

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Summary

The term, “nongovernmental 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, not for profit, and noncriminal.

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 grassroots 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.

1. Introduction

The term nongovernmental organization or NGO was not in general currency before the UN was formed. When 132 international NGOs decided to cooperate 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 cooperation 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 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 “nongovernmental 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 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 not for profit; and it will be not be a criminal group, in particular it will be nonviolent. 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.

2. NGOs, Interest Groups, Pressure Groups, Lobbies, and Private Voluntary Organizations

In the 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 put 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 “nongovernmental 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 catchall 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 nongovernmental 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.

3. 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 counter the assumption that

international relations were the same as interstate 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. First, it excludes all NGO activity that is confined to a single country. Second, it includes all the other nongovernmental 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.

4. 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 reassess 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.

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Biographical Sketch

Peter Willetts has a personal chair as a Professor of Global Politics at City University, London. He has written two books on the Non-Aligned Movement, two books on NGOs, and many articles or book chapters both on NGOs and on aspects of the UN system. In 2000, he was funded for two years by the UK Department for International Development to study what procedures might provide formal participation rights for NGOs at the IMF and the WTO.