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NGOS: A Long and Turbulent History

Thomas Davies

The diversity and reach of the more than 20,000 international NGOs operating today is difficult to overestimate. It encompasses the human rights activism of Amnesty International in 150 countries, the development work of the 120,000 staff of BRAC touching the lives of 126 million, and the participation of approximately one billion people in the member organizations of the International Co-operative Alliance. The breadth of activities stretches from the settlement by the Court of Arbitration of the International Chamber of Commerce of more disputes than the International Court of Justice, to the alternative globalization envisaged by the World Social Forums and pan-Islamic activism of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet, international NGOs have far deeper roots than is commonly assumed. The term itself – ‘non-governmental organizations’ – entered common usage via the UN Charter at the end of World War II. But even before the onset of the modern era, religious orders, missionary groups, merchant *hanses* and scientific societies engaged in activities crossing continents. Many of these bodies – including Roman Catholic monastic orders and Sufi *tariqahs* – survive to the present day. It was in the context of the Enlightenment idealism, revolutionary upheavals and East-West contacts of the late 18th Century, however, that the sphere of international NGOs was to be truly transformed.

Indeed, the wave of protests of 2011 – from the Arab uprisings, to the Indian anti-corruption protests and Occupy Wall Street – are evocative of the much earlier wave of revolutions in the Atlantic world, encompassing the American, French and Haitian revolutions. Activists

such as Tom Paine, and international networks of masonic and secret societies, helped promote revolution from one country to another. A 'Universal Confederation of the Friends of Truth' was established in revolutionary Paris in 1790, with affiliates not only in France, but also in London, Philadelphia, Hamburg, Geneva, Genoa and Utrecht. The confederation was one of many groups at the time to describe its goals as "universal." European revolutionaries were inspired not only by Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality, but also by reports of uprisings in Muslim territories – amongst the texts of the French revolution was a 'Republican Koran.'

In contrast, nascent humanitarian organizations of the period built upon Chinese experience. Since at least the 13th Century, humanitarian associations had been active along Chinese rivers. Following the establishment of a 'Society for the Recovery of the Drowned' in Amsterdam in 1767, 'Humane Societies' specializing in the rescue and resuscitation of victims of drowning and shipwreck were founded in every continent by the onset of the 19th Century. Whereas the 'Humane Societies' aimed to disseminate new techniques of resuscitation, another humanitarian NGO, the Royal Jennerian Society, was established in 1803 to ensure that "Small-pox may be speedily exterminated... ultimately from the whole earth" by promoting newly-discovered methods of vaccination. Within two decades, the society had attracted an impressive array of patrons, including 14 European monarchs, the Ottoman Sultan, the Mughal of India, the Pacha of Baghdad, the American President and the Pope. It was claimed at the time that "by its efforts... nearly all parts of the world" had received vaccinations.

Amongst the most influential NGOs of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were the many anti-slavery groups established in the Atlantic world in the decades following the formation of the Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage in

1775. These organizations influenced not only national legislation such as the *British Slave Trade Act* of 1807, but also international negotiations. Abolitionist lobbying contributed, for instance, to the issuing of international declarations on the slave trade in the peace congresses following the Napoleonic wars. Another group, the Quakers, had been critical to the development of the abolitionist movement, and were also central to the formation of some of the earliest peace societies that developed in Great Britain and the US from 1815.

The peace movement has the distinction of being responsible for the earliest recorded organization to actually describe itself as international. The 'International Association' created in Scotland in 1834 claimed to consist "of those who desire to find just grounds for mutual esteem and respect, – who cherish peace, – and will act upon the grand principle of collecting and disseminating such information as tends to meliorate the individual and social condition of their fellow creatures." In the same year, Italian republican Giuseppe Mazzini established 'Young Europe' for the promotion of nationalism, and communist revolutionaries united in their first international organization – the 'League of the Just' – based in Paris.

