

# NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

A new actor has emerged on the international stage, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) are increasingly making their presence felt. A decade ago, NGOs were fairly peripheral to major international diplomacy. Today, however, NGOs participate actively in various political, economical and social matters. NGOs work on their own, in conjunction with individual governments or with international organizations. As former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and other UN officials have noted, the involvement of NGOs in making decisions on the environment, sustainable development, human rights and women have increased the legitimacy and transparency of intergovernmental deliberations.

NGOs come in all sizes, shapes, ideologies, nationalities, organizing structures and styles. Some focus on nothing but local issues. Others, address issues that span whole continents, and some like Amnesty International span the entire globe. Their very diversity reflects the complexity of these organizations. NGOs encompass everything from charities and relief agencies to political parties; think tanks and academic centers to community organizations; cultural associations to continent wide farmers' networks; women's groups to environmental federations; social movements to human rights and religious groups.

NGOs are usually formed among private groups of individuals sharing specialized interests in regards to issues that can be local, national or international. While a few such organizations had existed from the early beginnings of the nation-state, they were to proliferate in the transnational era and increased even more dramatically after World War II. This change can be attributed to technological developments, industrialization, and urbanization. Further still these factors are likely to continue to make the presence of NGOs felt in global arena.

The industrialized democracies in recent years have accounted for well over half of all memberships in international NGOs, and have been headquarters for almost 90 percent of all these organizations. For example, the term NGOs is used to refer to such organizations as the International Red Cross, Oxfam, Care, Amnesty International, International Chamber of Commerce, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, International Criminal Police Organization, Salvation Army, World Federation of United Nations Associations, etc. Hundreds of NGOs are permitted direct involvement in the activities of several UN agencies. Their tasks involve sharing information and advancing proposals as part of a web of governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental efforts aimed at global problem solving. NGOs, then, are an indispensable organ of international importance.

## India & NGOs

India has a long tradition of social service, social reform and voluntary agencies. NGOs emerged in India soon after Independence when Mahamata Gandhi made a plea for dissolving the Indian National Congress (the political party which came into power upon Independence), and transforming it into a Lok Sevak Sangh (Public Service Organization). This plea was, however, rejected; nevertheless, it did not halt the formation of non-governmental organizations in India. Many Gandhi followers established voluntary agencies to work closely with the governmental programs on social and economical issues. These agencies organized handicrafts and village industries, rural development programs, credit cooperatives, educational institutions, etc.

The second stage of growth of NGOs in India was around 1960 when many individuals noticed that the governmental programs seemed to be inadequate to deal with the deprived sections of India. These groups formed organizations that worked on behalf of the poor, the landless, the tribals, the bonded labourers, and many other social groups that were being discriminated against by the policies of the state and social structure. These grass roots organizations work at the micro-level and work with limited resources and lack of coordination.

Since Independence in 1947 until around 1980 there was little effort on the part of the Indian Government to define the role of a voluntary agency or to recognize its importance. In 1980, however, with the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-1985), the government identified new areas in which NGOs as new actors could participate in development. These areas included:

Optimal utilization and development of renewable source of energy, including forestry through the formation of renewable energy association at the block level

Family welfare, health and nutrition, education and relevant community programs in the field

Health for all programs

Water management and soil conservation

Social welfare programs for weaker sections

Implementation of minimum needs program

Disaster preparedness and management (i.e. for floods, cyclones, etc)

Promotion of ecology and tribal development, and

Environmental protection and education.

This plan, nevertheless, was to become the first of a series. Under the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-1990) the Indian government envisioned a more active role for voluntary organizations to aid in making communities as self-reliant as possible. These groups were expected to show how village and indigenous resources could be used and how human resources, rural skills and local knowledge, grossly underutilized at present could be used for their own development. NGOs because of their situation and interaction with local people can be very effective in bringing change since they are able to address issues that governments are often not able to comprehend. That is, because these organizations work at the grass roots level they are able to sense the urgency of issues and prioritize into the problem solving mode at a quicker pace.

This advantage has also been noticed by the Indian government. In the Eight Five Year Plan the importance of NGOs is further enhanced, paying particular attention to the role of these agencies as participants in rural appraisal for drawing up development plans at a very low cost and involving the rural community. The plan document states, "A nation-wide network of NGOs will be created. In order to facilitate the working of this network, three schemes relating to the creation, replication, multiplication and consultancy development have been worked out by the Planning Commission."

Today, India has a vigorous NGO sector. Although there has been no complete census of NGOs, it is estimated that about 25,000 to 30,000 are active in India. In fact, as of December 31st, 1989, there were 12,313 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) 1976; furthermore, 726 NGOs are unregistered but under the prior permission category. One problem with NGOs in India, as with NGOs anywhere else in the world, has been the increasing dependency on governmental funds or donations from external (foreign) donors like the World Bank. This dependent relationship has resulted in a lack of flexibility on the part of NGOs to pick their missions and objectives since many are expected to perform certain tasks in return for funding. But, further still, it has also created structures that have become more bureaucratic in nature and, hence, less effective in development. Nevertheless, NGOs are here to stay and will continue to work in India on political, economical or social issues, the task before them is how they will manage to produce change will keeping track for governmental documentation.

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