investors.⁹³ In each case, the credibility of the global advocacy was tethered to the specificity of data underpinning it.

Sustaining this dual posture—operating as a localized researcher and a global advocate at once—requires an organization to manage what would otherwise read as a contradiction. PAX articulates this duality in its own terms: “All our research has made us experts but we remain activists, prepared to mount the barricades.”⁹⁴ The point generalizes. Effective NGOs of this kind are neither purely insider technical contractors vulnerable to co-optation, nor purely outsider activists vulnerable to dismissal as ideological. They are both simultaneously, and the relational competence required to hold the two roles together is what the next section examines.

7. Relational Strategies for Influence

The relational competence required to hold the dual posture together is the focus of this section. While the strategic mechanisms identified in the preceding analysis—niche specialization, principled alignment, and the local-global empirical nexus—are illustrated by PAX and UNOY, the ethical foundations on which those mechanisms depend extend beyond what either case can demonstrate alone. This section therefore draws on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), HALO Trust, and the ICBL—paradigmatic cases with a documented record of scaling technical service into global authority—as well as management and ethical theory to articulate the relational logic that the service-first posture requires. Technical expertise provides the currency of influence, but the mechanism of its delivery is human relationship. While hard data is necessary to establish credibility and demonstrate impact, the ability to build trust with the diplomats and officials who represent sovereign states—the essence of soft power—is equally critical for survival.⁹⁵ This section examines how ethical frameworks, specifically servant leadership and the alignment of principles and actions, function as strategic tools for overcoming the skepticism often directed at new and emerging actors.

The Servant Leadership Framework

In a realist international system characterized by competition for limited resources, emerging NGOs often instinctively adopt aggressive postures to gain visibility.⁹⁶ This mimics the very state-centric power dynamics that civil society aims to critique. A more effective strategy can be found by transposing Robert K. Greenleaf's management theory of servant leadership into the multilateral arena. While Greenleaf's framework originated in organizational management literature, translating it into the multilateral space reveals a critical dynamic for international relations (IR). Where traditional IR frameworks presume that emerging actors must rely on either coercive leverage (realism), institutionalist bargaining (liberalism), or adversarial norm-shaming (constructivism), servant leadership suggests that asymmetric institu-

tional power can be navigated through what this paper terms the *service-first posture*. Greenleaf posited that authority is freely granted “in proportion to the clearly evident servant stature of the leader.”⁹⁷ For an emerging NGO, this means prioritizing the functional mandates of the UN over immediate brand visibility. This service-first posture dissolves the natural defensiveness of established gatekeepers, functioning not as an act of submission, but as a calculated choice to build influence through specialized contribution. In the lexicon of IR, this operational humility is not merely a moral posture but serves as a mechanism for generating what Joseph Nye terms *soft power*, which is the ability to shape the preferences of state actors through attraction and cooperative appeal rather than coercion.⁹⁸

A purist objection to this transposition deserves direct address. Servant leadership, in Greenleaf’s original formulation, is grounded in the leader’s primary motivation to serve. Critics may therefore argue that an NGO that adopts a service posture in order to accumulate institutional standing has corrupted the framework, instrumentalizing what was meant to be an intrinsic ethic. This paper rejects that purism. The dichotomy between authentic service and strategic survival collapses once we recognize that for an organization whose constitutive purpose is service, institutional survival is not separable from the capacity to keep serving. PAX’s continued existence makes continued disarmament work possible. UNOY’s institutional access makes continued youth peacebuilding possible. To insist that genuine service must remain analytically untainted by any strategic benefit is to demand of NGOs a purity of motive that Aristotle’s virtue ethics, Catholic social teaching, and even Greenleaf’s own emphasis on building enduring institutions do not require.⁹⁹ What reciprocal utility names, then, is not the substitution of strategy for service but their integration: service authentically rendered that, precisely because it is authentic, generates the relational equity through which the organization sustains its capacity to serve.

