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Environmental NGOs in Emerging Democracies: Obstacles to Effective Action

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Abstract

Environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) play an important role in environmental governance. However, ENGO activity does not always lead to favorable outcomes. This paper highlights the ways in which neoliberal economic reforms and governance deficits constrain ENGO effectiveness through a case study of Georgia — an emerging democracy that has attracted considerable external funding in the environmental domain. We analyze representative household survey data on environmental attitudes and conduct interviews with ENGO representatives and other key informants to show how many Georgian ENGOS are able to create a façade of successful activities for the country’s donors, while not contributing to meaningful environmental outcomes at the local level. The case study further illustrates the implications of Georgia’s business-government nexus, which censors criticism by genuine ENGOS, while leading others to take lucrative contracts for environmental impact evaluations. These findings have important implications for efforts by external actors working to promote environmental governance.

Keywords: civil society, environmental NGOs, Georgia, emerging democracies

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1 Introduction

The importance of non-state actors for sustainable development has gained increasing recognition over the last decade. In particular, the 2015 adoption of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) ushered in high-level recognition of the fact that state institutions and processes are insufficient “for addressing interrelated global climate change and sustainability problems” (Coenen, Glass and Sanderink, 2022, p. 1490). The SDGs promote partnerships with non-state actors through SDG 17 (“Partnerships for the Goals”) and through various fora that seek to engage member states, civil society, local authorities, the private sector, and academia. And while only governments can officially participate in UNFCCC negotiations, non-state “observers” (including businesses, municipal officials, and environmental NGOs) are understood to “play a critical role as the eyes, ears and conscience of the outside world” (UNFCCC, N.d.).

Indeed, when looking across countries, scholars have found greater environmental NGO (ENGO) activity to be associated with various favorable outcomes, including pro-environmental reforms (Longhofer et al., 2016), greater primary forest area among palm oil producers (Henderson and Shorette, 2017) and lower levels of threatened mammals in poor nations (Shandra et al., 2009). This aligns with theoretical expectations: Vibrant civil society engaged with environmental issues is believed to favor environmental protection for a variety of reasons. First, civil society organizations may consult decision-makers, advising them to take environmental concerns into account when adopting and implementing policies. They may also conduct informational campaigns and spread knowledge about environmental issues, helping form pro-environmental attitudes among the general public. In addition, civil society organizations may substitute government services in protecting the environment – organizing clean-up events, monitoring behavior of polluters and illegal loggers, and reporting or directly punishing illegal activities.

However, the literature suggests a need for nuance. For instance, while Bernauer, Böhmelt and Koubi (2013) find that countries with more ENGOs are more likely to ratify international environmental agreements, this positive effect is diminished in democracies as compared with non-democratic regimes. They explain this surprising result – ‘the democracy-civil society paradox’ – as a function of collective action problems in democratic settings, as well as the fact that citizens in democracies have more channels through which to express grievances. The neoliberal turn in world society has also made some ENGOs change their tactics to emphasize economic feasibility in free market settings (Gareau and Lucier, 2018). Scholars have in turn raised concerns about the potential for ‘greenwashing,’ i.e., “communication that misleads people into forming overly positive beliefs about an organization’s environmental practices or products” (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015, p. 223). For instance, there is evidence that voluntary certification schemes, which

aim to ensure consumers that the products they are purchasing promote fair trade or were harvested in a way that limits environmental impact, may in fact promote further exploitation (Kill, 2016).

In this paper, we seek to move beyond adjudicating whether or not ENGOs have a positive impact on environmental outcomes, and rather redirect our efforts to investigating the concrete obstacles hindering them from fulfilling this role. We focus on the obstacles faced by ENGOs in emerging democracies, where there is space for civil society to operate, but where environmental degradation represents an urgent threat to livelihoods (Wolf et al., 2022; Givens, Huang and Jorgenson, 2019). In such settings – particularly those where civil society depends on foreign aid, and where neoliberal economic reforms have generated new opportunities – we argue that ENGOs will face particular obstacles.

We investigate these obstacles through a case study of Georgia, an emerging democracy that has attracted considerable external funding in the environmental domain. We analyze representative household survey data on environmental attitudes and ENGO memberships and conduct interviews with ENGO representatives and other key informants to show how many Georgian ENGOs are able to create a façade of successful activities for the country’s donors, while not contributing to meaningful environmental governance at the local level. The case study further illustrates the implications of Georgia’s business-government nexus, which serves censor criticism by genuine ENGOs and also incentivizes cooptation, with ENGOs taking lucrative contracts to conduct environmental impact evaluations. These findings have important implications for efforts by external actors working to promote environmental governance, as well as to strengthen “civil society” more broadly speaking.

2 Theoretical background and previous literature

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are part of civil society – “an uncoerced associational life distinct from the family and institutions of the state” (Chambers and Kopstein, 2006). They are based on voluntary memberships and function outside the government and the market structures (Edwards, 2009). Environmental NGOs (ENGOs) represent an expanding component of civil society and are commonly understood to have their roots in activist movements established to counter environmental degradation (Longhofer and Schofer, 2010). The activities of ENGOs vary from advocacy to monitoring of river and air quality, to cleaning up oceans and rivers. They comprise household names such as Greenpeace and World Wildlife Fund, as well as grassroots organizations involved in targeted campaigns. Importantly, even such smaller ENGOs often have ties to global pro-environmental institutions (ibid.), either by serving as the ‘local partners’ of international organizations or through more indirect means, including funding. Overall, the sources of funding for ENGOs vary and can include membership fees, charitable contributions by businesses or foundations, government funding schemes to civil society, or grants from

national and international donors.

Longhofer et al. (2016) outline three “imageries of environmental policymaking,” which correspond to the different ways ENGOs work to counter environmental degradation. The first is a “bottom-up” perspective, which prioritizes the role of domestic ENGOs in pushing the state to enact reforms. Examples include the influence of organizations like the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy in advocating for the establishment of the United States’ Environmental Protection Agency, or the pressure that Malaysian ENGOs leveraged to slow logging in that country (Bryant and Bailey 1997 in *ibid.*). The second image considers the *interactions* that domestic ENGOs have with international players – e.g., to influence international environmental negotiations (Lund, 2013) – which can in ideal circumstances generate a “boomerang effect” (whereby domestic ENGOs influence international movements that in turn enhance domestic efforts). For example, Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue that mobilization against deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon was enhanced when local groups appealed to INGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, who in turn provided information to local residents and put pressure on the World Bank to honor its own commitments related to conservation. Finally, a third “top-down” perspective holds that ENGOs “are themselves derivative features of world society” (Longhofer et al., 2016, p. 1749). Indeed, given the efforts of, *inter alia*, the United Nations and the European Union, ENGOs have secured considerable institutionalized access at the international level (Rootes, 2013).

