

# What is a Non-Governmental Organization?

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## Advance Reading for participants of the Human Rights NGO Capacity-Building Programme – Iraq

### Summary

The term, "non-governmental organization" or NGO, came into currency in 1945 because of the need for the UN to differentiate in its Charter between participation rights for intergovernmental specialized agencies and those for international private organizations. At the UN, virtually all types of private bodies can be recognized as NGOs. They only have to be independent from government control, not seeking to challenge governments either as a political party or by a narrow focus on human rights, non-profit-making and non-criminal.

The structures of NGOs vary considerably. They can be global hierarchies, with either a relatively strong central authority or a more loose federal arrangement. Alternatively, they may be based in a single country and operate transnationally. With the improvement in communications, more locally-based groups, referred to as grass-roots organizations or community based organizations, have become active at the national or even the global level. Increasingly this occurs through the formation of coalitions. There are international umbrella NGOs, providing an institutional structure for different NGOs that do not share a common identity. There are also looser issue-based networks and ad hoc caucuses, lobbying at UN conferences. In environmental politics, this occurs in the unique form of the nine "Major Groups", listed in *Agenda 21*.

At times NGOs are contrasted with social movements. Much as proponents of social movements may wish to see movements as being more progressive and more dynamic than NGOs, this is a false dichotomy. NGOs are components of social movements. Similarly, civil society is the broader concept to cover all social activity by individuals, groups and movements. It remains a matter of contention whether civil society also covers all economic activity. Usually, society is seen as being composed of three sectors: government, the private sector and civil society, excluding businesses.

NGOs are so diverse and so controversial that it is not possible to support, or be opposed to, all NGOs. They may claim to be the voice of the people and to have greater legitimacy than governments, but this can only be a plausible claim under authoritarian governments. However, their role as participants in democratic debate does not depend upon any claim to representative legitimacy.

### Introduction

The term non-governmental organization or NGO was not in general currency before the UN was formed. When 132 international NGOs decided to co-operate with each other in 1910, they did so under the label, the Union of International Associations. The League of Nations officially referred to its "liaison with private organizations", while many of these bodies at that time called themselves international institutes, international unions or simply international organizations. The first draft of the UN Charter did not make any mention of maintaining co-operation with private bodies. A variety of groups, mainly but not solely from the USA, lobbied to rectify this at the San Francisco conference, which established the UN in 1945. Not only did they succeed in introducing a provision for strengthening and formalizing the relations with private organizations previously maintained by the League, they also greatly enhanced the UN's role in economic

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<sup>1</sup> City University, London, <http://www.staff.city.ac.uk/p.willetts/CS-NTWKS/NGO-ART.HTM>. UNESCO Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems, Section 1 Institutional And Infrastructure Resource Issues, Article 1.44.3.7, Non-Governmental Organizations

and social issues and upgraded the status of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to a "principal organ" of the UN. To clarify matters, new terminology was introduced to cover ECOSOC's relationship with two types of international organizations. Under Article 70, "specialized agencies, established by intergovernmental agreement" could "participate without a vote in its deliberations", while under Article 71 "non-governmental organizations" could have "suitable arrangements for consultation". Thus, "specialized agencies" and "NGOs" became technical UN jargon. Unlike much UN jargon, the term, NGO, passed into popular usage, particularly from the early 1970s onwards.

Many diverse types of bodies are now described as being NGOs. There is no generally accepted definition of an NGO and the term carries different connotations in different circumstances. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental features. Clearly an NGO must be independent from the direct control of any government. In addition, there are three other generally accepted characteristics that exclude particular types of bodies from consideration. An NGO will not be constituted as a political party; it will be non-profit-making and it will not be a criminal group, in particular it will be non-violent. These characteristics apply in general usage, because they match the conditions for recognition by the United Nations. The boundaries can sometimes be blurred: some NGOs may in practice be closely identified with a political party; many NGOs generate income from commercial activities, notably consultancy contracts or sales of publications; and a small number of NGOs may be associated with violent political protests. Nevertheless, an NGO is never constituted as a government bureaucracy, a party, a company, a criminal organization or a guerrilla group. Thus, for this article, an NGO is defined as an independent voluntary association of people acting together on a continuous basis, for some common purpose, other than achieving government office, making money or illegal activities. This basic approach will be elaborated and modified below.

### **NGOs, Interest Groups, Pressure Groups, Lobbies and Private Voluntary Organizations**

In discussion of politics within countries, a distinction is often made between interest groups and pressure groups, but it is taken for granted that both types of private groups have an impact upon government policy-making. The term, interest group, is biased towards consideration of groups such as companies or trade unions. Use of the term is unsatisfactory, as it tends to imply that such groups are only concerned with economic policy, that they only act to safeguard their own economic position and that only groups with substantial economic resources can have an impact on politics. None of these propositions is valid. Major economic actors are also concerned with values beyond the accumulation of wealth. At the minimum, they also pursue security and status. At the maximum, they have a wider responsibility towards health and safety, social welfare and environmental values. The term, pressure group, invokes a wider range of groups. Its use is intended to cover those, such as environmentalists and human rights groups, who are pursuing goals that do not directly benefit themselves. It emphasizes the processes by which groups mobilize support to promote their political values. The contrast between interest groups and pressure groups can be used to suggest a contrast between objective goals and subjective goals and hence privilege the pursuit of economic returns over environmental values and other abstract values.

