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“Collaborative NGO Analysis in NRM: When your collaborator is also your unit of analysis”

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ABSTRACT

NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) continue to take more responsibility in Natural Resource Management (NRM). This requires in-depth analyses of the roles NGOs play in NRM. Collaborative NGO Analysis (CNGOA), whereby scholars take an expert role and partner with an NGO to study the organization, its impacts/activities, and its partnerships, can provide new insight into NGO roles in NRM. Existing collaborative studies in NRM primarily apply participatory and community-based approaches whereby researchers partner with organizations to study a problem, such as climate change. However, few studies use CNGOA. This research note addresses this gap by presenting three cases that use CNGOA. CNGOA can create new opportunities to apply theoretical constructs and open spaces for NGO reflexivity. Flexible agreements that include conditions for NGO involvement and anonymity support the approach and can protect the NGO and address some equity concerns. Findings lay the groundwork for additional studies that apply CNGOA in NRM.

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Introduction

Worldwide, from local to global scales, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and collaborative governance arrangements among governments, private enterprises, and NGOs continue to acquire more responsibility for natural resource management (NRM) (Lockwood et al. 2010; Raik, Wilson, and Decker 2008). In NRM, NGOs not only create spaces for communities to collectively make decisions about how to adapt to social-ecological changes. NGOs also act as stakeholders in national and transnational governance processes, such as integrated watershed management, and support numerous transnational environmental justice movements (Popovici et al. 2021; McCormick 2010). The evolving, complex roles NGOs play in NRM demand new models and theories to analyze how NGOs negotiate, manage, and govern natural resources. In this research note, we posit that increased attention to and application of Collaborative NGO Analysis (CNGOA), whereby scholars partner with an NGO and use a variety of social science methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, observations) to study the organization, its

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impacts/activities, and its partnerships, could create new insights into the roles NGOs play in NRM and the methodological processes for collaborating with them (Figure 1).

CNGOA rests under the umbrella of collaborative research, broadly understood here “as research involving coordination between the researchers, institutions, organizations, and/or communities” (Bansal et al. 2019), which can include Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) as well as other forms of community-engaged scholarship (Figure 1) (Israel et al. 2012). CNGOA differs from other collaborative research approaches in that CNGOA requires that the unit of analysis be the organization and its activities. In contrast, many scholars partner with NGOs, other universities, or communities through CBPR or other collaborative research approaches to collectively research problems outside of the organization (Israel et al. 2012; Roper 2002), instead of focusing on an NGO’s role in addressing these problems. NRM research that focuses on