Looking across countries, Longhofer et al. (2016) find considerable support for this latter perspective, regarding the influence of international ENGOs. Countries that are home to a greater number of individual memberships in international ENGOs are in turn more likely to adopt pro-environmental reforms. On the other hand, membership in domestic ENGOs does not bear an association with the adoption of such measures, except for in a subsample of democratic countries. The authors also fail to find evidence that international ENGOs amplify the effects of their domestic counterparts.

Pacheco-Vega and Murdie (2021), looking at the effect of environmental NGOs on carbon dioxide emissions, find that the effect of environmental advocacy on CO₂ emissions depends on whether citizens can participate in NGOs at all and whether the state is vulnerable to external pressures. Their findings are especially robust in non-OECD countries and emphasize the importance of political opportunity structures and international pressure. Indeed, Berny and Rootes (2018) caution that, while the institutionalization of ENGOs has enhanced their impact on policy, their becoming more mainstream has also heightened the risk of cooptation by more dominant agendas.

In another global study, Böhmelt and Betzold (2013) find that when more ENGOs participate in official negotiations, and are granted a higher degree of access (i.e., being involved in the negotiation rather than just being granted observer status), state commitments to solve environmental problems tend to be stronger.

[Böhmelt, Böker and Ward \(2016\)](#) find that ENGO leverage (measured in terms of the number of ENGOs registered in a country with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) matters for the ratification of international climate change agreements and corresponding action to achieve them, though the effect is diminished and even becomes negative in contexts characterized by higher levels of inclusion. This latter result is in line with the ‘democracy-civil society paradox’ [Bernauer, Böhmelt and Koubi \(2013\)](#) described above.

In sum, the literature to date presents evidence for the potential of ENGOs to promote better environmental outcomes, but is limited in explaining *why* or under *which circumstances* this is the case or which obstacles ENGOs are facing in their work. Moreover, previous literature analyzes ENGOs as actors, without paying attention to people who work in these ENGOs. Our study aims to help fill this gap.

We conceptualize three different levels at which obstacles to successful environmental action for ENGOs can emerge: (1) at the organizational level of ENGOs (horizontal); (2) in their relation with actors of political influence (top-down); and (3) in their relation with the wider public (bottom-up).

First, at the organizational level, ENGOs can face significant obstacles due to limited capacity and resources. If they operate on tight budgets and rely on volunteers and donations, this can make it difficult to undertake large-scale initiatives that are necessary to address complex environmental problems. Additionally, ENGOs can lack the necessary technical knowledge and expertise to effectively address environmental challenges. This can lead to fragmented efforts and duplication, resulting in less impact on the ground. The pressure to raise funds and deliver results quickly may also lead them to prioritize projects with immediate visibility over those needed to solve long-term environmental problems.

Second, environmental problems are often closely linked to political and economic interests, which in turn have an influence on policy-making. Environmental regulations, advocated by ENGOs, may be opposed by powerful corporations and industries, and governments in developing economies may prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term environmental protection ([Rootes, 2013](#); [Carlitz and Povitkina, 2021](#)). Political influence can also restrict access to funding and resources. In the face of opposition from powerful stakeholders with political clout, ENGOs may struggle to advocate for their causes and achieve meaningful policy change. On the other hand, scholars have alerted us about the dangers of ENGOs being coopted ([Gronow and Ylä-Anttila, 2019](#)). There is a risk that, in order to secure state funding and political access, ENGOs might formulate less ambitious policies. This also demonstrates how obstacles at the organizational level (lack of funding) can reinforce other obstacles at the political level. Similarly, obstacles stemming from economic, institutional, and political contexts create certain incentives for becoming ENGO members, thereby reinforcing organizational obstacles.

Finally, due to the complexity of environmental problems, the general public might be unaware of their severity and urgency. Here, ENGOs can do important work to raise awareness about these issues. However, a lack of trust and credibility can be a significant impediment to generating public support for action. Credibility and trustworthiness are especially important in highly polarizing issues such as environmental policy. Communication scholars for instance have found that credible and trusted sources of green messages lead to more behavior change (Diamond and Zhou, 2022). In contrast, a lack of trust can make it difficult for ENGOs to engage with the public and gain support for their causes. ENGOs may face public criticism or scrutiny if they are perceived to have a narrow focus (serving donor agendas to obtain funding), to be partisan (e.g. due to cooptation), or to fail to address broader social and economic issues.

In what follows, an inductive case study of Georgia serves to illustrate these obstacles and develop a research agenda for investigating them in greater detail.

3 Research design

The number of environmental non-governmental organizations has exploded over the past decades, and so has international funding available to them. Figure 1 illustrates these trends using data from Associations Unlimited (Gale Research Group, 2012)¹ in Panel (a) and aid activities targeting Global Environmental Objectives (CRS) specifically directed to governments and civil society from (OECD, 2023) in Panel (b).²

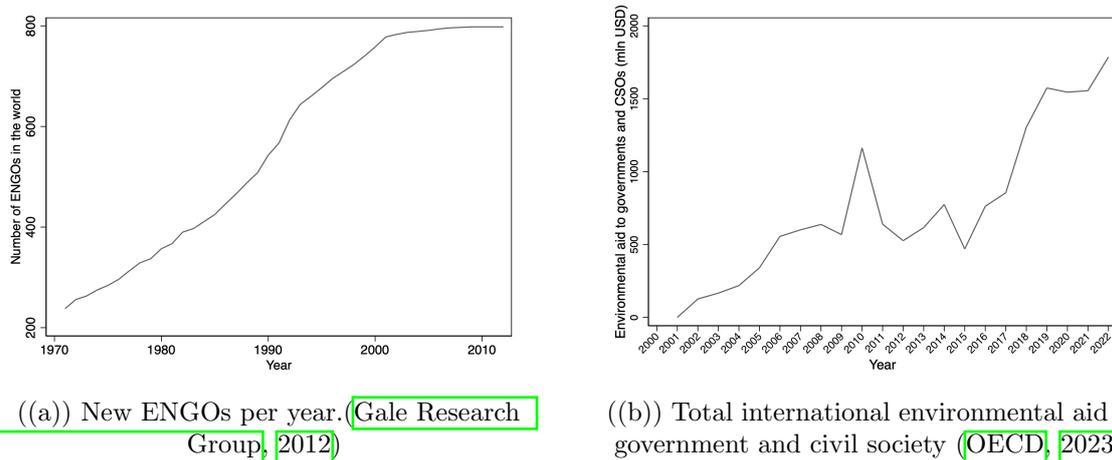


Figure 1: The rise in environmental non-governmental organization activity in the world

