

The backlash against NGOs

In a global world without global government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have stepped in to fill the gap. But there is now a backlash against their unaccountable power. Have they become too big for their boots?

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When 122 countries agreed to stop using and selling land mines in December 1997, the success was attributed not to the work of tireless government officials, but to the 1,000 or so non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 60 countries which had lobbied ministers on the issue for years. At the signing ceremony in Ottawa, Jody Williams, the campaign's coordinator, remarked that NGOs had come into their own on the international stage. "Together," she said, "we are a superpower."

Her words have a significance far beyond the land mines treaty. They encompass a shift in the balance of power in international politics, unimaginable 30 years ago. Where once global politics were dictated exclusively by elected governments, now elected governments must compete with "civil society"—interest groups accountable only to themselves but often with significant financial resources, the management structure of a multinational company and a media image that governments can only envy.

Should we be worried about this shift? Is it safe to grant a mandate to change the world to unelected organisations which operate under the banner of democracy, but which answer only to their directors, fundholders or members, and are far less transparent than most political parties? The same question is asked by NGOs of multinational corporations. But are the champions of the oppressed in danger of mirroring some of the sins of the oppressor? More important, how responsible have NGOs been in wielding their newly-won power?

Filling the global gap

The turning-point in the fortunes of NGOs was the UN earth summit in Rio in 1992, where environmental pressure groups were directly involved in drawing up a treaty to control emissions of greenhouse gases. They had access to the official working groups and served on government delegations, and through lobbying and use of the media they greatly accelerated the negotiating process. For the first time, NGOs had moved from the spectators gallery to the decision-making table. Since then they have had considerable success: they have forced the World Bank to review its funding strategy; helped to create the post of UN high commissioner for human rights; scuppered the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (which aimed to liberalise foreign investment and immunise it from the interests of national governments); helped to derail the World Trade Organisation (WTO) talks in Seattle last year; and, at the end of 1999, helped to win a pledge from Britain (with other lenders expected to follow) to write off the debts of the world's 41 poorer countries. In January, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, representatives from 15 NGOs were for the first time invited to take part in debates on globalisation.

As finance and production become more global and increasingly important decisions are taken at an international level, where there is no political machinery to deal with citizens' concerns, NGOs are filling the "democratic deficit." "The same factors that have been eroding nation-states have also been promoting NGOs," says James Paul, executive director of the Global Policy Forum in New York. "NGOs have become the vehicle for the expression of popular concern in this transitional period as nation-states weaken and politics is not yet established at the transnational level." The effectiveness of NGOs has been assisted by the internet. The collection and communication of large volumes of information is no longer the domain of governments alone. Pressure groups can link up across the world without moving from their desks—as the demonstrations in Seattle showed. "The difference between what you can do now and what you could do 15 years ago is enormous," says Jessica Mathews, co-founder of the World Resources Institute. "In the 1980s at the WRI it was impossible to deal with people in Africa—the phones didn't work well enough. The relative lowering of the cost of communication has made a huge difference for NGOs domestically and internationally."

Even if you exclude domestic NGOs (which number in the millions) it is difficult to estimate how many NGOs there are. One source estimates that during the 1990s the number of international NGOs increased from about 6,000 to more than 26,000. Many of the larger ones, such as Care, control budgets worth more than \$100m. Membership of the Worldwide Fund for Nature has increased nearly tenfold, to 5m, since the mid-1980s; it has 3,300 staff and an annual budget of more than \$350m. Greenpeace has nearly 2.5m members and 1,142 staff. Amnesty International has 1m members in 162 countries. Friends of the Earth has 1m members in 58 countries. Membership of Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has risen from 10,000 in 1960, to 1m today. Several NGOs have stepped in to take up roles that the UN or national governments might once have been expected to fill. About 10 per cent of all development aid is channelled through NGOs, and that figure will rise. In the human rights field, the UN acknowledges that its entire programme would fall apart without the information-gathering and campaigning resources of NGOs. In his study *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1998), William Korey notes that when the Declaration was approved by the UN in 1948, 41 NGOs held consultative status. It has now been granted to more than 1,000. Amnesty International alone is better resourced than the human rights arm of the UN.

The big international NGOs cover three main areas: human rights, development and the environment. Some specialise in distributing aid, others in campaigning and propaganda. As advocates for change, NGOs are often far more effective than governments or international bodies: they are in touch with the grassroots, they can mobilise public

opinion through the media and embarrass officialdom or businesses into action without fear of retaliation. In poor countries, foreign NGOs can provide assistance and poverty relief faster than bureaucratic government agencies. As the global economy takes hold, NGOs appear well-placed to act as transnational trouble-shooters and are thus natural allies of the UN. Kofi Annan, UN secretary-general, has called them “the conscience of humanity.”

