

An Analytical Concept and Framework of Non-Government Organizations

Nisar U

University: C.C.S, Meerut

INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are now recognized as key third sector actors on the landscapes of development, human rights, humanitarian action, environment, and many other areas of public action, from the post-2004 tsunami reconstruction efforts in Indonesia, India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, to the 2005 Make Poverty History campaign for aid and trade reform and developing country debt cancellation. As these two examples illustrate, NGOs are best-known for two different, but often interrelated, types of activity – the delivery of services to people in need, and the organization of policy advocacy, and public campaigns in pursuit of social transformation.

NGOs are also active in a wide range of other specialized roles such as democracy building, conflict resolution, human rights work, cultural preservation, environmental activism, policy analysis, research, and information provision. This chapter mainly confines itself to a discussion of NGOs in the international development context, but much of its argument also applies to NGOs more widely.

The world of NGOs contains a bewildering variety of labels. While the term “NGO” is widely used, there are also many other over-lapping terms used such as “nonprofit,” “voluntary,” and “civil society” organizations. In many cases, the use of different terms does not reflect descriptive or analytical rigor, but is instead a consequence of the different cultures and histories in which thinking about NGOs has emerged. For example, “nonprofit organization” is frequently used in the USA, where the market is dominant, and where citizen organizations are rewarded with fiscal benefits if they show that they are not commercial, profit-making entities and work for the public good. In the UK, “voluntary organization” or “charity” is commonly used, following a long tradition of volunteering and voluntary work that has been informed by Christian values and the development of charity law. But charitable status in the UK depends on an NGO being “non-political,” so that while Oxfam is allowed the formal status of a registered charity (with its

associated tax benefits) because of its humanitarian focus, Amnesty International is not, because its work is seen by the Charity Commission as more directly “political.” Finally, the acronym “NGO” tends to be used in relation to international or “developing” country work, since its origin lies in the formation of the United Nations in 1945, when the designation “non-governmental organization” was awarded to certain international non-state organizations that were given consultative status in UN activities.

Although the humanitarian landscape is constantly evolving, one factor which stands out among the players of aid, and particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is the significance of the private, not-for-profit dimension. After tracing the historical origin of those organizations, defining them and stressing how well known and well regarded they are, the article goes on to discuss the main questions they set. It points out that although each one has its own specific characteristics; their operating methods have much in common. In conclusion the role NGOs play on the international stage is also mentioned, as well as their position regarding UN plans to overhaul the international humanitarian system. Faced with a transnational environment and a growing demand for accountability both to beneficiaries and to sponsors, with uncertain times ahead and difficult choices to make, NGOs must be even more humanitarian in the approach they take.

Although these changes concern the various players, a glance back over the humanitarian landscape since the mid-twentieth century reveals a new feature, namely the private dimension of humanitarian action – in other words the great extent to which humanitarian assistance is delivered by entities which are neither state nor inter-state organizations. This factor, too, is often underestimated in approaches that are simplistic, ideologically divided or incapable of imagining international action other than by states or organizations created by them. This private presence takes the form of non-profit, non-commercial structures such as, of course, the various components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, ranging from the International Committee of the Red Cross

(ICRC) to the International Federation (IFRC) and the National RC Societies, but also – if not more so in the eyes of public opinion, as a result of wider media coverage – by the humanitarian non-profit sector, known as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Nor is the latter's importance in the humanitarian domain diminishing, contrary to what a pseudo-deterministic view might suggest. Their influence seems, on the contrary, to be growing. At all events, the regular predictions that humanitarian NGOs are on their way out are just as regularly and relentlessly disproved by operational realities in the field. In a book which caused quite a stir and much debate in humanitarian circles at the turn of this century, the American essayist David Rieff held that independent nongovernmental humanitarian action was coming to an end and that aid would henceforth boil down to action by two sole players states and intergovernmental agencies. At most, he conceded a residual place to the ICRC. Recent events, from the tsunami in Asia in December 2004 to the earthquake in Pakistan in October 2005 or from Darfur, southern Sudan, to Haiti in 2006 have quashed this gloomy prophecy.

Not only has no one player taken the lead over others, but NGOs are more present and more active than ever, both as part of the complex interaction system that is likely to lead to humanitarian intervention and as operational entities in their own right, vested with decision-making and analytical autonomy, or at least endeavoring to preserve it.