At the same time, the number of environmental NGOs seems to only correlate strongly with environmental policy outcomes in countries that we consider high-income democra-

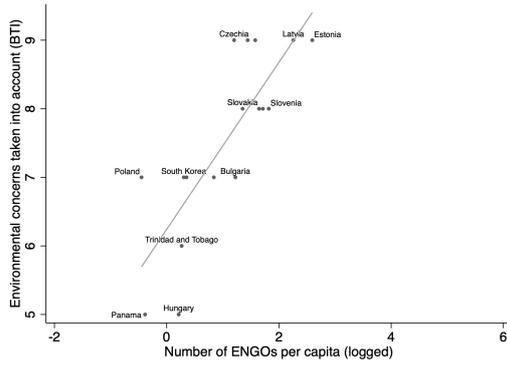
¹This is the latest available data on the growth of ENGOs over time, collected by (Longhofer et al., 2016)

²OECD does not provide separate statistics for environmental aid to civil society organizations, grouping the data with environmental aid channeled to governments.

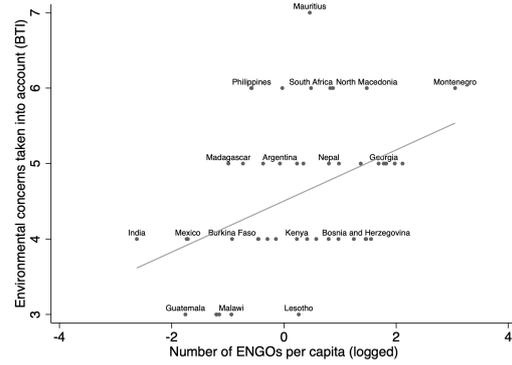
cies. The relationship is much weaker among democracies that are commonly classified as developing countries ([The World Bank Group, 2023](#)) or emerging economies. Figure 2 presents a bivariate relationship between the number of ENGOs, calculated by the authors from a new database tracking environmental organizations around the world, EcoHub ([EcoHub, 2023](#)),³ weighted by the population size measure from the World Bank ([World Bank, 2023](#)), to account for country size, and environmental policy score from the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI) ([Donner et al., 2022](#)). The index evaluates “transformation processes toward democracy and a market economy” in 137 countries and excludes countries that are considered consolidated democracies and advanced economies.⁴ In the figure, we only compare democracies, as democratic institutions provide room for civil society to organize and freely operate, while in authoritarian regimes such freedom of association is limited, and non-governmental organizations, if they exist, are often under government control. To distinguish between democracies and non-democracies, we use a dichotomous measure from [Boix, Miller and Rosato \(2022, 2013\)](#). We can see from the figure that the relationship between the number of ENGOs and responsive environmental policy is stronger among high-income democracies, raising questions about what might be impeding the impacts of ENGOs in emerging democracies. We conduct regression analysis to test the strength of this relationship after adding the relevant control variables in Appendix 5. The results show the same patterns.

³Ecohub provides information on both international and domestic ENGOs. The list is likely not comprehensive, but it has information on much more ENGOs than other popular sources, such as Associations Unlimited previously used by [\(Longhofer et al., 2016\)](#) and [\(Pacheco-Vega and Murdie, 2021\)](#) or lists from IUCN used by [Bernauer, Böhmelt and Koubi \(2013\)](#). It is the largest dataset on ENGOs available online and approximately reflects the differences in the number of ENGOs between countries. It is, therefore, suitable for cross-country comparisons

⁴The policy score is an average of country expert answers to the question “To what extent are environmental concerns effectively taken into account?”. It ranges from 1 to 10, where 1 is “Environmental concerns receive no consideration and are entirely subordinated to growth efforts. There is no environmental regulation”, 4 is “Environmental concerns receive only sporadic consideration and are often subordinated to growth efforts. Environmental regulation is weak and hardly enforced”, 7 is “Environmental concerns are taken into account but are occasionally subordinated to growth efforts. Environmental regulation and incentives are in place, but their enforcement at times is deficient”, and 10 is “Environmental concerns are effectively taken into account and are carefully balanced with growth efforts. Environmental regulation and incentives are in place and enforced”. The BTI source is particularly beneficial for our illustration of environmental outcomes, as it has good coverage of the developing world and the expert question is broad enough to cover a general commitment of countries to environmental goals - something that domestic ENGOs can influence.



((a)) High-income democracies



((b)) Low- and middle-income democracies

Figure 2: The relationship between the number of ENGOs per capita and environmental policy score from Bertelsmann Transformation Index (Donner et al., 2022) in a sample of high-income democracies (a) and low- and middle-income democracies (b).

We investigate factors that might impede successful environmental action from ENGOs in emerging democracies in a case study. For the case study, we chose Georgia - a democracy with an active environmental civil society where high ENGO participation is not accompanied by strong environmental outcomes.

3.1 Why Georgia?

Georgia is a young multiparty democracy with a vibrant civil society. Figure 3 shows that civil society activities and the participatory environment for civil society organizations in Georgia have steadily developed since independence. Many highlight that the strength of civil society organizations (CSOs) consolidated in the years prior to 2003, when they were for the first time referred to as non-government organizations and “successfully fought for various issues ranging from environmental protection to human rights” (ADB, 2011, 1).

