NGOs, Civil Society and Global Policy Making

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Oxfam, Greenpeace, Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders -- these and thousands of other private organizations serve the public on an international scale. Today, as nation states slash budgets, cut regulations and abandon social protections, such non-profit groups seem more vital than ever.

At the United Nations, they are known as "non-governmental organizations" or NGOs. They have few formal powers but growing influence.

In recent years, NGOs have chalked up many important accomplishments. They put the environment on the global agenda and pressed reluctant nation states to take it seriously. They insisted that human rights deserve universal respect and embarrassed states into greater compliance. They pressed for the rights and well-being of children, the disabled, women, indigenous peoples. They forced powerful countries to come to the table on disarmament. Scarcely any recent progress in human well-being does not owe a good deal to NGOs.

During the great international conferences organized by the UN, NGOs made the news as the most colorful, active and imaginative participants. NGOs shaped the conferences and moved them further than the states alone would have gone. NGOs took the lead in bringing the case for abolition of nuclear weapons to the World Court, they built momentum behind a new International Criminal Court, and they pressed states into negotiating new, tougher standards on emissions to head off global warming

Day-to-day at the UN, some NGOs attract enormous respect and admiration through careful research, keen analysis and skillful lobbying. Secretariat members look to them for innovative ideas and information. Diplomats consult them and seek their support. Former Secretary General Boutros Ghali affirmed

that NGOs "are an indispensable part of the legitimacy without which no international activity can be meaningful."[1]

NGO Differences

NGOs, like nation states, are a very diverse lot. In addition to the great organizations dealing with human rights, environmental protection and humanitarian relief, there are NGOs representing industries like soap and chemicals, fundamentalist religious sects and flying saucer watchers. While some NGOs are fiercely independent, others are known as the creatures of corrupt governments, grasping businesses or other less-than-selfless interests. Some have tens of thousands of members around the world while others are no more than one or two people. Some have large central secretariats and some are very decentralized. Some lean to the left and some are definitely on the right. With such diversity, generalizations about NGOs can be dangerously misleading

Recently, NGOs have been increasing in many countries. In a 1995 speech, Secretary General Boutros Ghali noted that in a short space of time, in diverse countries such as France, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Chile, thousands of new NGOs have come into being.

Many observers see these trends as signs of increasing pluralism and democracy. In many countries, popular NGOs command more legitimacy and have better links to the grass roots than do political parties or governments. But some NGOs have been accused of fraud, of being nothing more than tax havens for wealthy sponsors, or of serving as vehicles for conservative or elitist policies. Recent studies in the United States have shown that people have less time for volunteer work than in decades past and devote considerably less time to non-profits, leaving paid staffers more than ever in charge. And in some countries, like Brazil, numbers of NGOs are reported to be sharply down, as foreign funding moves elsewhere and economic pressures force many organizations to close.

Even authentic and honestly-run NGOs can have problematic results. Proliferating NGOs can fragment and weaken grassroots political action, by channeling concerns into narrow and often competing "interest group" lobbying. Those performing social services can be an unwitting part of the neoliberal assault on the state, or (at best) a desperate and inadequate response to the state's pullout from social protection. In an effort to survive and provide services for mounting needs, they can foster false hopes, promote misplaced pragmatism and block more fundamental and critical understanding of the roots of the social crisis.

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[1] Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Democracy, A Newly-Recognized Imperative," *Global Governance*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter, 1995), p. 10.

NGOs and Official Funding

NGOs deliver valuable services and channel billions of dollars in development assistance, humanitarian aid and technical support to the world's poorest people -- estimated at over $8 billion in 1992 or more than the entire UN system. Traditionally, NGOs collected money directly from citizens to fund their aid and relief efforts, making them independent of official policies. But increasingly, NGOs serve as conduits for governments and multilateral development institutions like the World Bank. A 1996 report in the magazine of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) expressed alarm that governments are channeling funds for humanitarian assistance to their own national NGOs rather than to multilateral agencies, undermining previous systems of coordination and cooperation in large-scale emergencies. From 1992 to 1994, European Union funding of NGOs rose 27%, to 803 million ECUs (about $1 billion). World Bank funding, also on the rise, has provoked heated controversy in the NGO community [click here for more on this issue].

