

The poor will always be with us—and so will NGOs

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NGOs: an expression of social solidarity?

This Viewpoint argues for the need to discuss the growing and increasingly far-reaching initiatives of NGOs given that, despite their stated aims, they are not only failing to change the prevailing international order but may even be helping to sustain it.

Quite apart from the phenomenal growth of the development NGO sector in recent years, anyone not entirely divorced from the real world will have noticed that among the welter of advertisements for cosmetics, cars, and other consumer goods, there are a few odd ones which instead of urging people to buy their products ask them to give money so that on behalf of the donating public the advertiser can alleviate the hunger of skeletal, fly-ridden black children, care for someone mutilated by a landmine in a developing country, dig a well in a remote arid zone, and so on.

Likewise, especially following a disaster in some distant country, the word ‘solidarity’ crops up in the media. Perhaps a military unit has been sent to join international peacekeeping forces in controlling an armed conflict, or maybe a couple of aircraft packed with tents and powdered milk have been flown into a flood zone, or a group of youngsters has mounted a street demonstration calling for ‘0.7 per cent’.¹

Development NGOs seem to be everywhere—there are books and articles written about them, universities specialise in a variety of courses on development, and the Internet is full of information about NGOs and the work that they do. Ever more present as a social force, NGOs deal with everything from specific events which would otherwise go unnoticed to national foreign policy, hitherto the exclusive preserve of governments and politicians. Another sign of the progressive institutionalisation of NGOs is that they organise events on topics such as the participation of NGOs in development, the concept of collective well-being, and Official Development Assistance (ODA). And from these flow analyses of the sector, declarations and projects, national and international alliances, press communiqués, and so on.

But there are also far less prominent concerns. To address these one has to venture into an area that is not so clearly demarcated or defined: what is it fair to expect of NGOs in achieving their ultimate goal of a better world? According to their code of conduct (see, for example, *contrainformación en red*), development NGOs are an ‘expression of the solidarity existing in society’, whose purpose is to ‘fight to eradicate poverty’, which they consider ‘basically the result of exploitation of peoples and nature’, holding that ‘the cause of social inequalities lies in unequal access to resources and the exclusion of peoples from decisions that affect them’ (*contrainformación en red*, author’s translation).

To their explanation for the way the world is—marked by poverty, exploitation, inequality, and exclusion—NGOs add their own proposal for eradicating these ills, claiming that they:

... promote development, meaning a process of social, economic, political, cultural, and other forms of change, which is the product of a collective will and requires participative organisation and democratic use of power by the members of a community. Development in this sense creates conditions of equity which bring more and better opportunities of life for human beings and enables them to realise their full potential while ensuring that future generations have access to and can make good use of the natural environment and their cultural heritage. (Ibid., author's translation)

World welfare institutions and their achievements

What is surprising about this upsurge of NGOs is that it coincides with an increase in the influence of states, both individually and still more so collectively through international regulatory institutions such as unions, organisations, treaties, agreements, conventions, protocols, charters, declarations, resolutions, pacts, associations, and so on. If we look at the most fundamental of these—the UN Charter of 26 June 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December that year—we might be excused for thinking that there is no need for any NGO to assist the so-called ‘human family’ in its inexorable march towards the common well-being which is the declared purpose of these resolutions.

Associations of states supposedly exist both to promote progress and attain a state of general well-being based on justice and the sustainable exploitation and fair distribution of the world's resources, and to prevent evils, particularly those resulting from international armed conflicts. Together they possess the legal and technical means to do so. At first sight, it might therefore seem strange that NGOs should be growing and that their interventions should have become so necessary. However, although the dreaded Third World War has not happened, there is no shortage of other conflicts, nor has the big threat disappeared. There is also no solution in sight to the problems of poverty, injustice, and exploitation. And that is precisely the reason for the proliferation of NGOs.

Our surprise at the existence of NGOs, to some extent explained by the failure of international institutions to achieve their declared aims, is insignificant, however, in comparison with the idea that NGOs may succeed where government initiatives have failed. Attempts to assess how much or how little has been achieved in terms of progress regarding our moral or ethical development lead only to a dead end. Should we be satisfied that the last 50 years have not seen a repetition of the world wars of the twentieth century, or disappointed that as many people have died in conflicts since 1945 as died in the First World War? Is it progress that the percentage of the world population that is hungry and illiterate has fallen, or a step backwards that the absolute numbers have grown, especially since the situation may well deteriorate even further?

It is difficult to avoid taking sides in making such an assessment. Some will say that thanks to these instruments the world is no worse than it is and that progress has been significant. Of course, we cannot know what the world would have been like without these instruments. At the same time, although there is no slavery (despite isolated spots and forms of wage labour that come close to it), international controls on nuclear weapons have been introduced (even if all they have accomplished—if indeed it is thanks to them—is to avoid a repetition of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), an international criminal court has been established (although how