In the United States, a similar distinction is made, with stronger, but different, normative connotations. Mention of a lobby seems to imply the illegitimate use of wealth in a secretive manner, while private voluntary organizations or public interest groups convey a positive image. There is a logical problem with the distinction in that membership of a lobby is both private and voluntary. These terms are also unsatisfactory as the latter two suggest charitable activity and do not readily bring to mind campaigning groups nor those who are concerned with global issues, such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International. "Public interest" appears to cover the general good, in an objective manner, but it is an essentially-contested concept, both with respect to what is "the public" and with respect to identifying "the common interest". One person's view of the public interest may be seen by another person as the assertion of unacceptable values, ideological extremism or special pleading.

The distinction between interest groups and pressure groups or between lobbies and private voluntary organizations has no analytical value. All pressure groups or voluntary organizations have some interests to protect, even if it is only the maintenance of their reputation, increasing the number of active supporters and gaining sufficient income to communicate effectively. Altruistic charities use sophisticated public relations campaigns to raise funds and standard lobbying techniques when government taxation policy affects their income. Equally, all interest groups and lobbies are of political importance, precisely because their pressure influences social and political outcomes. They do not necessarily operate in a secretive manner in the corridors of power and they do at times seek to mobilize public support. When they engage in political

debate, company representatives often argue for general abstract values that go beyond their specific concrete interests. Companies can only challenge the public interest – or more precisely public opinion – at the risk of damaging their public reputation, their brand values and their income. Many companies more positively promote what is often seen as the public interest. They may donate profits to charitable activities, identify directly with environmental values to benefit from green consumerism or even reduce consumption of energy and raw materials to reduce costs. Trade unions usually go much further than companies in making explicit their endorsement of a wide range of political values. They also allocate money, personnel and other resources to campaigning, both independently and in coalition with other pressure groups.

Whatever one might think of these terms from the discourse on politics within countries, they are never used in global politics. Because diplomats like to claim that they are pursuing "the national interest" of a united society, they will not admit to relations with interest groups or pressure groups and they prefer the bland title, non-governmental organizations. The thinking behind the concept of a public interest group has been transferred to some people's attitudes to NGOs. There is a desire to limit access to the UN system to "proper" NGOs, but all this means is that groups supported by the person concerned should be included and other groups excluded. The other terms – interest group, pressure group, lobby and private voluntary organization – could *all* be applied legitimately to most NGOs. However, there is mutual connivance in most political processes at the global level to hide behind the uncontroversial catch-all term NGOs. The only significant exception, which is discussed below, is the tendency in global environmental politics to talk about "Major Groups". This sounds more positive, but it is still a vague term, devoid of any direct association with participation in policy-making.

In the logic of the language, there is no difference between a non-governmental organization and a private voluntary organization, but NGO still carries neutral connotations and applicability to a diverse range of political actors, whereas PVO suggests moral approval of a more limited range of groups. In practice, it is impossible to agree any general terms to distinguish praiseworthy from unacceptable groups, either in domestic politics or in global politics, because such a distinction is a subjective choice made on the basis of each observer's own value preferences.

### **Transnational Actors**

In academic study of international relations, the term "transnational" was adopted to refer to any relationship across country boundaries, in which at least one of the actors was not a government. It was adopted in order to deny the assumption that international relations was the same as inter-state relations, or more precisely intergovernmental relations. It came into currency in the 1970s as a result of economic and environmental questions being recognized as a high priority for the global agenda. It is immediately apparent that the academic concept of a transnational actor is quite different from the political concept of an NGO. Firstly, it excludes all NGO activity that is confined to a single country. Secondly, it includes all the other non-governmental actors that have been defined as being outside the world of NGOs. It is commonplace to refer to transnational companies, transnational criminals, transnational guerrillas and transnational terrorists. In global politics, it is rare for any reference to be made to transnational NGOs, presumably because an NGO's involvement in global politics *ipso facto* makes it transnational.

### **NGOs and their Independence from Governments**

The most difficult question about the independence of NGOs is whether they come under governmental influence. Individual governments do at times try to influence the NGO community in a particular field, by establishing NGOs that promote their policies. This has been recognized by quite common use of the acronym GONGO, to label a government-organized NGO. Also, in more authoritarian societies, NGOs may find it very difficult to act independently and they may not receive acknowledgment from other political actors even when they are acting independently. Beyond these unusual situations, there is a widespread prejudice that government funding leads to government control. In the field of human rights, it would damage an NGO for such a perception to arise, so Amnesty International has strict rules that it will not accept direct government funding for normal activities. On the other hand, development and humanitarian relief NGOs need substantial resources, to run their operational programs, so most of them readily accept official funds. While these NGOs would like the security of a guaranteed budget for their administrative overheads, governments generally only want to support field costs for projects.

Nominally NGOs may appear to be independent, when they design their own programs, but government influence can arise indirectly if the program is designed to make it more likely that government grants or contracts will be forthcoming. On the other hand, confident experienced NGOs can appeal for funding for

new approaches and in so doing cause government officials to re-assess policy. The best example of this is the way in which NGOs, particularly the International Planned Parenthood Federation, dragged governments into adopting population programs. There is no obvious method to identify the direction of influence, without detailed knowledge of the relationship between an NGO and a government. Environmental NGOs may have either type of funding relationship. Conservation and research groups may happily obtain government funds to support their programs: some are innovative and some are not. Beyond these situations, radical campaigning groups may be unwilling and unable to attract government funds.