Servant leadership is also not the only candidate framework available for theorizing the relational mechanics this paper describes. Relational Leadership Theory, as developed by Mary Uhl-Bien, offers a more ontologically precise account of how leadership emerges through repeated relational transactions rather than residing in individual actors—a framing well-matched to the empirical reality of PAX’s and UNOY’s emergent standing at the UN.¹⁰⁰ This paper nonetheless anchors its analysis in servant leadership for three reasons. First, the central ethical claim the paper advances—that an NGO’s structural power derives from the alignment between its stated principles and its concrete actions—requires a framework that carries normative content rather than describing relational dynamics neutrally. Relational Leadership Theory is fundamentally descriptive whereas servant leadership is fundamentally normative, as is this paper’s argument. Second, the case organizations themselves operate within ethical traditions—PAX within Catholic peace witness, UNOY within the youth peacebuilding ethic of solidarity—that share the explicit service vocabulary servant leadership names. Imposing a more morally neutral framework would force a translation step that loses the very phenomenon the paper is trying to theorize. Third, the reciprocal utility construct integrates a strategic mechanism with an ethical commitment. The framework that best supports that integration is one that already holds the same tension at its core. Servant leadership’s persistent question—whether service can be both intrinsically motivated and strategically generative—is precisely the question this paper answers in the affirmative.

Translating this framework into diplomatic practice requires NGOs to cultivate an operational ethos rooted in humility. Taj Hamad, then-Chairman of the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, articulates this value proposition by noting that effective NGOs must serve with a “heart of a parent and shoes of a servant.”¹⁰¹ In an institutional context, the posture functions as a generator of normative power—though notably one earned through service rather

than claimed through advocacy alone, a distinction from the constructivist norm entrepreneur model critiqued earlier.¹⁰² As David Wang et al. argue, cultural sensitivity and humility are vital to effective leadership precisely because they allow actors to listen and adapt their approaches to “best suit the evolving needs of the communities they serve.”¹⁰³ This principle recognizes the dignity of the local communities and prioritizes sincere partnerships over institutional interests. This relational philosophy explains the functional alignment of the DGC pathway identified earlier in this paper. By acting as information multipliers who serve the Secretariat’s need for public dissemination, NGOs trade the demand for immediate, aggressive advocacy for the slower cultivation of institutional standing. Analytically, the move functions as a mechanism for strategic alignment. By positioning themselves as supporters of state goals rather than competitors, NGOs do not surrender their agency. They mitigate resistance and accumulate relational equity. This trade-off, accepting reduced visibility for sustainable standing, carries real risks of capture and irrelevance, which the discussion of co-optation below addresses directly.

Protective Indispensability

While some might argue that a service-first approach is naive when dealing with regimes that view civil society as a systemic threat, scholars such as Jude Howell et al. argue that in authoritarian contexts like China, NGOs survive by building “second-order accountability.”¹⁰⁴ That is, legitimacy accumulated through stocks of trust and reputational standing with donors, government, and users rather than through formal political rights or legal status. In practice, for emerging NGOs, this accumulation depends heavily on consistent service delivery.¹⁰⁵ This creates a strategy this paper terms *protective indispensability*. Unlike direct advocacy, which may result in expulsion, capture, or dismantlement, focusing on technical cooperation or humanitarian support creates a tangible cost of removal for the state. By embedding themselves in essential service delivery, NGOs make their expulsion economically or socially painful for the regime.¹⁰⁶ However, as Sarah

Stroup and Wendy Wong note, accumulating this level of state deference creates an “authority trap” where NGOs are forced to moderate their radicalism to maintain their favored status, despite it remaining a primary survival mechanism.¹⁰⁷

The operational model of the ICRC provides a foundational illustration of this survival mechanism in practice. Operating in highly volatile conflict zones, the ICRC secures its access not through coercive pressure, but through the deliberate cultivation of reciprocal utility. By adhering to a strict doctrine of neutrality and focusing on essential service delivery—such as medical aid, water sanitation, and prisoner visits—the ICRC makes itself indispensable to regimes that would otherwise reject external scrutiny.¹⁰⁸ Rather than challenging a state’s sovereignty through public condemnation, the ICRC positions itself as a technical necessity for the state’s own functioning.

