Activism and the Role of NGOs

“We had to do a lot to make [it] happen. It took several demonstrations by our organization and getting arrested, throwing myself on the table in Congress, before we got an invitation to speak … I had five minutes.”
Cheri Honkala, the first welfare recipient in the US to testify before Congress; Kensington Welfare Rights Union

What are NGOs?

The term non-governmental, or, more accurately non-profit is normally used to cover the range of organisations which go to make up civil society. Such organisations are characterised, in general, by having as the purpose of their existence something other than financial profit. However, this leaves a huge multitude of reasons for existence and a wide variety of enterprises and activities. NGOs range from small pressure groups on, for example, specific environmental concerns or specific human rights violations, through educational charities, women's refuges, cultural associations, religious organisations, legal foundations, humanitarian assistance programmes – and the list could continue – all the way to the huge international organisations with hundreds or even thousands of branches or members in different parts of the world.

In this section, we look briefly at the significant role that such organisations have had, and continue to have, in the protection of human rights throughout the world. At nearly every level of the different attempts to preserve the dignity of individual citizens when this is threatened by the power of the state, NGOs play a crucial role in:

- fighting individual violations of HR
- offering direct assistance to those whose rights have been violated
- lobbying for changes to national or international law
- helping to develop the substance of those laws
- promoting knowledge of, and respect for, human rights among the population.

The contribution of NGOs is important not only in terms of the results that are achieved, and therefore for the optimism that people may feel about the defence of human rights in the world, but also because NGOs are, in a very direct sense, tools that are available to be used by individuals throughout the world. They are managed and co-ordinated – as many organisations are – by private individuals, but they also draw a large part of their strength from other members of the community offering voluntary support to their cause. This fact gives them great significance for those individuals who would like to contribute to the improvement of human rights in the world.

Types of human rights NGOs

The 1993 UN Conference on Human Rights – known as the Vienna Conference - was attended by 841 NGOs from throughout the world, all of which described themselves as working with a human rights mission. Though an impressive figure in itself, this actually represented only a tiny fraction of the total number of human rights NGOs active in the world.
Most self-professed “human rights organisations” tend to be engaged in the protection of civil and political rights. The best known of such organisations, at least on the international stage, are probably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, both of which operate across the globe. However, as we have seen, civil and political rights are just one category of the many different human rights recognised by the international community, and new rights are continuing to emerge, even today. When we take this into account and consider the NGOs active in countering poverty, violence, racism, health problems, homelessness and environmental concerns, to name just a few, the actual number of NGOs engaged in human rights protection, in one form or another, runs into the hundreds of thousands throughout the world.

At its General Assembly in 2001, Amnesty International reformed its mandate to include economical and social rights and the right to development within its aims and areas of concern for action.

¿ Do you know of any NGOs fighting for human rights in your country?

How do they influence the process?

NGOs may attempt to engage in the protection of human rights at various different stages or levels, and the strategies they employ will vary according to the nature of their objectives – their specificity or generality; their long-term or short-term nature; their local, national or international scope, and so on.

a. Direct assistance

It is particularly common for NGOs working on social and economic rights to offer some form of direct service to those who have been victims of human rights violations. Such services may include forms of humanitarian assistance, protection or training to develop new skills. Alternatively, where the right is protected by law, they may include legal advocacy or advice on how to present claims.

In many cases, however, direct assistance to the victim of a violation is either not possible or does not represent the best use of an organisation’s resources. On such occasions, and this probably represents the majority of cases, NGOs need to take a longer view and to think of other ways either of rectifying the violation or of preventing similar occurrences from happening in the future.

b. Collecting accurate information

If there is a fundamental strategy lying at the base of the different forms of NGO activism, it is perhaps the idea of attempting to ‘show up’ the perpetrators of injustice. Governments are very often able to shirk their obligations under the international treaties that they have signed up to because the impact of their policies is simply not known to the general public. Collecting such information and using it to ‘show up’ governments is an essential element in holding them to account and is frequently used by NGOs. They attempt to put pressure on people or governments by identifying a cause that will appeal to people’s sense of injustice and then making it public.

