

## The Role of International Non-governmental Organisations in International Politics

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### Abstract

*For centuries, international politics was considered as an arena of the states. However, with the rise of the free-market economy, globalisation, international institutions and technology, many non-state actors such as international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) started sharing the power corridors along with the states. Contemporary academic literature cites many examples where INGOs has played important roles in decision-making processes. The flow of development aid from developed countries to the developing countries through INGOs has enhanced their role in international development. Similarly, many developing countries started outsourcing social services such as health and education to INGOs. International laws, on one hand, protect INGOs to mobilise additional financial resources from developed states. INGOs contributed to humanitarian diplomacy especially in climate change and banning landmines. INGOs also face some criticism in terms of poor accountability and legitimacy. Southern countries sometimes perceive INGOs as carriers and promoters of western liberal agenda.*

**Key Words:** INGOs, International Development, International Politics, Social Development

### Introduction

Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648 provides the foundation for the development of the modern state system. Since then, states (nation-states in the literature produced during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) are considered crucial in the study of international relations. Theories such as realism and neorealism further contributed to lionizing the role of states in international politics. States are described as political actors interacting in anarchy and egoistically pursuing their national interest defined in terms of the struggle for power further led to recurring wars. These schools of thought dominated the debates in international relations for around three hundred years since the emergence of nation-states until the end of World War ii. During this period, international politics became complex due to various factors mainly (i) the evolution of states' internal systems, structures and institutions, (ii) increase in a number of states, (iii) industrialization and (iv) wars. This evolution process contributed to the enhanced transactions among states mostly in terms of trade, education, tourism and culture. Complexities in international politics resulted in the emergence of a variety of non-state actors (NSAs) including a multinational corporation, non-governmental organisation, trade associations, regimes, movements, diaspora, various clubs, criminal organisations, faith-based organisations, media, academia, community-based groups and terrorist groups. Since the post-cold war era, students of international politics started recognizing the role of NSAs in many issues of international politics (Arts, 2003). Intricacies in international politics convinced the states to start sharing their powers in the globalized economy including their social, security and political duties especially with corporations, citizens groups termed as NGOs (Mathews, 2012). Non-governmental organisations seized the maximum space in civil society and almost transformed its traditional look from a rural and philanthropic view to a modern and professional guise.

The entry of new actors such as the business sector and modern civil society in national and international politics and changes in the role of states have contributed to the emergence of new challenges and opportunities. NGOs started gaining prominence in many parts of the world. The states initiated delegating their duties such as the delivery of social services, human development and humanitarian response during emergencies to NGOs. Developed countries in the north also selected NGOs as a vehicle to transmit their development aid to the poorest segments in developing societies. Students of international politics started studying NGOs in relation to the strengthening of democracy and making states accountable. There are

incidences where NGOs played a significant role in international politics. Although some states have started criticizing the NGOs especially in the south of the world, however, NGOs are still prominent in the north and playing a significant role in political decision making. With the rise in complexities in international politics, the emergence of new NSAs, an increase in the number of transnational transactions, it is thus important to learn about the role of NGOs in international politics.

NGOs can be broadly categorised into National NGOs and International NGOs. This paper will mainly discuss International NGOs and refer to them as NGOs. This paper tries to answer the questions of what are the NGOs, what are the contemporary debates about the origin of NGOs and how NGOs relate to contemporary international politics. The objective of the paper is to empirically describe the impact of NGOs on international politics. The paper explains NGOs at two different levels. At first, it defines the NGOs through the lens of some popular theoretical approaches such as realism, liberalism and constructivism of International Relations. The paper then goes on to attempt to explain the connexion between NGOs and international politics. The paper presents some examples from the academic literature to understand the subject. The paper does not argue on normative grounds that NGOs should have a relationship with international politics rather argues on empirical grounds that they relate to international politics. The paper follows the research methodology of Meta-Analysis (Newmann 2004). This technique includes two major steps; gathering a large amount of relevant available studies, and their synthesis.