According to UN staffer Antonio Donini, public grants represented 1.5% of NGO income in 1970 and 35% in 1988 and they probably account for more than 40% of NGO income today. Western countries used to criticize Communist governments for subsidizing and controlling their NGOs. Recent trends in the West could lead in a similar direction. Switzerland distributes 19% of its overseas development aid through NGOs. In 1993 the United States distributed 17%, a sum that lept to 30% in 1995 and is likely to rise even further under the "New Partnership Initiative" announced by the Clinton Administration at the 1995 UN Social Summit.

Governments in the North fund not only their national NGOs but also NGOs in Southern countries, as service-providers and as counterweights to the state -- under the rubric of promoting "open society," "capacity building," "NGO strengthening" or reinforcing "civil society." Organizations like the International Executive Service Corps and World Learning have broad international programs of this kind, with large funding from USAID, the United States foreign aid agency. Private sources, notably billionaire speculator George Soros, have poured money into these initiatives, too. Such programs -- official or unofficial -- can be related to neoliberal policy goals, aimed at weakening or undermining the state, though they may have diverse purposes, not all necessarily questionable. Many NGOs distinguish between different Northern donors, preferring money from the Nordic countries, Canada, the Netherlands or even Germany, in preference to the more imperially-inclined governments like the United States, Britain or France.

NGOs take money from businesses, big foundations and rich individuals, too. Increasingly, they also sell products or services, just like a private company. The US-based American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) had $3.8 billion in gross revenue for supplemental health insurance in 1996 and it had nine mutual funds with $13.7 billion in assets. To many observers, this looks more like a financial services company than an NGO. Thousands of other hard-pressed NGOs worldwide have taken the market path -- selling credit cards, internet services, travel tours and key rings, while charging for services they once provided free.

NGO coalitions have been recipients of government and foundation money, too. Even corporations are getting into the game. The Eli Lilly pharmaceutical company, a major funder of conservative think-tanks, opened discussions with a UN NGO Committee in mid-1996 about substantial funding. Though these discussions eventually fell through, more deals of this type may be on the horizon. Some observers fear that funding from conservative private sources (as opposed to mass membership dues) may undermine NGOs' independence and influence them to support neoliberal policies. There is no simple answer to these dilemmas, but the most effective NGOs are very careful about their funding. They manage to resist financial blandishments and they remain at least *relatively* independent and free of narrow financial pressures.

NGOs and International Organizations

Internationally, NGOs have a long tradition, going back to the second half of the 19th Century, when the International Committee for the Red Cross and a number of other "world" NGO federations emerged (in practice they were largely centered on Europe). The first major intergovernmental agency, the International Labour Office, incorporated trade unions in its governing structure, but the League of Nations gave NGOs little voice. By 1939, an estimated 700 international NGOs existed. When the UN was founded in 1945, NGOs forced the governments to make provision in the Charter for "consultative" NGO status with the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This was a great step forward, but NGOs did not win any status *beyond* ECOSOC. They were given no formal voice in the General Assembly or other bodies; above all, the powerful Security Council remained strictly off limits.

Over the years, NGOs have won a consultative role with various specialized agencies and funds of the UN, like UNICEF and UNFPA. But the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have kept NGOs at arm's length. As the years have passed, the number of NGOs has steadily grown and three types of organizations have emerged as especially vocal and effective -- groups working on the environment, womens' organizations and human rights advocacy bodies. Groups working on humanitarian assistance and disarmament as well as religious organizations -- long influential players -- remain a strong presence.