Two of the best known examples of organisations that are reputed for their accurate monitoring and reporting are Amnesty International (see p xx for more information) and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Both of these organisations possess authority not only among the general public but also at the level of the UN, where their reports are taken into account as part of the official process of monitoring governments that have agreed to be bound by the terms of international treaties.
c. Campaigning and lobbying.

Lobbying is the general name given to the various ways of putting pressure on national or international actors in order to bring about a policy change. Again, there are numerous forms, and an NGO will try to adopt the most appropriate one given the objectives it has in mind, the nature of its ‘target’, and of course, its own available resources. Some common practices are outlined below.

- Letter-writing campaigns are a method that has been used to great effect by Amnesty International and other NGOs. People and organisations ‘bombard’ government officials with letters from thousands of its members all over the world.
- Street actions or demonstrations, with the media coverage that these normally attract, may be used when organisations want to enlist the support of the public or to bring something to the public eye in order to ‘shame’ a government.
- The media will frequently play an important part in lobbying practices, and the Internet is now assuming an increasingly significant role.
- In addition to demonstrations of support or public outrage, NGOs may also engage in private meetings or briefings with officials. Sometimes the mere threat of bringing something to the public eye may be enough to change a policy or practice, as in the story below.

In general, the greater the backing from the public or from other influential actors (for example, other governments), the more likely is it that a campaign will achieve its objectives. Even if they do not always use this support directly, NGOs can ensure that their message is heard simply by indicating that a large popular movement could be mobilised against a government.

Have there been any high profile campaigns in your country? What was the outcome?

d. Long-term education

Many human rights NGOs also include, at least as part of their activities, some type of public awareness or educational work. Realising that the essence of their support lies with the general public, NGOs will often try to bring greater knowledge of human rights issues to members of the public. A greater knowledge of these issues and of the methods of defending them is likely to engender a greater respect and this, in turn, will increase the likelihood of being able to mobilise support in particular instances of human rights violations. It is that support, or potential support, that lies at the base of the success of the NGO community in improving the human rights environment.

Examples of successful activism

Domestic violence in Russia

There are different estimates of levels of domestic violence in Russia, but some figures suggest that between 30 and 40 percent of families have experienced it. In 1995, after the Beijing Women’s Conference, the first reliable statistics were published. These suggested that 14,500 women a year had been killed by their husbands and about fifty thousand had been hospitalised. It has taken a great deal of effort for this problem even to be recognised in Russia but most of the success is a result of the efforts of an NGO called ANNA, a founding member of the Russian Association for Crisis Centres for Women.

The organisation was set up by Marina Pisklakova, a leading women’s rights activist. In July 1993, she worked alone to run a hotline for women in distress and then expanded the work to

“It can be fun to write to people who lead authoritarian or repressive regimes, have a dictator as a pen-pal, and be a complete nuisance to him by sending him these letters.”

Sting

“Human Rights Education is a way of living. We’ve been doing it over the past few years without knowing that all our activities were about Human Rights Education.”

Alexandra Vidanovic, Open Club Nis, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, participant at the Forum on Human Rights Education.
establish the first women's crisis centre in the country. She lobbied for legislation banning abuse and worked with a hostile law enforcement establishment to bring aid to victims and to bring criminal prosecutions. She began a media campaign to expose the violence against women and to educate women about their rights and now regularly appears on radio and television promoting respect for women's rights.

The organisation succeeded in expanding the definition of domestic violence to include marital rape, sexual violence in the marriage or partnership, psychological violence, isolation and economic control. By the summer of 1994, they had trained a first group of women to work as telephone counsellors and, in 1995, began work in other Russian cities for local women's groups that were starting to emerge and wanted to start up hotlines or crisis centres. ANNA helped to developing programmes to provide psychological and legal counselling for the victims of domestic violence and, in April 1997, lawyers working for the organisation brought the first domestic violence case to court and won, setting a legal precedent for all of Russia. By the start of the new millennium, they had over forty women's crisis centres operating throughout Russia.

Website for the organisation: www.owl.ru/anna.