### **Defining NGO**

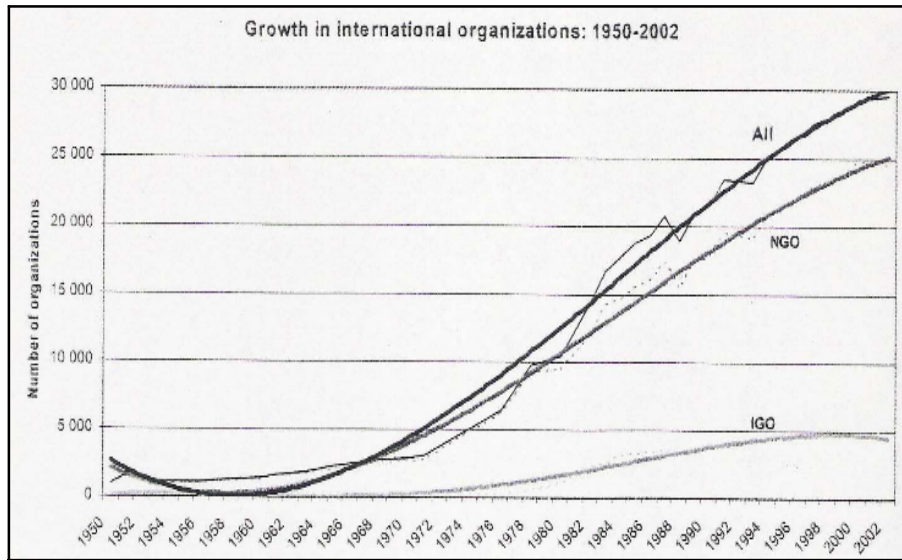
There are as many definitions of NGO as the number of writers who have been writing in this subject (Clark 1998). The term NGO has been described in various studies related to sociology, anthropology, economy, development, transnationalism, democracy, civil society, liberalism, peacebuilding and political science. Defining NGOs in international relations is comparatively a recent phenomenon. The term "NGO" is synonymised with International NGO in international relations. Bob Reinalda defines NGOs at three different levels: as domestic actors when they are interacting with their national political systems; as transnational actors when they establish their relationships with a like-minded NGO in another country and start functioning across national boundaries; as an international non-governmental actor when several NGOs from three or more countries start cooperating with each and constitutes an international NGO that serves as a platform for collaboration among national NGOs. This third level facilitates NGOs to interact with international politics (Reinalda, 2001). The word NGO covers a wide range of organisation including non-profit organisations, voluntary groups, international NGO, community development organisation, community-based groups, social movements, people's organisation, membership organisation etc (Clark 1998). NGOs can further be divided based on ideology, organisation and operations (Fernando and Heston 1997). Scholars in international politics who explain the world through the lens of the north-south divide, apply their relevant theories and concepts in discussion related to NGOs. Northern NGOs have their head offices in developed countries and mostly support NGOs in the developing countries (Hulme and Edwards 1997). John Clark divides NGOs into six different categories: relief and welfare organisations, service delivery organisations, development agencies, organisations working for grassroots development, human rights and advocacy groups and technical innovation organizations (Cleary 1997). Some of the scholars include charities, religious groups, schools, clubs, hospitals, professional associations, cooperatives, foundation, lobby groups, epistemic communities and think tanks in the categories of NGOs (Fernando and Heston 1997). Catherine Agg (2006) defines NGOs as a civil society organisation that are comparatively larger and more professional than other civil society groups. Their services are not restricted to their membership. International NGOs mostly have their origins and head offices in developed countries while they operate in developing the world.

In sum, there is no consensus among scholars in international relations about the definition of NGO. Learning from the various definitions cited above, NGOs can be defined as non-profit, non-governmental, affiliated with states through some legislation, a professional body with a particular set of skills and aiming at the democracy, peace, welfare and socio-political development of communities mainly in developing countries.

### **History of NGOs**

Gerard Clark (1998) writes that the segregation by the United Nations (UN) in the rights of the participation of intergovernmental organisations and international private sectors resulted in the emergence in NGOs in international politics. Article 71 of the charter of UN categorically highlights the role of NGOs by stating that "the Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations." The representatives of 1,200 NGOs participated in the founding conference of the United

Nations in 1945, held at San Francisco. The first seven words of the UN Charter were written with the active participation of NGOs representatives. The UN Charter starts with; "we the people of United Nations..." (Alger 2002). UN also defines the term NGO as a "non-profit entity whose members are citizens or associations of citizens of one or more countries and whose activities are determined by the collective will of its members in response to the needs of the members of one or more communities with which the NGO cooperates" (Simmons 1998). The number of NGOs increased from 2,500 to more than 25,000 since the establishment of the UN until the end of the twentieth century, as shown in Fig 1.



**Figure 1:** Trends in the number of active international organizations: 1950-2002. Source: München: K. G.Saur, 2003, p. 40.

One can easily realize that expansion in NGOs remained much more than that of an intergovernmental organisation (IGOs). It also indicates that NGOs exist in the political world and are important to study international politics.

