

Non Governmental Organisation

Definition

The Encyclopaedia Britannica gives us a very good and exhaustive definition of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO)¹ that we can adopt. Let us however add a few comments.

¹ Defined by Voluntary group of individuals or organizations, usually not affiliated with any government, that is formed to provide services or to advocate a public policy. Although some NGOs are for-profit corporations, the vast majority are non-profit organizations. Some NGOs, particularly those based in authoritarian countries, may be created or controlled by governments. By most definitions, political parties and criminal or violent guerrilla organizations are not considered NGOs. The issues addressed by NGOs run the gamut of human concerns (e.g., human rights, environmental protection, disaster relief, and development assistance), and the scope of their activities may be local, national, or international. Some NGOs fulfil quasi-governmental functions for ethnic groups that lack a state of their own. NGOs may be financed by private donations, international organizations, governments, or a combination of these.

NGOs have existed for centuries; indeed, in 1910 some 130 international groups organized a coordinating body called the Union of International Associations. The term nongovernmental organization was coined at about the time of the founding of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 to distinguish private organizations from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), such as the UN itself. Many large international NGOs, such as Amnesty International, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Oxfam International, CARE, Save the Children, and the World Wildlife Fund, are transnational federations of national groups. Other international NGOs, such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, are mass-membership organizations. Most NGOs are small, grassroots organizations not formally affiliated with any international body, though they may receive some international funding for local programs.

NGOs perform a variety of functions. They provide information and technical expertise to governments and international organizations (such as specialized agencies of the UN) on various international issues, often supplying local information unavailable to governments. NGOs may advocate on behalf of specific policies, such as debt relief or the banning of landmines (e.g., the International Campaign to Ban Landmines), and they may provide humanitarian relief and development assistance (e.g., the Red Cross, Oxfam, and CARE). NGOs may also monitor human rights or the implementation of environmental regulations (e.g., the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Transparency International).

Since World War II—and particularly since the 1970s—NGOs have proliferated, especially at the national and local levels. At the international level, large numbers of NGOs have been created to address issues such as human rights, women's rights, and environmental protection. At the same time, international NGOs have become important actors in world affairs within the UN and its specialized agencies and within other forums. A variety of factors have contributed to the growth of NGOs, including globalization; the increasing prominence of transnational issues such as those just mentioned; the growth in UN-sponsored global conferences, which often include parallel NGO forums; the communications revolution, which has linked individuals and groups through facsimile (fax), the Internet, and e-mail; and the spread of democracy, which has bolstered civil society and enabled individuals to form and operate organizations more freely. By the early 21st century, there were some 6,000 recognized international NGOs.

Although NGOs vary considerably in size, organization, and approach, they share the basic belief that principled individuals working together can do much to solve human and environmental problems through grassroots organizing, the creative use of information, and sophisticated political strategies. NGOs have played central roles in global campaigns against slavery, the trade in ivory, whaling, violence against women, apartheid in South Africa, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Spectrum of NGOs

The spectrum of NGOs is very wide: on one end, we find local organisations, constituted of small groups of volunteers, and gathered around an altruistic idea. On the other end, we see multinational organisations, with hundreds of millions of dollars of annual budget and thousands of paid employees, constituted around the need to coordinate and carry on certain tasks that State cannot or is not willing to achieve.

There are hundreds of thousands of NGOs. There are probably not as many definitions but similarly with the Civil Society, there appears to be no common definition of NGO. Why is that so? How does it define itself? What is the “taxonomy” of NGOs? Should we define it by its actions or by how it gets its resources, those are the many questions that face those who want to understand the NGO phenomenon.

This thesis has for objective the study of the transformation of NGOs’ governance, by the means of ICT. It is quite clear that in order to transform an institution, one has to know it and the environment into which it acts and produce effects. A good definition of the concept of NGO is a good point to start with.

Organisations of a great variety populate the space of NGOs. They may differ in terms of size, constitution, internal organisation, goals, but also according on how they are legally organised, who provide their funds and how, who are the beneficiaries of their activity and so on.

NGOs exert influence on the policies and programs of governments and IGOs by observing or participating in the meetings at which norms, principles, treaties, and conventions are negotiated, disputes settled, and resources allocated. Although the UN's members are states, Article 71 of the UN Charter authorizes the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to grant consultative status to NGOs. In the early 21st century, more than 2,000 NGOs were officially accredited with consultative status. Accredited NGOs are automatically granted the right to participate in UN-sponsored conferences, though each conference has different rules for the participation of other NGOs, particularly local ones. Beyond the UN, other IGOs set their own guidelines for NGO participation.

NGOs are influential because of their expertise and their access to important sources of information. As a result, a significant share of development aid and humanitarian relief is now channelled through such organizations. In some cases, however, the sheer number of NGOs as well as their diversity makes it difficult for them to develop a coordinated approach to certain problems. Another factor that tends to limit their effectiveness is their perceived lack of representativeness. Many international NGOs, for example, claim to speak for the peoples of Africa, Asia, or Latin America, though their leadership is drawn almost exclusively from Europe or North America.