In the context of the proliferating associations of the 1830s, a young Frenchman introducing himself as "the Count of Liancourt," Caliste-Auguste Godde, decided to set up an 'International Shipwreck Society' in 1835, modelled on the earlier Humane Societies and established "with a view to uniting the benevolent of all countries." It proved hugely successful in collecting large subscriptions from members, and was run from Place Vendôme 16, next door to what is now the Paris Ritz. The society potentially contributed to the spread of more than 150 lifesaving societies across every continent, and published a journal, *The International*, marketed as "the intelligent organ of all civilized people." Its activities were not to last long, however: in 1842 it was revealed that Godde – who turned out not to be a

count, but in fact a provincial doctor from the village of Liancourt – had been using the society to line his own pockets.

Whereas most of the international associations of the 1830s were to prove short-lived, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society established in 1839 has survived to the present day as the oldest international human rights organization, now Anti-Slavery International. Its significance extends beyond this achievement. British anti-slavery sentiment was one factor underpinning Whitehall's failure to recognize the Confederacy in the 1860s, playing a part in the abolition of slavery in the US. Similarly, the organization's international Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 was to spark a wave of private international congresses leading to the establishment of NGOs in many fields in subsequent decades. The barring of women from the event also spurred two of the excluded delegates – Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott – to convene a women's rights convention at Seneca Falls in 1848, a key moment in the development of the international movement for women's suffrage.

Few individuals were to play a more critical role in the development of international NGOs, however, than Swiss philanthropist Henri Dunant. In 1855, he spearheaded the creation of the World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations, notable for its pioneering structure as an international federation of national NGOs. More famously, after witnessing the carnage of the Battle of Solferino in 1859, Dunant went on in 1863 to found the Red Cross movement for the provision of neutral assistance to the wounded in conflict.

In the period from the 1870s to World War I, there was a massive expansion in the number and variety of international NGOs parallel to the second industrial revolution. Among the more than 400 bodies established at this time were organizations as diverse as the Universal Scientific Alliance, the World League for Protection of Animals, the International Council of

Women, the International Federation of Trade Unions, the International Cooperative Alliance, the International Olympic Committee, Rotary International, and the International Socialist Bureau.

The achievements of international NGOs in the decades preceding the war included successful campaigns for new treaties, such as by the International Literary and Artistic Association in respect of international copyright, and by the International Abolitionist Federation in relation to sex trafficking. In addition, women's groups were crucial in the dissemination of suffrage activism around the world. New Zealand, for instance, was the first country to grant women the right to vote in 1893. The suffrage movement there was stimulated by the American travelling envoy of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Mary Leavitt.

The late 19th Century was an era in which the pan-nationalist ideas that were to have considerable influence on international politics in the 20th Century began to be promoted by new NGOs such as the Pan-German League, the Pan-African Association, the Asia Association, the Pan-Islamic Society, and the World Zionist Organization. Widespread belief that national self-determination could lead to a more peaceful world was reflected in the creation in 1911 of a 'Central Office of Nationalities,' which aimed to promote "universal and perpetual peace" through its work on behalf of nationalist groups. More ominous was the development of organizations like the International Society for Racial Hygiene in 1905, and International Eugenics Committee in 1912, revealing the growing popularity of racist and eugenicist theories.

With hindsight, the years immediately preceding the onset of World War I represented a period where internationalist idealism reached a denouement. Mass campaigns were

launched around the Hague peace conferences of 1899 and 1907, with a global petition circulated by women's organizations in 1899 amassing one million signatures. This sentiment was also reflected in the proliferation of associations dedicated to the promotion of international languages such as Esperanto, whose inventor, Lejzer Ludwik Zamhenhof, referred to himself as 'Dr Hopeful.' By 1911, numerous international NGOs had been created for Esperantists of different backgrounds, ranging from police employees to teachers, bankers, postal workers, and even an International Union of Esperantist Vegetarians, which remarkably has managed to survive to the present day.