The single issue problem

But there is another side to the NGOs. International civil society is not a homogeneous forum of altruistic groups fighting for a common outcome. As Jessica Mathews wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1997: “For all their strengths, NGOs are special interests. The best of them... often suffer most from tunnel vision, judging every public act by how it affects their particular interest. Generally, they have limited capacity for large-scale endeavours, and as they grow, the need to sustain growing budgets can compromise the independence of mind that is their greatest asset.” The fact that NGOs do not have to think about policy trade-offs or the overall impact of their causes can even be harmful. “A society in which the piling up of special interests replaces a single strong voice for the common good is unlikely to fare well.”

NGOs are like political parties in that they depend on their members for funding and answer to them for their policies. Since they could not survive without their “grassroots,” much of their campaigning is geared towards expanding this base, sometimes in competition with other organisations. But NGOs are unlike political parties in that they are not accountable to the electorate. However much they claim to speak for the public, their main responsibility is always to themselves.

A tendency to play to the gallery, and straightforward infighting, is common among some NGOs desperate to maximise membership. This is most marked in the environmental sector. “There isn’t a green movement,” says Pete Wilkinson, a director of Greenpeace UK during the 1980s. “It’s a bunch of self-interested organisations which generally don’t get on.” Tom Burke, director of Friends of the Earth from 1975-79, then adviser to three secretaries of state for the environment, and now an environmental policy consultant to BP and Rio Tinto, warns of a ghetto mentality. “One of the dangers is that you really do think you’ve got all the answers and anyone who doesn’t agree with you is an idiot or evil.”

Typical divisions include that between the Humane Society of the US, which wants to preserve wildlife at all costs, and organisations such as the Worldwide Fund for Nature which favour sustainable management and community involvement; or the division between advocates of a logging ban in North American forests and those promoting wood as a sustainable resource which could replace fossil fuels. Some NGOs measure their success in terms of new regulations passed by Congress or parliament; others favour decentralisation and a more market-orientated approach. And some green groups openly demonise others. In 1993 Greenpeace published a book of environmental enemies which included other organisations fighting for the same goals but using methods of which it did not approve. For organisations which are not elected yet have a big influence on our lives, trust is usually crucial to their success. Monsanto has many enemies because it appears untrustworthy with its influence. But international NGOs are different, for now at least. If they fall down they are less likely to be penalised than a political party—which would lose an election—or a multinational—which would face a boycott of its products. NGO influence is thus open to abuse.

Aid NGOs carry a great responsibility because their work directly affects the world’s poorest people. They also tend to attract most public money. (Of Oxfam’s £98m budget, about 25 per cent was given by either the British government or the EU; Médecins Sans Frontières gets almost 50 per cent of its income from public sources.) They are given this responsibility because they are usually smaller and more flexible than government agencies. However, some groups are themselves now as large as a small government agency—and as bureaucratic. In many cases they have set up pervasive structures of aid provision in developing countries, taking over services such as healthcare and water supply which were previously run—however haphazardly—by the country’s government. Because these structures often collapse when the foreign NGOs leave, this approach to aid provision can end up undermining the government. NGOs are also expensive. A report written for Unicef in 1995, by Sussex University’s Reginald Green and others, estimated that in Mozambique, health services set up by NGOs cost up to ten times as much as those provided by the government. Green recommends that foreign technical assistance should be reduced and the money used to support national or local government programmes instead. Joseph Hanlon, author of several books about aid to Mozambique, recalls that during a period in 1993 NGOs working in the health sector were spending more in two provinces than the entire national health budget—and that rather than use local doctors, they were flying in foreign experts. Hanlon calls NGOs “the new missionaries.” A provincial governor in Mozambique once told him: “NGOs are trying to take the place of the government. They are trying to show that the old colonisers are really interested in the people after all; that they can bring you water today whereas the government can only give you a well tomorrow.” Clare Short, Britain’s secretary of state for international development, warned last year that aid agencies had concentrated too much on isolated projects instead of helping governments to provide essential services such as health and education. The success of aid agencies, she said, should be measured by how soon they leave a country, not by how long they stay.

Most large NGOs, such as Oxfam, the Red Cross, Cafod and Action Aid, are striving to make their aid provision more sustainable. But some, mostly in the US, are still exporting the ideologies of their backers. “They can be either

evangelical in nature, or very traditional in approach, emphasising hand-outs and soup kitchens rather than trying both to provide relief and tackle the source of the problems,” says Sarah Stewart of Christian Aid.

Yet however well intentioned, every NGO has to answer to the people who pay its bills. Accountability is central to the debate about NGOs’ role in global decision-making. Critics claim that they are hardly a democratic substitute for governments. But James Paul says that campaigning groups may be no less representative than parliaments. After all, he says, democracies are often not very democratic.

Playing to the gallery

Publicity is crucial to NGOs’ success. At the earth summit in Rio, “civil society” became an international force mostly due to the presence of 9,000 journalists—more than twice as many as had attended any previous UN conference. This creates public relations temptations for NGOs. Stewart says that Christian Aid comes under pressure to pursue a certain goal not from its trustees so much as from the public, which wants to see action in response to a crisis. She cites the war in Kosovo, “where overwhelming media attention—to the detriment of equally severe crises in Africa—compelled agencies to respond, in some cases beyond their original remit.”

