Briefing

Sins of the secular missionaries

Aid and campaign groups, or NGOs, matter more and more in world affairs. But they are often far from being "non-governmental", as they claim. And they are not always a force for good

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name are printed three letters: NGO.

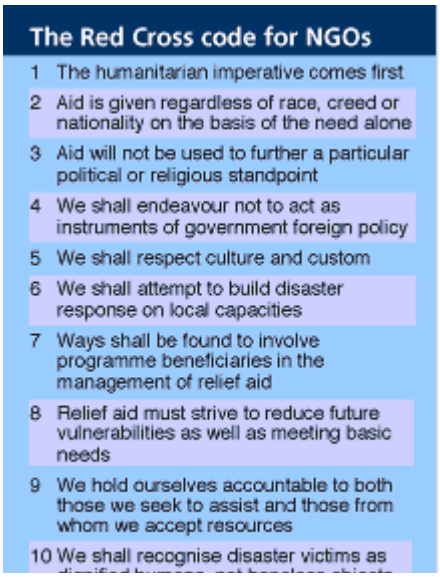
“What do you do?” the visitor asks.“I have formed an

NGO

.”“Yes, but what does it do?”“Whatever they want. I am waiting for some funds and then I will make a project.”

Once little more than ragged charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are now big business. Somalia, where that exchange took place, is heaven for them. In large parts of the country, western governments, the United Nations and foreign aid agencies cannot work directly; it is too dangerous. So outsiders must work through local groups, which become a powerful source of patronage. “Anybody who’s anybody is an NGO these days,” sighs one UN official.

And not just in Somalia. NGOs now head for crisis zones as fast as journalists do: a war, a flood, refugees, a dodgy election, even a world trade conference, will draw them like a honey pot. Last spring, Tirana, the capital of Albania, was swamped by some 200 groups intending to help the refugees from Kosovo. In Kosovo itself, the ground is now thick with foreign groups competing to foster democracy, build homes and proffer goods and services. Environmental activists in Norway board whaling ships; do-gooders gather for the Chiapas rebels in Mexico.



The Red Cross code for NGOs

1. The humanitarian imperative comes first
2. Aid is given regardless of race, creed or nationality on the basis of the need alone
3. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint
4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy
5. We shall respect culture and custom
6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities
7. Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid
8. Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities as well as meeting basic needs
9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources
10. We shall recognise disaster victims as

Domestic ones have grown even faster. By one estimate, there are now 2m in America alone, most formed in the past 30 years. In Russia, where almost none existed before the fall of communism, there are at least 65,000. Dozens are created daily; in Kenya alone, some 240 NGOs are now created every year.

Most of these are minnows; some are whales, with annual incomes of millions of dollars and a worldwide operation. Some are primarily helpers, distributing relief where it is needed; some are mainly campaigners, existing to promote issues deemed important by their members. The general public tends to see them as uniformly altruistic, idealistic and independent. But the term "NGO", like the activities of the NGOs themselves, deserves much sharper scrutiny.

Governments' puppets?

The tag "Non-Governmental Organisation" was used first at the founding of the UN. It implies that NGOs keep their distance from officialdom; they do things that governments will not, or cannot, do. In fact, NGOs have a great deal to do with governments. Not all of it is healthy.

Take the aid NGOs. A growing share of development spending, emergency relief and aid transfers passes through them. According to Carol Lancaster, a former deputy director of USAID, America's development body, NGOs have become "the most important constituency for the activities of development aid agencies". Much of the food delivered by the World Food Programme, a UN body, in Albania last year was actually handed out by NGOs working in the refugee camps. Between 1990 and 1994, the proportion of the EU's relief aid channelled through NGOs rose from 47% to 67%. The Red Cross reckons that NGOs now disburse more money than the World Bank.

And governments are happy to provide that money. Of Oxfam's £98m ($162m) income in 1998, a quarter, £24.1m, was given by the British government and the EU. World Vision US, which boasts of being the world's "largest privately funded Christian relief and development organisation", collected $55m-worth of goods that year from the American government. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the winner of last year's Nobel peace prize, gets 46% of its income from government sources. Of 120 NGOs which sprang up in Kenya between 1993 and the end of 1996, all but nine received all their income from foreign governments and international bodies. Such official contributions will go on, especially if the public gets more stingy. Today's young, educated and rich give a smaller share of their incomes away than did—and do—their parents.

In Africa, where international help has the greatest influence, western governments have long been shifting their aid towards NGOs. America's help, some $711m last year, increasingly goes to approved organisations, often via USAID. Europe's donors also say that bilateral aid should go to NGOs, which are generally more open and efficient than governments. For the UN, too, they are now seen as indispensable. The new head of the UN's Development Programme says the body "will put a lot more emphasis on relations with NGOs". Most such agencies now have hundreds of NGO partners.

