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The ways that external and internal dynamics influence intermediaries in the climate policy process

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Abstract

“Climate intermediaries” are important for climate governance, as they can strengthen mitigation efforts by drawing enable diverse insights into the policy process. However, actors wishing to inter-mediate may be stymied from assuming such a role; hence, there is a need for a greater understanding of whether and how, organizations can act as climate intermediaries. We investigate in what ways external governance dynamics surrounding an organization can influence their intermediation, and further, in what ways these external dynamics produce internal dynamics that influence intermediation still further. We find that externally, the presence of funding limitations, competition between intermediaries, and unwilling or inappropriate intermediation partners can influence nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) pursuit of intermediation. Moreover, by examining internal dynamics, we see that these external dynamics challenge NGOs’ strategy-making, staff well-being, and maintenance of expertise, which impact their organization’s intermediation still further. Resultantly, we propose that despite intermediaries being a crucial component of the post-Paris Agreement climate policymaking process, the governance arrangements that surround NGOs impact their ability to assume this role, with attendant implications for limiting the diversity of insights into the policy process.

Keywords: climate policy; climate intermediaries; employees; NGOs; intermediation; wellbeing

Policy intermediaries can facilitate a greater diversity of inputs into the policy process, and so understanding what factors affect their capacity to inter-mediate holds implications for the design, passage, and implementation of policies (Kivimaa et al., 2019; Tosun et al., 2023). Indeed, governance increasingly depends upon these actors (Abbott et al., 2017). Yet, as outlined in the introduction to this special issue (Eitan et al., forthcoming) there exist gaps in the existing literature. For instance, Eitan et al. (2025) note that there is a need for a greater understanding of how policy intermediaries navigate competing accountabilities, and how they sustain their roles within the policy process. We know from a systematic review of management studies that among organizations pursuing positive social change, external change mechanisms, and internal practices can result in different processes and outcomes

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(Stephan et al., 2016). However, these interacting considerations, regarding the influence of external dynamics—that is, the actors and governance structures in which intermediaries operate—and internal dynamics—that is, suborganizational tools and procedures—upon the ways in which an organization can intermediate. As such, we ask, “in what ways do external and internal dynamics influence an organisation’s intermediation activities?”

In particular, the policy process for climate change mitigation is noteworthy because of the highly multilevel structure of this policy area’s governance model (Bäckstrand, 2008), in which actors seek to influence, and are influenced by, the policy process across scales (Bäckstrand, 2006). Since the Paris Agreement of 2015, actors such as the European Union (EU) and national governments have encouraged a greater diversity of actors to design and implement climate change mitigation policy (Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Hanegraaff, 2015; Kuyper et al., 2018; Saucedo Dávila, 2019). In doing so, these actors can act as a specific type of policy intermediary, namely “climate intermediaries,” thus linking different types of actors and levels of governance, with the goal of influencing climate policy (Tobin et al., 2023a); yet, at other times, their efforts to do so can be stymied. Hence, the experiences of those working within climate intermediaries (Tobin et al., 2023a) provide a useful illustrative case for examining the ways that actors intermediate within a policy process that comprises myriad external dynamics (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2021; Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; van Veelen & Hague, 2024).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are one type of actor that may attempt to become a climate intermediary, and they derive their influence from a perception that they possess and increase legitimacy, while holding a commitment to “principled” causes (Allan, 2018; Allan & Hadden, 2017). Indeed, the post-Paris climate governance structure encourages NGOs to become climate intermediaries (Bäckstrand et al., 2017:575), and at the 2024 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change’s (UNFCCC’s) Conference of the Parties (COP), NGOs played a key role in supporting economically developing countries’ participation at the negotiations (McGrath, 2024). Here, we analyze NGOs because the diverse range of organizational structures of NGOs—across size, funding model, trans-/international engagement, and targets of intermediation (Doyle, 2018; Tosun et al., 2023)—enables new insights regarding the conceptualization of intermediation. We investigate in what ways the effectiveness and sustainability of NGOs as climate intermediaries are shaped by external policymaking structures, which may in turn create internal dynamics that influence intermediation still further.

Our article is structured as follows. First, we begin with a review of the existing literature on intermediaries and NGOs in the climate policy process. Second, in the methods section, we explain our data collection process, which involved original interviews with employees of NGOs in the UK. Third, our analysis section is divided into two parts. The analysis begins by identifying three external dynamics that affect NGOs’ intermediation activities, before turning inward to assess how external factors impact upon the internal workings of NGOs, affecting intermediation still further. Specifically, we find that externally, the presence of funding limitations, competition between intermediaries, and unwilling or inappropriate intermediation partners can influence NGOs’ pursuit of intermediation. Moreover, by examining internal dynamics, we see that these external dynamics challenge NGOs’ strategy-making, staff well-being, and maintenance of expertise, which impact their organization’s intermediation still further. Fourth, in our discussion, we reflect on our findings’ implications for understanding the precarious positions of NGOs as potentially influential policy intermediaries within climate governance. Finally, in our conclusion, we summarize our findings and propose new avenues for research.

