

# **NGOs and the Future**

**A Think Piece**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper takes a strategic and futuristic view of the likely evolution of international NGOs. The paper is a personal view. It draws on my exposure to current NGO policy discussions and on personal observation and speculation. The paper explores the current motivation, likely dynamics and future trajectory of the humanitarian and development NGO sector.

The tone of the paper is more definite than any real prediction of the future permits. This apparent certainty is deliberate, and is intended to build a hard scenario against which NGO leaders can better think and react.

## **Key Points**

INGOs will remain focused on poverty and use new post-2015 international targets to hold governments to account. But increasingly they will focus on four big poverty issues and place them centre-stage: environment; inequality; migration, and natural disasters. They will also push the experience of indignity as the marker for what people feel when experiencing poverty, exclusion and violence of all kinds.

A normative and human rights-based commitment to global governance will continue to form the basis of NGO cosmopolitanism and global ethics. NGOs will employ more lawyers to give material precision to what human rights and government duties mean in practice around environment, inequality, disasters, migration and other aspects of poverty. A fierce backlash against neo-liberal global government may emerge from national NGOs in highly unequal countries if poverty increases. These groups will reject the NGO label and present as people movements and citizens organizations.

Big will be beautiful in development towards 2025. Donor governments will increase the scale of development projects and insist on consortia of state, NGO and commercial contractors. Some NGOs will choose to go for growth to become “mega NGOs” while others will resist and critique this model in ever wider networks.

INGOs will not have the run of the world. Instead, they will meet resistance and a desire for localization in fast-growing liberal states. This humanitarian and development nationalism will demand restructuring from INGOs. In Islamist settings, the liberal-islamist confrontation will continue and INGOs will be met with extreme Occidentalism and racism.

New aid actors will increase. Turkey, Gulf states and BRIC countries will develop their own humanitarian and development programmes. These will differ from western states and deliberately seek to dilute western aid hegemony. They will create their own models of NGOs that will marginalize western NGOs in several settings and may prefer coordination from regional organizations rather than the UN.

The NGO sector will see significant technological innovation and need to seek this out to deal with new challenges of environment, inequality, migration and disaster.

The pressure for NGO accountability will continue to build. Demands for fundamental mission accountability and particular project accountability will be more public and detailed. The need for harder evidence of NGO effectiveness and efficiency will increase.

## 1. NGO Evolution

The current world of NGOs is already aware of major trends affecting the sector. These trends pose a range of strategic questions that will need answering over the next twenty years. Answering some of these questions posed by future trends is felt to be truly existential, rather than purely optional. INGOs, in particular, recognize that survival is not a given. Instead, NGO continuity and adaptation is likely to be a struggle that will demand profound strategic choices around mission and method.

The emerging trends create significant new choices for NGOs that will be focused on a number of key areas: mission and relevance; global governance; scale and shape; collaboration; localization; resistance and Occidentalism; new actors, and innovation.

### Mission and Relevance

Humanitarian and development NGOs will remain broadly consistent about their mission and intent, and are likely to remain so up to 2025. There is consensus that poverty eradication remains a global challenge and is the right focus for their organizations. Strong buy-in around the MDGs in the last fifteen years means the majority of NGOs are determined to develop new long-range development goals to fan outwards towards 2030. These new “post-2015” goals will act as a continuing rallying point for the global NGO sector. Their specific targets will ensure clear focal points for constructive friction between NGOs and governments across the next 20 years.

This general mission and intent will, however, be significantly nuanced by an increasingly strong focus on newly strategic poverty problems. Environmental objectives can expect to see major lift-off running up to 2035, moving centre stage in INGO thinking and practice. Socially and economically, inequality will become the major issue of development injustice. As emerging powers create large new middle classes, and the gap between rich and poor expands across the world, inequality and environmental risk will become the main battleground of social justice for development NGOs. Common to both will be a complex concern with migration and the rights of human movement. In development discourse, NGOs will push the notion of indignity as the main expression of what it feels like for people to experience poverty, exclusion and violence of all kinds.

Increasingly, NGOs will frame development not simply as human progress but more fundamentally as a matter of human survival. This new survivalist paradigm will sound increasingly alarming at times in the run up to 2035. Climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, fair access to natural resources, good governance, ethical global business and a life of dignity for everyone will be increasingly strategic programme and advocacy priorities for NGOs.

Without some breakthrough in renewable energy and global governance, NGOs will frame the big four problems of environment, inequality, migration and natural disaster as the “make or break” survival issues for the human species. The urgency of environmental and inequality issues will run the risk of crowding out more fundamental human development concerns like education, health and gender equality. These will remain essential ingredients in social justice but may lose out to the noisier vanguard issues of environment and inequality in evolving NGO

discourse. But education, health and gender equality will continue to complement livelihoods, wealth creation, peace and good governance as the big drivers of human development. NGOs will need to find a way to include them firmly in their new focus on environment and inequality.

