# NGOs on the Front Lines
# Seminar for State Department Senior Staff
# Multilateral Responses to Humanitarian Crises

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During the past four years, the Humanitarianism and War research project has interviewed more than one thousand persons involved in armed conflicts around the world. Our focus has been on the humanitarian assistance and human rights protection provided to civilian populations by the UN, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the ICRC. Our project receives funds from the US and three other governments, six UN agencies, more than a dozen NGOs, and several foundations.

To date we have completed case studies on the Sudan, Cambodia, the Persian Gulf crisis, and Central America. Our study on the former Yugoslavia in currently being finalized. A description of our project, along with a bibliography of our publications on humanitarian and security issues, has been distributed.

Drawing on our research to date, I would like to address the assigned questions about NGOs on the front lines.

A. What roles can/should NGOs play in providing relief assistance?

Our research identified five major areas of NGO comparative advantage vis a vis the other major actors, notably governments and UN organizations.

**1. Reaching people at the grassroots**

The whirlwind being reaped today in Somalia is in part the product of the lack of presence in that country during most of 1991-92 of the UN and governments. Governments were not represented at critical points when civil order was giving way to chaos and civilian populations were beginning to pay the price. At that time, UN personnel were watching the deterioration apprehensively from Nairobi and Djibouti and the only representative in Mogadishu of governments outside the region was an Egyptian diplomat.

As the situation unravelled, most of the information which came out of the country -- largely falling on deaf ears -- was from NGOs such as MSF and Save the Children and from the International Committee of the Red Cross. UNICEF, WFP, WHO, UNHCR -- not to say the OFDA and AID -- were conspicuous by their absence. When the international community "discovered" the war and famine in Somalia, it turned to those same private organizations, which not only ran the feeding kitchens in Mogadishu but set up activities in Baidoa, Kismayu, and Bardere and elsewhere throughout the country.

It was the protection of those humanitarian operations, incidentally, that was the rationale for the commitment of troops under UNOSOM 1, UNITAF, and UNOSOM 2. Many of the NGOs, including some who urged the commitment of more troops, have suspended operations in recent months. At no time since its arrival in Mogadishu two and a half years, ago, said the European NGO Medecines sans Frontieres upon its recent departure, has the security situation been so precarious. When the U.S. Rangers arrived in the capitol in August, they descended first on the offices of the UNDP, MSF, and another NGO.

**2. Operating in situations of disputed sovereignty and legality**

NGOs place priority on the relief of suffering, wherever it exists. While most NGOs generally prefer to function with the permission of host governments, when push comes to shove -- that is, when sovereignty conflicts with suffering -- their allegiances are clear. Many are prepared to work in situations where government consent, for whatever reason, is not forthcoming.

A good example is provided by the hundreds of NGOs, US and others, who worked inside Pakistan on the border of Afghanistan during the 1980s. Most provided services to refugees within the camps that had been set up to accommodate them following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Some, however, supported or engaged in cross-border operations, providing food, medical, and other assistance to villages within Afghanistan.

Once again, intergovernmental agencies conspicuous by their absence in directly attending to the needs of those within Afghanistan: either the internally displaced or those who were trying to tough it out in their own communities. Donor government revulsion against the Kabul authorities and their Soviet patrons limited the presence of UN agencies and government aid missions alike within Afghanistan.

There are other similar examples of NGOs operating in situations of disputed legality or sovereignty: in the southern Sudan, in Tigray and Eritrea, in Nicaragua and el Salvador.

**3. Making the connections to reconciliation, reconstruction, and development**

Governments and UN organizations are better at mounting massive relief efforts than at resolving the conflicts which produce such colossal suffering. In fact, during the Cold War they became experts at quite the opposite: pursuing policies which fueled conflicts and wreaked widespread human carnage. The issue now is not whether Cold War leopards can change their spots but whether governments and UN organizations can do the things that make for reconciliation and peace at the very local level where tensions abound and conflicts have their roots, make for peace and reconciliation.

Working on the frontlines in war and peace, NGOs have a different orientation. Many hold that you don't develop people from outside. Instead, you facilitate and support their own development process. Conflict resolution from New York, Geneva, and Washington will not be meaningful unless bridges are built at the local level across ethnic divides in Sri Lanka, Nicosia, and Azerbaijan.