Precise definitions vary as to what constitutes an NGO, and the challenge of analyzing the phenomenon of NGOs remains surprisingly difficult. One reason for this is that NGOs are a diverse group of organizations that defy generalization, ranging from small informal groups to large formal agencies. NGOs play different roles and take different shapes within and across different societies. As a result, "NGO" as an analytical category remains complex and unclear. For example, despite the fact that NGOs are neither run by government, nor driven by the profit motive, there are nevertheless some NGOs that receive high levels of government funding, and others that seek to generate profits to plough back into their work. Boundaries are unclear, and as one might expect from a classification that emphasizes what they are not rather than what they are, NGOs therefore turn out to be quite difficult to pin down analytically. This has generated complex debates about what is and what is not an NGO, and about the most suitable approaches for analyzing their roles.

TRADITIONAL BACKGROUND

From the late 1980s, NGOs assumed a far greater role in development than previously. NGOs were first discovered and then celebrated by the international donor community as bringing fresh solutions to longstanding development problems characterized by inefficient government to

government aid and ineffective development projects. Within the subsequent effort to liberalize economies and "roll back" the state as part of structural adjustment policies, NGOs came also to be seen as a cost-effective alternative to public sector service delivery.

In the post- Cold War era the international donor community began to advocate a new policy agenda of "good governance" which saw development outcomes as emerging from a balanced relationship between government, market, and third sector. Within this paradigm, NGOs also came to be seen as part of an emerging "civil society."

The new attention given to NGOs at this time brought large quantities of aid resources, efforts at building the capacity of NGOs to scale up their work, and led ultimately to important changes in mainstream development thinking and practice, including new ideas about participation, empowerment, gender, and a range of people centered approaches to poverty reduction work. For example, Cernea (1988: 8) argued that NGOs embodied "a philosophy that recognizes the centrality of people in development policies," and that this along with some other factors gave them "comparative advantages" over government. But too much was expected of NGOs, which came to be seen in some quarters as a "quick fix" for development problems.

The first NGO was the Anti-Slavery Society followed by the Red Cross and Caritas, a movement that arose at the end of the 19th century. Most of the other NGO movements were founded after the two world wars and, hence, were primarily humanitarian in nature. For example, Save the Children was formed after World War I, and CARE was formed after World War II (Hall-Jones, 2006). The decolonization of Africa in the 1960s led to a new way of thinking—one that aimed at causes of poverty rather than its consequences. The armed conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s (Vietnam, Angola, Palestine) led the European NGOs to take on the task of mediators for informal diplomacy. Their support for locals had an impact on the demise of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the dictatorships of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and Augusto Pinochet in Chile. In addition, in the mid-1980s, the World Bank realized that NGOs were more effective and less corrupt than the typical government channels. The food crisis in Ethiopia in 1984 spurred a new market for "humanitarian aid" (Berthoud, 2001).

In the history of the NGO movement's growth, there have been several milestones. One of the first milestones was the role of the solidarity movement in the political transformation in Poland in the 1980s. The next was the impact of environmental activists on the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Another milestone was the Fifty Years Is Enough campaign in 1994. This was organized

by the South Council and was aimed at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) on the belief that these two institutions had been promoting and financing unsustainable development overseas that created poverty and destroyed the environment.

Although the modern history of humanitarian action has been rich in developments since the mid-nineteenth century and the founding of the Red Cross by Henry Dunant, the non-governmental not-for-profit sector has its own historical origin. Both in the North and in the South, what we refer to as “NGO communities” fall within a particular phase of history, and the humanitarian branch is no exception. Far from it. Position, size, place in society, relations with the political world and the state and so on depend on the historical circumstances in which private humanitarian action came into being in a given country and then on the extent to which it expands into the international field. This can be demonstrated quite easily. Think only of the humanitarian private organizations working at the international level that have been created over the last twenty-five years in the course of European Union enlargement, in countries ranging from Spain to Finland and Poland without any such previous endogenous tradition except for the presence of a National Red Cross Society. Or refer to the advent of large-scale NGOs in emerging countries such as Brazil or India, or of humanitarian – termed Islamic – NGOs in the Muslim world and in Western countries with large Muslim communities today, such as the United Kingdom, France or the United States.

OPINIONS OF NGO'S

While there have been many advocates for NGOs who emphasize their strengths, NGOs have also been subjected to fierce criticism in some quarters. Top of the list is the idea that NGOs undermine the centrality of the state in developing countries. As may be obvious from the brief history outlined above, there has been a shift away from a focus on state institutions and towards more privatized forms of development intervention which rely on NGOs.