Governments will need to remain firmly committed to education in particular over the next twenty years. There is still no global NGO network with a core focus on education. Unless one is created, NGOs may risk overlooking this vital sector and prove unable to hold governments to account for educational failures.

As armed conflicts proper continue to decline, NGOs will take more interest in violence than war. NGO concerns with law and order issues will build on the pivotal problems of environment and inequality to emphasize a global epidemic of violence arising from social exclusion, marginalized millions, transnational crime, social conflict around extractive industries, justified migration and legitimate civil resistance.

Violence will be understood across a broad spectrum that will include domestic violence, gang violence, migration violence, organized crime and structural economic violence. This analysis will emphasize the emergence of significant “cultures of violence” in many of the world’s poor communities and in many of the rich world’s economic and migration policies. In their prioritization of violence, NGO concern with the control of light weapons will continue to build, and new campaigns will reach directly into the United States, Russia and Latin America.

Humanitarian action will remain a “first equal” intent alongside development in most international NGOs and an increasing number of national NGOs. As state funding for emergencies increases with the advent of new donors, NGOs will continue to invest in improving their humanitarian capability and positioning themselves as partners of choice for disaster affected states and donor governments. A determination to prove themselves capable of responding well in urban settings will be increasingly important to NGOs. They have long predicted that “super disasters” resulting from an urbanizing world will become more common. NGOs will skill up to meet this new need over the next twenty years. But their acceptability on the ground will be subject to how well they achieve localization (see below) and the levels of anti-western sentiment they experience in particular settings (see Occidentalism below).

## **Global Governance**

The great majority of NGOs will continue to adopt a normative approach to international relations and state governance as they frame the development agenda in survivalist terms. NGOs will use appeals to human rights and improved national and global governance as the normative framework of their vision of political progress, social justice, planet protection and species survival.

NGOs will lobby more and more for development and social justice to become more transparently elaborated in clear political contracts between government and citizen, and in measurable indices of dignity and quality of life. To achieve this, NGOs will employ more lawyers to work on civil, political, social, economic and environmental rights in an effort to give material precision to general ideas of human rights and good governance.

Efforts will continue to build an effective international system of humanitarian action for all people affected by disasters and armed conflicts. In particular, NGOs will lobby to develop this system into a global safety net for people affected by protracted food security emergencies and sudden onset natural disasters. This safety net or welfare approach to chronic crisis will be increasingly framed as a human right and a government duty in the face of environmental and economic vulnerability.

Not all the world's NGO sector will necessarily be content to support the continuing development of global governance in its current form. If development conditions deteriorate for many people around the world or inequality rises sharply towards 2035, the current system of global governance will be disputed by many. It will be regarded as representing only the interests of neo-liberal governments, global businesses and INGOs. A critical mass of confident and alternative NGOs, probably from within BRIC nations and poorer countries, will then launch a backlash against global governance. This revolutionary NGO movement will clash with the more normative NGO movement represented by western INGOs. The new movement will reject the "NGO" label as discredited and prefer instead to frame themselves as citizens' organizations or people's movements.

### **Scale and Shape**

Many INGOs will have to make profound choices about their scale and shape over the next twenty years. These choices turn on questions of organizational growth, and operational streamlining to maximize growth. Implicit in these choices will be challenges to the moral integrity and popular legitimacy of new mega NGOs.

Most INGOs have adopted a new transnational structure with single country programmes. Most recently, this has seen agencies like ActionAid, Oxfam and Save the Children realign their autonomous international affiliates into a single transnational organization with a "one programme approach". This means Save the Children no longer has several affiliates (like Save UK, Sweden and USA) working separately in one country but a single country office resourced by affiliate members working as Save the Children International. Other major NGOs like CARE and World Vision were already working to a single programme approach but through a network of autonomous country offices that is more like the Red Cross/Crescent system of national societies. This new transnational model is deemed the best platform for dramatic growth. The next ten years will prove the resilience and effectiveness (or not) of this streamlined global approach.

The question of NGO scale will become a major issue in NGO politics over the next twenty years. So far, two of the largest INGOS are going for growth. World Vision and Save the Children have both decided to make global scale a priority. Their aim is to be mega NGOs. Their logic is to become global brands in development and disaster, and to leverage their impact and influence accordingly. To achieve this, they are considering all kinds of financial and operational partnerships. They are also reverting to extreme marketing techniques that emphasize the physical agony of poverty and exaggerate the importance of aid. This kind of "disaster pornography" was universally discredited in NGO circles in the 1990s.