While the ICRC utilizes reciprocal utility primarily to maintain operational access, the Hazardous Area Life-support Organization (HALO Trust) demonstrates how this local indispensability can be actively leveraged for global policy advocacy, while also revealing the costs of separating those functions across organizations. HALO Trust specializes in the removal of landmines operating in some of the world’s most politically restrictive environments. This includes Taliban-controlled Afghanistan where Taliban officials have supposedly cooperated with HALO Trust teams, helping identify explosives they themselves planted because the organization provides a public safety service the regime cannot deliver itself.¹⁰⁹ By positioning itself not as a moral critic but as a provider of indispensable utility, HALO Trust generates the protective indispensability this paper argues is necessary to operate where advocacy alone would lead to expulsion. Yet this neutrality, while preserving operational space, comes at a cost when policy change requires advocacy that the technical work alone cannot provide. Without an advocacy partner translating that technical work into policy pressure, the data accumulated risks remaining operational

record rather than political leverage—the limitation the ICBL partnership was designed to address.

This strategic synthesis of on-the-ground utility and high-level policy influence demonstrates David Lewis's framework of NGO management, which posits that effective organizations must continuously navigate the dual roles of practical service providers (implementers) and political advocates (catalysts).¹¹⁰ Historically, however, this duality created a sharp strategic schism within the disarmament space. While the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) focused on norm entrepreneurship—pressing for the moral stigmatization of landmines through public advocacy—HALO Trust explicitly distanced itself from this political campaigning.¹¹¹ Matthew Bolton documents that HALO Trust was influenced by the “impartiality and neutrality’ doctrine of the ICRC,” concerned that overt advocacy could divert resources and jeopardize the humanitarian space required to negotiate clearance with warring factions.¹¹²

This division of labor produced the *1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* (also known as the *Ottawa Treaty*) but also exposed the costs of distributing the implementer and catalyst functions across rivalrous organizations. As documented in *Mine Action After Diana*, the operational NGOs, working alongside the ICBL's overt political campaigning, reframed landmines from a military concern into a humanitarian development crisis, using technical survey data to provide the empirical foundation for the treaty without themselves engaging in traditional political agitation.¹¹³ This was perhaps most visible in HALO Trust's management of the UK's Princess Diana's 1997 visit to Angola. By equipping her in standard demining protective gear and guiding her through a cleared lane, HALO Trust framed her presence as a technical inspection of humanitarian service rather than an advocacy spectacle.¹¹⁴ This leveraged celebrity attention to highlight the human cost to a global audience while preserving operational standing.

The ICRC, HALO Trust, and ICBL cases illustrate the strategic implementer-catalyst schism in its classical form. PAX and UNOY demonstrate that it can be resolved within a single organization. PAX's *Don't Bank on the Bomb* reports performed an empirical-foundation function comparable to that of the landmine surveys, while PAX operated as a steering coalition member of ICAN's advocacy push for the TPNW. UNOY paired the *Mapping a Sector* survey work with explicit advocacy through the Working Group. The historical schism between technical service and norm entrepreneurship is therefore not structurally necessary. An organization willing to discipline its scope can do both, and the empirical foundation strengthens rather than dilutes the advocacy. Reciprocal utility names the integrative move, and protective indispensability the survival logic, that allow a single organization to occupy both roles without collapsing into either.

Asymmetric Responsibility and Restorative Engagement

How, then, does an emerging NGO deal with a hostile or blocking Member State? This challenge requires a strategy this paper terms *restorative engagement*.¹¹⁵ It involves moving beyond the demand for institutional rights and instead focusing on repairing the broken trust between the NGO and the state. In many gatekeeping conflicts, the established power views the emerging actor as a threat to its sovereignty or narrative control. Standard political theory might suggest balancing against this threat.¹¹⁶ For a small NGO lacking material power, however, conflict is a losing strategy. Instead, the burden of transforming the hostile relationship falls on the emerging actor—what this paper terms *asymmetric responsibility*, adapted from Emmanuel Levinas's ethics. Levinas's phenomenological claim is that ethical responsibility for the Other is infinite and non-reciprocal: I bear responsibility for the Other regardless of whether that responsibility is returned.¹¹⁷ Applied to the multilateral arena, this dynamic suggests that when an NGO adopts a non-transactional service-first posture, it paradoxically generates the relational equity required for political influence.