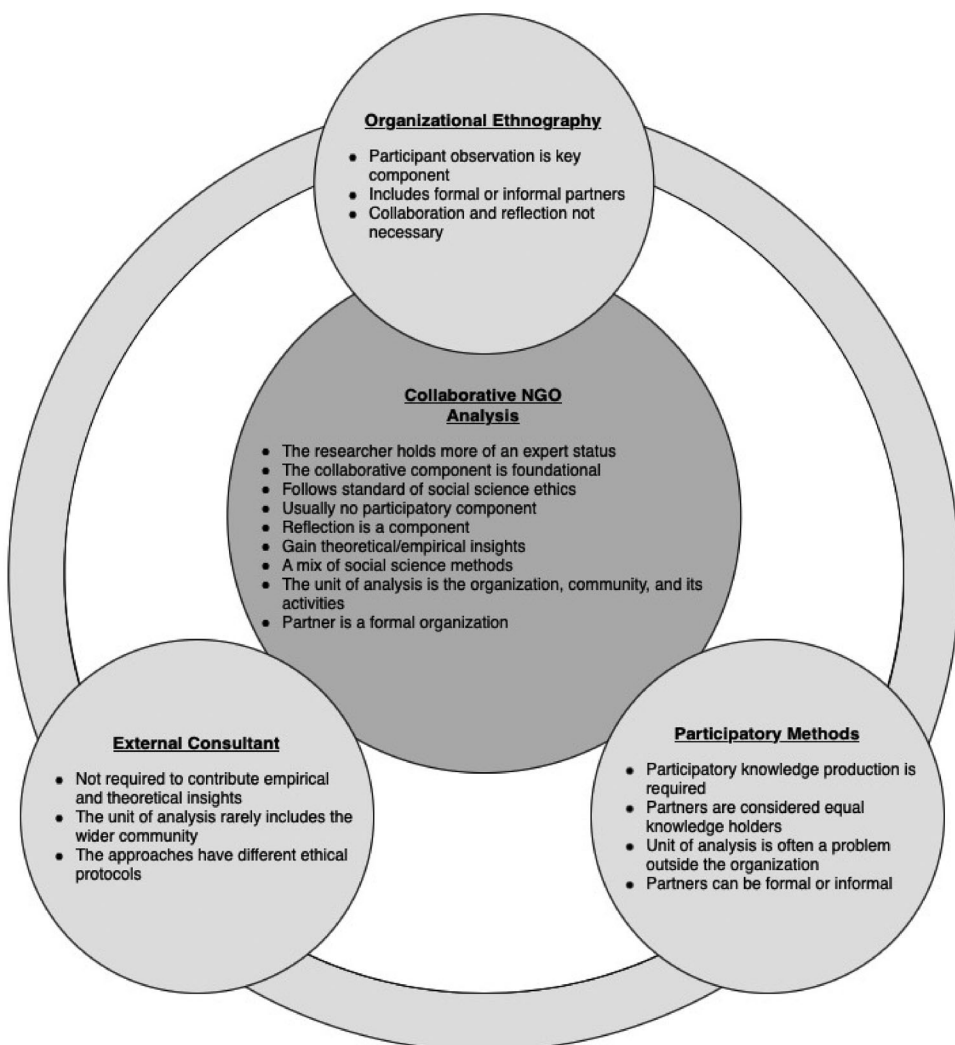


Figure 1. CNGOA compared to other collaborative approaches.

the NGO's role will often use organizational ethnography to critically analyze the organization and events but focus less on the collaborative learning component nor the wider activities and community associated with the NGO (e.g. Marion Suiseeya and Zanolli 2019; Thaler 2021). Others will analyze multiple NGOs from a bird's eye view (Novellino and Dressler 2009).

However, while there is overlap in these approaches, CNGOA is distinct. For instance, a foundational component of participatory research is to work toward knowledge co-creation through balancing intellectual input among partners (Israel et al. 2012). In CNGOA, scholars use their knowledge and expertise to analyze the organization's activities and therefore take on more of an expert role than in participatory research. Similarly, CNGOA can also resemble an evaluation completed by an outside consultant. However, organizational research consultants usually report results back to the organization, while CNGOA involves presenting to and eliciting critique from a larger scholarly community.

It is also important to note that many studies in NRM likely apply approaches that mimic CNGOA, one where the researcher collaborates with an NGO to study the organization and/or its activities (e.g. Ligrani and Niewolny 2017). However, while some have undertaken this type of analysis, there is much less guidance on how to conduct CNGOA. Moreover, even though scholars document and describe best practices for conducting participatory research with an entity outside of an academic institution, it is rare to find descriptions of middle ground, projects where there is less participation from the organization and where the researcher takes on the expert role. Even less research identifies the methodological conditions which support this approach.

Overall, CNGOA is distinct in its approach from other collaborative research approaches. Still, while there is ample research analyzing different forms of collaborative research, there is overall little methodological guidance on CNGOA. An approach, which in short, necessarily researches the NGO itself. In what follows, we briefly present three separate cases that provide details into CNGOA in NRM. We then conduct cross-case analyses that reveal common contributions and constraints across cases as well as unique attributes of each case (Yin 2009). Analyses show how CNGOA promotes the expansion of theory and a reflexive space for practitioners. Results also reveal constraints when conducting CNGOA, including drawbacks with the expert-oriented approach when compared to more equitable approaches, such as CBPR, and challenges associated with making the research useful to NGO partners. Findings provide guidance for scholars and NGO professionals who currently pursue or endeavor to conduct CNGOA by differentiating it from other approaches, providing insights into its strengths, and describing constraints and approaches to address constraints. Ongoing, increased attention to methodological conditions and limitations in scholarship that uses a CNGOA approach is necessary to advancing this approach and providing unique, valuable reflections into how NGOs support, hinder, or contribute to NRM.

Methods

Three researchers conducted case studies with three different organizations, a faith-based farmworker ministry, a local foods NGO, and a conservation NGO in Latin

America (see [Table 1](#) and [Supplementary Appendix 1](#)). The unit of analysis for each case was the organization or the organization and its municipal partners. We used cross-case analysis (Yin 2009) to present and analyze how the three separate cases provide details into CNGOA in NRM. Each study was approved by the affiliated university's IRB. We use pseudonyms and exact locations throughout this publication to protect the anonymity of our NGO partners.

Table 1. Case studies in CNGOA in NRM.