Literature review: defining “intermediaries,” “NGOs,” and their roles in the climate policy process

Building on the work of Abbott et al. (2017) regarding regulatory intermediaries, Tobin et al. (2023a) developed a policy-specific understanding of intermediaries that act on climate change, known as “climate intermediaries.” Climate intermediaries are:

“go-betweens” that operate between different types of actors and/or between levels of governance, acting directly or indirectly to affect stakeholders’ behaviour and/or policy goals on climate change (Tobin et al., 2023a: 2).

In turn, this definition of climate intermediaries has subsequently laid the conceptual foundations for articles about a variety of types of organizations’ roles in the climate policy process (e.g., Farstad

et al., 2023; Hague & Bomberg, 2023; Solorio & Tosun, 2023; Tobin et al., 2023b). The policy process surrounding “climate action” necessarily entails a broad governance context, including myriad types of actors, levels of governance, and dynamic, interacting subsystems spread across national boundaries. Some activities within this context are regulatory in nature (Eitan & Levi-Faur, 2025), and others instead entail mutual adjustments of goals, or the sharing of best practices (Almeida et al., 2024). For example, climate intermediaries can shape the design of finance roadmaps across policy sectors (Hall & Meng, 2023), and may shape policymaking bidirectionally, by influencing both the funding and implementation of local levels projects (Farstad et al., 2023). However, multiple variables within a policy arena may affect whether an intermediary can influence policy (Tosun et al., 2023). Indeed, in a systematic review of organizations that drive positive social change, which included environmental protection initiatives, Stephan et al. (2016) find that the external context, the processes within the organization, and the interactions between these two factors affect whether an actor/organization is able to affect a transformation. Yet, the existing literature on climate intermediaries has neglected this multilevel relationship between external and internal dynamics as components that may influence an organization’s capacity to intermediate.

NGOs are one type of organization that may attempt to become a climate intermediary. The well-established definition of NGOs is that they are “formal (professionalized) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or the international level” (Martens, 2002: 282). NGOs have long acted as intermediaries in the policy process, such as intermediating between those from whom they receive funding, and to whom this funding is allocated (see Antrobus, 1987). Being nongovernmental, NGOs need to find reliable sources of funding, which presents specific challenges that may not be felt similarly by regulatory intermediaries (Abbott et al., 2017; Eitan & Levi-Faur, 2025). For example, NGOs may need to shift their priorities to meet the demands of donors (Parks, 2008), and over time, this dynamic can create tensions around the need to remain autonomous, while also being dependent on specific sources of funding (Vincent, 2006). Indeed, using panel data, Chewinski and Corrigan-Brown (2020) find that elite funding sources can channel NGOs away from protest strategies, and onto more formalized institutional advocacy (see also Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017). As such, considerations of funding sources are likely to be especially of note regarding climate intermediation, considering the politicized—and frequently, conflictual—nature of climate policymaking (Patterson & Paterson, 2024). We survey three literatures that are pertinent for understanding NGOs as climate intermediaries, namely the research on: NGOs as intermediaries in areas other than climate policy; NGOs as climate actors, but with little reference to intermediation activities; and finally, NGOs that are not labeled a “climate intermediary” as defined by Tobin et al. (2023a), but still are found to intermediate within the climate policy process.

First, NGOs regularly function as intermediaries in policy areas other than climate change. For example, De Silva (2017) investigated the International Criminal Court’s usage of NGOs as regulatory intermediaries regarding international crimes. She showed that these intermediaries may also employ “subintermediaries” to increase capacity for action, underscoring the complex, multiactor governance arrangements that commonly exist within policy areas. Furthermore, Kingston et al. (2023) show that NGOs play a “vital role” in intermediating between supranational and intergovernmental institutions within the EU, demonstrating the need to consider intermediation across levels of governance. Therefore, while a better theorization and understanding of the factors affecting NGOs’ experiences of intermediation is important for climate policy, it is also likely to inform theory-building across other policy areas.