Critics on the left such as Yash Tandon (1996) point to the ways in which NGOs have helped to sustain and extend neocolonial relations in Africa. More recently, Hearn (2007) has argued that African NGOs are the 'new compradors', reviving an older Marxist term used within dependency theory to describe the role of an indigenous Southern bourgeoisie which acted as the agent of international capital against the interests of local peasants and workers. New African NGO leaders, whose positions Hearn argues are dependent on outside agencies, manage Western aid money and then use it to build patronage networks and consolidate their political and economic power, in return for importing and projecting

develop mentalist ideas and rhetoric into African communities.

Many people throughout the world are familiar today with the term “NGO”, and this familiarity is corroborated by various opinion polls both among the citizens of developed, emerging and developing countries and among groups of people in precarious circumstances or victims of conflicts or natural disasters. In the past few years the results have been systematically converging towards a high level of reference to “NGOs”. So not only is the denomination known, but its confidence rating is also tending to rise.

In late 2002, for instance, a survey initiated by the Davos World Economic Forum was conducted among 36,000 people in forty-seven countries on six continents, ranging in Europe from Austria, Germany and Switzerland to Poland, Russia and the United Kingdom and, outside that continent, from Turkey, Israel, the United States and Canada to Japan, Cameroon and South Africa. Asked to rate their level of trust in various institutions “to operate in the best interest of society”, the respondents ranked the armed forces highest (“A lot/some trust”, combined with multiple replies), with NGOs a close runner-up. Parliaments came last.

ROLE ASSOCIATED WITH NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Given this unprecedented growth in the numbers and financial power of NGOs, how has the role changed or matured? What we see is that NGOs can have a huge impact. These NGOs are unfettered, not answerable to specific agendas, and, in many instances, can act independently.

Even though NGOs are highly diverse organizations, the one common goal is that they are not focused on short-term targets, and, hence, they devote themselves to long-term issues like climate change, malaria prevention, or human rights. In addition, public surveys state that NGOs often have public trust, which makes them a useful proxy for societal concerns (Hall-Jones, 2006).

Next, we will discuss four important roles of NGOs. These roles are:

- (1) social development,
- (2) sustainable community development,
- (3) sustainable development, and
- (4) sustainable consumption.

NGOs can also play an important role as partners to business/industry in promoting sustainable consumption.

Some of the instances where this partnership has been successful is in categories such as product development, sustainable housing, labeling, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), green purchasing, marine stewardship, and so on. The basic premise is, can NGOs influence behavioral change? Specifically, there are two questions that need to be asked: (1) How are NGOs educating households to change their consumption behavior, and (2) how can NGOs be potential partners to businesses in promoting sustainable consumption (Kong, Saltzmann, Steger, & Ionescu-Somers, 2002)?

NGOs are helping in the establishment of certification systems that would help companies to monitor, measure, and communicate their social and environmental best practices. As an example, the WWF, an environmental NGO, has helped in the FSC accreditation, certification, and labeling scheme that endorses products from properly managed forests. Rather than waiting for time-consuming regulatory agreements, the NGO spearheaded the creation of a new organization for moving the industry toward sustainability (Bendell, 2010).

CONCLUSION

NGOs are no longer 'flavour of the month' in either mainstream or alternative development circles, as once perhaps they were during the 1990s. The idea of NGOs as a straightforward 'magic bullet' that would help to reorient development efforts and make them more successful has now passed (Hulme and Edwards 1997). In the media, NGOs no longer have the relatively easy ride they once did, and it is not unusual to find them criticized as ineffectual do-gooders, over-professionalized large humanitarian business corporations, or self-serving interest groups.

Yet non-state actors such as NGOs play increasingly important roles in developing, transitional and developed societies. Levels of international assistance received by the NGO sector have increased dramatically. The increasing resource flows, combined with the fact that NGOs receive a higher level of public exposure and scrutiny than ever before, speak to their continuing importance. Perhaps there is now a more realistic view among policy makers about what NGOs can and cannot achieve.

Although it is not up to NGOs alone to seek to preserve that humanitarian space, previous experience suggests that it is better to trust the solutions which the non-governmental humanitarian agencies will endeavor to apply, because their approach has already demonstrated its capacity for innovation and continues to be developed in this early twenty-first century through action in the field, trial and error, research and experimentation. Should not this approach be regarded, after all, as positive in that it

tries, not in isolation, but in dialogue with the other players, to forestall any dysfunctional problems and setbacks and to capitalize on those which inevitably occur?

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