### Theoretical Perspectives

There is very less literature available in academia about the theoretical apt of NGOs into the mainstream international relations (IR) theories. Ahmed and Potter share that NGOs are at a low profile in international relations theory because of the two reasons. First, NGOs are simultaneously studied in a range of subjects including public administration, social movements, public interest groups, civil society, political science and development. In these disciplines, NGOs are discussed as a subject of domestic politics. Second, the mainstream theories of IR such as realism ignore the domestic politics of states while theorising international relations. Although theories such as liberalism and transnationalism acknowledge the role of NGOs in international policymaking, yet most of the debates in international relations are dominated by the realist school of thought.

Realism governs the discussions in international politics for the last five decades and it notoriously ignores the role of NSAs including NGOs. In a realist perspective, the struggle for power in an anarchical world leads to a security dilemma where conflict is the expected mode of states interface. Kenneth Waltz (1986), one of the most cited realist scholars today, sums up the realism' position on NGOs and other non-state actors: "*States are not and never have been the only international actors. But then structures are defined not by all the actors that flourish within them but by the major ones*".

Liberalism as compare to realism offers space to NGOs to explain and understand their role in international politics. Liberals propose that cooperation is possible among states due to the transnational

transactions occurs outside the states. However, within non-state actors, NGOs are not as prominent as are the multinational companies and corporations [Kahler 1987].

Constructivism is the third dominant theory in international relations. It emphasises that identities and interest are social and historically constructed. Constructivists believe that “anarchy is what the states make of it”. The international system at any time is a result of the repeated interaction of states and NSAs. The system is developed based on the understanding of key players about the system, their identities and interests and their perceptions about the others. States’ relations depend upon the definitions of the states about the interests and identities of their own and that of other countries. Constructivists acknowledge the role of ideas, norms, epistemic communities, civil society and NGOs in the processes of shaping and transforming the international political system [Checkel 1998]. Constructivism thus serves as a more appropriate tool of thinking and explaining the role of NGOs in IR [Ahmed and Potter 2006].

### **INGOs in International Politics**

Studying international politics especially the politics of development in twenty-first is incomplete without NGOs. As a group, NGO is diverse, complex and multifaced. Scale and scope of the issues taken up by NGOs can be explained at different levels such as local, national, bilateral, regional, transnational and international. Some NGOs are issue-oriented, some task-oriented and some ideology-driven. Some are engaged in issues of the interest of the general public while others have a more specific, private or narrowly focused agenda. Some NGOs are professionally sound with large funds while some others depend upon indigenous skills and resources with smaller funds. Some have staff in thousands while some others have human resource less than a hundred [Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighborhood*]. NGOs are known for innovation, introducing new ideas, advocacy, mobilising citizen’s support for public interest issues, policy analysis, advocacy and lobbying with decision-makers, provision of services, provide feedback to the governments and IGOs during policy development processes, support in the implementation of policies, making Governments accountable and proposing changes and reforms [Mathews 1997].

P. J. Simmons [1998] writes that NGOs exercise their influence over the national governments and corporation, multilateral institutions and corporation, and in four ways: “setting agendas, negotiating outcomes, conferring legitimacy, and implementing solutions”. His taxonomic approach facilitates the researchers in understanding NGOs and their focus. Simmons’s approach explains the goals, funding sources, membership procedures, and other factors of NGOs. This approach to understanding NGOs guides a researcher to understand and explain their functions, memberships and funding mechanisms. Simmons further shares many examples where NGOs are influencing national governments, multilateral institution, national corporations and multinational businesses through adapting four strategies. These include; setting agendas through using innovative technologies and lobbying with policymakers to bring people’ issues to the priority lists of policymakers; negotiating legitimacy through providing information and analysis to the general public and political actors to influence the decision making processes; conferring outcomes through participating in the designing process of multilateral treaties; and, implementing solutions through reaching out to the unreachable and doing what the Governments cannot do such as the provision of social services in poverty-stricken areas [Simmons 1998].

