

Participants in the International Legal System

Multiple perspectives on
non-state actors in
international law

Edited by
Jean d'Aspremont

Foreword by
W. Michael Reisman

Presentation by
Math Noortmann



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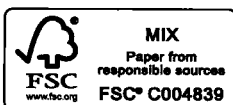
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Foreword

Veritas vos liberabit

Definitions are artifacts which can illuminate or obscure and, in so doing, empower or enslave. International legal scholarship provides an object lesson.

As long as international law scholarship defined itself as a body of rules establishing law between states in a system in which only states were “subjects,” the scholarly focus was on states. By contrast, the founders of the New Haven School conceived of jurists as problem-solvers, charged with (among other things) three principal intellectual tasks: (i) explaining why past decisions had been taken the way they were; (ii) predicting possible future decisions; and (iii) influencing the course of future decisions. To facilitate the performance of these tasks, the aperture of observation was opened to enable the jurist to identify everyone who was actually involved in decision. Accordingly, international law was conceived as a *process* of decision in which, in addition to the representatives of states, a much wider range of actors was engaged. Those “participants,” as Myres McDougal called them, included national and international officials, the elites of non-governmental organizations concerned with pursuing wealth, enlightenment, skill, well-being, affection, respect or rectitude, transnational business entities, gangs and criminal organizations, terrorists and, acting on behalf of these collective entities or on their own behalf, individuals.

Focusing on a range of actors, encompassing far more than states, allowed for a more accurate picture of actual participation. But that, in turn, demanded a heuristic that would allow the jurist to focus on what those diverse participants were actually doing. Simply saying that they were participating in “decision making” did not enable an observer to gather meaningful data. One innovative concept required other intellectual tools.

One of the most important of these was the concept of decision “functions.” Harold D. Lasswell proposed that the word “decision” at any level of social organization be conceived in terms of seven component functions:

- *intelligence* or the gathering of information relevant to decision;
- *promotion* or the identification of a problem as amenable to legal solution and the agitation for a prescriptive response or promotion;

- *prescription* or the enactment of authoritative and effective policy through law-making;
- *invocation* or the provisional characterization of someone's action as deviating from a prescription and the insistence on the application of the prescription;
- *application* or the authoritative confirmation of the facts and identification of the relevant policies and their specification to deviations from a prescription;
- *termination* or the abrogation of existing prescriptions and the provision for ameliorating measures;
- *appraisal* or the assessment of the aggregate performance of the decision process in terms of its major goals or appraisal.

By disentangling the various components of the word "decision" in this fashion, it was easy to see and then gather and organize data on the roles the various categories of actors or participants were playing in the different component functions of international decision. In some traditional arenas for international decision, for example, meetings of heads of states or international diplomatic conferences for purposes of law-making, formal access was limited to duly certified state representatives; non-state actors, insofar as they participated, did so indirectly. In other arenas, however, non-state actors were principal and direct participants.

Theoretical tools such as these have facilitated intellectual inquiry, as amply evidenced in this book. Equally important, the concepts have proved to be liberating and empowering, enabling non-state actors to perceive new opportunities for participating in and influencing the course of international decision. The more radical implications of these conceptions for the study and practice of international law are only now being appreciated.

W. Michael Reisman
New Haven, Connecticut
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Presentation

Presenting the participants in the international legal system in an all-encompassing and coherent manner is, given their multitude and diversity, a rather futile endeavor. Only an encyclopedic approach could grasp both their volume and variety. The empirical problem appears once we have left the realm of the state and its intergovernmental organizations and entered the world of non-state actors and non-governmental organizations in all their forms and appearances. The methodological difficulty of dealing with the sheer mass and eminence of such entities that appears at the same time in our research efforts compels us to differentiate, categorize and label them.

A first rather crude form of indicating dissimilarity is to distinguish between the state and everything else, which are – by our legal definition – not-states. However, give or take a few contested entities (mostly in terms of governmental control), we would have a fairly concise, homogeneous group of some 190+ states and an amalgam of thousands of “non-state actors.”

A second accepted distinction in the study of international law is between governmental organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), that allows us to engage international entities which, albeit not being states, are closely enough associated to the state through (quasi) legal arrangements. That distinction is then refurbished by the concept of legal personality, which differentiates between primary and original subjects of international law, i.e. states and those entities that are derivative and trivial from the perspective of legal personality. In this we also encounter the first conceptual and perhaps paradigmatic dichotomy between the subjects and objects of international law.

If we move further away from the state and its intergovernmental organizations we enter into the empirical swamp of non-state actors and NGOs, which we seek to master with the help of marked paths and pole vaults which are constructed to guide one through and surmount the natural hindrances one might encounter in exploring new areas.