Second, NGOs perform multiple roles within the climate policy process that have not been defined as intermediation (Tosun et al., 2024). NGOs can provide specialized knowledge, targeted expertise, and contacts when required (Berny & Rootes, 2018; Kellow, 2018; Wurzel & Connelly, 2010). Furthermore, NGOs can use their expertise to influence agenda-setting, the negotiation of higher goals, and the implementation of policies (Carter & Childs, 2018; Gulbrandsen & Andresen, 2004; Newell, 2000). Each of these activities has subsequently been understood as possible types of intermediation (see Tobin et al., 2023a). Thus, from this literature on NGOs in climate governance, we know that NGOs are embedded within climate policy formation and execution. As such, our analytical focus is on their intermediation activities, with a view to informing our understanding of when NGOs act as intermediaries, and when they do not.

Third, within the literature that analyzes NGOs as intermediaries in climate governance (e.g., Dryzek, 2017; Harvey et al., 2019; Kingston et al., 2023; McGregor et al., 2018; Moon & Park, 2004), there has been a particular emphasis on climate adaptation policy via service delivery for economically developing states (Harvey et al., 2019; McGregor et al., 2018; Moon & Park, 2004). However, there has been little examination of how NGOs' resource limitations may affect their capacity to influence climate policy, particularly in more economically developed states. As Dryzek (2017: 792) notes, if NGOs "are enlisted to play the intermediary role in [climate policy] orchestration, they may not be able to play other roles so effectively," or vice versa. That is, as shown in the wider literature on NGOs as intermediaries, above, NGOs can assume multiple roles at once, including but not limited to intermediation. Resultantly, we expect that a better understanding of the factors influencing whether, and how, NGOs attempt to function as intermediaries will provide important steps in understanding intermediation.

In sum, from existing research, we know that NGOs intermediate between many actors across multiple levels in the policy process, manifested via a variety of forms, while also performing multiple roles, involving both intermediation and other forms of activity. Furthermore, NGOs' internal workings may affect their activities, especially when facing resource limitations, but there has been no direct enquiry as to the decisions NGOs make when intermediating in such a context. Resultantly, there is a need to understand how NGOs' external dynamics and internal dynamics interact with one another, and in what ways these interactions shape intermediation activities.

Methods

To analyze NGOs as climate intermediaries, we employed a research design employing semistructured interviews with individuals working in UK NGOs. Because of the exploratory nature of our research (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), we targeted NGOs with a range of characteristics, to maximize the breadth of individual experiences of the employees we interviewed, to provide a rich dataset, and to avoid neglecting the views of individuals working for smaller organizations. We interviewed individuals who are based within the UK, whose roles include directly or indirectly working on climate change. The NGOs ranged from being very small (fewer than 20 employees) to very large (over 500 employees) and included multiple strategic approaches (e.g., lobbying, activism, knowledge-building), policy targets (from local emissions reductions to shaping international negotiations), funding sources (such as relying on fee-paying members, donors, and/or competitive grants), and sectors (from reducing emissions in sectors separate to the environment, to only working within the climate policy arena). In doing so, we sought to obtain insights from individuals who had detailed experiences of working within these organizations, rather than relying on externally-facing documents or outputs.

Between January and April 2024, we asked each of our 31 interviewees their gender, age, and whether they managed staff within the organization. We spoke to 17 male and 14 female employees, whose ages ranged from 24 to 49 years. Nineteen of the 31 individuals managed people at the time of the interviews and 12 did not. We felt this provided a range of perspectives across the interviews and ceased interviewing upon reaching data saturation (Charmaz, 2006). We conducted and recorded the interviews online, with each lasting between 40 and 90 min, and then two members of the research team transcribed them. The anonymized list of individuals—comprising the date of the interview, the interviewee's gender, age, whether they managed staff, and whether the interview was conducted by author two (A) or author three (B)—is provided as an Appendix at the end of this article. The interviews are numbered according to the dates on which we transcribed them.

The funding that supported this article originated from a wider project on employee experiences within NGOs, and all of the interviews included discussions of the policy process and intermediation. We structured our research questions around two broad areas: (a) the interviewees' personal experiences of working in their field and organizations; and (b) relations within the wider policy sector, particularly via intermediation. We followed these discussions with an open question in which the interviewee could raise any pertinent topics that had not previously been discussed. Each participant reported that their organization engaged in some form of intermediation, and eight participants perceived their NGO to explicitly pursue intermediation as a core activity of its existence (Participants 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 15, and 25). In line with expectations and the definition of climate intermediaries, participants within our sample reported that their organizations intermediate between a wide range of actors and across levels of government, for example, "between academia and policy and policymakers" (Participant 10), "companies... [and] unions" (Participant 5), "councils, statutory agencies" (Participant 29), "[l]ocal authorities,

businesses” (Participant 7), and “governmental bodies and universities” (Participant 4). In short, as (Participant 21) paraphrases, the NGOs are often “working with literally hundreds of partner organisations, staff, individuals and volunteers.” As such, we are confident that the individuals to whom we spoke worked for NGOs that attempted to be, and often succeeded in being, climate intermediaries, and which at other times were stymied in their efforts. We coded the transcripts according to themes we identified inductively, using the guiding framework of external and internal dynamics, and identified subthemes within these.