The media also encourage NGOs to indulge in competitive posturing. When a Chinese government delegation visited Britain a few years ago to discuss human rights, at least one big pressure group declined to attend a meeting with the delegation because it wanted to preserve its purity in the struggle against human rights abuse in China. Last year the same organisation, during the visit to London of Chinese president Jiang Zemin, was able to hold up placards saying “All we want to do is talk.”

NGOs cannot grow in membership, funding or power without the media. Thus the “difficult” issues, which are often those most in need of attention, are ignored. As Paul de Jongh, former Dutch deputy director-general for the environment, warns in his book *Our Common Journey*: “The fruits we have harvested were the lowest on the tree, and we have reached nearly all of them.” Global warming is a perfect campaign issue because it affects everyone and has potentially catastrophic consequences. But issues such as nitrate leaching, forest biodiversity or soil erosion in Africa hardly get a look in. Hanlon says that in the aid industry, NGOs’ dependency on their media image for funds can be damaging for the country they are trying to help. “They need a new fashion to help them raise more money. One year it’s gender, another it’s democracy, the next year it’s age. The problem is that local organisations cannot move so fast.”

Little white lies

Environmental groups have often been accused of stretching facts to create a greater media impact. In the campaign to ban the ivory trade, environmental and animal rights groups peddled statistics on the decline of elephant populations in Africa. When Norway was targeted for killing whales, activist groups placed advertisements in national newspapers implying that all whales were threatened with extinction, when in fact the Norwegians were sustainably hunting just one species, the minke. When the Braer oil tanker went aground off Shetland in 1993 and spilled tens of thousands of tonnes of crude oil into the sea, wildlife groups predicted catastrophic effects on marine life which were never borne out. And in Greenpeace’s (ultimately successful) campaign to prevent Shell abandoning the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea in 1995, the group overestimated by a factor of 37 the amount of hydrocarbons in the rig which might leak into the sea. Greenpeace later apologised for its mistake over the Brent Spar, but the incident underlined how scientific facts frequently play second fiddle to politics.

The row over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is another example. When Greenpeace activists destroyed an experimental crop of GM maize near Norwich last summer, effectively they were saying that they were rejecting GM crops irrespective of whether or not these had a detrimental effect on the environment. In this way Greenpeace can no longer strictly call itself an environmental group: it is fighting as much against global trade and the multinationals. Doug Parr, chief scientist at Greenpeace, acknowledges that the group no longer operates “wholly in the scientific domain,” but claims that public perception of the environment has moved on. “There’s a tendency among our critics to say that science is the only decision-making tool... but political and commercial interests are using science as a cover for getting their way.”

Because of their big grassroots support, environmental groups have never been limited to working through government to achieve their ends—unlike aid agencies and human rights groups. Thus the green groups are responsible for most of the innovations in NGO tactics. Now that green groups have started to campaign beyond their original remit, NGOs in other sectors may follow suit. But are any of them really ready for this shift?

Richard Jefferson, a molecular biologist and executive director of Cambia, which helps farmers in the third world, thinks not. He believes that anti-GMO campaigns in the west have already done huge damage to farming in the developing world. European institutions which have been funding the development of GM technologies for third world farmers have been cutting back because they are worried about their public image. And yet, he says, western activists are ignorant of third world farming. “They are becoming as paternalistic as the multinationals they propose to save these farmers from. If people really knew how agriculture was done here they’d thank God we had some technologies that could save us from past mistakes. If the activists really cared for the environment they would be looking at lowering pesticides usage or reducing tillage.”

Philip Burnham, a social anthropologist at University College London, who has worked for 30 years in central and west Africa, says that NGOs will often try to stifle development at any cost. He has recently been assessing the social

impact of Exxon's proposed oil pipeline through Cameroon. Exxon, he says, has been surprisingly open about the project, and local people are for it. But various US and European environmental groups are against it because they claim it will destroy rainforest biodiversity—a claim Burnham says is based on poor science. Pete Wilkinson says the problem is bigger than faulty analysis; green groups have failed to move from the confrontational tactics of the 1980s to a more conciliatory approach required today when the issues have become more complex, and business and government have adopted much of the lexicon of the movement. "After Rio, I thought there'd be a major consolidation of the green movement, a rethinking of tactics and the emergence of a more mature green lobby. We haven't seen that." The failure of green groups to cooperate with other "players" spurred Jens Katjek, former head of policy with Friends of the Earth Germany, to move to the corporate sector two years ago. If NGOs want the best for the environment, he says, they have to learn to compromise. Richard Jefferson is more critical still. "They've got everything so mixed up now. In their anti-corporatism they've become anti-technology, anti-science, anti-informed discussion. They do not like complexity, just the black-and-white."

Should NGOs be granted responsibilities on the big stage if they shirk responsibilities on the small one? When they are good they are very good: a catalyst for positive social change. But when they are bad, they are self-promoting and irresponsible.