Rather than attempting to force the incumbent power to concede, which only deepens the defensive reaction, the emerging actor must compel the incumbent by demonstrating that its success is tied to the state's success. This requires the NGO to look beyond the immediate political blockage and identify the human or developmental goals it shares with the state. By treating the hostile actor with the dignity of a potential partner rather than an enemy, the NGO operationalizes the peace it seeks to build.¹¹⁸ Intrinsically, this is a principled refusal to mirror the cynicism of established powers. Extrinsically, it functions as a mechanism for generating relational equity. Drawing on foundational management literature, Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal establish that an organization's most durable assets, such as trust, mutual obligation, and respect, are generated through the relational dimension of social capital.¹¹⁹ By prioritizing the success of the collective over immediate recognition, the NGO disarms the rival's defensiveness and accumulates the social capital needed to secure a seat at the table.

This principle of asymmetric responsibility applies not only to state gatekeepers but also to the intra-civil society hierarchy.¹²⁰ Because funding and recognition are often treated as zero-sum games, emerging actors frequently fall into the trap of duplicating efforts, where competing NGOs become noise to funders. The service-first model proposes a strategic alternative to this fragmentation. Clifford Bob's *Marketing of Rebellion* framework, although developed to explain how insurgent movements compete for the attention of international NGOs, applies analogously to the relationship between emerging NGOs and established super-NGOs. In both cases, the smaller actor must actively present themselves to established super-NGOs by matching their causes to the larger actors' specific organizational and informational needs.¹²¹ Rather than competing for the same generalist spotlight, the emerging actor can adopt a posture of strict complementarity.

This mirrors Keck and Sikkink's framework of Transnational Advocacy Networks, which relies on a distinct division of labor.¹²² While reciprocal utility with a state gatekeeper often involves trading technical services for operational tolerance, reciprocal utility within a civil society network involves trading localized legitimacy for institutional access. Emerging or local NGOs serve as indispensable providers of niche, localized data, while the larger umbrella organizations provide the diplomatic platform.¹²³ By acting as a specialized technical partner to a generalist organization, the smaller NGO helps alleviate the structural consequences of the authority trap. Large NGOs constrained by the need to maintain elite access face a constant deficit of localized, grassroots authenticity required to validate their global mandates.¹²⁴ By supplying that missing legitimacy, the emerging NGO accumulates the relational equity needed to join established coalitions and networks rather than being marginalized by them. This dynamic transforms a zero-sum competition into a positive-sum collaboration. Through the strategy of reciprocal utility, the emerging actor secures its seat at the table precisely by making the incumbent gatekeeper more effective.

The Risk of Co-optation

It is important to acknowledge that the service-first model is not a guaranteed transactional mechanism. Relational equity does not always convert seamlessly into political influence. The primary risk is co-optation, whereby a state or institution extracts an NGO's technical utility while continuing to suppress its advocacy, effectively reducing the organization to a simple contractor.¹²⁵ Ward describes this as a structural pattern rather than a one-off risk: "as NGOs evolve they, nevertheless, become increasingly susceptible to becoming mainstreamed, institutionalized, and, sadly, compromised in their values."¹²⁶ Institutional access without principled discipline therefore does not stabilize an organization. It places it on a predictable trajectory toward irrelevance.

This vulnerability is acute because the pressure to secure institutional access frequently drives emerging NGOs toward transactional behaviors, as the YPS/CVE alignment discussed above illustrates. As James McGann and Mary Johnstone warn, civil society navigates a credibility crisis, driven by the perception that non-state actors are increasingly abandoning their principled mandates to operate as self-interested political entities.¹²⁷ When NGOs mimic the cynical, competitive posturing of states to win funding or consultative status, they trigger institutional backlashes that delegitimize their work. Vivien Collingwood observes that an NGO's influence in international society relies almost entirely on its normative legitimacy.¹²⁸ Unlike states, which can leverage economic or military coercion, an NGO stripped of its moral consistency is left without structural power.