Analysis

In this section, we follow the proposal of [Stephan et al. \(2016\)](#) that external and internal dynamics can impact upon organizations’ prosocial activities, by examining the ways that participants proposed that these dynamics influenced their organization’s intermediation activities. Through analysis of these external and internal dynamics, we also gain insights into the ways in which climate NGOs view themselves as intermediaries and develop scholarly understandings of the breadth of climate intermediation activities. Given the inchoate nature of research in this area, these insights make novel empirical contributions to the literature.

External dynamics

From our interview data, we identified three external dynamics that influenced whether and how their organizations could intermediate. These three themes are unreliable funding streams, competition between NGOs, and limitations to the range of potential intermediation partners.

Unreliable funding

Government-created, “regulatory” intermediaries may receive relatively reliable medium-to-long-term financial support from the state (see [Abbott et al., 2017](#)), but the provision of such support is not predictable for NGOs ([Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017](#); [Parks, 2008](#); [Vincent, 2006](#)). Funding plays a key role in determining whether, how, and with whom NGOs attempt intermediation (Participants 5, 11, 14, 23, 24, and 29). Resultantly, the inclusion of a funder within an intermediation chain can determine whether an NGO can act as an intermediary at all. Participant 29, a 35-year-old man, proposed that “there’s a lot of good collaboration. I would say the tensions come from competing for funding sources ... we’re in a competitive bidding war with people with really aligned goals.” If unsuccessful in such applications, intermediation between a funder and a target community or policymaker becomes impossible. Resultantly, NGOs divert time and attention away from intermediation activities, and onto attracting funding, which wastes time, considering that funding applications are often unsuccessful. Participant 15, a 44-year-old female NGO worker, reflected that even when one’s own organization possesses sufficient resources, “within other organisations, it [the capacity to be an intermediation partner] all comes down to money,” stymying their interactions and influence on resultant policy. Because much of an NGO’s work stems from an external funder paying the NGO to interact with policymakers or service-delivery actors, these recipient NGOs are commonly reliant on short-term, often issue-specific funding. As one female employee aged 29 reflected:

“every time that funding renewal comes around, there is the worry of ‘what happens if they say no?’ ... it’s always in the back of the mind going: ‘Are we going to still exist five years in the future?’” (Participant 14).

Hence, even when NGOs wish to intermediate, their status as an independent actor, away from long-term government funding, fosters an inefficient prioritization of funding to ensure that intermediation activities are even possible. Without the involvement of a funding source within an intermediation chain, our interviewees reported that their NGO simply could not function as an intermediary, let alone choose how to do so.

Competition between NGOs

Related to considerations of funding, 10 participants¹ proposed that competition between NGOs was a major obstacle to intermediation. In particular, the importance of achieving a certain level of increased brand awareness for a partner was identified as especially important in determining whether intermediation is possible (Participants 5, 9, 12, 15, 23–25, 27, and 29). As Participant 15 explained,

we're competing for branding and you hear in the organisation, people saying 'well, you know if we go in this partnership where are you gonna stick our logo? We want this percentage.' It becomes competing in that space rather than pulling together.

The impact of competition on intermediation is heightened by the diversity in scale of actors within an intermediation chain. For example, smaller organizations may “openly” hinder intermediation by refusing to intermediate between certain partners, with a view to elevating their importance in the policy process (Participant 15), and larger organizations can squeeze out smaller NGOs through greater investment in branding and exposure (Participant 29). Summarizing how this competition hinders intermediation, a 49-year-old female employee (Participant 5) isolated the challenge: “that competing space that we have for our own existence detracts from our ability to have a shared voice that would put far more pressure on governments.” Hence, although NGOs are encouraged to act as intermediaries within the climate policy process by, for example, the UNFCCC Secretariat and the EU, NGOs' abilities to assume such a role can be determined by the presence of other actors within the policy space.

The challenge of finding willing and appropriate partners

The final external obstacle to intermediation identified by our interviewees was the willingness, and/or appropriateness of potential intermediation partners (Participants 5, 16, 19, 25, and 27). We may assume that difficulties in identifying intermediation partners are a common challenge for intermediaries within any policy area. However, our interviewees suggested that climate policy presented specific intermediation challenges, because climate intermediation with certain partners can be a sensitive, or even impossible, consideration. A 40-year-old female manager (Participant 16) explained that her NGO had created a policy regarding “what type of companies or foundations we definitely won't work with.” These considerations can become entrenched over time: one 31-year-old male employee explained (Participant 27) that new ideas for ways to intermediate and collaborate were quashed by senior managers “because of historical tensions ... When [he] first came into the sector, within the first six months, [he] was told to ‘watch out for that organisation’, and ‘don't talk to that organisation’.” Hence, although the 2015 Paris Agreement governance landscape welcomed nonstate actors into the climate policy process (Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Hanegraaff, 2015; Kuyper et al., 2018; Saucedo Dávila, 2019), with the passage of time, organizations may be more selective in the pathways and partners with which they are willing to participate.