#### NGOs, Political Parties and Ethnic Minorities

While a political party is not regarded as an NGO and cannot gain recognition at the UN, a small number of transnational groupings of political parties do gain consultative status with ECOSOC. There are also several groups of parliamentarians with consultative status. No problems have arisen with either group, because they have carefully avoided trying to involve the UN in the "internal affairs of states". Human rights NGOs feel aggrieved that the same principle is applied to them, even though one of the purposes of ECOSOC is "promoting respect for, and observance of, human rights". In May 1968, ECOSOC Resolution 1296 (XLIV) specified that NGOs "should have a general international concern with this matter, not restricted to the interests of a particular group of persons, a single nationality or the situation in a single State". While this provision was dropped from the revised text in July 1996, it is still applied in practice. On this basis, the Indian government can block the World Sikh Organization from gaining UN recognition. Christian Solidarity International also lost its consultative status in October 1999 after it had allowed the guerrilla leader, John Garang, to speak on its behalf, at the Commission on Human Rights.

The recognition of minority rights is such a complex question that it is handled very differently in different countries. In both North and South America, the minority communities who are descendants of the inhabitants prior to the arrival of the great waves of European settlers are given the privileged title of "indigenous peoples". The term has also been adopted in Australia and New Zealand and a few other countries. On the other hand, governments in various ethnically diverse countries do not wish to accord any special recognition to minorities. The compromise is that the UN refers to indigenous people, as individuals who have rights, and not to indigenous peoples (note the plural). This avoids recognition of any collective identity or any claim to the right of self-determination. The restrictions deriving from Resolution 1296 mean the organizations with consultative status are mainly global or regional coalitions of ethnic minorities. However, special procedures have been adopted in both the Commission on Human Rights and the Commission on Sustainable Development to allow participation by a wider range of indigenous organizations. In addition, in July 2000, ECOSOC established a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, consisting of sixteen independent experts, half of whom are nominated by indigenous organizations. Through a variety of complex issue linkages, these NGOs can be important in environmental politics, notably in the conservation of rainforests. While they are only present in the UN system under the auspices of the arrangements for NGOs, indigenous people are often keen to claim a unique status that is separate from and superior to the representatives of NGOs. As a result, their alliance with environmentalists does not always operate smoothly.

#### NGOs and their Relations with Business and Commerce

A few intergovernmental economic organizations do allow an individual company to have access under their provisions for NGOs, but this is only in cases where there are loose *ad hoc* procedures and there are no formal institutional arrangements. However, as with political parties, non-profit-making federations of companies, established for industry-wide collaboration and to act as lobbies, are widely accepted. From the earliest days of the UN, bodies such as the International Chamber of Commerce, the International Organization of Employers and similar organizations for particular economic sectors have been included among the NGOs. Until the 1990s, they were not of much significance in the UN itself, but they have always been important in the specialized agencies. The more technical the question under discussion, the more the policy-making process will draw on their expertise.

One of the outcomes of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the UN Conference on Environment and Development, was to draw companies into global environmental politics and hence more into the work of ECOSOC. Sectoral bodies are prominent when questions such as energy or transport are on the agenda. In addition, issue-oriented commercial grouping have been formed. The most prominent is the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, a successor to various lobbies that focused on the Earth Summit, to promote environmentally friendly business. The oil companies have sound environmental credentials in some forums, but not in others. The Oil Companies International Maritime Forum is making a useful

contribution to the reduction of oil pollution at sea, but the Global Climate Coalition opposes reductions in oil consumption. OCIMF is registered as an NGO by the International Maritime Organization, and the GCC is admitted as an observer to the sessions of the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 1999, the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, explicitly called upon companies to widen their social responsibilities by entering into a Global Compact with the UN. Companies that do so agree to endorse nine principles, covering promotion of a set of core values in the areas of human rights, labor standards and protection of the environment. Soon afterwards, global business organizations, several hundred companies and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions responded positively, but only a handful of human rights, environment and development NGOs did so. There remains a deep suspicion among many such NGOs about the possibility of companies implementing commitments to social responsibility.

Despite the suspicion of business, some NGOs have chosen to engage directly in collaborative arrangements to formulate and monitor statements of business ethics. This has been done both on an industry-wide basis and with individual companies. For example, WWF (known as the Worldwide Fund for Nature until July 2000) took the lead in forming the Forest Stewardship Council in 1993 and the Marine Stewardship Council in 1996. Each Council works to promote sustainable practices, with participating companies gaining the benefit of having their products endorsed by the NGOs as being environmentally friendly. Similarly, various companies are having environmental and/or social audits undertaken on an annual basis, by independent assessors.