All these examples make NGOs relevant to the debates on international relations. NGOs literature share evidence where NGOs have influenced the decision-making process in international society and administrative agencies of various governments. Below are some of the key features of NGOs’ role in politics,

### **NGOs and Development Aid**

States have historically been helping each other both finically and by other means. However, during the post-World War ii (WW ii) era, both the institutionalised foreign aid and NGOs emerged together. The institutionalised ‘foreign aid’ is commonly known as “official development assistance” (ODA) and is defined as “*the transfer of public resources on concessional terms [with at least a 25 per cent grant element], a significant objective of which is to bring about an improvement in economic, political, and social conditions in any foreign country*” [Lancaster 2000]. ODA has mainly been implemented as a government-to-government transfer of funds. Trade, exports, subsidies, military aid and foreign direct investment are not included in the domain of ODA. There are two channels to transfer this aid from a developed country to a developing country; bilateral - directly from donor government to recipient government and multilateral - through involving third parties such as the World Bank, different agencies of United Nations or other development banks and

institutions. Donor countries have also developed some organisations to provide technical support to developing countries for the effective utilisation of aid.

WW ii played an important role in the emergence of the idea of ODA. Foreign aid initiated as reconstruction support to Europe during post WW ii era. After the completion of the reconstruction project, the donors started focusing on the developing countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. However, the context of aid was quite different in these developing countries. These countries were not war-stricken rather newly emerged states after the fall of colonialism. ODA focused on the social, economic and political development of newly established states. Foreign aid from the developed countries initially focused on improving agriculture, infrastructure, transportation, communication, irrigation and hydropower generation.

During the 1960s, donors learned that ODA in the form of large-scale loans to develop mega infrastructure projects resulted in an enhanced burden of loans on developing countries. Economic inequalities and poverty emerged as some of the outcomes of ODA in these countries. Large scale projects in developing countries created an economic elite that directly contributed to the unequal distribution of resources. Analysis of the ODA indicates that both the donor and recipient governments had their shares in this uneven development. Disappointment with the results of ODA forced the donor countries to change their strategies for developing countries. Revised ODA' strategies constitute the financial support both for large scale projects benefitting the whole country and small-scale projects targeting socially and economically deprived communities in the developing societies. This new strategy required new partners and techniques. New terminologies such as participation, empowerment and inclusion entered into the debates of the global development agenda. Both the donors and aid recipient governments were lacking such expertise and human resource that can identify poverty pockets and reach out to the poor especially in rural and slums areas. This approach was named as "basic human needs approach".

In 1973, Congress introduced a new strategy to provide social services to poor people in developing countries. It recommended to engage with the NGOs in developing countries and delivering such projects that can deliver social services and alleviate poverty in rural and semi-urban areas of developing countries. USAID and other OECD governments expanded their funding opportunities towards NGOs (Smith 1990). Aid channelled through NGOs increased from US\$ 1 billion in 1970 to over US\$ 7 billion in 1990. The 1980s can easily be named as the decade of NGOs (Ahmed and Potter 2006).

### **Earning Public Trust**

Some of the NGOs have earned greater public trust over time. These include human rights advocacy groups such as Amnesty International. More than one million members in 162 countries donate money to run the NGO. Amnesty International is quoted very often in international relations as an NGO that is an expert in human rights advocacy. Care International is providing social services such as essential health, food, water, education and humanitarian support to the world's poorest people since 1945. More than half a million persons from Europe, Canada, the United States and Japan, many governments in developed countries and other donors support this organisation in achieving its objectives. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) presents a unique hybrid model within the domain of NGOs. IUCN offers memberships to both governments and NGOs. The International Crises Group is another unique NGO. It has developed its expertise in crises management, especially humanitarian emergencies through joining the fieldwork, political analysis and strategic advocacy (Simmons 1998). NGOs such as Greenpeace that are focusing on the environment have case studies of influencing the states and convincing them to prepare and follow the laws to control the export of ivory (Iriye 1999). Some of the NGOs even have received Nobel Peace Prize including Institute of International Law (1904), Friends Service Council, American Friends Service Committee (1947), Amnesty International (1977) and Médecins Sans Frontières (1999).

### **Financial Resources with NGOs**

If finances are considered as one of the criteria of a strong political actor, NGOs have sufficient financial resources to meet these criteria. Catherine Agg (2006) in her paper "*Trends in Government Support for Non-Governmental Organizations*" shares that financial worth of NGOs is over 1 trillion dollars (2006 US\$) per year at a global level. This makes NGOs as the world's eighth-largest economy. She further adds that the incomes of the largest NGOs are several times larger than many bilateral donors. This financial strength of NGOs makes them stronger in many situations and fortify their capacities to influence the decisions. The availability of financial resources sometimes creates competition on acquiring more funds resulting in rifts among NGOs and between NGOs and the Governments (in developing countries). With so much financial

resources, NGOs are less accountable to their host governments and the beneficiaries. The Governments in many developing countries especially in South Asia have started formulating new rules and regulations to make NGOs accountable and to monitor their activities. NGOs perceive these controls as a tactic by the governments to curtail their freedom and autonomy. NGOs believe that their main function of making the governments accountable would be severely affected if the governments start influencing their decisions and choices of the projects.

