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International NGOs

International NGOs (the abbreviation for nongovernmental organizations) have emerged as major players on the international scene over the past two decades. Current estimates put the number of NGOs that work internationally at over 50,000. They come in all shapes and sizes but two major categories (which overlap) are advocacy and operational. Advocacy focused groups address many social justice issues, for example global integrity, rights of indigenous peoples, and gender rights. The more operationally focused group work on a vast array of activities, ranging from HIV/AIDS programs, education, global health, and protecting the environment. NGOs with a religious character are often termed faith-based organizations (FBOs) or faith-inspired organizations (FIOs), the latter defined to capture a wider group of organizations. FIOs also are advocates and service providers. This entry highlights definitional issues, the path of their evolution, key roles played by international NGOs, with a particular focus on FIOs, and some debates that surround them.

Contending definitions highlight this topic's complexity. A vast literature exists about civil society and the multitude of institutions involved. "NGO" highlights what NGOs are not: above all government; "organization" suggests that they have some form of legal foundation. "International" highlights their transnational roles. Other commonly used terms include CSOs: Civil Society Organizations, highlighting, by stressing civil society, their civic, social purposes and citizen roles in their creation and management; PVO: private voluntary organization, a term often used by the United States government, highlights the significance of voluntary engagement and of volunteers; and Not-for-profit organizations, underscores a broad financial character distinct from private business. Each of these definitions has drawbacks but they underscore the great variety of organizations and their capacity for innovation and adaptation to differing circumstances and purposes.

Definitional debates also feature for FIOs, some similar to those around secular civic organizations and others more specifically tied to the link to religion. The fundamental question of how FIOs differ from other NGOs (is there some kind of "faith DNA"?) is much debated. Many FIOs function much like other NGOs, while others present their religious dimensions in more overt, leading role, including evangelizing as an intrinsic goal. Relationships between FIOs and religious organizations vary, from organizations formally linked to a specific religious body (Lutheran World Service), international interfaith organizations that bring together different faith traditions, less formally affiliated organizations (like Habitat for Humanity International), to organizations that look more like federations or movements. By some measures and definitions, religion is itself a non-governmental organization; the terms FBO and FIO highlight that some more organized, generally legally constituted entity is involved; albeit in very different ways, faith or religious beliefs are intrinsic to the organizations' inspiration and character.

Private organizations whose primary purposes are social, not business, have existed for centuries but the explosion in numbers and activities of international NGOs dates from the post-World War II period. An important marker is explicit recognition of civil society organizations in the UN Charter. Important antecedents were the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movements

and networks that mobilized and integrated anti-slavery and women's rights campaigns. Globalization has contributed to NGO growth, with information technologies propelling new international links, but NGOs also are factors in globalization trends. The quantitative dimensions of what is a revolutionary increase in the numbers of organizations are difficult to pin down, in part because of disputed definitions, but also because the diversity of organizations makes counting problematic. As an indicator, some 3500 CSO/NGOs are accredited formally to the United Nations. This stands in contrast to the related but different numbers of national CSOs/NGOs: the United States counts 2 million in this category, India 1.2 million.

Relationships among governments and international organizations, private companies, churches and religious bodies, and international NGOs take us to the heart of what NGOs are, and are not, about. The UN website definition is telling: "The United Nations is both a participant in and a witness to an increasingly global civil society." But beyond general appreciation that organizations without formal government links bind societies and carry many social and cultural functions, clarity breaks down. Most international NGOs do not rely exclusively on volunteers; many in practice receive substantial funding from governments and private companies. While profit motivation is rarely an explicit NGO purpose, many (notably microfinance and "patient capital" organizations) see business principles and private sector disciplines as drivers of both creativity and efficiency. Partnerships linking many different types of organizations are promoted actively, bridging traditional or notional divides among sectors. An array of often tongue in cheek nicknames for different NGO types highlights the complexity of relationships: GONGOs are "government organized NGOs"; QUANGOS "quasi government NGOS, BINGOs "big NGOs" and DANGOS "donor organized NGOs". The list can and does go on indefinitely. In short, relationships take every imaginable form.

NGOs are part of the accepted international scene, increasingly present at the places where global issues are discussed. That said, their roles and perceptions about them vary quite widely. Civil society is seen rather differently in Europe than in North America. Asia, Latin America, and Africa are seeing rapid changes in NGO roles and considerable controversy around how far governments can and should be regulated them. International NGOs can be a blessing, bringing resources, creativity, and, often, a flexibility to respond more quickly and creatively than governments. But their legitimacy and the core questions - who do they represent and who are they accountable to - are often present, explicitly or in underlying, often unspoken attitudes.

International NGOS have important strengths and assets. Most significant may be in ensuring that poor and marginalized people, the stakeholders, are indeed heard and represented in policy decisions. NGOs can be more agile than governments, and more altruistic than most businesses. They play roles in promoting public sector accountability, transparency, and participatory approaches that aim to empower local people. International NGOs can help break down the barriers of national borders. Sometimes (not always) international NGOs offer less costly operations. They play critical roles where governments are weak or failing, stepping into the breaches of missing services. FIOs play particularly critical roles, with often deep roots in communities, high trust from people, and capacity to mobilize voluntary efforts a wide range of people.

Less positive views on international NGOs include an image of “self appointed altruists” whose voice far exceeds both the merits of arguments and their right to represent, for example, the wishes and interests of the poor communities. The balance of power and resources between “northern NGOs”, that is, NGOs largely fueled by citizens in richer nations, are contrasted with “southern NGOs”, which often see themselves as shoved aside when resources and decisions are at issue. Some international NGOs are seen as motivated as much by a quest for contracts as by the welfare of the people they claim to represent.

The leading issue for international NGOs is accountability. It is the topic of active work, as all concerned, the NGOs themselves and those who support them, recognize the need for clear mechanisms to judge results and especially for financial accountability. Some international NGOs have world class management and accounting standards but that is by no means universal. Another issue is the fragmentation that is to an extent in the nature of civil society organizations. At issue is how far their contributions “add up” to lasting and equitable change.

Major international NGOs are household words: CARE, born after World War II to distribute “care packages” to war weary Europe, is a prime example, as are Medicins Sans Frontiers, Human Rights Watch, World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, the Salvation Army, Islamic Relief, and Save the Children. After the 2004 tsunami devastated parts of Asia and the 2010 Haiti earthquake struck, NGOs were at the forefront of the humanitarian effort. Many are stalwart participants in every facet of international development and advocacy, arguing for increased aid and debt relief and providing on-the-ground support for orphans, housing construction, and women’s empowerment. But these well known entities represent the tip of the iceberg of the array of organizations working across borders, engaging citizens in global issues, and linking compassion and caring with today’s rich understanding of the obligations of global citizenship.

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Further Readings

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