

Nongovernmental Organizations—example #2

Determining the roles NGOs take on provides a framework in which to analyze the organizations. They can be separated into two groups based on whether they are primarily service delivery or advocacy organizations (Hudock, 1999:54). To some degree, NGOs are engaged in both roles, but they can be categorized according to the type of work on which they primarily focus. For instance, development NGOs are primarily service delivery organizations, in that they provide and carry out services to help people in need. Human rights and environmental organizations, on the other hand, are primarily advocacy NGOs. These NGOs focus their energies on educating people about particular issues and pressuring decision makers into addressing policies concerning those issues. The primary role an NGO takes on inevitably affects the kind of relationship they have on the state and its authority.

The work of Gordenker and Weiss (1996a) adds to these categories by describing the broad roles that NGOs play (37-40). They establish two sets of general roles that all NGOs take on---operational roles and educational and advocacy roles. Operational roles include fundraising, providing services to their members, other organizations, and/or recipients of NGO activity. This function also includes donors using NGOs as ‘project contractors’ or facilitators for states and/or IGOs.

The educational role involves creating awareness among citizens “whose voices are then registered through public opinion and bear fruit in the form of additional resources for their activities as well as new policies, better decisions, and enhanced international regimes” (Gordenker and Weiss, 1996a:38). Framing the educational role of NGOs in this way requires citizens to have the channels and institutions necessary to influence public opinion, policies, and so forth. This approach implies that citizens of advanced industrial countries are the only targets of NGO education. While educating these citizens and drawing their attention to the issues is one role NGOs fulfill, they are also responsible for educating people as a part of service delivery. Implying that NGOs exclusively target the people whose support they are seeking overlooks that for service delivery NGOs to be successful, education is a significant part of their work.

NGOs also take on the role of advocating issues. Historically, NGOs have been pitted against states and their IGOs, though relations with IGOs like the UN are improving (Gordenker and Weiss, 1996a:39).

Advocacy involves lobbying and targeting decision makers, pressuring states to adopt policies, and/or challenging states to change policies. It may also involve acting as a ‘watchdog’ to put checks on state power and ensure accountability by subjecting governments to public scrutiny (Dicklitch, 2001:30), or monitoring whether policies are integrated and enforced. Creating awareness, educating people, and directing citizens through the appropriate institutional channels benefit the advocacy efforts of NGOs.

These roles are not exclusive; to varying degrees, NGOs perform operational functions, educate citizens, and advocate policy changes. Applying Hudock’s typology, service delivery NGOs are those organizations that primarily perform operational roles by providing direct services to assist people. Organizations more focused on making change by targeting decision makers and state policies are fall under the rubric of advocacy NGOs. Education is essential to both types of organizations. As such, organizations engage in educating citizens in order facilitate development or raise awareness about issues that affect them. The primary agenda of the organization is therefore what determines whether an NGO is a service delivery or advocacy organization.

2) Issues NGOs Address

The type of issue NGOs address also influences how these organizations affect state sovereignty (Gordenker and Weiss 1996a; Fisher 1998; Hudock 1999). Gordenker and Weiss (1996a) categorize the issues NGOs address into three groups---human rights, environment, and development. Their purpose for separating out the issues on which NGOs focus is to show how “NGO interactions may be constrained or facilitated according to the consensus surrounding the issues that they address” (Gordenker and Weiss, 1996a:41). Identifying which issue area an NGO focuses on provides some insight into the kind of relationship that organization will have with a state. Generally, advocacy organizations, including human rights and environment NGOs, have the most strained relations with states, while states tend to be more accepting of service delivery NGOs that do development work (Hudock, 1999:54).

As one would expect, repressive countries feel the most threatened by human rights advocacy NGOs, taking extreme steps to limit their capabilities (Gaer, 1996:56). Many governments, however, of both

democratic and authoritarian countries, resent NGO activities that challenge state policies, even though states rely on human rights organizations for information (Hudock, 1999:54). Despite the international community signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, debate continues over what constitutes human rights. Most advanced industrial countries argue that human rights are based on protecting the individual's interests, while many developing countries assert that the good of the community takes precedence over that of the individual. Hence, disagreements over what human rights involves remain heated. This divergence over what human rights encompasses has complicated the work of the UN. As a result, the United Nations has come to rely heavily upon human rights organizations for information, and those NGOs are credited with being most responsible for the progress that has been made on human rights issues (Gaer, 1996:51, 55).

