

# NGOs: Somewhere between Compassion, Profitability and Solidarity

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*After more than four decades of existence,  
the varied NGO world is caught in deep contradictions.  
If the North's NGOs are genuinely seeking ways  
to help overcome the poverty in the South,  
they have yet to find many answers.*

The development NGOs from the countries of the North are performing an increasingly important role in the international system. They handled nearly US\$6 billion in 1998, over 10% of all development aid circulating in the world. The term NGO, or nongovernmental organization, covers a wide variety of institutions. At one end of the spectrum are the myriad small neighborhood associations in different cities of the North, each pulled together by a single individual in direct contact with some project in the South or East needing financing. At the other are huge enterprises like *Plan International*, which administers some US\$300 million annually and employs thousands of people.

## **Brief history of this broad spectrum**

We are using the term development NGO here to refer especially to institutions of a certain size. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has on record some four thousand registered NGOs in the European countries, which does not cover the tens of thousands of small local associations. These registered NGOs do fundraising among the population but also receive contributions from their respective government. They thus have the possibility of influencing their government's positions, but can also be a target of its influences.

Even schematized, the NGO universe is extremely heterogeneous. It is worth looking back at the origins of NGOs, relocating them in their national contexts to get a better understanding of what they have at stake, the challenges they have to assume.

Apart from the Red Cross and Caritas, movements that arose at the end of the 19th century and have only recently begun to be called NGOs, many of these institutions were founded after the two world wars. They were frequently born of compassion for the victims of those wars, to whom they sought to provide direct material assistance such as food or clothing. Other NGOs of a trade-union origin and motivated by political solidarity with the Spanish Republic, were founded in the Scandinavian countries and Switzerland in 1936 and are still active today.

In the 1960s, decolonization in Africa brought about the first mutation of these institutions, creating a new generation. The slogan of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization—*Give them a fish and they will eat for a day; teach them to fish and they will eat all their life*—opened new doors of thinking: go to the causes of poverty, not its consequences. Solidarity with the new nations of the South and with national liberation movements marked this period; change and social justice were the banners they carried. The Christian churches readjusted their strictly missionary approach as best they could. The states of the North sent volunteers and technical experts and later set up ministries of development cooperation. The governments in the Germanic and Nordic countries and in Holland fostered the creation of private institutions and put burgeoning

amounts of funds at their disposal. Churches, unions and non-confessional groups re-tooled their NGOs or created new ones to channel this new flow of financial resources.

During the 1970s and 80s, the South was marked by the growing impact of East-West polarization. Vietnam's victory against the United States in 1975 and armed conflicts in Angola, Palestine and elsewhere led certain European NGOs to take on tasks of informal diplomacy. They served as mediators and intervened, sometimes together with and sometimes parallel to European Social Democratic solidarity movements and governments. Their support to local actors played a not insignificant role in the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the dictatorships of Ferdinand Marcos and Augusto Pinochet in the Philippines and Chile. They participated in the current of Western solidarity that descended on Sandinista Nicaragua in the form of multiple projects, making a significant contribution to neutralizing the effects of the US economic and political blockade. They also played a significant role in the other Central American countries in conflict and contributed to their transition to democracy.

This was a period in which major social mobilizations in Europe raised the banner of gender equity, environmental protection and the defense of human rights. Although the development NGOs participated only modestly in these movements, they would soon become very active in addressing those themes in the huge international conferences of the 1990s. The problematic of women, of sustainable development and of human rights today figure in any respectable development program, whether governmental or nongovernmental. It is to the NGOs' credit that they took up these issues and introduced them into the international community's agenda and discourse.