The distinction between reciprocal utility and co-optation ultimately hinges on the difference between tactics and teleology. Co-optation occurs when an organization alters its ultimate normative goals to secure funding, institutional favor, or other operational resources. Reciprocal utility, conversely, requires an organization to adapt its technical formats, providing the specific data, reports, or networks a gatekeeper requires in order to induce that gatekeeper to advance the NGO's normative agenda.

While the provision of localized service—whether clearing landmines or delivering medical aid—is an intrinsic moral good for an organization grounded in servant leadership, it is insufficient on its own for systemic political change. Strategically, when an NGO embeds itself in essential service delivery, it establishes an operational monopoly within the marketplace that the gatekeeper cannot easily replace. Over time, this protective indispensability shifts the balance of power. The cost of expelling the technical partner becomes prohibitive to the gatekeeper's own goals, and concessions that initially appeared as compromises become institutionalized. An NGO's strategic utility nonetheless cannot be separated from its moral character. An actor that

mimics the cynical, competitive tactics of states loses its comparative advantage, because soft power stems from the perceived consistency between an organization's principles and its actions.¹²⁹ The ethic of reciprocity—treating the competing actor with the dignity one demands for oneself—is not merely a moral ideal but a political necessity in a polarized UN.¹³⁰ By prioritizing collective outcomes over zero-sum victories, the non-transactional posture ensures that humility and service function not just as moral duties, but as the tactical foundation of political relevance.

8. Opportunities Amid Crisis: Navigating an Unpredictable UN Landscape

The financial and legitimacy pressures now bearing on the UN are exactly the conditions under which the strategic dynamics developed in this paper become most operative. The UN Secretariat's severe liquidity shortfall has generated operational deficits the institution cannot resolve internally.¹³¹ These deficits convert directly into the institutional gaps that organizations practicing reciprocal utility are positioned to fill. The PAX and UNOY trajectories illustrate the mechanism in two registers. PAX's *Don't Bank on the Bomb* reports supplied financial-research capacity the UN system was not equipped to generate. UNOY's *Mapping a Sector* survey supplied the demographic dataset the Peacebuilding Support Office required to operationalize UNSCR 2250. In both cases, the organizations did not lobby a resource-constrained institution. They did work the institution needed but could not perform itself. Austerity widens the institutional gaps which this strategy is positioned to fill.

The institution's parallel crisis of relevance compounds the opportunity. A 70-country analysis determined that just 3% of 87 million media mentions of global conflict referenced the UN.¹³² This communicative disconnect is mirrored in public awareness: a 2020 global survey established that 40% of respondents "know little or nothing about the UN,"¹³³ while a 2022 Pew Research Center analysis

confirmed that severe deficits in public knowledge of international institutions persist.¹³⁴ Compounding this visibility gap, internal assessments reveal a profound disconnect between institutional production and audience engagement, acknowledging that official UN reports rarely achieve active readership.¹³⁵ The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer registers the deeper consequence: public trust in the UN has eroded to the point where the institution is trusted in only ten of the twenty-eight countries measured.¹³⁶ When information on international action does reach the public, it is increasingly contested by mis- and dis-information that the UN's own communication infrastructure is poorly positioned to counter.¹³⁷

For emerging NGOs, this trust deficit is a structural opening, not just a backdrop. Trent and Schnurr argue that civil society must generate public support through an "exchange of legitimacy."¹³⁸ The UNOY case demonstrates the form this exchange can take. The Inter-Agency Working Group's effectiveness depended on civil-society members supplying the localized credibility that UN bodies and member states could not generate independently. In exchange, UNOY moved from outside the consultative process to a position of architectural influence within it. The same logic applies more broadly. Since NGOs maintain existing relationships and social capital within localized communities, they reach populations and translate institutional language in ways that distant intergovernmental bodies cannot.¹³⁹ An emerging NGO that supplies that grassroots validation makes itself functionally indispensable to a UN that increasingly cannot afford to operate without it.