Once an NGO has identified acceptable intermediation partners, clashes regarding those actors' values, priorities, and opinions can weaken the policy that results. Participant 5 opined that when intermediating between one type of actor and the government, the government's priorities distorted the resulting policies: “it felt like you gave them the information, they put it through some sort of weird mangle, and what came at the end just was unusable and unrecognisable.” The size of partners whose policies were being changed was particularly influential here. Participant 25, a 43-year-old female employee, said that NGOs can be led by “corporate partners, suppliers, because they've got so much more organisational expertise on certain things But it's costing us ... in terms of possible outcomes being watered down.” To encapsulate these sentiments, one interviewee (Participant 19), a 32-year-old female manager, explained that attempting intermediation as an NGO is difficult, because of the need to juggle precise, values-based outcomes with a dependence on partners' willingness to collaborate: “I think being stuck in the middle has its challenges ... [it can] dampen down your ability to really have a critical eye” about intermediation partners' activities, and about the policies that result. Resultantly, these external dynamics—unreliable funding, competition between NGOs, and unwilling or inappropriate intermediation partners—each affect whether an NGO can intermediate, and, as we show next, they can also ripple down into an NGO's internal dynamics.

¹ Participants 5, 7, 10, 14, 15, 19, 20, 24, 27, 29, and 30.

Internal dynamics

Our interviewees reported feeling that the above external dynamics also influence their organization's internal workings, impeding their ability to act as intermediaries in the policy process. We identify three internal dynamics that are shaped by the above external dynamics, namely short-term and siloed strategy-making, reduced employee wellbeing, and loss of expertise from the sector. Each of these three internal dynamics, in turn, affects whether, and how, an NGO can intermediate between actors.

Short-term and siloed strategy-making

First, we find that precarity brought from external contexts undermines internal strategy-making. For instance, the competitive funding environment for NGOs affects strategic planning, which is especially important when seeking to tackle such a multidecadal policy issue as climate mitigation. "There's a massive lack of long-term thinking, not just the next 5 to 10 years, but 20 years ... collaborative fundraising strategies across the NGO sector, it's a mess" (Participant 21). Echoing this point, Participant 9 explained that by the nature of being an intermediary, strategic thinking can be compromised: "being between these two organisations, there's sometimes a complete lack of structure, so there's no sustainability function. I don't feed into a strategy anywhere." That is, an intermediary acts between others, which can squeeze the organization's attention away from its own internal workings. As NGOs pivot to align with the changing priorities of their funders (Participant 23) and to meet the changing needs of their funders' policy targets (Participants 24 and 28), they change their behaviors rapidly, or prioritize short-term over long-term goals. As a 35-year-old male interviewee (Participant 29) summarized, "the government is often asking for quite oven-ready projects to give out government money. So, NGOs are scrambling together to have these oven-ready products." These rapid changes may be made despite the NGO's own long-term policy priorities, and can lead to a lowering of standards in what the intermediary is willing to achieve, as they settle for an achievable, rather than ideal, policy output (Participant 25).

Reduced employee wellbeing

Second, while unreliable funding and competition between NGOs were identified as external factors that directly obstruct intermediation, they also lead to indirect obstacles by impacting individuals and working conditions within NGOs. One 44-year-old female manager (Participant 15) explained that "we are competing ... and it's just exhausting. I find that absolutely exhausting." Outlining how funding difficulties limit the number of staff an NGO can afford, especially within smaller organizations, a 27-year-old employee (Participant 23) reflected that her role should be divided among several people, "so there's a lot of work that I am not always able to do justice to, and then burnout is a real risk." This experience is reflected by the challenge of working at a precarious NGO that seeks to function as an intermediary: Participant 11 noted that "a lot of people have left the organisation because of the stress ... it was so difficult to manage, because you have to manage the external input from the stakeholders, but also we have to serve the clients." In the short term, these impacts can limit the influence NGOs wield in climate policymaking, undermining the achievement of transformative climate action as soon as possible (Pörtner et al., 2022). Moreover, "if people are stressed and burnt out, they are more likely to take leave or leave the job completely, maybe going to a different sector ... Which then makes it difficult to collaborate, [as] you have to build a whole new relationship" (Participant 3).