At first, but increasingly contested, a conceptual distinction between the realm of the state and intergovernmental organizations on the one

hand and the realm of non-state actors and NGOs is that of the public/private divide. Any attempt to understand and explain non-state actors/NGOs from an exclusive "private" perspective requires one to tackle the difference between the form and the purpose of organizations and engage the problematic of hybrid actors such as public-private partnerships; it involves a discourse on the very public-private divide.

In addition to the conceptual labeling and dichotomy approaches, many scholars adopt a more empirical approach, which labels and categorizes non-state participants according to what they "are" or what they "do." The habitually socio-political oriented denomination often neglects the legal quality of many of these actors in our understandings and explanations thereof, for example, the differences between limited and unlimited companies, associations and foundations, or the legal hybridism of public-private partnerships.

Presenting the multitude of non-state actors in bigger or smaller categories does little to serve our analytical purpose. Whether we concentrate on broader categories such as NGOs *strictu sensu*, multinational enterprises and armed opposition groups or we break those down into ever smaller agency-bearing categories such as civil society organizations, grass-roots organizations, environmental or human rights organizations, political parties, labour unions, terrorist organizations, criminal organizations, advocacy networks, religious communities, indigenous peoples, judicial networks, epistemic communities or liberation movements, we are generally unable to avoid overlap and conceptual confusion.

The latter problematic becomes clear if, for example, we want to classify each and every NGO listed under the consultative status arrangement of Article 71 of the UN Charter, which only constitutes the tip of the proverbial iceberg. In our efforts to further differentiate between them, we would start by labeling those NGOs according to their activities, focus or character as humanitarian, environmental, human rights, developmental, professional, agricultural, cultural, women, academic, sports etc. We would also seek to distinguish between the "real" NGOs, which have a philanthropic, public good and non-for-profit orientation, and all those others that we would (dis)qualify by labeling them as "quasi (autonomous)," "donor-oriented," "government-oriented," "business," "transnational" and "international" and thereby creating a rich language of acronyms, which have become part of our discourses: QUANGOs, DONGOs, GONGOs, BINGOs, TRANGOs and INGOs.

However, there seem to be a couple of societal issues that all of these participants have in common or have triggered since they have risen in numbers and importance, and those issues are precisely why an increasing community of international legal scholarship has gradually gained an interest in those non-state participants. The most significant legal issues are: responsibility and legitimacy, which are often embedded in more general discourses on the role and position of these actors in the formative processes

of international law. What *is* their legal status within international governmental organizations? What *is* the extent and content of their legal personality? What *is* the legal character of agreements they enter into with states? In other words: What *is* their position under international law and within the international legal system?

While one could technically find an inter-subjectively agreeable answer to that question with respect to specific individual participants such as the ICRC, Greenpeace, the PLO, Amnesty International, the Holy See and others, it will not satisfy the theoretical and conceptual questions involved. These require, rather than bestowing single participants with international legal significance, a reconsideration of the legal assumptions that underlie our current international legal system. This is what this volume is trying to achieve, thereby contributing to filling an important gap in the literature and consolidating the inherently connected discourses in international law and international relations.

Math Noortmann

Contents

<i>Cases and statutes</i>	xi
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xxxiii
<i>Foreword: Veritas vos liberabit</i>	xxxv
W. MICHAEL REISMAN	
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxxvii
<i>Presentation</i>	xxxviii
MATH NOORTMANN	
Introduction: non-state actors in international law: oscillating between concepts and dynamics	1
JEAN D'ASPREMONT	
PART I	
Theoretical perspectives	22
1 Non-state actors from the perspective of legal positivism: the communitarian semantics for the secondary rules of international law	23
JEAN D'ASPREMONT	
2 Non-state actors from an international constitutionalist perspective: participation matters!	41
THOMAS KLEINLEIN	
3 Non-state actors from the perspective of the Pure Theory of Law	54
JÖRG KAMMERHOFER	
4 Non-state actors from the perspective of the policy-oriented school: power, law, actors and the view from New Haven	64
ANTHONY D'AMATO	

- 5 Towards an interdisciplinary approach to non-state participation in the formation of global law and order** 76
MATH NOORTMANN

PART II

The regional perspectives 82

- 6 Non-state actors in French legal scholarship: international legal personality in question** 83
NICOLAS LEROUX
- 7 Non-state actors in North American legal scholarship: four lessons for the progressive and critical international lawyer** 97
RÉMI BAGHAND
- 8 Non-state actors in Southeast Asia: how does civil society contribute towards norm-building in a state-centric environment?** 109
TAN HSIEN-LI
- 9 Contemporary Russian perspectives on non-state actors: fear of the loss of state sovereignty** 126
LAURI MÄLKSOO