The strategic implication is concrete. Despite the immense strain on the sector, crisis conditions prioritize organizations that have already made themselves technically useful at the local level and remain principled enough to be credible at the global one. Specialized contributions, such as technical research, communicative reach, or localized credibility, are structurally harder to ignore. The financial crisis has therefore not

merely created openings for emerging NGOs; it has tilted the institutional environment toward them, narrowing the strategic space available to organizations that approach the UN as adversaries rather than as partners. This establishes a functional symbiosis dictated by the mechanics of reciprocal utility: the NGO provides the grassroots validation and communicative reach that the UN desperately needs, and in exchange, it secures the institutional access and political relevance required to advance its mission on the global stage.

9. Conclusion

Despite differences in era, sector, and resources, PAX and UNOY achieved institutional standing through the same mechanism: translating normative commitments into the technical formats that gatekeepers required. Each succeeded in navigating a crowded multilateral space by occupying a defined niche—specifically, nuclear disarmament for PAX and the YPS agenda for UNOY. Additionally, they succeeded by making themselves useful to the very institutions that had initially excluded them. PAX did so over half a century with substantial faith-based institutional inheritance, while UNOY did so in under five years with almost none. The strategic logic of reciprocal utility, the paired comparison demonstrates, is not an artifact of legacy resources.

In analyzing these relational strategies, this research provides an ethically grounded alternative to rationalist accounts of civil-society engagement. Where rationalist frameworks typically reduce institutional adaptation to a transactional surrender of identity, such a view obscures the true source of an NGO's structural power. By bridging institutional mechanics with constructivist ethics, this paper demonstrates that influence derives not from coercive leverage or material resources, but from the disciplined alignment between an organization's normative principles and its technical actions. Viewed through the logic of reciprocal utility, an emerging NGO that adapts to serve a gatekeeping actor is not surrendering its moral identity but enacting it—the servant-leadership ethic operating at the institutional

rather than the individual register, where the alignment of principle and action becomes inseparable from the strategic capacity to sustain that alignment over time.

Crucially, this paper introduces a double application of this ethical model. Where existing scholarship typically isolates either NGO-to-NGO competition or NGO-to-state lobbying, the paired cases demonstrate that a service-first posture functions across the UN ecosystem. The same moral posture, rooted in asymmetric responsibility, has the capacity to disarm both hostile member states and competitive, gatekeeping super-NGOs. PAX's ICAN partnership and UNOY's role within the Inter-Agency Working Group illustrate the intra-civil-society application. PAX's engagement with arms-trading states and UNOY's strategic alignment with the CVE preoccupations of UNSC members illustrate the state-facing one. The mechanism is identical in structure even when the gatekeeper differs in form.

Several limitations should be acknowledged, each of which suggests a direction for further work. As a theory-building exercise rather than a theory-testing one, the paper does not establish the dominance of reciprocal utility against alternative explanations of NGO influence. It argues that the mechanism operates and warrants further investigation. Additionally, the two cases are drawn from the same national setting as both PAX and UNOY are Dutch peace organizations. While this shared national setting controls for domestic institutional variables, the Netherlands provides a more supportive environment for civil society infrastructure and funding. Consequently, the generalizability of these findings to NGOs operating from the Global South or under non-democratic regimes remains a necessary area for future research.

The case material analyzed is also drawn entirely from English-language scholarship and primary sources, which structurally privileges advocacy that has already been translated into the dominant

institutional language and may obscure parallel strategies operating in other linguistic contexts. A further limitation concerns the choice of leadership framework itself. Anchoring the analysis in servant leadership delivers the normative grammar the paper's argument requires, but the framework's origin in organizational management literature means it does not theorize emergent inter-institutional dynamics as natively as Relational Leadership Theory might. The current analysis treats this trade as justified by the priority of the normative argument, but future empirical work testing reciprocal utility against broader datasets might benefit from a relational-process framework that can more readily capture how influence accumulates across repeated transactions.