Just as NGOs are highly responsible for bringing human rights issues to the fore, environment organizations have been key to drawing public attention to and influencing political attitudes about the environment (Hurrell, 1995:145). The success of these organizations is due to the extensive resources---financial, technical, legal, and scientific---from which they draw. In order for citizens and states to be convinced of the importance of the environment, however, first they must be convinced that a global community exists. Realists argue that this community is "no more than the figment of the theorist's imagination" (Hurrell, 1995:146). Another criticism that can be made of the concept of a global community is that, because of disparities, only the privileged will benefit from protecting the environment: the less privileged might have clean air to breathe, but at the same time are starving because they were prohibited from clearing land to grow crops or MNCs were banned from constructing new factories that would provide jobs and incomes. Such are the points of contention between environment advocacy NGOs and the states and MNCs they challenge.

Development NGOs, in pursuing their goals, often need to address human rights and environment issues along with health and economic and labor issues. Human rights concerns like women's issues and repressive social norms inevitably require attention for development to be possible (Everts 1998; Fisher 1998; Sweetman 1998; Warkentin, 2001). Sustainable development presents a similar concern insofar as development agencies must consider how their projects impact the environment. As service delivery organizations, NGOs are less

threatening to governments. States see them as opportunities to counterbalance the effects of IGOs' structural adjustment policies, provide welfare services where the state is lacking, and introduce economic development projects (Gordenker and Weiss 1996a, 1996b; Stirrat and Henkel 1997; Fisher 1998; Ronit and Schneider 2000). NGO presence in developing countries, however, does not go uncontested. As described above, states can react to NGOs in a number of ways that may include attempts at co-opting the organizations in an effort to control them or ignoring altogether.

3) Actors

The work of NGOs is influenced by different sets of actors, ranging from the private citizen to the IGO. Members provide the foundation for NGOs, acting in their interests and their concerns as private citizens. These organizations encounter and are influenced by other international actors such as states, IGOs, and multinational corporations (MNCs). Furthermore, international actors, in the capacity of donors, impact the decisions, responsibilities, and accountability of NGOs. These various actors, in turn, impact how NGOs affect state authority.

Members

Private citizens prompt the formation of NGOs. As members, they become the foundation for NGOs by supporting staff, board members, and field workers. Obviously the purpose of NGOs is to influence policies---whether their main focus is service delivery or advocacy. Members are citizens who have interests and are concerned about the issues that NGOs tackle. They offer contributions and occasionally serve as volunteers to support the work of NGOs. Having a member-base establishes NGO legitimacy. The degree to which NGOs depend on their members as volunteers or for contributions varies. In the United States, to be recognized and receive funding, member donations must constitute at least 20% of an NGO's budget (Gordenker and Weiss, 1996b, 211). The type of issue NGOs address also determines their reliance on membership. Development NGOs more willingly accept support from governments, IGOs, and MNCs because it does not compromise their autonomy to the same degree that human rights organizations, for instance, are affected. These NGOs can more effectively challenge government policies if they rely more heavily on private donations.

Citizens in both developed and developing countries have found the need to establish NGOs. People in advanced industrial countries, however, have greater access to political participation because institutions are in place to facilitate them. The underdeveloped infrastructure in Southern countries does not invite and cannot facilitate the same level of political participation as that in the Northern countries. NGOs help to bridge the infrastructural gap in developing countries by acting as representatives for developing people who would otherwise be less able to represent themselves (Feldman 1997; Haynes 1997; Fisher 1998; Hudock 1999).

The results vary when NGOs act on behalf of people in need. Helping voiceless people gain representation institutionalizes them within the system, thus fortifying state sovereignty. When NGOs help people lobby their cases directly to their states, governments are then pressured to recognize those people and address their concerns. In effect, NGOs actually help states to legitimately deal with an issue by challenging it. In cases where states do not respond to NGO pressures, the organizations lobby the international community to put pressure on states to change their policies. In turn, the effect legitimizes the state as having the ultimate authority over the people making the demands.

Though members form the basis of NGOs, these organizations are minimally accountable to their members and individual donors (Hudock, 1999:3). The staff, volunteers, field workers, and board members make and carry out the decisions, based on their interests and the demands of their primary donors like governments, IGOs, or MNCs. Presumably founding members continue their support while new members are drawn to the organizations because they feel that the NGOs are addressing issues that concern them. Thus, members provide the foundation necessary for NGO operations that influence relations with the state.

International actors

International actors, including state governments, IGOs, MNCs, and networks of NGOs, have a significant bearing on what NGOs accomplish and who is affected in the process. States respond to NGOs by adopting policies as an attempt to regulate their relations and the impact of the NGOs on them. The type of government does not necessarily have any bearing on the relationship between the state and the NGO (Sanyal 1997; Streeten 1997, Fisher 1998, Gray, 1998). Therefore, the effect of NGOs is not one that necessarily breaks down authoritarian states or enhances democratic states, even though NGOs aim to foster civil society

and “understand that democracy would allow them to operate more freely” (Ndegwa cited in Fisher, 1998:53). Instead, how states react depends more on the issues and approaches NGOs take.