So the principal reason for the recent boom in NGOs is that western governments finance them. This is not a matter of charity, but of privatisation: many "non-governmental" groups are becoming contractors for governments. Governments prefer to pass aid through NGOs because it is cheaper, more efficient—and more at arm's length—than direct official aid.

Governments also find NGOs useful in ways that go beyond the distribution of food and blankets. Some bring back useful information, and make it part of their brief to do so. Outfits such as the International Crisis Group and Global Witness publish detailed and opinionated reports from places beset by war or other disasters. The work of Global Witness in Angola is actually paid for by the British Foreign Office.

Diplomats and governments, as well as other NGOs, journalists and the public, can make good use of these reports. As the staff of foreign embassies shrink, and the need to keep abreast of events abroad increases, governments inevitably turn to private sources of information. In some benighted parts of the world, sometimes only NGOs can nowadays reveal what is going on.

Take, for example, human rights, the business of one of the biggest of the campaigning NGOs, Amnesty International. Amnesty has around 1m members in over 162 countries, and its campaigns against political repression, in particular against unfair imprisonment, are known around the world. The information it gathers is often unavailable from other sources.

Where western governments' interests match those of campaigning NGOs, they can form effective alliances. In 1997, a coalition of over 350 NGOs pushed for, and obtained, a treaty against the use of landmines. The campaign was backed by the usual array of concerned governments (Canada, the Scandinavians) and won the Nobel peace prize.

NGOs are also interesting and useful to governments because they work in the midst of conflict. Many were created by wars: the Red Cross after the Battle of Solferino in 1859, the Save the Children Fund after the first world war, MSF after the Biafran war. By being "close to the action" some NGOs, perhaps unwittingly, provide good cover for spies—a more traditional means by which governments gather information.

In some cases, NGOs are taking over directly from diplomats: not attempting

London-based peace research group, tried the same for Sierra Leone in the mid-1990s. Last year, Unicef (a part of the UN) and the Carter Centre, founded by ex-President Jimmy Carter, brought about a peace deal of sorts between Uganda and Sudan. There are now roughly 500 groups registered by the European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation. "Civil war demands civil action," say the organisers.

Larger NGOs have pledged not to act as "instruments of government foreign policy". But at times they are seen as just that. Governments are more willing to pay groups to deliver humanitarian aid to a war zone than to deliver it themselves. Last autumn, America's Congress passed a resolution to deliver food aid to rebels in southern Sudan via USAID and sympathetic Christian groups (religious NGOs earn the label RINGOs, and are found everywhere).

Perhaps the most potent sign of the closeness between NGOs and governments, aside from their financial links, is the exchange of personnel. In developing countries, where the civil service is poor, some governments ask NGOs to help with the paperwork requested by the World Bank and other international institutions. Politicians, or their wives, often have their own local NGOs. In the developed world, meanwhile, increasing numbers of civil servants take time off to work for NGOs, and vice versa: Oxfam has former

may also help aid groups to do their job effectively. But it hardly reflects their independence.

NGOS can also stray too close to the corporate world. Some, known to critics as "business NGOs", deliberately model themselves on, or depend greatly on, particular corporations. Bigger ones have commercial arms, media departments, aggressive head-hunting methods and a wide array of private fund-raising and investment strategies. Smaller ones can be overwhelmed by philanthropic businesses or their owners: Bill Gates, the head of Microsoft, gave $25m last year to an NGO that is looking for a vaccine for AIDS, transforming it overnight from a small group with a good idea to a powerful one with a lot of money to spend.

The business of helping

In 1997, according to the OECD, NGOs raised $5.5 billion from private donors. The real figure may well be higher: as leisure, travel and other industries have grown, so too have charities. In 1995 non-profit groups (including, but not only, NGOs) provided over 12% of all jobs in the Netherlands, 8% in America and 6% in Britain.

Many groups have come to depend on their media presence to help with fund-raising. This is bringing NGOs their greatest problems. They are adapting from shoebox outfits, stuffing envelopes and sending off perhaps one container of medicines, to sophisticated multi-million-dollar operations. In the now-crowded relief market, campaigning groups must jostle for attention: increasingly, NGOs compete and spend a lot of time and money marketing themselves. Bigger ones typically spend 10% of their funds on marketing and fund-raising.