An example from the experience of Central America in the 1980s, recently reviewed in one of our case studies, illustrates the point. The US had bet on a succession of governments in San Salvador; the Soviets were patrons of, and some western European governments were sympathetic to, the FMLN. For their part, NGOs were something of an independent force for pressing ahead on the agenda of reconstruction and development, even while the conflicts raged.

NGOs were the major international actors that helped people return from exile and reassert control over their lives. The UN, the US and nearby governments opposed the return of Salvadorans into Chaletenango from refugee camps in Honduras. But the people themselves thought otherwise. They were accompanied to the border by NGOs, and assisted once back with assistance and protection by NGOs.

The message was not lost on the UN and governments. The first organized return of Guatemalans from Mexico took place in January of this year. While UN agencies had reservations about the strategy and tactics of the refugees, this time they were more helpful. The region's experience also suggests that, once back, refugees can be a force for reconstruction, development, and peace.

**4. Mobilizing domestic constituencies and holding governments' feet to the fire**

NGOs have come to play distinctive roles not only on the front lines, but also in the corridors of power. The past twenty years have seen a maturing of the NGO community here and abroad. NGOs now take seriously an obligation not only to provide emergency relief but to work to bring about changes in government policies to avoid the suffering to which they are called to respond.

AID Administrator Peter McPherson, attending a reception by Bread for the World on Capitol Hill in the mid-Eighties, complimented "Bread" on its advocacy for aid to Ethiopian civilians dying of starvation in 1984. McPherson recalled the tough fight waged by those within the Reagan Administration who held that responding to starvation was the responsibility of the Mengistu government and its Soviet patron. U.S. policy that "A hungry child knows no politics," said McPherson, reflected the influence of constituency pressure generated by groups like Bread for the World.

**5. Embodying a global movement for social change**

To many US policy-makers, NGOs are a uniquely US institution and the US government is in the vanguard of construction and creative engagement with them. A global review suggests a reality quite different. The US government could learn a lot from the Scandinavians, the Dutch, and the Canadians about structuring its relations with their respective NGO communities. The vitality of NGO growth and development in the Philippines makes US NGOs appear straight out of hydroponic greenhouses.

InterAction, itself a membership organization of some 150 US PVOs, is but one of almost one hundred members in the Geneva-based International Council of Voluntary Agencies. There is a proliferation of NGO activity around the world, at every level. At the UNCED conference on the Environment in Rio last year, 14,700 NGO representative registered for the NGO forum which preceded the intergovernmental meeting. At the time of the conference itself, the number of NGO staff person and concerned citizens, many of them Brazilian, was estimated at upwards of 250,000, a mind-boggling figure.

The World Conference on Human Rights last June in Vienna was attended by 2,000 delegates from 1,000 NGOs, a number which, as in Rio, dwarfed the number of government delegates. Some of the NGOs had consultative status with the UN and were thus able to participate as observers; others did not. Their presence was such that the Chinese delegation said that it would not take part in drafting sessions at which NGOs were present as observers. Delegations do not need babysitters to watch over us, they explained. The Chair of the Drafting Committee sustained the objection.

In addition to strengths in these five areas -- sustained in each instance by a clear sense of purpose, driving energy, and constituency base -- NGOs have certain identifiable weaknesses. Two principal ones are their inability to say no and their vulnerability to political manipulation. Those weaknesses become more apparent as we move on to the second question.

B. How do NGOs interact with each other and with governmental and UN agencies?

Our research identifies a number of recurring patterns of interaction, which include both positive and negative aspects. The overall pattern of NGO involvement is one of random molecular activity. NGOs resemble molecules, large and small, bouncing off each other in great profusion and with large bursts of energy. The interaction, which characterizes reconstruction and development settings, features even greater animation and pyrotechnic displays during major emergencies.

In responding to the Gulf crisis, for example, NGOs virtually overnight set up emergency shelter and feeding programs a. the Jordanian border to assist third-country nationals retreating from Kuwait and Iraq. NGO efforts were well underway by the time the first UN interagency coordination meeting in Geneva addressed the crisis. They were also on the frontlines in Iran and Turkey, as people fled east and north. In reaching a judgment about their effectiveness,

however, we said in our case study of the humanitarian response to the Gulf crisis that "The prevailing picture of NGOs in the crisis is one of energy and determination, mixed with confusion and disarray."