This rush for growth has made both organizations unpopular and suspect in wider NGO circles that fear dangerous moral compromises in a single-minded dash for

global scale. But the question of growth now faces every INGO as many of them fear being left behind by agencies like Save and World Vision. At the root of the growth dilemma is a fundamental question about the ability of a mega NGO to keep hold of its moral integrity, and its roots in a social movement of some kind. Is it possible for an NGO to grow into a global brand without losing its moral bearings, its popular legitimacy and its independence to speak out? Strategic growth, rather than organic growth, will need new partnerships with government donors and commercial contractors that worry many in the sector.

## **Collaborations**

Mega growth will not be achieved by raising private funds alone in the medium term. Instead such growth will require major reliance on government funding. Leading British NGOs traditionally had a rule that they would never take more than 49% of their finances from government funding. This was in contrast to many US and European NGOs who were often 90% funded by the EU or US government. If British NGOs go for growth they may well need ratios of government funding at 70% or more. This gives them serious financial risks if western governments later react against international aid. It also risks their ability to speak out freely against their donor governments. In short, this level of collaboration with donor governments risks political co-option.

Such intense collaboration also risks commercial cooption because government donors will increasingly prefer to distribute aid monies in much larger grants to consortia that mix NGOs and multinational commercial contractors. This new pattern of aid is already well underway in European and US governments, emerging from experience with large contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq. For example, DFID is already putting out large tenders for public health, governance projects or water and sanitation infrastructure worth tens of millions of pounds, with the condition that bidders are mixed corporate-NGO consortia.

Big will be beautiful in official humanitarian and development aid for the next ten years. Western governments will continue to explore their belief that development is best created by combining investment in state, commercial and NGO partners. As scale becomes the norm in development, the ideal project in Africa will be territorially ambitious and involve several types of stakeholders. It will have a price tag of around £50m; cover the needs of a region not a district; develop the infrastructure of a government department, and link the commercial expertise and efficiency of a PWC or Mott Macdonald with the grassroots network of Oxfam or World Vision and its local partners. Development and humanitarian aid will increasingly be public-private state building in which NGOs will be junior partners.

NGOs that decide to pursue strategic mega growth rather than organic growth will have no choice but to join in this model of development. In so doing, they will need to agree that human development can be pursued as a commercial venture and that multinational companies make acceptable partners. They will also need to agree that big is beautiful, and prove that they are well placed to fulfill the small soft parts of large commercially driven projects. Large development projects will become more like commercial “major projects” (like the Olympics or mine construction) with five or ten years to complete complex infrastructure projects that remain sensitive to community needs and expectations. Like the distinction between field sports and

extreme sports, international development will move from a predominant pattern of community development with an organic twenty year view, to a model of “extreme development” with major investments compressed into five year timelines.

To remain ethically mission-based, the new art of NGO work will be to leverage community empowerment and development values out of large time-bound major projects that are primarily driven by incentives of delivery, timeliness and profit margin. NGOs that decide not to engage in this new contract model of mega development will inevitably stay small and have to seek out alliances or advocacy innovations that enable them to fulfill their missions in other ways. Smaller NGOs may fall away or consolidate with one another in cooperative mergers to avoid being absorbed by mega NGOs in corporate style take-over bids and acquisitions of the kind just seen between Save the Children and Merlin.

### **Localization, Resistance and Occidentalism**

INGOs will no longer have a clear run at countries throughout the world as it develops in the next twenty years. In many countries, especially ones with a growing economy and a newly assertive middle class, neither government nor civil society will accept the old model of post-colonial aid. The role of European and American elites in development and humanitarian action will be rightly challenged by assertive cultures of humanitarian and development nationalism.

There is already considerable dissatisfaction among national NGOs with the way INGOs monopolize aid budgets, dominate development decision-making and leave very little space for national NGOs to develop. The current model of “partnership” between INGOs and national NGOs is often experienced as sub-contracting rather than equal collaboration by local development professionals. The elite lifestyle of many international aid workers adds to a frustrating sense of double standards in the aid world. This will become less tolerable as patterns of inequality become more extreme.

INGOs will need to find effective ways to take root and localize within the societies they wish to work. Christian NGO networks like Caritas and ACT will continue to do this well as they work directly through local churches. The Red Cross/Crescent model of national societies and thousands of volunteers is similarly embedded in a grassroots membership model. So too are many Islamic charities and southern NGOs, like BRAC and Grameen, who have gone global from Bangladesh and remain modest in their salaries and lifestyles, and deeply communal in their approach.