Our participants told us that the very essence of trying to be a climate intermediary is in itself a challenge for protecting employee wellbeing, which in turn undermines intermediation. Five participants² argued that the global nature of climate change as a policy problem, and difficulties of coordinating at this scale, impeded employees' performance. Although being an intermediary brought benefits for an NGO, "it's this being in the middle that is really hard" to sustain (Participant 11). A further five participants³ identified that major climate policy events were valuable opportunities for climate intermediation, but global summitry stretched capacities and resources thinly and even led to "burnout" (see Maslach & Leiter, 2016), which hindered intermediation during and after these events. A 25-year-old female NGO employee (Participant 25) described the situation thus: "[w]hichever role you're in, there's always the next milestone... That's the inherent emergency state that we're in." The annual global COPs were deemed especially impactful on the employee well-being and ability to work, even by employees based

² Participants 3, 8, 9, 11, and 19.

³ Participants 3, 8, 14, 25, and 26.

at smaller, more localized NGOs (Participant 8). A 27-year-old female manager (Participant 3) lamented that “you can imagine around COP and run up, it’s absolutely chaos ... We have so many clients who want to announce stuff at COP.” This interviewee discussed that although intermediation is a long-term process, the policy outputs of this activity are often targeted toward key events, such as COPs, which again elevate competition, increase workload, and hinder effective intermediation. Participant 8 put it simply: “I’ve seen burnout a lot with other staff, and I think it usually comes when it’s around a big event. So around COP.” Some of our interviewees highlighted that their NGOs were undertaking wellbeing initiatives to support intermediation activities around the COPs (Participants 14, 25, and 26). However, for many, flagship events created an opportunity to intermediate in the present, but also an unsustainably intense period that threatened their capacity to act.

Loss of expertise

Third, as employees tackle a boom-and-bust cycle entailing intense periods of climate intermediation, they must decide whether the long hours, comparatively low pay, and periods of high stress are worthwhile, while juggling these demands against other priorities in their own lives. Participants 3, 10, 11, and 17 proposed that employee burnout and resultant loss of expertise from the sector were obstructing intermediation over the medium-to-long term. When NGO employees leave the climate sector, they take their expertise with them: crucially, it is this expertise that underpins why NGOs are targeted by funders to become climate intermediaries in the first place (Allan, 2018: 567). Participant 17, a 26-year-old male, nonmanager explained how the loss of staff impacts intermediation: “basically everybody’s out the door and... that really damages relationships ... [which means it] can take longer to build up the expertise and the skills,” although Participant 27 disagreed, saying that he had not “seen people burnout and leave policy” as a specific area of activity. These differing stances raise the need to assess the magnitude of this problem, as we propose for future research in our conclusion. One exacerbating factor in determining loss of expertise may be structural inequalities around who can maintain a career within climate intermediation (Participant 23; also, Bell & Bevan, 2021; Tobin et al., 2023b). One female manager (Participant 16) felt that a lack of diversity within her organization influenced the design of policy priorities within intermediation. Hence, a lack of diversity in the climate sector affects how NGOs undertake intermediation, and the goals that are resultantly pursued within the organizations with which they intermediate. In short, loss of expertise can determine if an NGO can attempt to be an intermediary, or see it through to fruition, and also the priorities of the intermediation that is being attempted.

Discussion

Our study sought to examine in what ways external and internal dynamics influence an organization’s intermediation activities. Through analysis of 31 interviewees’ accounts of working in NGOs, we found that the sustainability of NGOs, for example, in terms of financing or staffing and wellbeing, impacts their organization’s ability to act as climate intermediaries. Indeed, a key finding of our research is that what might be considered supportive elements for intermediation—such as the provision of funding, and global conferences that bring people together—can also generate dynamics that complicate intermediation from certain actors’ perspectives. Our participants identified funding, competition, and unwilling or inappropriate partners as external dynamics that directly affect the ability of NGOs to intermediate. Our participants’ accounts also highlighted how these external dynamics are connected to the internal functioning of NGOs, influencing long-term strategy-making, working conditions, and the retention of staff expertise. In this section, we examine the implications of our findings in relation to existing understandings of intermediation, and the forces that support and derail whether, and how, NGOs act as intermediaries. Our discussion reflects upon three implications from our research, namely: (a) the need to consider funding structures when conceptualizing nonregulatory intermediaries; (b) the importance of understanding intermediaries according to the specific governance context in which they operate, including peaks and troughs of activity over time that may affect performance; and (c) the policy implications of our study.