PART III

Institutional perspectives 139

- 10 Non-state actors from the perspective of the International Court of Justice** 140
GLEIDER I. HERNÁNDEZ
- 11 Non-state actors from the perspective of the International Law Commission** 165
GENTIAN ZYBERI
- 12 Non-state actors from the perspective of the Institut de Droit international** 179
FRANÇOIS RIGAU
- 13 Non-state actors from the perspective of international criminal tribunals** 185
GUIDO ACQUAVIVA
- 14 Non-state actors from the perspective of the International Committee of the Red Cross** 204
RAPHAËL VAN STEENBERGHE

15 The International Law Association and non-state actors: professional network, public interest group or epistemic community?	233
MATH NOORTMANN	
16 NGOs' perspectives on non-state actors	248
GAËLLE BRETON-LE GOFF	
PART IV	
Subject-matter based perspectives	267
17 Non-state actors and human rights: corporate responsibility and the attempts to formalize the role of corporations as participants in the international legal system	268
ERIC DE BRABANDERE	
18 Non-state actors in international humanitarian law	284
CEDRIC RYNGAERT	
19 Non-state actors in international criminal law	295
CASSANDRA STEER	
20 Non-state actors in international institutional law: non-state, inter-state or supra-state? The peculiar identity of the intergovernmental organization	311
RICHARD COLLINS	
21 Non-state actors in international peace and security: non-state actors and the use of force	326
NICHOLAS TSAGOURIAS	
22 Non-state actors in international dispute settlement: pragmatism in international law	342
ERIC DE BRABANDERE	
23 Non-state actors in international investment law: the legal personality of corporations and NGOs in the context of investor-state arbitration	360
PATRICK DUMBERRY AND ÉRIK LABELLE-EASTAUGH	
24 Non-state actors in international environmental law: a Rousseauist perspective	372
MAKANE MOÏSE MBENGUE	
25 Non-state actors in refugee law: <i>l'état, c'est moi</i>. Refugee law as a response to non-state action	390
PENELOPE MATHEW	

26	Non-state actors in European Law: enhanced participation of non-state actors in EU law-making and law-enforcement processes – a quest for legitimacy	407
	DAMIEN GERARD	
27	Conclusion: inclusive law-making and law-enforcement processes for an exclusive international legal system	425
	JEAN D'ASPREMONT	
	<i>Index</i>	440

Cases and statutes

TABLE OF STATUTORY MATERIALS

This table includes Agreements; Charters; Covenants; Declarations; Directives; General documentation; Reports; Resolutions; Rules, Regulations and Statutes; and Treaties and Conventions. The International section includes European Union material.

INTERNATIONAL

Agreements

Agreement Establishing the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA) 2009	121
Agreement on Investment of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and the People's Republic of China, 2009	121
Agreement on the Privileges and Immunities of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2009	
Art 2(1)	122
Art 2(2)	122
ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement 2009	121
ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement 2009	121
Cotonou Agreement (Partnership Agreement between the Members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, on the one part, and the European Community and its Member States, on the other part, signed in Cotonou on 23 June 2000)	63
Art 4	413, 423
Art 6(1)	413
Art 6(2)	423
Art 7	423
Art 19(3)	423
Art 33(5)	423
Art 57(3)	423
General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)	
Art XX	259–60

General Postal Union 1874	181
North American Agreement on Labour Cooperation (NAALC) 1993 ...	283
Art 2	276
North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)	
Chapter 11	352
Understanding on Rules and Procedures Governing the Settlement of Disputes, Annex 2 to the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization, 33 ILM (1994), 1197	358

Charters

African Charter on Human and People's Rights 1981	262
Art 55	263
Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States by the General Assembly 1974	362
Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN Charter) 2007	109, 110, 119
Art 1(13)	122
Art 2(2)	122
Art 3	122
Art 20(1)	122
Art 20(2)	122
Art 21(2)	122
Arts 7-15	122
Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal	170
Montreal Charter 1990	257
Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Establishment of an African Court of Human and People's Rights 1998	
Art 5(3)	35, 264
Art 34(6)	35
United Nations Charter 1945	42, 152, 326
Art 2(4)	327, 329, 337
Art 13(1)	165
Art 51	136, 144, 328, 329, 332, 334
Art 71	77, 235
Art 96(2)	163
Art 104	316
Chapter VII	188, 189, 191, 193, 203, 337, 341
World Charter for Nature (1982)	373, 374, 377, 387

Conventions *see under* Treaties and Conventions (below)

Covenants

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) 1966. .	51, 271
Art 2	281
Art 12	402