Of all the international NGOs to be established before the war, none was more ambitious than the Union of International Associations founded in 1910, which described its goals as no less than "the representation of all... international associations in a federated body." Its leaders laid ambitious plans for an "international palace" based in Brussels, "worthy of the importance of the organizations that created it." Although its objective of uniting all international NGOs in a single global federation was to be cut short by mass conflict in Europe, the union succeeded in building its 'international palace' (now a car exhibition space), and survives to the present day as the principal data repository on international civil society organizations, publishing the annual *Yearbook of International Organizations*.

Many groups failed to survive the devastating effects of World War I. At the same time, the vast destruction wrought by the conflict also spurred the formation of a myriad of new organizations to address its humanitarian consequences. The Save the Children Fund, for example, was established in 1919 to provide relief for children in danger of starvation as a result of war-induced food shortages. In the same year, the organization now known as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies emerged as another critical actor in the provision of post-war famine relief.

Although most NGOs found it impossible to hold international conferences during the war, an important exception was to be found in the convening in 1915 of an international congress of more than 1,000 women at the Hague, who were later to form the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Peace activists also played a key role in promoting the idea of a League of Nations, the establishment of which in 1919 was to transform NGOs' activities. Despite its well-known ineffectiveness as a security institution, the League worked in conjunction with NGOs on a huge array of international issues in the 1920s and 30s, including refugees, sex trafficking, children's rights, and economic reconstruction. This collaboration was to provide an important precedent for the contemporary role of NGOs within the UN system.

Strikingly, twice as many international NGOs were founded in the 1920s as in the entire 19th Century. Although few issues at the time could unite new groups as diverse as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Labour and Socialist International, one that came close was the promotion of international disarmament in the hope of avoiding another bloody world war. Large coalitions of women's, peace, Christian, ex-servicemen's, labor, students' and other international NGOs were formed around this goal, with some estimates of their combined membership as high as 50 percent of the entire global population. The world's largest international petition was circulated in support of disarmament by women's NGOs in the early 1930s. The campaign was to achieve little, however, and was even considered by Winston Churchill to have contributed to the unpreparedness of Western Europe in the face of the Fascist challenge later in the decade.

World War II had a similar impact upon the development of international NGOs as its predecessor, its destructive consequences spurring the establishment of many of today's

best-known relief NGOs, such as Oxfam, Catholic Relief Services and CARE International. NGOs were also influential in shaping aspects of the post-war settlement, especially the insertion of human rights references in the UN Charter, which took place after consultants to the US delegation to the San Francisco conference in 1945 announced “it would come as a grievous shock if the constitutional framework of the Organization would fail to make adequate provision for the ultimate achievement of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Three years later, the drafting of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* took place with the assistance of NGOs.

Although the number of international NGOs was to increase exponentially in the post-war era, their activities were constrained by the hardening Cold War environment. The international trade union movement, for instance, divided along partisan lines, with the secession of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions from the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1949. The establishment of numerous ‘front organizations’ was a key feature of this period, such as the pro-communist World Federation of Democratic Youth formed in 1945, which found itself in competition with the pro-Western World Assembly of Youth created three years later.

With the waves of decolonization in Asia and Africa from the 1950s, international NGOs became increasingly divided along North-South as well as East-West lines. This was reflected in the creation of regionally oriented organizations such as the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization in 1958. It could also be seen in the transformed self-awareness of European-based groups, which had previously considered their role in global terms. European broadcasters, for instance, replaced the ‘*International Broadcasting Union*’ with the ‘*European Broadcasting Union*.’

Created in 1961 to “mobilize public opinion in defence of those men and women who are imprisoned because their ideas are unacceptable to their governments,” Amnesty International was an early leader in pioneering a novel method for bridging the East-West and North-South divides. The organization developed the ‘threes network’ by which Amnesty groups would work in support of prisoners from each of the first, second and third worlds, thereby emphasizing their impartiality. Amnesty International was one of many new international NGOs established amidst the 1960s proliferation of ‘new social movements,’ such as for women’s rights and the protection of the natural environment.