### **NGOs and the Political Use of Violence**

There has been no compromise in any political system with the idea that the use of violence is not a normal part of the political process. In the UN, aggressive behavior by individuals is sufficient to raise the question of suspension of an NGO's consultative status. In the exceptional circumstances where group of guerrillas wish to claim their use of violence is acceptable as part of the struggle against an oppressive regime, the group does not call itself an NGO. Their supporters call them a national liberation movement, whereas their opponents call them terrorists. Sometimes these groups gain admittance to intergovernmental organizations, as if they were the governments of recognized states. At the UN, they have never been classified as NGOs, but a few have been given a different status, as observers at the General Assembly and at UN conferences. Within individual countries, there are rare examples of the use of violence as a deliberate tactic, by groups that would normally be referred to as NGOs. A clear example is the Animal Liberation Front in the United Kingdom. They are simply regarded as criminals by the government and by the public, including many who support their goals. A commitment to non-violence is the best respected of the principles defining what is an NGO.

### **Different Types of Structures Among NGOs**

There is a great variety of ways in which NGOs are structured. The classic model is of a membership organization, co-ordinated in a geographically-defined hierarchy. Individual people work in local groups, which co-ordinate in provinces and then have a headquarters in the capital city for the country as a whole. Such country-wide organizations are called national NGOs. Frequently, the national NGOs combine in an international NGO, or INGO, which may consist of regional groups of countries and be capped by a global body. Not all the levels of the hierarchy need exist. Many countries are too small to have provincial structures. Smaller specialist NGOs may simply enroll individual members at the national level, without having any local branches. Occasionally, individuals are enrolled at the international level. On the other hand, in large organizations, the international level often seems relatively remote and attracts little attention, even among the NGO's own members. The group running a local family planning clinic does not necessarily know about the work of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. Nevertheless, such global organizations with their membership measured in millions do maintain a democratic policy-making process. While some may hold direct elections for key posts at the national level, the responsibility to the membership at the global level is always indirect, via some international council or assembly of national representatives.

It should be noted that one of the ambiguities about the term, NGO, is whether it is referring to a local, provincial, national, regional or global body. Until the early 1990s, the matter was generally straightforward

in academic, news media or political discussions. The overwhelming majority of local and provincial NGOs never engaged in transnational activities. Thus NGO, by itself, usually meant a national NGO and regional or global bodies were called international NGOs. National NGOs did engage in transnational development and humanitarian activities, but, with very few exceptions, they were not, in their own right, participants in international diplomacy. When they wanted to exercise political influence at the global level, they did so through the appropriate INGO. In the 1990s, there was a great upsurge in local organizations becoming active at the global level, particularly on environmental issues, because of the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992, and on social issues, because of the Copenhagen Social Summit in March 1995. Since then, the term INGO has not been used so much and NGO, by itself, has come to cover both national and international NGOs. As an expression of the new politics, various terms then were popularized to refer to local NGOs. Grass-roots organizations, community based organizations (CBOs), and civil society organizations (CSOs), all came into currency. There is still an ambiguity whether these newer terms cover organizations that only operate at the local level or also include local branches of national organizations. Grass-roots and community organizations clearly refer solely to the local level, but civil society has connotations of any level within a single country. Indeed, it has become quite common to refer to global civil society.

Linguistic usage in the legal atmosphere at the UN used to be somewhat different. When the UN was formed, any involvement of private individuals or groups in its work constituted deviation from the norm of diplomacy being the exclusive preserve of "states". Thus, a national organization, as mentioned in Article 71 of the UN Charter, was any NGO based in a single country. No distinction was made between an organization that covered a large constituency, over the whole country, and an organization based solely in a local community or a small section of the population. The lack of any distinction did not matter, as participation by either country-wide or more limited national NGOs was so rare in the permanent UN organs. Participation began on a small scale in the 1970s at UN conferences, on an *ad hoc* basis. When the ECOSOC rules were changed in 1996, to admit "national NGOs" to consultative status as a matter of routine, the presumption became that a national organization was a country-wide membership organization or a federation of local groups or an umbrella group, that is a coalition of NGOs operating in different fields. As is common at the UN, practice has not been consistent: a few local NGOs have been admitted as "national NGOs" to consultative status. The Rio conference also produced a term that has only been used in environmental politics at the UN. "Major Groups" refers to a system of categorizing NGOs from all levels, for the purposes of participating in UN policy-making processes.

Hereafter, use of NGO alone will imply that any or all levels are included, while local, national or global will be used when the meaning must be restricted to that level. Terms such as CBOs and Major Groups will also be used in the appropriate political context.

#### Changes in Terminology Covering NGOs

<b>Level of Organisation</b>	<b>From 1945 to Early 1990s</b>	<b>Early 1990s Onwards</b>
Local	National NGO, at the UN Not discussed elsewhere	Grass-roots, community based or civil society organization, or local NGO
Provincial (USA - state)	National NGO, at the UN Not discussed elsewhere	Civil society organization or local NGO
National	National NGO, at the UN NGO, outside the UN	NGO or national NGO or civil society organization
Regional	International NGO	NGO or civil society organization
Global	International NGO	NGO or Major Group or civil society organization