States engage NGOs with an array of approaches (Hulme and Edwards 1995; Streeten 1997; Coston 1998; Fisher 1998; Brainard and Siplon 2000, 2002; Najam 2000; and Young 2000). State policies toward NGOs range from governments treating them as threats, to cooperating with them, with the policies that ignore, seek to institutionalize (co-opt) them, or passively accept them falling in between. In some cases, states even attempt to create agencies, called government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) that parallel the work NGOs seek to carry out.

Just as states adopt different policies to deal with NGOs, IGOs take a similar approach toward NGOs. As organizations instituted by sovereign states, IGOs provide agencies that help states fulfill their interests and collectively address issues of concern. When dealing with NGOs, their tactic can be to ignore them, cooperate with them, or co-opt them in an effort to control NGO activity. IGOs are more readily accepting NGOs as significant political actors, partly due to protest and criticism. After decades of criticism, the World Bank has not only sought to cooperate with NGOs, but has worked to further their potential contributions by coordinating efforts with them and implementing joint training programs. Similarly, the WTO has made efforts to establish relations with and be more forthcoming with information to NGOs, following the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle.

MNCs also have a stake in NGO activities, not only as donors, but also as businesses. When NGOs lobby states to change their policies on workers’ rights, women’s rights, or the environment, MNCs are affected. MNCs can also benefit from development projects. As NGOs educate people, transfer technology, offer micro-lending programs, implement economic development projects, and introduce development schemes, MNCs potentially benefit from literate, skilled, trained workers. MNCs have incentives to become donors and have the monetary power to influence NGO decisions. When working in coordination with MNCs, however, NGOs must consider whether these businesses will pose a threat to any local enterprises the development organizations are helping people to establish (Everts, 1998:80).

Sometimes independent NGOs join with other NGOs and form networks. Julie Fisher (1998) identifies these as grassroots organization networks (GRO networks) and grassroots support organizations (GRSO networks) (4). GRO networks are those that link member-serving grassroots organizations based in local communities, while GRSO networks connect nationally or regionally based development assistance organizations. The aim is to further the goals of the individual agencies by sharing information and resources, potentially increasing valuable contributions of NGOs. When alliances are made between Northern and Southern NGOs, however, this imbalance of power can lead to a different kind of co-opting---of the Northern NGO over the Southern NGO (Hudock 1999).

Donors

As private organizations, NGOs depend on their members for donations and staffing. Most NGOs also rely on support from governments, IGOs, and/or MNCs, in the form of funding, resources, or technological support. Accepting support from international actors, though, usually comes at a price. Governments and IGOs donate money directly to NGOs for them to use at their discretion or to fund particular projects. Accepting external support usually entails accountability to the donor. In detailing their work for their donors, NGOs spend considerable time and resources that could have otherwise been directed toward achieving their goals. Hence, donors often determine NGO activities (Hulme and Edwards 1995; Spiro 1995; Gordenker and Weiss, 1996a; Stirrat and Henkel 1997; Fisher 1998; Hudock 1999; Dichlitch 2001).

States and IGOs also use NGOs in helping them decide how and where to dole out funds. NGOs, in these cases, act as facilitators for donors. Some have even argued that development NGOs are in better positions to deliver services than governments (Hudock, 1999:8). Sometimes it is because their field workers have local knowledge and language skills that give them an advantage in determining what projects should be funded. Other times it is because the organization is specialized in a particular issue area. Being a facilitator for donors, however, does not preclude them from accountability.

Having to answer to donors affects the relationship NGOs have with states in various ways. First, constraints on NGOs limit their ability to challenge the state because they end up spending time and efforts making themselves accountable to the donors. Second, if corporations are the donors, they want to put

restrictions on NGOs that might jeopardize the MNCs' relations with elites in developing states. Third, the more autonomous NGOs are, the more effective they are going to be. By making NGOs account for their activities, states, IGOs, and MNCs are able to monitor the organizations and curb actions that may pose a threat to them. Fourth, as world leaders, it is in the interest of the advanced industrial countries to keep the international structure intact. Despite how dysfunctional they might be, states "are not allowed to disappear juridically---even if for all intents and purposes they have already fallen or been pulled down in fact" (Jackson, 1990:23). Thus, as donors, advanced industrial countries attempt to minimize the effects of NGOs on state sovereignty.

Individual members, international actors, and donors are all forces that shape the agendas of NGOs, impact the work they do, and influence the goals they set and attain. Though NGOs have little accountability to individual members, private citizens form the basis of all NGOs. International actors impact the activities of NGOs in a variety of ways. Whether it be the policies states adopt, the restrictions MNC donors set, or the approach Northern NGOs take toward their Southern counterparts, international actors ultimately impact the effect an NGO will have on one or more states in the international system. Finally, as donors, international actors provide the majority of support for most NGOs.