### **Provision of Social Services**

NGOs are also considered as an important service provider in developing countries. Although it varies in various regions and within regions among different countries. In general, where states don't have sufficient resources and capacities to provide especially the social services to their citizens, NGOs play a significant role. Catherine Agg shares the example of sub-Saharan Africa where structural adjustment program severely affected the states' capacities to provide social services to their citizens, NGOs came forwards and started providing health and education services to a vast majority of the countries' population. NGOs provided around 35% of the health services and 50% of the educational services in Kenya by mid-1990s. Similarly, during the same period, around 40% of the health services in Ghana and 30% in Malawi were also provided by the NGOs. In South and Southeast Asia regions, NGOs actively provided social services to a large scale of population. BRAC in Bangladesh was providing employment directly to 28,000 persons and indirectly to 200,788 people through its various development projects during 2006. BRAC's projects include a bank, university, provision of internet services and a range of financial services. While analysing the key factors behind the success of BRAC, support from international development communities appears as a significant contributor (Agg 2006).

NGOs are portrayed as innovative and value-driven as compared to states in the development debates during this period. States are characterised as bureaucratic, inefficient and possibly corrupt. NGOs are placed in civil society as a responsible civic force between state and citizens.

### **New Diplomacy**

Davenport (2002) introduces the concept of "*new diplomacy*". The various strategies within the framework of new diplomacy include developing consensus, participation, empowerment and people-centred approach. New diplomacy proposes to shift the leadership in the decision-making process from influential states such as the US to smaller states and NGOs. New diplomacy facilitated the completion of the Ottawa Process," and "the Rome Statute." The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) facilitated the process of former one while the NGO Coalition for the International Criminal Court supported the process of later one. These examples also indicate the increasing strength of NGOs in strengthening peace and protecting human rights by facilitating cooperation at the international level (William 1997). These examples provide us with an opportunity about the importance and operationalization of new diplomacy in global political affairs that seek negotiations.

### **Conclusion**

NGOs are considered an important factor in international development. They are development partners and work with the Governments in some countries. While in some other countries, NGOs resist against the policies of the Government that they think is not beneficial to the citizens or environment. NGOs also dominate the civic space both in developed and developing countries. In many parts of the world, the word NGOs have become synonymous to the term civil society. During the policy-making process, when states feel the need for citizen's participation in the process, NGOs are called upon for this purpose. As a project of neoliberalism or western liberal democracy, NGOs in the east and south of the world work closely with their counterparts in the west of the world. This interaction enables NGOs in developing countries to learn about the position of NGOs on the global development agenda, the development jargons and skills and knowledge to understand the complex aid systems. In developing countries of Asia and Africa, NGOs are familiar with the aid processes of donors in developed countries and have skills to access their financial and non-financial resources. Simultaneously, NGOs are employing thousands of people in developing countries and are contributing to develop and strengthen the local economy.

Occupation of civic space by NGOs is posing existential threats to indigenous civil society organisations both in developed and developing countries. Foreign aid has helped NGOs to acquire front seats in the decision-making process. Any change in the policies of donors or shift in the development paradigm will create serious challenges for NGOs. Both the Governments in developing countries and NGOs are oblivious of their role in

future if their funding is reduced or ended. Similarly, if global development paradigm shifts from neoliberalism to some other school of thought, how would NGOs accommodate themselves. In contemporary development literature, there emerge some serious questions of legitimacy and accountability of NGOs. Efforts to mitigate the side effects [economic inequality, poverty, deprivation etc] of Structural Adjustment Program in developing countries, NGOs are notoriously labelled as an agenda of neoliberalism to further exploit the developing countries. Similarly, the accountability of NGOs is also a question. NGOs do not appear as accountable to anyone except their donors even not to their host governments in developing countries. This poses some questions about the sovereignty of developing countries. NGOs as a recipient of foreign aid from western countries are seen suspiciously in developing countries, especially in Muslim countries. Their human right, poverty alleviation and service delivery programs are sometimes considered as promotion of western agenda in eastern societies. Similarly, while applying the lens of the north-south divide, northern NGOs are more powerful than southern NGOs thus maintaining the status quo in international politics even within the domain of NGOs. To clarify their position in international relations, NGOs need to answer these questions related to their legitimacy and accountability.

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