Case	Contributions to NGO and NRM scholarship		Methodological conditions that lead to successfully meeting outcomes	
	Theory	Space for reflection	Collaborative arrangements between researcher and NGO	NGO research involvement and ongoing communication
Faith-based Farmworker Ministry (Anna Erwin)	Operationalized Fraser's (2009) theory of participatory parity to analyze an FBO's participatory project.	Throughout project initiation and ethnographic fieldwork.	NGO approached the researcher, and they came to a mutual agreement for the study. They created a MOU including compensation and anonymity of NGO in all publications following.	NGO was highly involved throughout data collection, including by serving as a gatekeeper to migrant farmworkers and providing ongoing feedback on research insights. It was not involved during data analysis or publication.
Local Foods NGO (Lorien MacAuley)	Applied a critical ethnography (Carspecken 2013) to describe the ways actors and environments recursively reproduce sustainable agricultural discourses.	Occurred continually through participation in NGO educational programming and informal conversations with NGO staff.	Informal agreement from key staff and informal agreement from board members.	NGO was not highly involved, but they granted permission for the research. However, NGO collaboration was a necessity due to research questions and associated theoretical constructs. They were not involved during data analysis or publication.
Conservation NGO in Latin America (Brooke McWherter)	Applied the IAD framework (Ostrom 2009) and inter-organizational relationship theory (Hibbert, Huxham, and Ring 2009) to understand cross-sectoral collaboration.	Happened before the project and continuously throughout the project.	Research was initially proposed to and approved by the NGO. Researcher then created a verbal agreement with NGO.	NGO was part of interviews and facilitated municipal contact. They were also part of the creation of questions, analysis, and publications.

Setting the Stage for CNGOA: Methodological Conditions, Constraints, and Possibilities

Case analyses demonstrate that CNGOA can support the operationalization of theoretical constructs that critically analyze the roles NGOs play in NRM. It supports these analyses by providing a framework by which to apply constructs and giving the researcher expert status (see [Table 1](#) and [Supplementary Appendix 1](#)). In Lorien's case, the systems theory approach with the organization at the center, along with the NGO's openness to internal examination, allowed Lorien to categorize, link, and map the theoretical dimensions that showed precisely how the organization was inadvertently supporting and reinforcing structural racism and classism (MacAuley 2017). In Brooke's case, the collaborative component and unit of analysis inherent to CNGOA supported her capacity to apply a new and complex theoretical framework to investigate how NGO-municipal relations are evolving in an international context (McWherter 2022). In particular, the unit of analysis was squarely on the organization and its partnerships with municipalities, something that is not necessarily part of CBPR or other collaborative approaches. Moreover, the collaborative relationship and buy-in from her NGO partner allowed her to cater the questions to the problem, connect with local populations and municipal partners, and thus apply theory to analyze the organization from multiple perspectives.

Results also show that NGOs, communities, and agency partners can benefit from CNGOA. Findings indicate that CNGOA can provide space for organizational reflection and learning. Indeed, collaborating research partners across all cases appreciated the opportunity to reflect on and learn about their organizations from their partnering researchers and the wider community. For example, Lorien's presentation of results led to the NGO's resolve to achieve greater sociocultural inclusivity, and Brooke's continuous solicitation of feedback from her NGO partners supported ongoing reflection. By employing CNGOA, the NGOs under study gained an in-depth, outside, theoretically informed understanding of issues impacting their work and insights on how to address these issues. Therefore, results not only informed scholarship on how to address possible equity issues in NGOs and governance arrangements in NRM. Because the unit of analysis in CNGOA was centrally the organization and its activities, researchers analyzed the NGO and used that data to support organizations as they worked toward being more inclusive and responsive to the communities they serve. Through this reflection, CNGOA can inform how NGOs design their programs and, thereby, introduce avenues for NGOs to create more equitable programs and policies.

Case study findings also illuminate challenges when pursuing CNGOA. Across cases, there were varying levels of participation and involvement of NGO partners, which presented additional constraints to this approach. In Anna's case, the organization approached her to conduct the research. Their participation was integral to every step of the process, and she interacted with them regularly throughout the process. However, while they were very interested in the research process and maintained heavy involvement, they did not give input on the research questions, nor were they interested in reflection. Brooke's partner had a similar amount of participation, but they participated throughout by providing feedback on questions and the research process. They have also shown consistent interest in learning from the study's results. For Lorien, the NGO's participation was integral at the beginning, and they participated in reflection.

Findings also indicate that the type of collaboration is not prescriptive and relies on context. Even though CNGOA can open space for theoretical expansion and organizational reflection, reflection is not a given and depends on multiple factors, including researcher goals and NGO buy-in. While the NGOs in all three studies were committed to the research component, none expressed explicit interest in critical reflection, a transformative space where NGO actors, as well as the people they serve, have the agency to reflect on their reality and transform it through that reflection (Freire 1970). Studies show that when NGOs are interested in critical reflection and scholars prioritize critical reflection, studies can create reflexive opportunities for all parties (Ligrani and Niewolny 2017). Findings thus demonstrate that incorporating reflection as part of the CNGOA process necessitates both NGO buy-in and academic structures and researchers that prioritize collaborative reflection. In future CNGOA, increased attention to enhancing meaningful reflexive opportunities for NGOs could improve the collaborative relationships between parties and increase the benefits that NGOs gain from the collaborative research process.