Trade unions have faded from their once-powerful place in the NGO community. In the first half of the century, the unions took the lead in many international efforts for social protection (agreements on work hours, child labor, social security, etc.) and they had some of the most highly-developed international networks. The World Confederation of Trade Unions was the most important NGO in the UN's early years. But the Cold War splintered the trade union movement and the neoliberal era has weakened it further. In recent years, unions seem to have lost enthusiasm for the UN and they have mostly limited their involvement to the ILO, where they have a formal place in the decision-making machinery. But the US and other governments are now cutting the ILO budget, so trade unions will have to re-think their priorities if they are not to fade still further from the UN scene.

NGOs have complex relations with member states. They form temporary alliances with governments, seek to persuade and to pressure, and sometimes openly criticize or even furiously oppose them. Some NGOs tend more towards the opposition, others tend to be cozy, especially with the powerful. Governments have offered NGOs money, "access," and even some kinds of partnership. At the international conferences, governments have even invited NGO leaders to join national delegations -- though the NGO community remains skeptical about the results.

NGOs won their right to a voice at the UN by heavy pressure during the wartime negotiations (1943-45). Their rights are guaranteed by Article 71 of the Charter and affirmed by many decisions since. Member states have agreed to give NGOs several different statuses and rights, a system successfully renegotiated in 1996 (click here for further information). Large, international NGOs have won the highest status. They number about 70 in 1996. Some 2,000 others, including smaller, nationally-based NGOs, have acquired more limited rights and access. But the lines between the two have always been blurred. Small NGOs with eloquent and effective representatives have wielded considerable influence. Recently, especially in the international conferences of 1990-96, small activist NGOs gained an impressively large voice.

Conferences, Campaigns and Day-to-Day Lobbying

Thousands of NGOs participated in the conference preparatory processes and the conferences themselves, with a real impact. Many observers thought that the NGOs had better ideas and a longer-term perspective than the governments. The Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 set the pace for intense NGO participation, with nearly 1,500 accredited NGO organizations. NGOs helped make the conference a success, claimed an important place in the conference declaration and played a key role in developing post-conference institutions, like the Commission on Sustainable Development. Three years later, the Fourth World Conference on

Women in September 1995 broke all records and attracted 35,000 NGO representatives to Beijing.

NGOs' international campaigns can greatly influence the terms of the global policy-making debate. Recently the "Fifty Years is Enough" Campaign focused attention on misdeeds, secrecy and unaccountability at the World Bank. Hundreds of NGOs from every continent participated in a campaign that forced issues into the open for the first time and pressured the Bank to make concessions. Similarly, the NGO campaign on the UN's financial crisis generated great pressure on the US and other delinquents to pay up.

In contrast to the the global conferences at Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen, Beijing, and Istanbul, and the high profile campaigns like "Fifty Years is Enough," NGOs play a less dramatic role at the UN and in the day-to-day activities in the global policy-making arena. But UN agencies have long engaged NGOs as partners in important policy areas. The International Committee of the Red Cross is so vital that its head meets quarterly with the Secretary General and its representative meets monthly with each incoming Security Council President. Less grandly, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs holds regular meetings with a committee of major NGOs to discuss responses to complex emergencies.

Coalitions, Committees, Working Groups and Networks

NGOs have been most effective when they work together in coalitions, pooling their resources and coordinating their lobbying efforts. Examples include the NGO Committee on Disarmament, the NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court, and the NGO Working Group on the Security Council and the NGO initiatives on the UN financial crisis. There are also important NGO *networks*, particularly on the environment, that allow NGOs to coordinate their actions in many countries and at international conferences and negotiations. Third World Network, based in Malaysia, is one of the most effective and visible, but there are many more.

The General Assembly of European NGOs builds links among citizen groups in the European Union. They met on 18-22 April in Brussels in 1996, bringing together 90 elected delegates from all 15 EU countries. They discussed common issues and agreed on 14 resolutions. Within countries, NGOs have formed important networks, too, like the German Network of Environment and Development NGOs.