First, participants highlighted external factors, such as how the governance landscape that has been designed by orchestrators for facilitating climate action can create unintended repercussions, can then ripple down governance levels, including shaping strategies within organizations. These insights help us to conceptualize whether and how an organization can become a climate intermediary. We define

climate intermediaries by assessing the role taken by actors (Tobin et al., 2023a), but to analyze intermediaries' actions, we build from the work of Stephan et al. (2016). That is, the successful achievement of a prosocial organization's goals draws from the interplay between their external and internal dynamics. Here, we have analyzed how NGOs may wish to function as climate intermediaries—indeed, it is their primary reason for existing—but when challenging external and internal dynamics arise, climate intermediation can be hindered. This insight is a departure from much of the literature on intermediaries, where studies have focused on regulatory intermediaries that have been created by a government, and thus are assumed to have the resources they need (Abbott et al., 2017; Ma & Yee, 2024), or on the strategies and impacts of climate intermediaries (Tobin et al., 2023a). Instead, our empirical insights encourage us to theorize more deeply the role of funding for social issues in which nonregulatory actors are encouraged to intermediate, and the sustainability of these organizations. NGOs wishing to be climate intermediaries attempt to insert themselves into the policy process to achieve their policy goals by linking with other actors, but their success in this process is influenced by the nature of the governance arrangements structuring the climate policy process. The work of Bäckstrand (2006, 2008) and van Veelen and Hague (2024) is helpful here for showing the multiscale nature of climate governance which NGOs must navigate to obtain their funding.

Second, we reflect on the importance of analyzing intermediaries within the specific governance context in which they operate (Kooiman, 1993), as this may shape an organization's capacity to intermediate when examined over time. For example, scholars are divided as to the utility of global summitry, which has been understood as regular and beneficial events that increasingly involve extensive civil society participation (Stoddart et al., 2023), and alternatively as megaconferences that perpetuate inadequate governance responses (Stevenson, 2020). Our findings speak to the mixed impacts of such intense policy events—for instance, the UNFCCC's annual COPs—can have on an organization's intermediation efforts. In the existing literature on COPs, one common expectation is that greater involvement by NGOs improves transparency, legitimacy, and inclusivity (see Derman, 2014). Yet, while NGOs have been actively encouraged to attend and attempt to influence these negotiations, the toll it takes on NGOs has been neglected by research. Allan and Hadden (2017) show that the Paris Agreement is creating a landscape that favors only the largest NGOs: our interview data adds further insights to this understanding, by analyzing how these events influence the internal dynamics of an NGO, which in turn can impact upon intermediation. These insights hold attendant implications for the breadth of solutions and perspectives that are developed in response to a policy problem—climate change—that not only mirrors but exacerbates existing inequality (Stephens, 2020). In short, our empirical research illuminates the ways in which key governance actors—namely, NGOs as climate intermediaries—may vary in their capacity to intermediate over time, in line with and as a result of attempting to participate in key policymaking events.

Third, there are several policy implications arising from our research. We suggest that our findings are not limited to NGOs working on climate change but likely hold parallels with those working in other policy areas. Overlapping but distinct environmental policy areas, such as biodiversity protection, include NGOs as intermediaries across multiple levels of governance and across boundaries. Moreover, these nonclimate environmental NGOs likewise face funding limitations, as well as peaks in activity arising from global summitry, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity's own annual COPs. The current global climate governance architecture has been designed by orchestrators to rightly welcome the insights and expertise of a diverse range of NGOs. These NGOs can in turn build impactful networks of actors by undertaking climate intermediation activities. But if this structure undermines the sustainability of such organizations—and the individuals' careers who work for them—then this long-grown expertise will be recurrently lost, as employees struggle to juggle competing demands. Existing research has shown that no-strings-attached grants are the most promising for long-term poverty alleviation (Hanlon et al., 2012), yet applying this approach to climate funding will be extremely difficult due to the scale of action required. Nevertheless, the expansion of funding streams that feature few conditionalities for climate intermediaries will increasingly be required if expertise-rich, cash-poor NGOs are to assume the intermediary roles required of them by orchestrators. The outcome is a governance model that actively requires greater participation year-on-year from NGOs, involving extensive time and cost implications. The downstream implications of these global COPs, which depend on the intermediation

of NGOs, mean that participation may not be sustainable in the long term for the organizations in question, especially smaller, more focused bodies that work on specific policy dimensions in their climate intermediation.