A minority of NGOs conform to the model of a global democratic hierarchy, in which any person may become a member. One variant is for the NGO to have subscribers or supporters, providing income, receiving newsletters and responding to calls for action, but not having any democratic control either over expenditure or over policy priorities for the organization. This is common among altruistic NGOs, promoting social welfare and poverty alleviation, and also among environmental NGOs. Another variant is for a specific status or participation in some activity to be a prerequisite for membership. Thus trade unions are only open to those employed in certain occupations (sometimes very broadly defined). Similarly, professional, scientific and technical bodies are only open to people with the relevant qualification. Such organizations may then be grouped on a functional basis rather than a geographical basis, before they form national and/or international federations. Trade unions do maintain democratic decision-making structures (at least in principle, if not always in practice). However, professional, scientific and technical bodies have professional norms that override democratic norms and members may be expelled for violating the professional norms. A third variant is a religious organization. The major religions do all have complex hierarchies, from the local faith community through to global spiritual authorities. None of them claim to be democratic: authority is based on faith, a holy text, the charisma of individuals or a hierarchical tradition. To some it will be surprising to discuss trade unions, professional bodies and religious organizations as if they are NGOs. Indeed, the leaders of all three will usually deny they are NGOs. Nevertheless, they are treated on the same basis as NGOs throughout the UN system, with the exception of the special place for unions in the International Labour Organisation's tripartite system of governance.

### **Coalition-Building Among NGOs**

Once NGOs do decide to influence public policy, they organize, in broad coalitions, specifically for this purpose. This means there is a large number of NGOs that bear no resemblance to the classic model of a unified hierarchy. Coalitions may take the form of umbrella INGOs, networks or caucuses. In the days when the main form of communication was by mail and even transnational telephone conversations were expensive and time-consuming to arrange, multi-national coalitions generally took the form of institutional structures. Many international women's organizations, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and the World Conservation Union are examples that date from this era. They are referred to as umbrella organizations, to signify the presence under the single umbrella of a variety of different NGOs that do not share a common identity. In the 1960s, direct transnational telephone dialing was established and air travel became sufficiently cheap for individuals to meet occasionally. Then in the 1970s the news media gradually used satellite communications, so that events in one place were shared around the world as television images. These processes encouraged the formation of looser issue-based networks of NGOs to exchange information, mobilize support and co-ordinate strategies. At this stage, networks still required some degree of formal organization, with enough resources being raised to pay the salary of a network administrator and associated costs for the paperwork. The International Baby Foods Action Network was the prototype, followed by similar networks on pesticides, rainforests, climate change and other questions. The advent of e-mail and the web in the 1990s then meant that the costs of running a network dropped substantially and individual people could afford to take part in sophisticated instantaneous global communications. The number of networks increased dramatically and they no longer needed any formal structure. Once a lead organization or even a lead individual establishes technical and political communication skills, a coalition of thousands of NGOs can be formed rapidly and their influence focused on specific targets. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Coalition for an International Criminal Court and Jubilee 2000 are the most spectacular examples. However, the impact of technological change should not be exaggerated. The most effective modern networks still derive their impact from being coalitions of well-organized NGOs. Although communication costs are now minimal, it is still essential to have sufficient resources at the center, even if they are provided by a single member of the network, for at least one person to devote most or all of his/her time to servicing the network.

A variant of the global network is a global caucus. This arises when a group of NGOs come together as lobbyists at an international diplomatic event, such as a UN agenda-setting conference or a UN forum for negotiating on the formulation or implementation of a treaty. The caucus will be highly focused on achieving specific outcomes from the diplomatic process. The impression is given that such a caucus is an ad hoc grouping that only exists during the two or three weeks of the relevant diplomatic meetings. It may be accurate that the particular combination of NGOs having the particular political purpose will never meet again. However, a successful caucus will be well prepared and will carry forward procedural expertise, substantive knowledge, political status and diplomatic contacts gained in one forum through to the next forum, handling similar questions. Key organizations and key individuals provide continuity. Women's organizations and environmentalists are among the most successful operating in this way.

When we consider something as loose and transient as a caucus, it is perhaps inappropriate to call it an organization. Nevertheless, structured umbrella coalitions, networks and caucuses are all handled in the same way by governments. In the UN system, all transnational actors have to accept the label "NGO", in order to participate. They may be present under the label of the coalition or of its constituents or through both routes. Umbrella INGOs have consultative status and networks usually are listed, but caucuses rarely have any formal recognition. Coalitions that focus on policy outcomes in a particular country or a particular intergovernmental organization will tend to take the form of an umbrella organization. Coalitions that focus on issues tend to take the form of a network or a caucus, with different members being active in different policy forums.

In global environmental politics, there is a unique set of caucuses – the system of "Major Groups". The term was adopted at the Earth Summit, when *Agenda 21* devoted one of its four sections to "Strengthening the Role of Major Groups". The preamble argued that "one of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making" and this must be done as a "real social partnership" with "individuals, groups and organizations". The aim was for the UN to move beyond the traditional reliance on the established NGOs, in two ways. Communication must reach down to individuals at the level of local communities and particular sectors of society of importance for the environment must be mobilized. The section devoted separate chapters to nine Major Groups, under the following headings.

- Global action for women towards sustainable and equitable development
- Children and youth in sustainable development
- Recognising and strengthening the role of indigenous people and their communities
- Strengthening the role of non-governmental organizations: partners for sustainable development
- Local authorities' initiatives in support of *Agenda 21*
- Strengthening the role of workers and their trade unions
- Strengthening the role of business and industry
- Scientific and technological community
- Strengthening the role of farmers.