Similarly, the integration of strategic and intrinsic motivation defended in Section 7 is philosophically defensible but empirically difficult to verify: the paper cannot definitively distinguish, on the available case material, between organizations that authentically integrate service and strategy and organizations that have rationalized strategic behavior in service-oriented vocabulary. The case studies suggest the former interpretation; sustained ethnographic work inside organizations like PAX and UNOY would be required to confirm it. Furthermore, the UNOY case relies substantially on a single peer-reviewed interpretive source and grey literature, reflecting the relative scarcity of independent scholarship on the internal strategic dynamics of NGOs, particularly newer or youth-led organizations. Further independent scholarship on the YPS advocacy coalition would strengthen the empirical foundation. Finally, the contemporary financial-crisis argument developed in Section 8 is anchored in 2025-2026 conditions and should be revisited as the institutional context evolves, particularly in the context of UN80 and related reform efforts as well as post-2030 Agenda negotiations. Nevertheless, the cross-sectoral test of the paired comparison conducted—spanning disarmament policy versus youth participation, multi-decade versus compressed advocacy, and legacy resourcing versus austerity—is

sufficient to establish that the strategic logic of reciprocal utility is not an artifact of any single organizational type or context. Within these bounds, the framework offers a productive starting point for further empirical work as well as a contemporary application that is increasingly urgent.

The UN's current austerity crisis has widened the institutional gaps that emerging NGOs are uniquely positioned to fill, and the parallel fragmentation within civil society creates room for those willing to act as specialized technical partners rather than generalist competitors. By translating abstract mandates into tangible local realities, NGOs grounded in the alignment of principle and action can close the widening gap between what international institutions say and what they actually deliver. For an emerging NGO, ethical consistency is therefore not merely a normative ideal—it is the essential, pragmatic prerequisite for durable political relevance. In an international system that increasingly relies on civil society to bridge its own capacity deficits, moral authority alone is insufficient. To survive and shape a polarized United Nations, their soft power requires hard data.

Notes

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- ² Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, “UN80 and the Future of Atrocity Prevention: Opportunities for Structural Reform,” October 21, 2024, <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/un80-and-the-future-of-atrocity-prevention-opportunities-for-structural-reform>
- ³ Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, eds., *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2018), introduction.
- ⁴ Thomas Davies, “Introducing NGOs and International Relations,” in *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations*, ed. Thomas Davies (Routledge, 2019), 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315268927-1>; United Nations, “The UN and Civil Society,” <https://www.un.org/en/get-involved/un-and-civil-society>
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- ⁶ Charli Carpenter, *“Lost” Causes: Agenda Vetting in Global Issue Networks and the Shaping of Human Security* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 19–21.
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¹¹³ Stuart Maslen, *Mine Action After Diana: Progress in the Struggle Against Landmines* (Pluto Press, 2004), 11–31.

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¹¹⁹ Nahapiet and Ghoshal, “Social Capital,” 244.

¹²⁰ The intra-civil-society dynamics described here are conditioned by structural inequalities—particularly the Western institutional location of most super-NGOs and the historically asymmetric power relationships between Global North and Global South actors. A fuller treatment of how decolonial critiques complicate the “complementarity” framing presented

here is beyond the scope of this paper but is essential to its further development. See, for instance, Themrise Khan et al., eds., *White Saviorism in International Development: Theories, Practices and Lived Experiences* (Daraja Press, 2023).

¹²¹ Bob, *Marketing of Rebellion*, 21, 28, 39.

¹²² Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, 1–38.

¹²³ Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, 12–13, 18–19.

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¹²⁵ Michael Edwards and David Hulme, eds., *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 8–10; see also Mark Robinson, “Privatising the Voluntary Sector: NGOs as Public Service Contractors?” in the same volume, 59–60.

¹²⁶ Ward, “Political Economy of NGOs,” 57.

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¹²⁹ For analyses on how an NGO’s legitimacy and soft power are derived from normative consistency rather than coercive state tactics, see Collingwood, “Non-Governmental Organisations,” 442–46, 448; and McGann and Johnstone, “NGO Credibility Crisis,” 159–72.

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