The focus of such NGOs can easily shift from finding solutions and helping needy recipients to pleasing their donors and winning television coverage. Events at Goma, in Congo, in 1994 brought this problem home. Tens of thousands of refugees from Rwanda, who had flooded into Goma, depended on food and shelter from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and from NGOs. Their dramatic plight drew the television cameras and, with them, the

reproduced above.

Since then, NGOs have been working hard to improve. More than 70 groups and 142 governments backed the 1995 code of conduct, agreeing that aid should be delivered "only on a basis of need". "We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources," they pledged. Yet in Kosovo last year there was a similar scramble, with groups pushing to be seen by camera crews as they worked. Personnel and resources were even shifted there from worse wars and refugee crises in Africa.

As they get larger, NGOs are also looking more and more like businesses themselves. In the past, such groups sought no profits, paid low wages—or none at all—and employed idealists. Now a whole class of them, even if not directly backed by businesses, have taken on corporate trappings. Known collectively as BINGOs, these groups manage funds and employ staff which a medium-sized company would envy. Like corporations, they attend conferences endlessly. Fund-raisers and senior staff at such NGOs earn wages comparable to the private sector. Some bodies, once registered as charities, now choose to become non-profit companies or charitable trusts for tax reasons and so that they can control their spending and programmes more easily. Many big charities have trading arms, registered as companies. One manufacturing company, Tetra Pak, has even considered sponsoring emergency food delivery as a way to advertise itself.

Any neat division between the corporate and the NGO worlds is long gone. Many NGOs operate as competitors seeking contracts in the aid market, raising funds with polished media campaigns and lobbying governments as hard as any other business. Governments and UN bodies could now, in theory, ask for tenders from businesses and NGOs to carry out their programmes. It seems only a matter of time before this happens. If NGOs are cheap and good at delivering food or health care in tough areas, they should win the contracts easily.

Good intentions not enough

It could be argued that it does not matter even if NGOs are losing their independence, becoming just another arm of government or another business.

caught in civil wars, for those imprisoned unfairly and for millions of desperate refugees. There are many examples of small, efficient and inspirational groups with great achievements: the best will employ local people, keep foreign expertise to a minimum, attempt precise goals (such as providing clean water) and think deeply about the long-term impact of their work. Some of these grow into large, well-run groups.

But there are also problems. NGOs may be assumed to be less bureaucratic, wasteful or corrupt than governments, but under-scrutinised groups can suffer from the same chief failing: they can get into bad ways because they are not accountable to anyone.

Critics also suspect that some aid groups are used to propagate western values, as Christian missionaries did in the 19th century. Many NGOs, lacking any base in the local population and with their money coming from outside, simply try to impose their ideas without debate. For example, they often work to promote women's or children's interests as defined by western societies, winning funds easily but causing social disruption on the ground.

Groups that carry out population or birth-control projects are particularly controversial; some are paid to carry out sterilisation programmes in the poor parts of the world, because donors in the rich world consider there are too many people there. Anti-"slavery" campaigns in Africa, in which western NGOs buy children's freedom for a few hundred dollars each, are notorious. Unicef has condemned such groups, but American NGOs continue to buy slaves—or people they consider slaves—in southern Sudan. Clearly, buying slaves, if that is what they are, will do little to discourage the practice of trading them.

Even under calmer conditions, in non-emergency development work, not all single-interest groups may be the best guarantors of long-term success. They are rarely obliged to think about trade-offs in policy or to consider broad, cross-sector approaches to development. NGOs are "often organised to promote particular goals...rather than the broader goal of development," argues Ms Lancaster. In Kosovo last spring, "many governments made bilateral funding agreements with NGOs, greatly undermining UNHCR's ability to prioritise programmes or monitor efficiency," says Peter Morris of MSF. This spring in Kosovo, "there were instances of several NGOs competing to work in the same camps, duplication of essential services," complains an Oxfam worker.

And whatever big international NGOs do in the developing world, they bring in western living standards, personnel and purchasing power which can transform local markets and generate great local resentment. In troubled zones where foreign NGOs flourish, weekends bring a line of smart four-by-fours parked at the best beaches, restaurants or nightclubs. The local beggars do well, but discrepancies between expatriate staff and, say, impoverished local officials trying to do the same work can cause deep antipathy. Not only have NGOs diverted funds away from local governments, but they are often seen as directly challenging their sovereignty.

NGOs can also become self-perpetuating. When the problem for which they were founded is solved, they seek new campaigns and new funds. The old anti-apartheid movement, its job completed, did not disband, but instead became another lobby group for southern Africa. As NGOs become steadily more powerful on the world scene, the best antidote to hubris, and to institutionalisation, would be this: disband when the job is done. The chief aim of NGOs should be their own abolition.

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