Conclusion

Intermediaries are often cast as actors that support orchestrators actors in achieving their goals, particularly within the literature on regulatory policy (Abbott et al., 2017), rather than having specific priorities, and challenges, of their own. Yet, our findings show that by considering the ways that external and internal dynamics can influence intermediation, we can glean new insights into whether, and how, actors attempt to become climate intermediaries. Because policy responses to climate change encourage—and increasingly depend on—NGOs' participation in the optimization of policy design, passage, and implementation, our findings are especially noteworthy: orchestrators, such as the EU and UNFCCC Secretariat, have designed a governance model that requires long-term participation by NGOs, but this external context also creates dynamics that impact the strategic decisions made by these organizations, and the employees who work within them. In short, our analysis suggests that to conceptualize intermediation, there is much utility in examining the governance contexts in which actors operate, and the experiences of individuals who work within them.

We propose that future research could build on our findings in three ways. First, research would profit from examining the experiences of NGO employees operating in a different governance context to the UK. We do not suggest that NGO employees in the UK are meaningfully different from those in other countries, but rather that the nature of intermediation may be shaped by the distinct governance structures in which intermediaries seek to operate (Howlett & Tosun, 2018). Indeed, an analysis of NGOs operating at the EU level, which builds on our research and that of Kingston et al. (2023) regarding NGOs' environmental (not climate) intermediation in Brussels, may elicit specific internal dynamics compared to the national level, because of the combined supranational and intergovernmental external forces shaping the NGOs' behaviors. Second, our interviewees spoke of differing experiences regarding employee burnout leading to loss of expertise from the climate sector, and indeed to date, there has been little scholarly inquiry as to the sustainability of NGOs over time. Our study is not intended to be generalizable and instead examines the ways in which intermediation may be influenced, but a large-N analysis of the extent of lowered employee well-being leading to loss of expertise would enable insights into the scale of this issue for the sector. Third, because interviewees noted that ongoing access to funding is pivotal to NGOs' existence, a comparative study of the motivations and strategies of orchestrators, and the extent of their consideration of the sustainability and internal functioning of climate intermediaries when designing governance systems, would be illuminating for conceptualizing intermediaries. Such research would provide insights into the assumptions underpinning the design of the governance arrangements in which NGOs must attempt to survive.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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Appendix

Participant 1 (A): 17/01/2024, a male NGO employee, 37, manager.
 Participant 2 (A): 19/01/2024, a female NGO employee, 35, manager.
 Participant 3 (A): 02/02/2024, a female NGO employee, 27, manager.
 Participant 4 (B): 02/02/2024, a female NGO employee, 48, manager.
 Participant 5 (B): 02/02/2024, a female NGO employee, 49, manager.
 Participant 6 (B): 06/02/2024, a female NGO employee, 43, nonmanager (previously has managed others).
 Participant 7 (B): 09/02/2024, a male NGO employee, 34, manager.
 Participant 8 (A): 12/02/2024, a male NGO employee, 38, manager.
 Participant 9 (A): 12/02/2024, a male NGO employee, 35, nonmanager.
 Participant 10 (A): 15/02/2024, a male NGO employee, 33, manager.
 Participant 11 (B): 16/02/2024, a female NGO employee, 32, manager.
 Participant 12 (B): 23/02/2024, a male NGO employee, 25, nonmanager.
 Participant 13 (A): 26/02/2024, a male NGO employee, 24, manager.
 Participant 14 (B): 01/03/2024, a female NGO employee, 29, nonmanager.
 Participant 15 (B): 04/03/2024, a female NGO employee, 44, strategic manager.
 Participant 16 (B): 04/03/2024, a female NGO employee, 40, strategic manager.
 Participant 17 (B): 11/03/2024, a male NGO employee, 26, nonmanager.
 Participant 18 (B): 11/03/2024, a female NGO employee, 44, nonmanager.
 Participant 19 (B): 18/03/2024, a female NGO employee, 32, manager.
 Participant 20 (A): 13/02/2024, a male NGO employee, 46, strategic manager.
 Participant 21 (B): 25/03/2024, a male NGO employee, 43, nonmanager (previously has managed others).
 Participant 22 (B): 13/03/2024, a male NGO employee, 32, nonmanager.
 Participant 23 (B): 16/02/2024, a female NGO employee, 27, nonmanager.
 Participant 24 (B): 18/03/2024, a male NGO employee, 31, nonmanager (previously has managed others).
 Participant 25 (B): 23/02/2024, a female NGO employee, 43, nonmanager (previously has managed others).
 Participant 26 (B): 23/02/2024, male NGO employee, 46, manager.
 Participant 27 (B): 18/03/2024, male NGO employee, 31, nonmanager.
 Participant 28 (B): 05/04/2024, male NGO employee, 31, manager.
 Participant 29 (B): 05/04/2024, male NGO employee, 35, manager.
 Participant 30 (B): 19/04/2024, male NGO employee, 28, nonmanager.
 Participant 31 (B): 26/04/2024, female, NGO employee 28, nonmanager.

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