NGOs and Global Policy-Making

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June 2000

Organizations like Oxfam, Greenpeace, Amnesty International and thousands of others serve the public on a national and international scale. Known variously as "private voluntary organizations," "civil society organizations," and "citizen associations," they are increasingly called "NGOs," an acronym that stands for "non-governmental organizations." The United Nations system uses this term to distinguish representatives of these agencies from those of governments. While many NGOs dislike the term, it has come into wide use, because the UN system is the main focus of international rule-making and policy formulation in the fields where most NGOs operate.

Charitable and community organizations, separate from the state, have existed in many historical settings, but NGOs are primarily a modern phenomenon. With the extension of citizenship rights in Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people founded increasing numbers of these organizations, as instruments to meet community needs, defend interests or promote new policies. The French writer Alexis de Toqueville emphasized the importance of what he called "political associations" as institutions of democracy, uniquely numerous and influential in the United States at the time of his famous visit in 1831. New legal rules for private corporations, emerging at this same time, provided modern juridical authority for the organizations and increased their defenses against state interference.

The anti-slavery movement, founded in England in the late 18th century, gave rise to many such organizations and eventually led to the World Anti-Slavery Convention (1840), a milestone gathering to coordinate the work of citizen organizations on an international basis. The World Alliance of YMCAs was founded soon after, in 1855, and the International Committee for the Red Cross

came into being in 1863. During the nineteenth century, independent associations of this kind addressed many issues, including women's rights, the condition of the poor, alcohol abuse and municipal reform. Trade unions emerged as a leading force in the NGO movement later in the century.

Today, NGOs address every conceivable issue and they operate in virtually every part of the globe. Though international NGO activity has grown steadily, most NGOs operate within a single country and frequently they function within a purely local setting. Some, such as legal assistance organizations, mainly provide services. Some such as chambers of commerce, concern themselves with narrowly-defined interests. And some, such as neighborhood associations, promote civic beautification or community improvement. But many important NGOs, such as those working for human rights and social justice, campaign for broad ideals. At the international level, thousands of organizations are active. According to one estimate, some 25,000 now qualify as international NGOs (with programs and affiliates in a number of countries) – up from less than 400 a century ago. Amnesty International, for example, has more than a million members and it has affiliates or networks in over 90 countries and territories. Its London-based International Secretariat has a staff of over 300 which carries out research, coordinates worldwide lobbying and maintains an impressive presence at many international conferences and institutions.

Political scientists often refer to NGOs as "pressure groups" or "lobby groups," but this concept does not do justice to these organizations and their broad public influence. In the 1980s, the term "civil society" came into fashion, but it proved too broad and amorphous. For this reason, a cross-disciplinary specialty emerged in the 1990s focusing on NGOs and their role in society. Scholars working in this area have noted that NGOs can command great legitimacy, sometimes more than national authorities. An opinion poll in Germany, for example, found that considerably more respondents said they trusted the NGO Greenpeace than those that expressed trust in the German Federal government. NGOs create "public goods," needed by citizens, that are not ordinarily created in the for-profit marketplace. Economists sometimes refer to NGOs and the broader, non-profit part of the economy as the "Third Sector," to distinguish it from government and private business. In some large countries, this sector accounts for millions of jobs and billions of dollars of economic activity.

NGOs are often seen as synonymous with non-profits, but a distinction between the two is useful. Non-profits include a very wide range of organizations, including museums, universities, and hospitals, that focus on services and rarely

(if ever) engage in advocacy. By contrast, NGOs always have an important advocacy mission.

In the field of international relations, scholars now speak of NGOs as "non-state actors" (a category that can also include transnational corporations). This term suggests NGOs' emerging influence in the international policy arena where previously only states played a significant role. Though NGOs have few formal powers over international decision-making, they have many accomplishments to their credit. In recent years, they have successfully promoted new environmental agreements, greatly strengthened women's rights, and won important arms control and disarmament measures. NGOs have also improved the rights and well-being of children, the disabled, the poor and indigenous peoples. Some analysts believe that these successes resulted from increasing globalization and the pressure of ordinary citizens to control and regulate the world beyond the nation state.