The choice of these nine groups was the arbitrary and incoherent outcome of negotiations at UNCED. It was influenced by the personal concerns of Maurice Strong and by the lobbying of NGOs who were accredited to the conference. It is arbitrary to single out women but not men; the young but not the elderly; indigenous people but not other minorities; unions but not professional associations; business and industry but not commerce, finance and services; natural scientists but not social scientists; and farmers but not fishing communities. It is anomalous, but understandable, to emphasize one level of government, local authorities, when they have responsibility for all the Major Groups. Above all it is incoherent to have NGOs as one of the Major Groups, when *all* the other eight (including associations of local authorities) are represented in the UN system via the ECOSOC "arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations". This incoherence arises because many in the other Major Groups did not wish to be labeled as NGOs and there had to be a category to encompass environment and development NGOs.

In the Commission on Sustainable Development set up after the Earth Summit, special arrangements were made to allow for participation by all the new groups that had engaged with the UN for the first time at Rio. Any NGO that had been accredited for UNCED was allowed to apply for Roster NGO status at sessions of the CSD and later was given a special fast-track procedure for gaining full status with ECOSOC. Although the CSD is constitutionally a standard subsidiary body of ECOSOC, it has developed its own procedures for relating to NGOs. Rather than each NGO attempting to exercise its participation rights separately, the NGOs are organized into the nine Major Groups from *Agenda 21*. These categories are used both by the NGOs in their own caucusing and in the formal proceedings. In addition, the CSD has gone beyond the normal consultative arrangements to hold various types of formal, and informal, panels and seminars. Notably, each of the annual sessions starts with the appropriate Major Groups making presentations in special "stakeholder dialogues" on the different substantive agenda items for that year. In

pragmatic terms, the illogicality of having NGOs as one of the nine groups of NGOs serves a useful function, in enabling any organization that does not fit elsewhere to be included. This Major Groups system has only operated in the CSD and in other processes that have been derived from UNCED.

### **The Geographical Spread of NGOs**

It used to be widely argued that NGOs were predominantly a feature of Western societies. This false proposition was derived from a mixture of ignorance, Western presumptions of their superiority in the Cold War and nationalist rhetoric from authoritarian regimes. All societies in modern times have had large numbers of NGOs at least at the local level. Under the most authoritarian regimes or in the least developed countries there are still self-help co-operative groups, community welfare associations, religious groups, professional and scientific associations, sports and recreational bodies, etc. Even Romania during the dictatorship of President Ceaucescu was host to the International Federation of Beekeepers' Associations. The presence or absence of a democratic political culture is one of the major variables determining the number of NGOs, but the size of a country, its ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, the complexity of its economy and the quality of its communication infrastructure are also of crucial importance. Thus there are tens of thousands of NGOs in countries such as Bangladesh and India, while there are relatively few in Iceland or Finland.

A particular source of controversy is the idea that the major NGOs are "Northern". Many people are still trapped by the mental prejudice that organizations have to be situated in geographical space. It might be a practical necessity for an international NGO to have a headquarters office in a particular building, but the location of the office in a North American or a European city does not convert a global NGO into a Northern NGO. Equally, the historical origins of an organization being formed in a particular country does not mean it is currently a Northern rather than a global organization. The proper criteria for assessment whether an organization is global are the location of its membership, the staffing of its headquarters, the sources of its funding and the content of its programs. An organization, such as Amnesty International, with 56 National Sections, groups in some 40 other countries, an International Secretariat from over 50 countries and an African Secretary-General is a global NGO, even if it started in Britain and has its headquarters in London. Due to the spread of democracy and the improvements in communications, many international NGOs that started in individual countries became global at the end of the twentieth century.

### **Types of NGO Activities**

Much as observers wish to gain greater understanding by defining different categories of NGOs, it is not possible to do so. We may distinguish different activities, but specific NGOs will often change the balance of the activities they pursue. The most common distinction is between operational and campaigning NGOs. This may be interpreted as the choice between small-scale change achieved directly through projects and large-scale change promoted indirectly through influence on the political system.

Operational NGOs have to mobilize resources, in the form of financial donations, materials or volunteer labor, in order to sustain their projects and programs. This process may require quite complex organization. Charity shops, staffed by volunteers, in premises provided at nominal rents and selling donated goods, end up providing finance to the national headquarters. Students in their vacations or during a break in their education provide labor for projects. Finance obtained from grants or contracts, from governments, foundations or companies, require time and expertise spent on planning, preparing applications, budgeting, accounting and reporting. Major fund-raising events require skills in advertising, media relations and motivating supporters. Thus, operational NGOs need to possess an efficient headquarters bureaucracy, in addition to the operational staff in the field. Campaigning NGOs will carry out much the same functions, but with a different balance between them. Fund-raising is still necessary, but on a smaller scale and it can serve the symbolic function of strengthening the donors' identification with the cause. Persuading people to donate their time is necessary, but, in addition to a small number of people giving a great deal of time, it is also necessary to be able to mobilize large numbers for brief periods. External donors may not impose onerous administrative burdens, but supporters still have to be supplied with information on an efficient regular basis. Major events will aim to attract favorable publicity rather than raise funds.