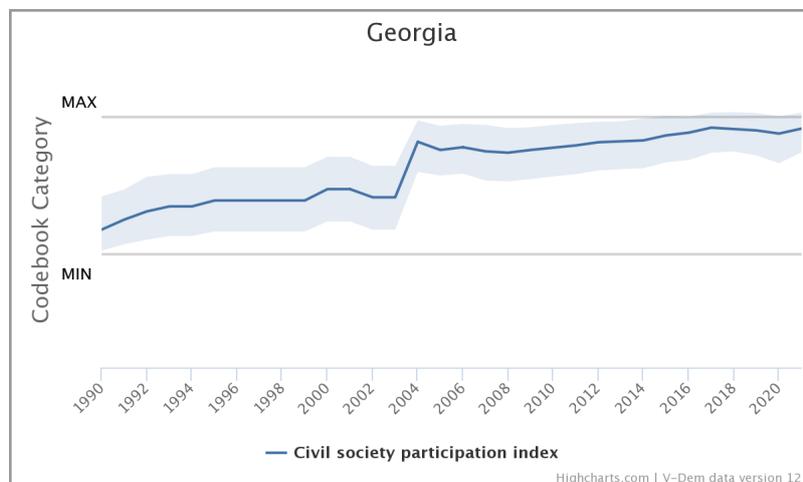


Figure 3: Civil Society Participation in Georgia. Source: Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al., 2021)

Georgian civil society organizations have also been supported by substantial donor funding from, *inter alia*, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union, various international organizations (e.g. Soros Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung), and country embassies. Figure 4 illustrates the donor funding for environmental purposes to government and civil society organizations (OECD, 2023). Moreover, in 2013 Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the European Union, with the country taking responsibility to harmonize its environmental legislation and governance with that of the EU standards.

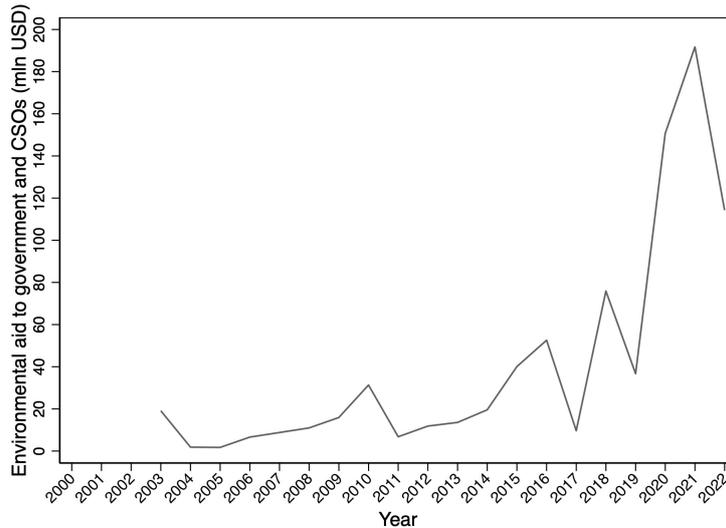


Figure 4: Environmental aid to the government and civil society in Georgia. *Source: OECD Statistics (OECD, 2023)*

At the outset, the combination of these factors creates an ideal backdrop for environmental NGOs to meaningfully engage in advocacy and watchdog activities, influence policy and decision-making, and thus have positive impact on the overall environmental governance in the country. Nonetheless, environmental problems remain acute in Georgia and environmental hazards continue to impact the population. Georgia is in the third place in Europe in terms of the mortality rate attributed to air pollution (per 100 000 people) (WHO, 2017). Apart from the polluted air, water contamination, land and forest degradation, lack of waste management, and biodiversity loss remain significant challenges. According to a study from 2021, the adverse environmental exposures in the country caused “21% of disease burden and 25% of deaths, including 30% of disease burden and 14% of deaths among children” (Berg and Sturua, 2020)

Georgia thus provides a crucial case setting to investigate why despite the presence of large and vibrant civil society, available donor funding, and favorable institutional framework (of the EU Association Agreement), NGOs are not able to improve environmental outcomes, so much so that about 14% of children die from ineffective environmental governance.

To find the answer to this puzzle, we rely on data collected during several rounds of fieldwork in Georgia’s capital Tbilisi. This included 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews in Georgian with representatives of various ENGOs in July 2022 (on-site) and July-August 2023 (via Zoom). In addition, we also rely on two rounds of fieldwork (conducted in 2016 and 2019) during which the authors examined institutional challenges to development and democratization in the country. These included more than 60 interviews with a variety of informants, including investigative journalists, civil society representatives, diplomats from foreign embassies and donor community, government officials, opposition members, academics, and independent policy consultants. We also analyze representative household survey data from the latest waves of the World Value Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2021) and European Value Survey (EVS, 2017) to examine the characteristics of ENGO members and compare ENGO participation patterns in Georgia with those in other emerging democracies and high-income democracies.

4 Results

4.1 Greenwashing to Attract Donor Funding?

According to the civil society data registry (created by the Civil Society Institute and “Open Society - Georgia” Foundation, with support from the EU), there are 173 NGOs registered as working on environmental issues and their number has steadily increased throughout the last 30 years (CSO Georgia 2022), as shown in Figure 5.

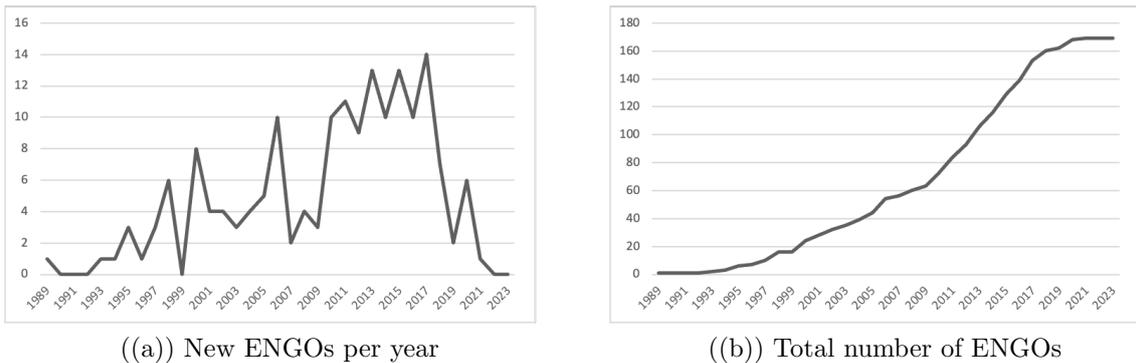


Figure 5: Number of ENGOs in Georgia

A closer look at these NGOs reveals that most of them combine “ecology” with other areas and activities (such as, “youth”, “sports”, “tourism”, “business development”, “economic growth”, “gender” etc), with the majority of ENGOs reporting four activities. In face-to-face interviews, one of our expert informants noted that “even though there are more than hundred environmental organizations, number of those that do real advocacy and watchdog activities is about 10” (authors’ interviews, Tbilisi, July 26, 2022). Many

NGOs with completely different specializations do environmental work on the side because this expands the number of available donors they can apply to for funding.