Results also show that researcher bias and positionality can have a different influence than other forms of collaborative research. As in most collaborative research approaches, positionality, power, and legitimacy shape not only who conducts research but also shape what knowledge is produced (Gaventa and Cornwall 2008). However, because the researcher has more of an expert status in CNGOA, these factors have distinct implications. Holding more of an expert status, rather than implementing a participatory approach to knowledge production, means that the researcher, rather than the NGO or the community, has more influence over knowledge production. While a more expert-oriented status is warranted for a CNGOA approach, this marks a clear distinction when compared to other more explicitly equity-informed approaches, such as CBPR, that aim to produce knowledge collectively with NGOs, throughout the life of the project (Israel et al. 2012).

Together, results show that attention to methodological conditions, understood here as factors that uphold the successful implementation of CNGOA, such as anonymity, ongoing communication, transparency, and NGO involvement in agreements between researchers and partner organizations, could begin to address these issues (Mazer et al. 2020; McDermott et al. 2019; Roper 2002). Lorien and Anna both found that, while challenging, keeping their organization's identities and specific location anonymous allowed them to implement analyses that contributed to scholarship on how to decrease power among stakeholders, specifically NGOs and their constituents, and address issues of class and race within NGOs. This anonymity allowed them to investigate how issues associated with race and class can block well-intentioned efforts to increase inclusivity in NRM (Erwin and Stephenson 2019; MacAuley 2017). Although it is common to uphold the anonymity of research participants, the long-term, public nature of collaborative research also makes it more difficult to maintain anonymity than in other social science studies (Macmillan and Scott 2003; McDermott et al. 2019). Attention to these challenges, along with preserving anonymity while adequately describing a study's social-ecological context, is vital to supporting research relationships when pursuing CNGOA in NRM.

Moreover, ongoing communication of research goals and agreement on the NGO's role in meeting those goals is also of utmost importance in CNGOA. Across cases, NGO partners enabled analyses by giving valuable feedback, logistical support, and/or access to contacts and documents. Brooke's experience notably demonstrates how ongoing communication on the NGO's role in the CNGOA process can support research as it allowed her to meet her goals amid COVID-19. Additionally, given that the scope of CNGOA is on the NGO, not necessarily on an environmental problem, partner organizations may be especially curious about how research outcomes can speak to their mission and improve their activities. Therefore, including NGOs in research processes while continually communicating research implications is particularly vital in CNGOA.

Finally, it is essential to note that all three NGOs in our cases were established and had a longstanding, strong relationship with the communities they worked with, which data from each study demonstrate (Erwin and Stephenson 2019, Erwin 2022a, 2022b; MacAuley 2017; McWherter 2022; Vargas et al. 2022). However, while these relationships were strong, collaborative research creates a risk of bias from all parties, including the NGO partner. These studies did not work with NGOs to investigate their own bias or positionality in the research process. Understanding these dynamics in future studies could provide additional guidance on decreasing NGO bias. It could also provide insight into the types of NGOs that have the opportunity to conduct CNGOA, perhaps even collaborative research in general, in the first place. This could demonstrate if some NGOs (formal *versus* informal; small *versus* larger) have more access to collaborative research opportunities than others.

Conclusion

Case analyses show how CNGOA's focus on the organization and its activities, the researcher's expert status, and its collaborative component illuminate theoretical insights that other approaches may not be as suited to produce. CNGOA can also provide benefits to both NGOs and communities. In particular, CNGOA can yield insights for NGOs who endeavor to create more equitable programs and policies. Case analyses also revealed constraints to the approach. While a necessary component in CNGOA, researchers' expert gave them more power over knowledge than communities or NGOs, which is a distinction to more equitable, participatory approaches. Moreover, differing levels of NGO involvement presented constraints to providing reflexive opportunities for NGO practitioners.

Results show that CNGOA requires setting the stage for collaboration at the outset. We recommend drafting flexible agreements that include transparency and reflexivity, creating clear expectations for the level of the NGO's involvement, and ongoing negotiations concerning anonymity. Moving forward, pursuing additional CNGOA, especially with larger NGOs, partnerships, or governmental agencies, could provide guidance into how these entities enhance or detract from efforts to manage natural resources effectively and equitably. Increased attention to researcher and NGO bias, as well as methodological conditions like NGO anonymity, ongoing communication, transparency, and agreements, could improve the implementation of the approach.

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