Since the late 20th century, some governments have reacted to the growing power and influence of NGOs by accusing them of being undemocratic and accountable only to those who provide them with funding. Other governments have attempted to prevent certain NGOs from participating in international decision-making forums. Despite these difficulties, NGOs continue to play an important role in developing global norms and rules on a wide range of transnational issues.

"nongovernmental organization." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 30 May 2007 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9395824>>.

A good step to define NGO is probably by asking them to define themselves. A good proportion of NGOs – but by far not all them – uses the Internet to introduce themselves to the public. Looking at these websites is a very educating process as it makes us discovering why it is so difficult to define the NGO.

Some NGO act locally, at the associative level, to defend particular and narrowly defined interests. This is not to say that they have no value, but they are usually closely related to those of the members of the association. Some NGO act at the national level, they are a further away from their members, which means that their interests are much less defined. These NGOs will either lobby the politicians or even execute tasks on behalf of their governments.

And finally of course we have many NGOs acting at the international level. Their goals are usually broader, they lobby groups of countries or international organisations, they have high budgets and that means that they have to be well renowned in order to have influence and resources.

The link between Civil Society and NGO

Definitions and observations tend to confirm that most NGOs belong to the Civil Society. There are exceptions, particularly at the international level.

The NGO at the local level - Associative level

Most NGOs of the local level are associations. Being local, they are small by definition, altruistic usually and have well defined objectives. They form the vast majority of NGOs. To the notable exception of countries with sometimes less democratic policies that request NGOs to register² specifically to have the legal right to existence, I doubt that there are valid and exhaustive lists of this kind of NGO. The local NGOs are usually engaged with concrete action with segments of the population that they think are in need of their assistance. Their main concerns are in getting access to resources they need to achieve their goals. The Information Society should help them to get known and to improve their efficiency, for example in finding, with the contribution of the authorities, who are their targeted beneficiaries. For NGOs providing assistance, beneficiaries are most certainly not members. The latter provide personal engagement, part of the funds and committee members.

The NGO at the national level

NGO acting at the national level rely more on communication than those acting at the local level. Their objectives are certainly more political unless they federate local NGO therefore a certain form of legal recognition is usually the

² Six Tunisian NGOs whose legal registration was refused, launched a Joint Declaration. The Conseil National pour les Libertés Tunisiennes (CNLT) and the Association de Lutte contre la Torture (ALT) belong to the coalition. The Declaration requires of the Tunisian government to act to guarantee the right to the freedom of association in conformity with the standards of the international human rights; <http://info.frontlinedefenders.org/francais/communiqués/1696>; accessed on 12.06.07

rule³. We shall further develop the subject at paragraph **Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.**

The NGO at the international level

The UN definition of the object NGO points out to generally admitted characteristics:

An NGO is a

- Not-for-profit,
- Voluntary citizens' group, task or objectives-oriented and made up of people with a common interest
- Which is organized on the following levels
 - local
 - national
 - international
- To address issues in support of the public good.

NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policy and programme implementation, and encourage participation of Civil Society stakeholders at the community level.

They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, the environment or health.

Accountability

Accountability should be a major concern of all NGOs, wherever their segment. We shall come to this point later in paragraph **Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.**

³ The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights was registered in 1985 as a branch of the Arab Organization for Human Rights, and presented a request in 1987 for registration *as an NGO* under Law #32 of 1964. However, the Ministry refused the request at that time, and although EOHR appealed the decision, the administrative judiciary upheld the refusal. In 1992, EOHR launched a challenge against the verdict before the Supreme Administrative Court, and subsequent hearings continued until 2000. During this period, the government enacted new legislation pertaining to NGOs - NGOs Law (#135/1999), and EOHR applied again for registration under this new law. After an 18-year Legal Struggle, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) finally attains legal recognition as an NGO under the NGOs Law (#84/2002); <http://www.canada.ifex.org/fr/content/view/full/51529>; accessed on 12.06.07

Relation partners – what perception?

- Members
- Financing partners – accreditation procedures
- Beneficiaries

Synthesis, conclusions for NGOs and the UICN

We shall have to find out whether the IUCN defines itself as an NGO as well as how IUCN compare with the ordinary definition of NGO? But equally we shall need to know whether IUCN thinks it should to be compared with other forms of organisations, like businesses for example? Effectively, big NGOs have important budgets and important human resources. Like for government high ranked civil servants who like to feel business men, the risk for NGOs executives of mixing positions exists in important NGOs. The border between NGOs and businesses thus tends to blur voluntarily or unconsciously. This will of course affect the reflection about the move to e-NGO of such organisation. A too strong identification with corporation's mind might perfectly affect the credibility and the potential of reaching the goals.