Environmental NGOs, just like other CSOs in the country, are heavily dependent on external funding. A study by the USAID (2010, 110) found that about 95% NGO funding in Georgia came from foreign donors. Contributions from a constituency, membership base or philanthropy are very rare (author’s interview with analyst from Transparency International, June 2016). To enable NGOs continue their work, foreign donors have continued to provide substantial funding throughout the years. As a recent study suggests, instead of engaging in constituency mobilization or citizen engagement, “most CSOs [...] concentrate on diversifying their funding sources through establishing relations with multiple international donors” (EWMI 2021, 3).

This has created incentives for many NGOs to include ecology/environment among their activities. While the upsurge in organizations interested in environmental problems appears to be a positive development, our informants noted that many of these organizations engage in “easy” “painless” and “superficial” work, which does not concentrate on long-term sustainable policy changes, and avoids conflict with entrenched interests.

As an example, informants brought up several projects (running from 2010 up until today) dedicated to organizing cleaning up activities of waste in the environment (on the roads and in the fields). Among others, this included projects such as ‘Clean-up Georgia’, ‘Keep Georgia beautiful’, ‘Keep Georgia Tidy’, all implemented by different ENGOs or their consortiums. UNDP, USAID, SIDA/the Government of Sweden have all provided several millions of USD for these different projects spanning over several years. This however has not led to any systemic changes in waste management. As one informant remarked: “How can you clean up Georgia for 9 years and not think about more sustainable institutional solutions?” (author’s interview, Tbilisi, July 2022).

These activities usually end up as one-off actions dealing only with the symptoms of the problem and do not address systemic challenges in solid and hazardous waste management. As a SIDA policy report acknowledged: while “Clean-up Georgia was more active to mobilise the public for a particular issue, the cleaning of the environment [...]” planned activities were “not sufficient” to deal with the most important issue of hazardous waste management (SIDA, 2018, 9).

4.2 Implications of the Business-Government Nexus

Even among ENGOs who have a genuine interest in promoting environmental protection, many avoid criticizing government policies because of entrenched business interests in politics. Our interviewees pointed to the practice of politicians accepting donations from big businesses (often violating environmental regulations) in exchange for passing laws that allow them to continue harming the environment. As an example, a law from March 2012

was mentioned, which was adopted just six months before the Parliamentary Elections, and allowed companies to avoid liability for environmental violations by making a one-off payment to the state. While adopting the law, the ruling party argued that it would only apply to minor violations and was necessary to prevent small businesses from going bankrupt. However, it soon became apparent that the very first agreements were made with the country's largest mining companies, Madneuli JSC and Quartzite Ltd. These companies were not only major polluters but also happened to be the biggest financial donors of the ruling party (Gujaraidze, 2014, 19). Given the strong business-government nexus, it is easier for many ENGOs to engage in activities which might be visible – such as cleaning up campaigns often covered on TV, print brochures and create ads using billboards – but do not induce institutional changes for better environmental governance.

To further illustrate ENGO engagement with superficial environmental actions, an expert informant brought up an example of waste separation in the streets of the capital. As part of the EU Association Agreement obligations, in 2018 the City Hall of Tbilisi and several ENGOs signed a Memorandum of Understanding, which was followed by the installment of trash bins for waste segregation in the central streets of the capital. While this was a positive start, the informant remarked that the next steps in the waste management process were not elaborated, and everything ended up in the same collector cars and ultimately dumped in landfills. Proponents of this project argued that it would “raise awareness” by making citizens “get used to the waste separation signs.” However, as our expert informant pointed out, such a superficial approach was detrimental: “People see the separated waste thrown together, it kills motivation and makes them more skeptical” (authors’ interview, July 2023). The informant also noted, that she did not “rule out financial interests behind the avid push in installing those bins,” because the separation bins were purchased through a simplified procurement method, which had often been linked to corruption, vested business interests in politics and ‘revolving door’ cases in Georgia (Droa, 2021; Tabula, 2021; Transparency International Georgia, 2015).

Another problem identified by our interviewees is that many entrepreneurial ENGOs do consultancy work on the side, particularly environmental impact assessment (EIA), which often comes in conflict with their environmental activism. As part of the Association Agreement signed in 2013, Georgia made commitments to implement the EU’s EIA Directive (Directive 2011/92/EU). As a result, the Georgian Parliament replaced its older ‘Law on Environmental Impact Permits’, with Environmental Assessment Code. This means that all public and private development projects need to prepare EIA reports before being approved and implemented.

While there are environmental consulting firms that concentrate on conducting the EIA, our interviewees noted that many ENGOs have also branched out in this sector and combine it with their supposed advocacy work. In fact, out of 173, 10 ENGOs reported that they also work with “business development.”

“The problem is that often these EIA reports reflect whatever the client wants, not what are the real risks. Companies offer big money, and especially if it’s a state-led development project. [...] It’s a good way [for ENGOs] to sell their credibility.”

As an illustration of incompatible advocacy and consultancy roles, interviewees brought up the cases of “Madneuli Mine” and “Khudoni Hydro Power Plant” [for privacy reasons the names of ENGOs are not revealed]. The Madneuli mining enrichment complex in southern Georgia has been linked to serious environmental issues, including heavy metal pollution, water pollution, and contamination of agricultural land. The toxins found in water, agricultural products, and dust has had impact on the public health of the local population with a dramatic increase in rates of cancer, birth defects and cardiovascular disease.

As local residents recalled (as quoted in [Swann-Quinn \(2019, 24-25\)](#)):

“You have to see the color of the river [...] I remember before there was very good fish. But OK, forget about it, there are no frogs now, even frogs die.”

“[T]he situation is very bad. Only yesterday there were five people dead, five burial ceremonies and this is mainly [due to] heart and breast cancer. And all children have this thyroid problem. [...] there are many birth defects. There is no proper data or research, but people think it is because they drink the water and live close to the [mining] area”.

Nonetheless, locals had been reluctant to protest due to limited employment options outside the mining industry in the settlement. When the mining company decided to further expand its activities across the river and destroy an archaeological site of 5000 years (“Sakdrisi”) for gold extraction, several environmental watchdogs from the capital tried to mobilize and prevent the destruction of the site and further ecological damage. As a representative from one of the watchdogs recalled:

“One day we had a meeting with the mining company. It was us and another ENGO [name removed]. Suddenly, the company representative turned to my colleague [from another ENGO] and said: – “Hasn’t your organization applied for consultancy at our tender call? So how does it work? You want our money but you still fight against us?””