NGO work on the environment led to the adoption of the Montreal Protocol on Substances Depleting the Ozone Layer in 1987. The International Campaign to Ban Land Mines, an NGO coalition, was prime mover in the Mine Ban Treaty of 1997. The Coalition for an International Criminal Court was indispensable to the adoption of the 1998 Treaty of Rome and another NGO mobilization forced governments to abandon secret negotiations for the Multilateral Agreement on Investments in 1998. In the late 1990s, the NGO Working Group on the Security Council emerged as an important interlocutor of the UN's most powerful body, while the Jubilee 2000 Campaign changed thinking and policy on poor countries' debt. At the same time, an increasingly influential international NGO campaign demanded more just economic policies from the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These recent NGO victories have often been due to effective use of the internet, enabling rapid mobilization of global constituencies.

NGOs operate with many different methods and goals. Some act alone while others work in coalitions. Some organize noisy protests and demonstrations while others prefer sober education or quiet diplomacy. Some "name and shame" those in power who abuse citizen rights, while others work closely with the authorities. Some simplify the issues for broad public campaigns, while others produce detailed studies to inform policy makers.

NGO action can be analyzed on three different levels: micro-policy, macro-policy and norm-setting. Some NGO campaigns combine all three. For example, the World Court Project, a network of NGOs opposed to nuclear weapons,

successfully brought a landmark case to the World Court in 1996 on the legality of nuclear weapons. Getting the Court to accept the case was a victory in the arena of micro-policy, but the larger campaign goal included macro-policy (changing governments' strategic reliance on nuclear weapons) and norm-setting (persuading the public that nuclear weapons are immoral and a threat to real security).

Governments and international organizations at times find NGOs a nuisance or even threatening to their interests. But officials nonetheless look to NGOs for innovative ideas and information. Officials also grudgingly recognize that consultation with (and support from) NGOs gives their public decisions more credibility. Former Secretary General Boutros Ghali affirmed that NGOs "are an indispensable part of the legitimacy" of the United Nations, while his successor Kofi Annan has said that NGOs are "the conscience of humanity."

NGOs are very diverse and by no means all are equally laudable. In addition to the great organizations dealing with human rights, environmental protection and humanitarian assistance, there are NGOs representing industry associations like soap and chemicals, narrowly zealous religious organizations and advocates of obscure causes like Esperanto and space colonization. While some NGOs are fiercely independent, others are known as the creatures of governments, businesses or even criminal interests. Some have hundreds of thousands of members around the world while others speak for only a handful of people. Some have large central secretariats and some are very decentralized. With such diversity, generalizations about NGOs can be difficult.

Recently, the number of NGOs has been growing rapidly. Thousands of NGOs have sprung up in such diverse countries as France, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Chile. Many observers see these trends as signs of increasing pluralism and democracy, because authoritarian and paternalistic governments have either outlawed independent NGOs or confronted them with severe administrative hurdles and harassment. Large numbers of NGOs certainly help to reflect a complex and diverse social reality and represent a rich variety of citizens' needs and concerns that governments on their own could scarcely identify or accommodate.

As NGOs take an increasingly important role in political life, some critics are concerned that NGOs speak in many different and conflicting voices, that can fragment and weaken political action. Often, there are many competing NGOs in the same policy field and their mutual contest for influence can undercut political effectiveness. Many respected NGOs work hard to overcome this narrowness by

operating in close partnership with others. Some NGOs themselves specialize in coalition-building. Interaction, for instance, serves as the umbrella for dozens of humanitarian organizations in the United States.

Even the most democratic governments subject NGOs to some type of control, such as registration and financial oversight. International organizations like the UN require officially-accredited NGOs to pass through a review process to determine which are legitimate partners. Thanks partly to these controls and to the ethos of public service in the NGO community, NGOs are not often accused of corruption, breaches of the law, gross failure to live up to their mandate or other serious abuses. Compared with the frequent scandals of corruption and abuse of authority by officials of nation states, NGOs appear as relatively virtuous.