In the 1970s, NGOs birthed by these societal shifts were to play an important part in the development of even larger transnational networks, especially following related UN gatherings such as the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, and the World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975. Groups like the International Feminist Network and the International Women’s Tribune Center were marked by more horizontal, networked, forms of organization, compared with the hierarchical structures of their predecessors.

The emergence of new development NGOs in the 1970s and 80s – including Africare in 1971, BRAC in 1972, and Islamic Relief Worldwide in 1984 – also reflected the growing diversity of the non-government sector in the final two decades of the Cold War. In the 1980s, for instance, the Consumers Association of Penang played a vital role in the development of multiple South-based networks, such as the Pesticide Action Network in 1982 and the Third World Network in 1984. Other groups formed in this period, such as the International Baby Food Action Network established in 1979 in the context of the Nestlé boycott, pointed to the growing importance of transnational corporations rather than governments as the objects of attention for campaigning NGOs.

Nevertheless, government-focused organizations remained influential during this period – in fact, they arguably contributed to some degree towards the ending of the Cold War. While the campaigns of anti-nuclear groups such as International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War shaped, in part, the negotiating environment of the *Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty* in 1987, the work of organizations such as Helsinki Watch (now Human Rights Watch) to expose the human rights abuses of Soviet bloc governments was credited by Vaclav Havel as significant in the 1989 revolutions toppling communist rule in central and eastern Europe.

As superpower tensions eased, international NGOs multiplied at an exceptional rate, numbering approximately 18,000 by the turn of the millennium. Aside from changing geopolitics, the undermining of government capabilities in the face of accelerating economic globalization appeared to open up considerable opportunities for civil society actors during the 1990s. The UN's Rio Earth Summit and Vienna World Conference on Human Rights were the focus of significant NGO lobbying early in the decade, while in subsequent years the apparent influence of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines on deliberations leading to the Ottawa *Landmines Convention* of 1997 prompted claims that NGOs had become a new "superpower." The growing economic power of the sector in the post-Cold War era was plainly evident in the increased scale of non-governmental development assistance, which expanded five-fold after 1990.

Indeed, some of the largest international NGOs now operate with greater aid budgets than many developed countries. In 2008, for instance, it was reported that the funds at World Vision's disposal exceeded the total overseas development assistance of Italy and Australia, while Save the Children's exceeded that of Austria. At the same time, the communications

revolution of the last two decades has in part been the work of international NGOs such as the Internet Society, and in turn made possible the activities of some of the most influential international NGOs of the contemporary era, such as the Wikimedia Foundation and campaigning network Avaaz.

The creation of large umbrella bodies of NGOs such as CIVICUS in recent years may be evocative of the ambitious efforts towards global co-ordination attempted by the Union of International Associations shortly before the First World War, and by the disarmament movement before the Second. However, there are important differences. Now, unlike the past, there is considerable emphasis upon the development of horizontal organization, rather than the top-down structures common to earlier NGOs. And now, unlike in the past, international NGOs are increasingly aware of their limitations, and bringing forward initiatives to address these limitations, such as the International NGO Accountability Charter.

From the promotion of revolutionary ideals in the late eighteenth century, through addressing the humanitarian consequences of two world wars and the East-West and North-South divides of the Cold War era, international NGOs have both shaped and been shaped by the principal historical developments of the last three centuries. The history of international NGOs has not been a simple story of expansion from a single part of the world outwards, but instead must be understood as the result of interactions among all continents that have intensified since the industrial revolution. Periods of crisis such as the world wars and Great Depression have been both a challenge and an opportunity for international NGOs: whereas some NGOs have failed to survive, others have been created or taken on new roles to address the new issues. Confronted with the challenges of economic crisis and fragmented authority in the contemporary era, international NGOs are adapting again with new approaches and forms of organization.