Another example involved the construction of a large Hydro Power Plant (HPP) on the Khudoni river in the Svaneti region. Environmental activists and NGOs mobilized together with the local population, arguing that the HPP entailed irreversible environmental and social risks, including flooding of villages, forests and cultural sites. Instead,

the activists advocated for the construction of smaller dams which minimized such risks. Disagreement between the environmentalists and the construction company continued for several years. Along the way, environmentalists discovered that one of the ENGOs in their network had prepared an Environmental Impact Assessment on behalf of the company, which highlighted the need for better “communication with the affected population” and preparation of a resettlement plan. The report included an analysis of potential sources of damage to the dam, but not of the impact this damage would have on the local population’s livelihoods or the environment. As one of the ENGO representatives noted: “This was a complete shock for us. At first the project was unacceptable for you and suddenly you work for the company?” (authors’ interviews with ENGOs, July 2022, Tbilisi).

Our informants noted that these kinds of entrepreneurial activities on the side create legitimacy problems for all the environmental NGOs:

“I understand this is a way to generate income. And many do it. But then switch completely to consultancy and leave advocacy alone. Do not erode others’ work.” (authors’ interview with an analyst from environmental watchdog, Tbilisi)

While environmentally active ENGOs were not able to stop the destruction of the archaeological site by the mining company, they managed to temporarily halt the construction of the Khudoni HPP. This goes to show that environmental activism sometimes makes a difference and that there are ENGOs dedicated to the cause of environmental protection. But in face-to-face interviews, they identified several important hurdles constraining their advocacy and watchdog efforts.

Lack of transparency in policy- and law-making was named as an important barrier. Representatives from ENGOs described the difficulties of accessing information about the initiated draft-laws in the parliament, even when they request it. And in those cases, when they manage to obtain the bill, it is often too late, as at that stage draft-laws have moved to the second or third hearings, when only minor amendments are allowed.

“We often have no idea what’s discussed at the first hearing. Frequently draft laws on environmental issues are discussed in a speedy manner, in 3-4 days if they need to. Even if we prepare comments on the bill, we have no idea if these will be taken into account or not. Participation and involvement – this is a big problem.” (authors’ interview, July 2022, Tbilisi)

Our respondents also mentioned the practice of government officials questioning – and sometimes discrediting – their work, when more outspoken ENGOs disagree with the government position and point to environmental drawbacks of big development projects. A representative from environmental watchdog recalled a case when with the financial

support of the USAID, the Ministry of Energy initiated a feasibility study to examine which rivers in Georgia were fit for the construction of HPPs.

“They hired an energy consultancy company. Feasibility study stated that the vast majority of rivers were suitable. But this relies on the older approach that you can take about 90% of the water, place it in the tube [sic], and leave only 10%. But what about the fish, the needs of locals for irrigation? We raised this issue. Few days later the Minister of Energy and his deputy held a press conference, calling us ‘Russian agents’, and claiming that we were against the energy independence of Georgia. But we are not against all the dams, only against the environmentally harmful ones.” (authors’ interview, July 2022, Tbilisi)

ENGO representatives noted that the government’s dismissive approach towards the more outspoken NGOs also makes donors hesitant to offer funding to the latter, due to fears of “spoiling relations with the government” (authors’ interviews, July 2022). As an interviewee involved in criticizing the USAID-funded HPP feasibility study recalled:

“Before that, we had received several rounds of funding from USAID. After that [the feasibility study report] we applied several times but never received funding directly. Instead, they provide funding to our partner organizations that work on social issues, but donors know that these organizations can’t do environmental advocacy without us, so these organizations involve us as indirect partners. [...] The government’s discreditation[sic] unfortunately had an impact.”

Another watchdog representative mentioned that due to the government’s dismissive approach, they sometimes try to keep a low profile. “We try to raise awareness among the affected communities about the environmental problems, teach them what are the recourse mechanisms if the oil pipeline goes through their plot, how to mobilize if they are against building another project in the nearby park, but we try not to draw too much attention [to ourselves] and let them be the driving force.” Notably, this was also confirmed by representatives from several NGOs, which maintain a more collaborative and close approach with the government. In an anonymous interview, a senior analyst from one of such organizations noted (August 1, 2023, authors’ interview):

“There are two options for NGOs, either to play the role of watchdogs or collaborate with the government. We choose the second path and try to introduce small changes. This does not mean we do not criticize the government - we criticize them within our team, but we never criticize them publicly. [...] And this also comes from the donors, they always ask, do you cooperate with the government in this project?”

Through the analysis of interview answers, we can build an impression of the main activities of ENGOs in Georgia and draw conclusions about the institutional obstacles and context-specific factors creating incentives for their work. Another dimension of ENGO performance, however, is what goes on within the organization itself, people who run the organization, and their motivations. In the next step of our analysis, we turn our attention to these potential internal obstacles to successful ENGO activity.

4.3 ENGO participants in Georgia

We take a closer look at the characteristics of individuals who work in ENGOs in Georgia and compare these to the ENGO participation demographics in other democracies classified as low- and middle-income countries (2023)⁵, to see if Georgia is a representative case of ENGO participation in ‘emerging democracies.’ We also compare Georgia to ENGO participation demographics in democracies that are classified as high-income countries by the World Bank (2023)⁶. In such polities, institutional conditions for environmental civil society to promote environmental action are understood to be the most favorable due to strong civil liberties, high levels of civil society activity, funding available, and publics that are relatively more concerned with environmental issues (Franzen and Vogl, 2013). As above, we only compare Georgia to other democracies and use a dichotomous measure from Boix, Miller and Rosato (2022, 2013) to distinguish between democracies and non-democracies.

Table 1 presents the results from logistic regression analysis of the membership in ENGOs on environmental concern, age, gender, education, and income in high-income democracies, low- and middle-income democracies, and Georgia. The data comes from the Integrated Value Survey (EVS, 2017; Haerpfer et al., 2021) for the latest year available (2018 for Georgia). We measure environmental concern using a question “Here are two statements people sometimes make when discussing the environment and economic growth. Which of them comes closer to your own point of view? A. Protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs B. Economic growth and creating jobs should be the top priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent.” The indicator is binary, where 1 corresponds to answer A and indicates higher environmental concerns.