Environmental concerns in Switzerland

Between 1961 and 1976, several large chemical giants dumped more than 114,000 tons of toxic industrial chemical waste in the former clay pit of Bonfol in Switzerland. Although it would be illegal to dump the waste today, in 1961, when the landfill site was started, the law did not prohibit such landfills. The toxic waste remained at the site and continued to contaminate surrounding communities and the environment with a mixture of organic and inorganic pollutants.

On May 14 2000, around 100 Greenpeace activists occupied the Bonfol chemical landfill site, near Basel, Switzerland, demanding that the chemical companies that dumped toxic waste at the site take full responsibility for cleaning it up. The activists declared that they would occupy the site until the chemical companies committed themselves to cleaning it up in a manner that would not pose any further risk to human health or the environment.

Occupation of the landfill forced the chemical industry to meet with community representatives and with Greenpeace and, as a result, the chemical industry finally signed an agreement to complete a clean-up study by February 2001 and to start the clean-up process in 2001. The industry also agreed to involve the local communities and environmental organisations fully in the clean-up and to inform the local communities about the ground water and drinking water pollution resulting from the dump. On July 7th 2001, Greenpeace ended their occupation of the chemical dumpsite.

See the Greenpeace website: www.greenpeace.org.

Doing your sums

Development Initiatives for Social and Human Action (DISHA)

DISHA was established in the early 1990s in the Indian State of Gujarat as the representatives of groups of tribal and forest workers that have some 80,000 members between them. It has been using the right to information to analyse state budgets and the extent to which allocations match public statements and declarations to alleviate poverty.

The organisation began by dealing with the issue of enforcing the minimum wage for people working in forest areas. The director of DISHA explained the organisation's approach: "As part of this work, we began to look at why the area had not developed and why employment
opportunities had not been created. We looked at the money spent by the state, and that's how we began to look at the state budget."

In 1994, DISHA members decided to distribute their analysis to all parliamentarians, the press and leading citizens. This ensured that the information was widely used and discussed.

Since the organisation started work, state allocations to tribal areas have increased substantially: at the start, the allocation was 12% of the budget but is now 18%. Because their research was so solid, DISHA soon earned respect as an institution "that was not just shouting slogans and marching, but presenting very sound arguments on the basis of facts and figures. People now come to us for information on the budget - we are the only institution in the country that classifies and analyses the budget".

The diamond wars

Global Witness, UK is an organisation that works to expose the link between environmental exploitation and human rights abuses. It is a London-based environmental group, which began work in 1993 in a rented office equipped only with a computer retrieved from a skip.

Today, the organisation is still tiny, with just nine members of staff, but for four years its founders, Charmain Gooch, Simon Taylor and Patrick Alley, led a campaign against the diamond industry.

During that time, Global Witness successfully linked the trade in illicit diamonds with bloody African wars. It collected evidence to convince governments, the United Nations and the public that illegally mined diamonds in African war zones were being used to bankroll conflicts in which children lose their limbs and tens of thousands die. The organisation lobbied ferociously to "make decision-makers see sense", forging alliances with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in Angola, and cultivating powerful political sympathisers such as the Canadian ambassador Robert Fowler, who heads the UN sanctions committee on Angola. Very quickly a global campaign force capable of taking on a global industry emerged.

When Robert Fowler, Canada's ambassador to the United Nations, issued the warning of a fur-style boycott at the World Diamond Congress in Antwerp, the diamond industry took fright. In July 2000, the US$ 7bn-a-year global diamond industry, apparently persuaded that it was on the edge of an abyss, capitulated to the campaigners' demands for fundamental changes to the trade in diamonds.

See their web-site http://www.globalwitness.org.

Wheelchair ramps in Tuzla

In 1996, a disability NGO in Tuzla, Bosnia Herzegovina, decided to run a campaign for traffic awareness. Lotos, the organisation, aimed to raise awareness about disabled people and traffic issues, and identified several concrete objectives, including special parking spaces for disabled people, better access on public transport, and accessible pavements and roads. They held events over the course of a week, just before the election campaign began. At the end of that time, public awareness had been increased and all pavements in Tuzla were rebuilt with ramps!

References


Campaigner, Tuzla.

"I am completely confident in saying that Tuzla is the most accessible town for wheelchair users in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina."

The Independent Newspaper