Our findings to date also identify other recurring elements in UN/NGO relations in armed conflicts. On the positive side, the UN can open humanitarian space within which NGOs function and can provide some security for NGO operations (including evacuation of staff). On the negative side, the UN is also used by governments to control NGO activities. The UN also has difficulty providing security for NGO operations and assumes no responsibility for evacuating NGO humanitarian personnel.

In the Sudan, UN organizations looked to NGOs as delivery mechanisms for UN programs under Operation Lifeline Sudan. In fact, Lifeline could never have reached its initial targets in 1989 without some help from its NGO friends. At the same time, the Khartoum authorities, aggrieved by the cross-border operations of NGOs in the southern Sudan from Nairobi, looked to the UN as a means for reining NGOs in. As a result, when the UN in 1990 sought to sign a letter of agreement with NGOs, some NGOs resisted, even in the face of pressure from their bilateral donor governments.

With each new crisis, the UN and governments "rediscover" NGOs, and the perennial "jerking around" process begins afresh. The ensuing process is a recurrent one. In an effort to harness NGO energy and capacities, NGOs are, in effect, placed into a linear accelerator, revved up to high speeds, and used to bombard immovable objects such as resistant governments or insurgent forces. They are a useful way for governments to put a humanitarian foot forward while hesitating to use a political or military foot.

While the random NGO molecular activity described earlier leaves a lot to be desired in productivity and efficiency, the linear accelerator approach does considerable violence of its own to the nature of NGOs. The US government can always find -- or create -- "consenting NGOs" to do its bidding. In the trade, there is a breed of would-be NGOs called GONGOs: government-organized NGOs. The half-lives of GONGOs are severely limited. The US in El Salvador, as it changes its agenda in the post-Peace Accords era, is now saying to its GONGOs of ten years: "get private or get lost."

Host governments are part of essentially the same process. In Marcos' days, government authorities in Manila responded to insistence by the US Congress that US aid go through private organizations by creating a spate of such entities. Many officials had "their own" NGOs. The "kept" agencies -- the palace harem -- ostensibly met the conditions for US aid.

In sum, government and the UN want a certain kind of interaction with a certain kind of NGOs. They want vehicles that reach people at the grass roots -- certain people in certain, but not all, communities. They want vehicles to assist people in situations of disputed legality -- certain people in certain, but not all, cross-border arenas. They do not particularly welcome some of the other things NGOs do best, including mobilizing to change government and UN policies.

Our research to date suggests that there is more need for and appreciation of the skills of NGOs in dealing with the new world disorder -- but not necessarily more respect for their independence, privateness, or value orientation. During the Cold War, the US governments was one of the principal belligerents in most armed conflicts. The work of US PVOs/NGOs, already politicized by the wars themselves, was further politicized by their US base. It was politicized further still to the extent that US NGOs became channels for US government resources.

Post-Cold War, the situation hasn't changed all that much. Rather than decreasing the level of belligerency, the "new world order" offers a context in which the UN as well as the US is now the prime mover. The danger to NGOs is a new linear accelerator labelled humanitarian intervention, highly selective in its field of activity and increasingly fueled by US and other military forces.

If the objective reality hasn't changed all that much, the NGO community itself does have greater maturity and professionalism now than earlier. Dialogue within InterAction several years ago on Cold War politicization established that some US NGOs had essentially followed the American flag in selecting countries in which to assist, while other US NGOs had charted their course according to where US foreign policy interests were not primary. The conclusion of those discussions was framed as follows: "Humanitarian assistance does not validate or invalidate itself because of its relation, positive or negative, to US foreign policy."

In other words, what US NGOs can contribute most on the frontlines and in the corridors of power is not principally a function of their connections to AID and the Department of State. As a result of recent experience, NGOs are probably less willing now to chart their courses primarily in support of, or in reaction against, US foreign policy. In any event, Cold War constraints on the functioning of NGOs are being replaced by New World Order constraints. One does not need to see the Security Council as the U.S. cat's paw to sense a danger to NGOs serving as front-lines surrogates of the UN in the world's many hotspots.

Our forthcoming Yugoslavia report contains a rather radical recommendation in this context. We suggest that in settings such as Northern Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia where Chapter VII of the UN Charter is invoked and economic or military force deployed, the UN's civilian organizations should not necessarily be expected to provide humanitarian assistance. NGOs would also be well advised in such circumstances to bide their time as well.