Therefore, despite their differences, both operational and campaigning NGOs need to engage in fund-raising, mobilization of work by supporters, organizing special events, cultivating the media and administering a headquarters. Only the defining activities – implementing projects or holding demonstrations – serve to differentiate them. In reality, the distinctions are not as sharp as the labels suggest. Operational NGOs often move into campaigning when projects regularly face similar problems and

the impact of the projects seems to be insufficient. All the large development and environment operational NGOs now run some regular campaigns, at least by supporting campaigning networks. Similarly, campaigning NGOs often feel they cannot ignore the immediate practical problems of people in their policy domain. Human rights NGOs and women's NGOs end up having programs to assist the victims of discrimination and injustice.

Various other types of NGOs can be regarded as promoting change by variants on these two primary functions. Research institutes have special forms of operational programs, in which the goal is to increase knowledge and understanding. They range across a spectrum from those promoting an academic, non-political image to those collating and disseminating information for campaigning purposes. Professional bodies, trade unions, recreational groups and associations of companies provide program activities required by and for their members, but they may also campaign to enhance the economic interests and the status of their organizations. These categories and several others have some practical value for everyday discourse, but they do not provide the basis for an analytical classification of NGOs.

The most effective way to distinguish between NGOs is to obtain precise data on a range of different variables. The number of full-time employees, the number of members and the funding of the annual budget give measures of the size of any NGO. Opinion poll data on recognition of and support for an NGO or its goals, along with the frequency of positive mentions in the news media, give measures of its political strength. There are also more subjective variables, such as the professional skill, knowledge and experience of the personnel, that matter for both operational and campaigning purposes.

### **NGOs, Social Movements and Civil Society**

Among some political activists, there is a tendency to see organizations, particularly hierarchical organizations, as conservative and oppressive. As a result NGOs may be seen as part of the established order. This view is enhanced by the fact that prominent NGOs may have a long history, complex structures, technical literature and a leadership who engage more with global politics than with their members or supporters. Thus at times NGOs are contrasted with the 'new social movements'. These can be portrayed as dynamic, innovative and non-hierarchical. The idea of a movement simultaneously invokes two dissimilar ideas: the political impact of mass action, by very large numbers of people, and the role of the individual person, independently making his/her own voice heard. The oldest example is the labor movement, going back to the nineteenth century. Since the 1960s, there have been references to the new social movements, such as those for peace, women's rights, development, the environment and anti-racism. They were 'new', partly because they were not based on class divisions and partly because new methods of mass mobilization became possible. In December 1999, a higher level of aggregation, into a diffuse and incoherent coalition, was recognized as the anti-globalization movement, when mass demonstrations disrupted the Seattle Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization. In practice, the conservative/radical contrast between NGOs and social movements cannot be sustained. There are both conservative and radical NGOs and many other shades of political opinion along the spectrum. There are some writers, including some academics, who refer to 'progressive' social movements, as if all social movements were progressive. This ignores the existence of reactionary social movements, such as neo-fascists and racists, who cannot be distinguished from other movements by any objective criteria.

Furthermore, NGOs should not be contrasted with social movements, because NGOs are *essential* components of social movements. If an idea is to catch the imagination of people, it has to be articulated by leaders through speeches, pamphlets or visual images. If the idea is going to reach large numbers of people, resources have to be mobilized and allocated to communication processes. If demonstrations are to occur, they have to be organized. If a movement is to achieve change, priorities have to be selected and targets designated. If a protest lasts more than a few days to become a movement, existing organizations or new organizations will provide the skeleton that transforms an amorphous mass into a strong body. This is not to say that social movements are composed solely of NGOs. A social movement consists of a range of organizations who collaborate for some common purpose that is sufficiently compelling to generate a sense of collective identity, *along with* all the people, within and outside the organizations, who identify with the common goals and the collective identity. Thus, a social movement is more than a coalition of NGOs and less than society as a whole.

In the 1990s, four mutually-reinforcing processes of change led to emphasis on the concept of civil society. There was an explosion in global communication facilities; the new forms of private association, from transnational community organizations to networks and caucuses, were recognized; the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and military regimes in developing countries promoted participation

in the new democratic systems; and the major UN conferences produced an unprecedented scale of global public engagement with intergovernmental events. In addition, the secretariats of the UN and other intergovernmental organizations sought to overcome the crises generated by the unilateralism of United States administrations and the failure of Congress to deliver US financial obligations, by appealing to global civil society as a source of legitimacy for international co-operation.

The simplest, most common, meaning given to "civil society" is all public activity, by any individuals, organizations or movements, other than government employees acting in a governmental capacity. In the broadest sense, it encompasses all social, economic, cultural and political relations, but the emphasis is usually on the political aspects of these relations. Thus, it can be used in reference to any level from the local to the country as a whole, or even global interactions. It also clearly goes beyond traditional NGOs to all forms of networks, caucuses and movements. As a result, it serves as a political tool for all those who want to promote innovative, wider and deeper levels of political participation.