Nonethelsss, some accuse NGOs of being structurally undemocratic and unaccountable. Elected government officials often defend themselves against NGO criticism by pointing out that NGO leaders are not elected. Though it is true that NGO leaders do not stand for election, they are held accountable by boards of directors, membership bodies, and other constituencies. They also must win voluntary financial support each year from members and donors and cannot rely on legally-enforced taxation as governments do.

Financing

Large international NGOs may have operational budgets in the tens of millions of dollars, though most NGO budgets are considerably smaller. Compared to corporations and governments that count their annual revenue in multiple billions, even the largest NGO budgets are very small indeed. NGOs are usually financed by a combination of sources. Traditionally, membership dues have provided the main source, but today NGOs tap many other sources including grants or contracts from governments and international institutions, fees for services, profits from sales of goods, and funding from private foundations, corporations and wealthy individuals.

Increasingly, relief and development NGOs like CARE and Oxfam receive large grants from governments' international assistance programs. In the 1990s, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees expressed alarm that governments were increasingly channeling funds for humanitarian assistance to their own national NGOs rather than to multilateral agencies. The agencies were losing their capacity to coordinate relief in large scale emergencies, as dozens of NGOs appeared on the scene. By 1994, European Union funding of NGOs had risen to

about $1 billion. According to UN staffer Antonio Donini, public grants represented 1.5% of NGO income in 1970 and 35% in 1988. Such grants probably accounted for more than 40% of NGO income by the end of the century. This trend inevitably exposes NGOs to pressure from governments and limits their capacity to act independently.

When NGOs take money from businesses, big foundations and rich individuals, such hefty grants can likewise create relations of influence and potentially lead NGOs away from their mandate to serve the broader public. Increasingly also, NGOs sell products or services, just like a private company. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is an extreme example of this tendency. In 1996 it had $3.8 billion in gross revenue for supplemental health insurance and 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 business path -- selling credit cards, internet services, travel tours and key rings, while charging for services they once provided free.

Diplomatic Role

Though NGOs have long operated internationally, their role in the sphere of official diplomacy was relatively restricted until after World War II. NGOs won their right to a voice at the United Nations by heavy lobbying during the wartime negotiations (1943-45). Their rights were eventually guaranteed by Article 71 of the UN Charter and affirmed by many subsequent decisions. By 2000, about 2,500 NGOs had consultative status with the UN and many thousands more had official arrangements with other organs in the UN system and other intergovernmental bodies.

The Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 set the pace for intense NGO participation in world conferences, with 17,000 NGO representatives participating in the NGO parallel forum and 1,400 directly involved in the intergovernmental negotiations. 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 attracted an astonishing 35,000 NGO representatives to Beijing to the parallel forum and 2,600 to the intergovernmental negotiations.

NGOs have been most effective when they work together in coalitions, pooling their resources and coordinating their lobbying efforts. There are important NGO

networks on the environment and on international economic policy that allow NGOs to coordinate their actions in many countries and at international conferences and negotiations. Third World Network, based in Malaysia, is an especially active example that addresses a very broad range of policy issues. There are national networks like the Philippine-based Freedom from Debt Coalition and the German NGO Network on Environment and Development. And there are regional networks like ARENA, the Asian Regional Exchange for New Initiatives, or the Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas, or AFRODAD, the African Debt and Development Network. In 1995, an international consultation of NGO networks concluded that: "Business and government are organized at the international level. There is a growing need to articulate countervailing visions . . . 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."

As discussions continue about democracy and accountability in global decision-making, it becomes increasingly clear that NGOs have a vital role to play. Globalization has created both cross-border issues that NGOs address and cross-border communities of interest that NGOs represent. National governments cannot do either task as effectively or as legitimately. In the globalizing world of the twenty-first century, NGOs will have a growing international calling.