### **Burning questions in the global era**

The NGOs also experienced spectacular growth in the recognition of their work in the 1970s and 80s, which in turn led to greater influence. The European governmental cooperation agencies saw them as the ideal agents for sensitizing public opinion about the North-South problematic, particularly in schools. In the mid-80s, just as the development models were beginning to be questioned, the World Bank discovered that the NGOs were close to the poor and were less onerous and corrupt and more effective than the traditional government channels. The NGOs of the North effectively channeled financing to the local NGOs of the South, which were also experiencing impressive growth and multiplication, not to mention extreme dependence on external aid. At a time when the neoliberal catechism known as the "Washington consensus" was waxing victorious with cookie-cutter recipes for "development," the NGOs frequently filled in for the social functions of the states, which were being dismantled by those very recipes. The NGOs that maintained a critical discourse about the system and continued analyzing the causes of poverty found it ever harder to respond to a number of pressing questions in the real world of practice. To what degree are NGO actions only a safety net to complement the structural adjustment measures being implemented by the Washington-based Bretton Woods institutions? What possibility is there that their actions at a local level could represent a challenge, or possibly even an alternative, to the dominant model? How can they multiply any such innovative local approaches so that they not remain a mere speck in the neoliberal sea? How can they go about influencing the regional or national policies that so often undermine the progress NGOs are making locally?

### **"Humanitarian aid" fever**

Parallel to these new roles in development cooperation, the massive intrusion of a new market for "humanitarian aid" starting with the starvation in Ethiopia in 1984 strongly influenced numerous institutions. It was only logical: the results and the media impact of distributing food rations in refugee camps are easier to measure than the transformation of

perceptions of power that take place in a group of poor women who have not been victims of any catastrophe. Many institutions threw themselves into humanitarian aid more through opportunism than conviction.

The approach in the humanitarian sphere is obviously very different from the development approach. In fact, it is contradictory. Humanitarian assistance requires rapid intervention, in most cases by those providing the aid, while cooperation for development is slow and requires listening to the counterparts' needs and then accompanying them. More serious still is that the major media's communication model for humanitarian intervention in the South leads NGOs to boil their discourse down to 30-second sound bites, simplifying and even caricaturing the image transmitted about the populations of an area that represents the majority of the planet's geography. The NGOs that have expanded the fastest in the past couple of decades and are today veritable transnational enterprises have based their fundraising on humanitarian aspects and especially on the mechanism of adopting children. For a modest monthly sum, which varies according to the spending power in the donor country, one can "save" a child and sometimes even establish direct contact with the fortunate chosen one. This paternalistic method is not only questionable, but can lead to conflicts in families and communities among those with "godparents" and those without. It further transmits a simplistic and false image of poverty, what causes it and how to combat it.

### **In search of identity**

In the 1990s, the development NGOs were subjected to new tensions. The governmental agencies that had included certain NGO approaches and methods in their own activities in the 80s were no longer so sure that the NGOs represented a panacea for development. Many studies were done that could not clearly demonstrate that the NGOs were as close to the poor or were as effective as they were made out to be. Given their budget cuts and criticisms of the public assistance system, governments posed increasing requirements on the NGOs: more professional management, greater resource concentration and exact measurements of their results and impact.

This new situation has led numerous NGOs to undertake a complex rethinking of their guiding vision, their strategies, objectives and planning models, taking their inspiration from the private sector. Despite many well-oriented efforts, however, tensions keep cropping up between their institutional imperatives—increasing their apparatus in the search for immediate results—and their development imperatives—to create a deep and lasting impact. To this dilemma is added the problem of identity, responsibility and legitimacy. If the development NGOs were often very active among the people at the beginning, after many years a lot of them turned to modern fundraising and technical marketing methods, and dedicated major efforts to influencing policy and channeling governmental funds. This has often been detrimental to their original associative base, which, it must be added, is getting old and worn out.

Reality has changed a lot. The NGOs work for their beneficiaries, the poor in the countries of the South, with money provided by major donors and individual contributions from the people of the North to whom they must be accountable. The donations market is increasingly commercial and emotional and decreasingly marked by dedication and solidarity. The growing competition for government funds—whose only growth factor is the number of strings attached—absorbs the institutions' essential energies at the cost of reflection and action that consider the long-term future. The only notable exceptions to this drift are certain institutions linked to churches, which every chance they get are doing important consciousness-raising work in their parishes around myriad micro-projects sprinkled throughout the three continents of the South. This single-project focus, criticized for years by the cooperation-for-development crowd, in fact responds to an important need

of the institutions of the North: it chops the South's reality up into numerous simplified microcosms that a parish or neighborhood group can relate to. It's like a picture postcard project: a reality is described and illustrated, people intervene, and at the end they can see the result of their material aid (a clinic, a school, a well...). The upshot of these actions is a clear contribution to poverty reduction, but it is equally clear that these projects only sporadically—if then—go to the deeper causes of the poverty. Despite this limited long-term structural impact, many churches consider that their activities are important because they focus on bearing witness and sharing or interchanging.