Over eighty NGO networks from around the world met in Manila, Philippines in November 1995 to discuss their common concerns and to plan common action. They included about a dozen networks from each of six world regions, as well as

about twenty international networks. They seemed agreed on the need for an oppositional NGO voice. As the background paper for the meeting said:

Business and government are organized at the international level. There is a growing need to articulate countervailing visions, societal norms and ethical and moral views at the international level. In the long run, we have to invent the infrastructure so citizens can participate effectively in the democratic management of the global system. Over the next decade, NGOs and their networks are one of the important precursors of an accountable global civil society. They are one of the few actors who try to articulate the global public interest. Clearly much work lies ahead on questions of accountability, democracy and links to social movements. At this point in time, there is a need to create more accountable processes that link national, regional and international networks to work in the global dialogue, on monitoring, agenda setting, policy development, etc.

In the day-to-day work at the UN (and its agencies), NGOs suffer from a serious disadvantage because most lack the resources to maintain a representative office at UN headquarters. Some depend instead on part-time volunteers who often are more interested in the diplomatic ambiance than the tough work of lobbying and reporting.

NGO Committees and Coalitions rarely have the funds to support regular staff either. Southern NGOs are at the greatest disadvantage and virtually never have regular representation (a few governments like Canada and the Nordics promoted democracy at the conferences by paying for Southern NGO participants at the prep-coms). In spite of these handicaps, NGOs can be very influential through quiet diplomacy, persistent effort and real international solidarity. They would be more effective if member states didn't insist on keeping the door closed when the most important policy issues come up for discussion.

NGOs, UN Reform and Global Democracy

During the intense negotiations on reform now under way at the UN, NGOs have asked government representatives for a larger voice -- both in the reform discussions and in the reformed institutions that emerge. But governments have kept the NGOs almost completely out of the reform decision-making process. Ironically, the very governments that are most verbally supportive of NGOs (the United States and the Europeans) have been most adamant in insisting that NGOs be excluded from the reform discussions and the high-level UN bodies more generally.

As discussions continue about democracy and accountability in global decision-making, we need to think carefully about NGOs and their potential role. What is

the best way to think about NGOs as vehicles for wider democracy? Can they legitimately "represent" anyone or do they function best as monitors and sources of ideas and information? Does a larger role for NGOs mean a more "democratic" discussion? As nation states get weaker, should NGOs take on some of the role of nations in the international arena. And what is the significance of all the money that NGOs are increasingly getting from governments and intergovernmental institutions like the World Bank? Click here for more about the Bank and NGOs.

Another set of questions relates to "civil society". Reformers often talk about a new role for "civil society" at the UN, and there are proposals to create a "Forum of Civil Society." Some people take this term to mean just NGOs, but to others it has another wider meaning, which includes business, the media, universities and other powerful institutions. The Secretary General and other UN officials have recently favored this "civil society" approach, as a means to strengthen business support for the organization. But would reforms in this direction help to democratize the UN, or just strengthen the role of those already most powerful?

The GPF website will explore these and many other questions. We are inclined to think that NGOs have a positive contribution to make at the UN (after all, GPF is itself an NGO!). But we want to look closely at the diversity of NGOs and the great differences in quality and representativity among them. As national governments and intergovernmental institutions like the World Bank increase their subsidies to NGOs, we want to monitor how these changes affect NGO independence and capacity to act as critical monitors.

We will post materials on the current negotiations to broaden NGO consultative rights with the UN General Assembly. NGOs have produced a number of good papers on this subject and NGOs have also made important statements at several official recent meetings with governments. We will also post materials on the activities of the NGO Working Group on the Security Council, a major initiative to promote dialogue between NGOs and the council and to monitor the council's activities. GPF is very active in both efforts.

We intend to review and discuss some of the burgeoning literature on NGOs and the institutions that are emerging to study them. We will look into the boom of new university centers and other institutions devoted to study "the non-profit sector" -- like the Washington DC-based Independent Sector, the Boston-based Institute for Civil Society, and Harvard University's new (1997) Hauser Center for the study of Nonprofits. We will also consider the many extremely interesting papers have recently been written by scholars and activists about NGOs and their role. In this era when states are backing away from social responsibilities towards their citizens, NGOs are bound to be important and their global role is likely to grow.