Unfortunately, civil society is also imbued with contradictory and contested meanings. In contrast with the paucity of civil society activities in former authoritarian regimes, it is sometimes implied that civil society is in opposition to government. However, academics who adopt the "critical theory" approach of Habermas take the opposite view. They see civil society as integrated with the state in maintaining bourgeois hegemony in capitalist societies. This approach is virtually unknown outside non-academic circles. A second confusion is whether civil society includes or excludes the economic activities. For some, civil society encompasses everything except government, but for others there are three quite separate realms: government, civil society and the economy. On the basis of the former assumption, the United Nations used the term civil society to express its desire to strengthen its relations with both companies and NGOs. The result was furious protests from those NGOs who blame companies for social exploitation, poverty and environmental degradation. In particular, they were most upset to find the UN website providing links to its relations with both business and NGOs from a single civil society web page. (The protests did lead to the UN adopting a wording that separated business from civil society.) Lastly, as with several other terms, some people wish to see civil society solely in a positive light and exclude actors of whom they disapprove. Not only criminals and drug dealers, but also "reactionary" NGOs, are occasionally referred to as "uncivil society". Despite these various problems, civil society is a useful way of going beyond the traditional NGOs and referring to all the ways in which diverse non-governmental actors are mobilized. Nevertheless, it is necessary to be explicit on whether economic actors are being included or not.

## **In Conclusion**

The discussion so far might appear to imply that all NGOs are politically active. This is obviously not the case, irrespective of the political situation or the issue under consideration. At any specific point in time, an NGO may have little contact with those who are not members. On the other hand, a change in society that is salient to the group can motivate an introspective NGO to engage in sustained political action. It is certainly not true that all NGOs are active in global politics. It is not even true that all NGOs attempt to influence politics at the country level, in the narrow sense of direct engagement in the debate over public policy. However, politics may also be seen, more broadly, as the process by which any set of people reaches a collective decision. This means that attempts by an NGO to mobilize individuals and change their personal behavior, to win support from a religious group or a trade union, or to articulate their values in the news media are all forms of political action. Legal systems may classify raising money for purposes such as poverty alleviation, disaster relief or environmental conservation as non-political, but the legal distinction between charitable and political activity is always based on an arbitrary, illogical and controversial definition of politics. Many NGOs will not see themselves as engaging directly in public policy, but their activities are always a social expression of values. Hence, NGOs are very likely to be political in the broadest sense of affecting social discourse and can often have an indirect effect on politics in the narrow sense of shaping public policy.

The point of this debate about terminology is to emphasize that NGOs are not just well-meaning, uncontroversial, non-political groups. Furthermore, there is no difference between the role of NGOs in domestic and in global politics. At both levels, they are diverse, controversial and of major political significance. The impact of a particular NGO may vary across time and place, and from one issue to another, but collectively NGOs generate the dynamics of political change. We have seen that there is often an assumption that NGOs are operating for the general public good or even that they are "progressive". However, there is such diversity to the values advocated by different NGOs that they oppose each other, as well as putting pressure on governments and companies. Many women's NGOs oppose religious NGOs on questions of sexual and reproductive behavior. Hunters, farmers and fishing communities oppose animal

rights groups. Environmental and development NGOs have different perspectives on sustainable development from each other. Many radical NGOs are hostile to reformist NGOs who accept incremental change. It is not logically possible for anybody to support all NGOs nor indeed to be hostile to all NGOs.

Many government leaders express quite hostile attitudes to NGOs, even in some democratic societies. In as much as this is a general sentiment, it is irrational. There are particular factors that explain the irrationality. Firstly, the increased impact of NGOs has caused resentment among those whom they criticize. Secondly, the claim by some NGOs that they are the "voice of the people" and hence have greater legitimacy than governments is deeply offensive to government officials. As they are quick to point out, it is also a ludicrous claim. Thirdly, the violence and the extreme revolutionary and/or nihilistic attitudes associated with some of the participants in a series of anti-globalization demonstrations, starting at Seattle in 1999, diminished the status of the other NGOs at the demonstrations. In some circles, there was even a generalized negative impact upon NGOs from the terrorist attacks upon New York and Washington in September 2001. Nevertheless, virtually all government leaders, in both domestic and global politics, including those who have expressed hostility, will work with NGOs when they expect the most active NGOs to be allies, in support of their current political goals.

There is often confusion about the role of NGOs in democratic political processes. Denial of their democratic legitimacy arises when democracy is simply reduced to the right to take part in governmental decision-making. Clearly, on this limited basis, NGOs cannot claim a greater legitimacy than elected governments. Many NGOs themselves do not have democratic procedures within their own organizations and many only represent a small number of people. Even the minority of NGOs that elect their leaders, have conferences to decide their policies and have millions of members, still have no basis to claim a right to take decisions on behalf of society as a whole. These arguments were obscured in the 1970s and 1980s when many NGOs significantly expanded their membership and their activities. In this period, more governments were authoritarian than democratic. Under regimes that are communist, feudal, fascist, military dictatorships or corrupt oligarchies it might be reasonable to claim NGOs are more representative of society as a whole, but such regimes have become the exception in a world of democracies from the 1990s onwards.

However, a wider view of democracy totally legitimizes the role of NGOs. Democracy is not just the holding of elections every four or five years. It is also the continuous process of debate, in which the legislature, the political parties, the media and society as a whole put questions on the political agenda, formulate alternative policy proposals and criticize the policy of the government. On this basis, any NGO has a right to participate, however large or small and however representative or unrepresentative of a particular sector of society it may be. Indeed, in both domestic and global politics, policy-making could not be democratic without the active participation of NGOs. Nevertheless, their legitimate role in sustaining an independent civil society does not give them any right to supplant the role of governments.