The North's NGOs also reflect very diverse situations in their relations with their respective government and society. Very schematically, the Anglo-Saxon model can be juxtaposed to the Nordic model, with all the possible nuances within each one.

In the Anglo-Saxon countries, charity, philanthropy or altruism have since the 19th century been considered a mainly individual responsibility, which, of course, naturally corresponds to people who have both the means and the desire. Important income tax deductions stimulate these private donations. And the principle according to which those who pay the piper get to pick the tune remains the general rule. The NGOs of this area of the world are caught in the dilemma of choosing between maintaining their independence at the cost of suffering shortages of almost everything or getting government funds and submitting to, or at least adjusting themselves to, official policies.

In the Nordic countries, on the other hand, the corporatist tradition means that civil institutions—churches, unions, associations—have long since been involved in state mechanisms. This is also true of Holland, Germany and Switzerland. The development NGOs depend significantly on governmental funds in all these countries, without it implying a loss of their identity.

In the Latin countries, particularly France and Spain, the weight of the colonial past makes their cooperation a more direct instrument for the defense of their economic and political interests. NGOs have remained on the fringes of the official aid system for a long time and have not experienced the growth and influence of those from the other European OECD countries. If the US and Scandinavian NGOs are frequently heavily dependent on government funds, the implications of this dependence vary considerably from one country to the next.

### **Spectacular actions and networks**

All the national models of development NGOs were deeply shaken in the mid-eighties by truly transnational NGOs that no longer propose global approaches such as the fight against poverty, but organize spectacular and original actions around specifically defined themes. Such is the case of Amnesty International in the human rights sphere and of Greenpeace in the ecology sphere, both of them unquestionably the two best known institutions in the media that are also independent of government financing.

In recent years, campaigns in the form of networks centered on a particular objective have also had growing success, thanks to new electronic communications media. The campaign developed at the end of the seventies to promote breast-feeding and challenge the sales policies of the multinational baby formula companies can be seen as a forerunner of these networks, as can the world campaign against the construction of mega-dams.

At the end of the nineties this type of campaign has been conducted with ever greater celerity, achieving notable successes, including the campaigns against anti-personnel mines and the Multilateral Investment Agreement or in favor of a moratorium on World Trade Organization agreements and abolition of the foreign debt for the countries of the South... Save some notable exceptions—Oxfam in particular—the development NGOs have maintained a very discreet presence in these campaigns and movements, or even remained on the sidelines. More interested in conserving their donors than mobilizing the citizenry,

they have chosen to avoid the risk of irritating or hurting those who provide them public funds.

### **The challenge to retake the initiative**

The main international institutions are taking a fresh look at the evidence and acknowledging that economic freedom, or economic development in freedom, does not in and of itself presuppose either social justice or poverty reduction. They are recognizing that the neoliberal development model applied over the past 15 years has only widened the abyss between rich and poor. Good administration of the state—which the Western countries loudly demanded of the South's countries following the fall of the Berlin wall—should logically go hand in hand with good administration of the private economy: control of child labor, regularization of the speculative financial markets and respect for all human rights, including the right to health and education, not limiting human rights to the civil and political spheres.

Treated with great pomp, but in isolation, social development will continue to be a palliative—or a safety net—instead of a sustainable effort to deal with the causes of poverty. Even getting the countries of the North to dedicate 0.7% of the GDP to development cooperation will never accomplish the aim of development. Lack of social development is not isolated from the other arenas of society, a bubble that can be popped with billions more. Development NGOs today have the opportunity to retake the initiative on themes in which they have acquired ample experience and around which they have woven a dense fabric of contacts in numerous countries. They have the opportunity to renew their work with the spirit of the solidarity movements from which many of them sprang some forty years ago, years in which they reflected on the essential options for combatting poverty, and the political decisions and social changes that this fight requires.

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