We measure memberships in environmental organizations as an answer to the question

⁵Low- and middle-income democracies in the sample are Albania, Armenia, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Georgia, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Mali, Mexico, Moldova, Montenegro, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Romania, Serbia, South Africa, Tunisia, Ukraine, Macedonia, Uruguay, Venezuela

⁶High-income democracies in the sample are Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Taiwan, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, United States

“Now I am going to read out a list of voluntary organizations; for each one, could you tell me whether you are a member, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member of that type of organization? Environmental organization” in World Value Survey (WVS) and “Here is a list of voluntary organizations. Please review this list and tell me if you are a member of any of them? Conservation, the environment, ecology, or animal rights” in European Value Survey (EVS). We recode the WVS measure into a binary variable, where 1 corresponds to active or inactive membership in environmental organizations, to make it comparable with the EVS measure.

Table 1: Demographics of ENGO members in the high-income democracies, low- and middle-income democracies, and Georgia

	Model 1 High-inc. dem.	Model 2 Low-&Middle- inc. dem.	Model 3 Georgia	Model 4 High-inc. dem.	Model 5 Low-&Middle- inc. dem.	Model 6 Georgia
DV: Membership in environmental organizations						
Env. concern	0.716*** (0.093)	0.076 (0.052)	-0.255 (0.346)	0.650*** (0.092)	0.071 (0.048)	-0.348 (0.356)
Age = 25-34				-0.245*** (0.082)	-0.142 (0.091)	-0.307 (0.748)
Age = 35-44				-0.291** (0.135)	-0.218** (0.086)	-0.087 (0.737)
Age = 45-54				-0.176 (0.207)	-0.254*** (0.072)	0.542 (0.710)
Age = 55-64				-0.004 (0.210)	-0.309*** (0.072)	0.714 (0.696)
Age = 65 +				0.054 (0.203)	-0.372*** (0.070)	0.090 (0.710)
Gender				0.167*** (0.063)	-0.239*** (0.070)	-0.457 (0.346)
Educ. = Middle				0.202* (0.105)	0.075 (0.091)	-1.279*** (0.381)
Educ. = Upper				0.551*** (0.116)	0.190** (0.096)	-2.028*** (0.528)
Income = Medium				0.102 (0.069)	0.055 (0.113)	1.704*** (0.652)
Income = High				0.222** (0.098)	0.265*** (0.077)	2.243*** (0.670)
Constant	-3.376*** (0.220)	-2.319*** (0.229)	-3.791*** (0.281)	0.750*** (0.162)	-2.176*** (0.289)	-4.106*** (0.900)
Observations	32,259	43,527	2,043	27,109	40,828	1,888
Number of countries	23	28		22	28	

Logistic regression of the membership in environmental organizations on environmental concern in high-income democracies (Models 1 and 3), low- and middle-income democracies (Models 2 and 4), and Georgia (Models 3 and 6). Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Models 1, 2, 4, and 5 are multilevel logistic regressions. Models 4, 5, and 6 control for age, gender, education, and income.

Table 1 shows that the demographics of those who participate in ENGOs in high-income, low- and middle-income democracies, and Georgia differ. The first notable difference is the association between environmental concern and ENGO memberships: in high-income democracies, there are significantly higher number of ENGO members among those who have higher environmental concerns. Both in low- and middle-income democracies and in Georgia, there is no statistically significant difference in ENGO memberships between those who are more concerned with the environment and those who are less concerned. This is striking, as we expect that dedication to the goal of the organization, in our case environmental protection, even if at the expense of other goals, is a core motivation for participation in an interest group in the first place (Yoho, 1998). Such findings might indicate that people participating in ENGOs in Georgia and other emerging democracies might have other motivations to be members than working towards the organization's goals.

The second difference is that most respondents in the high-income democracies, who are ENGO members, are female, ENGO members in the low- and middle-income democracies are overwhelmingly male, while in Georgia, there is no significant difference between genders among respondents who participate in ENGOs. The third difference is in the level of education. In high-income democracies, there are significantly more ENGO participants with upper and middle education among the survey respondents, in the general sample of low- and middle-income democracies - there are on average more people with higher education, while in Georgia - there are significantly more ENGO members with only lower education among the survey respondents. The results hint that ENGOs in Georgia, on average, might lack educated experts that could guide the organization in its work towards environmental goals. The distribution in income between members and non-members of ENGOs is similar in all three samples.

Although these results are based on representative samples from countries, where ENGO members are scant (2 percent of the sample in Georgia, 14 percent of the low- and middle-income democracies sample and 10 percent in the high-income democracies sample), they illustrate some interesting trends. They highlight that ENGO participation in Georgia might be dominated by individuals with lower education and high income - a combination that often dominates in sectors with a potential for easy cash. Coupled with a lack of environmental concern among ENGO members, compared to the general population, these results indicate that another obstacle for successful ENGO work in Georgia might be the motivation of people running ENGOs. While these results are explorative, they call for further investigation of the backgrounds of ENGO members.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The preceding case analysis highlights two main barriers hindering the potential of ENGOs and helps to illustrate the reasons behind the lack of correlation between the number of ENGOs and countries' environmental commitments in emerging democracies. First, in aid-dependent settings, the availability of donor funds incentivizes greenwashing and the establishment of superficial or even predatory ENGOs. Moreover, pro-market reforms in a context where business and government interests are often intertwined creates institutional hurdles for the ENGOs who are genuinely working to make a difference.

The Georgian case provides compelling evidence for both barriers: our interviews suggest that only about 10 of the country's 173 registered ENGOs are engaged in meaningful advocacy work. Others do superficial work to get funding from donors. For instance, one of our interviewees noted how Clean up Georgia has been engaged in "cleaning up Georgia for 9 years" rather than thinking about more sustainable institutional solutions. Furthermore, a number of Georgia's ENGOs conduct lucrative environmental impact assessments, which are required under EU law for all new large infrastructural projects. This creates incentives for the country's ENGOs to market their environmental credibility, and for entrepreneurs to enter the ENGO space as a way to find good business opportunities. In this light, our findings from the analysis of ENGO member demographics also indicate that it might be relevant to investigate who participates in ENGOs and whether these people are indeed driven towards environmental goals or are attracted to ENGO opportunities for personal enrichment.

Furthermore, Georgia's donors are careful not to cooperate with those NGOs that are critical of the government, which provides further difficulties for legitimate ENGOs to sustain their work. The close relationship between government and business interests in the country serves to further hinder the efforts of critical ENGOs. The government moreover at times adopts rhetoric that aims to delegitimize the country's ENGOs. For example, Georgian ENGOs have called for careful analysis before building big projects like hydropower plants to make sure they don't harm the rivers, the environment and don't violate property rights of the local villagers. The government is using this to frame as if they are against the energy independence from Russia and call them agents of Russia.

Our interviews also show that organizations which manage to persist in this environment face additional institutional hurdles. Often, they are not informed about the laws that the parliament is adopting. And even when they are informed it is often too late to influence decision-making. Finally, even if they manage to influence decision-making - after a lot of work to get through their agenda - the measures ENGOs have fought for might not be implemented.

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Appendix A. The relationship between ENGOs and environmental outcomes

In this Appendix, we look at whether the bivariate relationship between the number of ENGOs and environmental policy performance presented in the scatterplots in the research design section persists when controlling for relevant variables.

As in the scatterplots, we take the number of ENGOs per country from an online platform Ecohub (EcoHub, 2023), which claims to be the largest directory of environmental organizations. Ecohub provides information on government, business, media, and non-governmental organizations that work with environmental issues. The organizations are either added by the Ecohub research team, which then sends notifications to the organizations' email, or organizations can register on the website themselves. We filtered through the data to only include environmental NGOs. These organizations include both offices of international organizations (if present) and small domestic organizations. The list of organizations is likely not comprehensive, however, it approximately reflects the differences in the number of ENGOs between countries and is, therefore, suitable for cross-country analysis. The advantage of using Ecohub data compared to other available data on domestic ENGOs is that it is more reflective of the actual number of ENGOs operating within countries' borders. Other available sources, for example, from Associations Unlimited previously used by (Longhofer et al., 2016) and (Pacheco-Vega and Murdie, 2021) or lists from IUCN used by (Bernauer, Böhmelt and Koubi (2013) only cover large organizations, usually offices of international organizations, and exclude small or local organizations that might still matter for national environmental action. For example, the total number of ENGOs for Georgia in Association Unlimited is 1, in IUCN - 4, in Ecohub - 22, and in the EU-supported country NGO registry - 173. While collecting data from official country registries is not feasible, given that the definition of an ENGO may differ between countries, Ecohub database provides the most comprehensive available counts that help us compare the numbers of ENGO between countries. We weigh the measure by the population size measure from the World Bank (World Bank, 2023), to account for country size, and take a natural logarithm due to positive skewness.

To measure environmental policy performance, we use Environmental Policy Score from the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI) (Donner et al., 2022). For more information about the measure, see the main text. As in the figures in the main text, we only compare democracies and use a dichotomous measure from (Boix, Miller and Rosato (2022, 2013) to distinguish between democracies and non-democracies.

We control for the natural logarithms of GDP per capita from the World Development Indicators (The World Bank Group, 2023), and the level of corruption using the Political Corruption Index from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2021; Pemstein et al., 2020). In an additional model, we also include openness to trade from the World Bank (The

Table 2: The relationship between the number of ENGOS per capita and environmental policy performance in high-income vs low- and middle-income democracies

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	DV: Envir. policy performance		
Number of ENGOS per capita (ln)	1.028*** (0.234)	0.909*** (0.180)	0.714** (0.232)
Low- and middle-income dem	-1.425** (0.456)	0.319 (0.403)	0.340 (0.519)
N ENGOS/capita*Low-&Mid-inc. dem	-0.764** (0.260)	-0.875*** (0.201)	-0.793** (0.247)
GDP per capita (ln)		0.979*** (0.155)	1.130*** (0.219)
Political corruption index		-1.455* (0.574)	-1.484* (0.644)
Trade openness (ln)			0.278 (0.256)
Electoral democracy index			-0.641 (1.097)
Civil society participation index			1.662 (1.257)
Constant	6.212*** (0.426)	3.306*** (0.608)	1.009 (1.608)
Observations	63	63	57
R-squared	0.563	0.791	0.802

OLS regression of environmental policy performance on the number of ENGOS per capita(ln) in high-income democracies and low- and middle-income democracies. Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

World Bank Group, 2023), as countries more involved in trade tend to adhere more to international environmental standards, the level of democracy, as more democratic countries have shown to have stronger environmental commitments, and civil society participation index, which accounts for how widespread civil society participation is and how active civil society organizations are, both from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2021).⁷

Table 2 presents the results. It shows that the bivariate correlations presented in the scatterplots in the Research Design section in the main part of the article hold after controlling for other important predictors of environmental policy performance, including GDP per capita and the level of corruption. The interaction between the number of ENGOs and country income category is significant, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the relationship between the number of ENGOs in the two income groups under investigation.

Figure 6 illustrates the conditional effect of ENGOs further. The number of ENGOs only has a relationship with the environmental policy performance in high-income democracies. In low- and middle-income democracies, the relationship is not statistically significant.

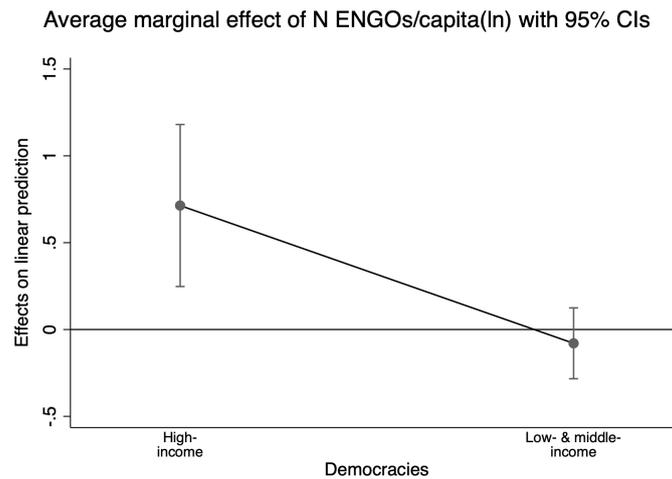


Figure 6: The relationship between the number of ENGOs per capita(ln) and environmental policy performance in high- vs low- and middle-income democracies

⁷We also tried including the amount of international environmental aid from OECD (OECD, 2023), which might help stricter environmental policies with environmental aid conditionality, but the measure is only available for the low- and middle-income countries, and if we use it, we cannot compare the association between ENGOs and environmental policy outcome there and in high-income democracies. The association between environmental aid and environmental policy outcomes in low- and middle-income democracies is not significant.