The exogenous INGO model, which has no membership base in country, will struggle to be local and acceptable. This will be particularly true of the new mega NGOs. They will be perceived more like development businesses and their corporate culture will continue to generate elite aid workers with dissonant lifestyles. This problem will only be avoided if they manage to develop large numbers of conviction supporters in emerging countries and the states in which they work.

Governments are likely to respond to failures of localization with strong new laws that insist on a preference for local ownership and local capacity in development and humanitarian work. These demands for localization will be the norm across all cultures, and will be routine in Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. They

will be a firm feature of authoritarian states and liberal democratic states alike. Authoritarian states will continue to be suspicious and resistant to INGOs, as Sudan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Syria have been in recent years. Even in countries that admire the West and seek out a path to liberal democratic culture, people will want more power, control and opportunity for themselves in development work. In such contexts, effective localization will be rightly regarded as indigenous liberal success.

In Islamist settings, the move to localization and the resistance to western power and influence will continue to be driven by violent and racist Occidentalism. This Occidentalism will be embodied in hatred and ideological polarization, rather than a simple desire for autonomy. The Islamist-Liberal confrontation of the last sixty years will continue to affect opportunities for humanitarian and development aid in the next twenty years. Infidel aid workers and liberal development projects will be unacceptable in places dominated by political Islamism. In countries that achieve Islamist government, this will create complete no-go areas for liberal NGOs. In other countries with an ongoing liberal-Islamist confrontation, development itself will become a battlefield as vaccination programmes, girls education and women's empowerment become viciously contested doctrines. Here, INGOs will have little option but to retreat entirely or to support moderate factions whenever they can be found.

All this means that western NGOs may be more absent from many emergencies than they have been in the last twenty years. Unable to play a central role, they may be gathered around the edge of crises managing refugee and displacement problems, or leading on advocacy with little presence on the ground.

### **New Aid Actors and Resistance**

The trend towards new entrants into international humanitarian and development work will continue to gather force. Turkey has just won the role to host the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, beating Geneva into second place. Turkey is already a world leader in disaster response. It is now determined to become one of the world's biggest humanitarian donors and to spawn new Islamic INGOs that follow the "Turkish model" and are more acceptable and culturally attuned to Islamic societies than western NGOs.

Several Gulf States and Iran are becoming big players in development and humanitarian support to regional emergencies around the Middle East, and are redefining ideas of aid in the process. These Gulf donors are still more likely to give most of their aid through partisan Islamic systems that lie outside the official UN network and appeals, and often favour particular recipients rather than an impartial approach. This trend is likely to continue because Arab donors will not want to bankroll a western UN system which, since Afghanistan and Iraq, they consider politically driven by liberal interests and in which they have little policy or operational control. As such, many new aid powers will continue to give high volumes of aid, but distribute it in their own way. The UN channeled donations to Syria from some Gulf countries look set to be the exception.

Brazil and India have recently launched international aid departments. They too are likely to try to reframe humanitarian and development aid rather than accept the current western tradition and its values. But the big question running up to 2035



concerns China. It is not yet clear whether Chinese civil society will find the space to cascade its own NGOs across the country and around the world. In the meantime, Chinese government policy continues to favour significant economic investment over aid in countries where it has reached out to secure natural resources. Its policy of non-interference in political development and social policy around the world looks set to hold. INGOs are still confused and hesitant about engaging with China. One notable exception is the work by the Humanitarian Policy Group who are actively engaged in a humanitarian dialogue in Beijing.

This means that the new emerging donors are not likely to support existing INGOs but to use their diversification of the aid system as another way of diluting western global hegemony. In future, the world may have a twin track aid and development system with no interest in reconciling its various differences. Regional Organizations (like ASEAN, the AU, the Arab League and OAS) may be developed as alternative aid coordinators to supersede the UN, and undermine western influence in natural disasters and armed conflicts. In such a world, INGOs will be deliberately marginalized if they have failed to localize effectively.

Another significant new humanitarian actor will be Diaspora organizations. With no need for INGO mediation in the Pakistan floods, many British Pakistani medics and business people initiated direct bi-lateral humanitarian support to their communities of origin in which they are still closely linked by family ties. The same has happened in Syria as British Syrians have gone direct. Independent of INGOs, these Diaspora organizations will be a popular new model of humanitarian action. They may also form the basis of new INGOs which come to have much better access and credibility in many parts of the world than traditional western NGOs and their local partners.

## **Innovation**

The next twenty years will see many innovations by NGOs beyond these structural changes. Communications technology will revolutionize needs assessment, human rights monitoring and aid delivery. Direct cash transfers to people via phone transfers will become increasingly common. Cash relief will be on a par with western welfare systems, and many local businesses will thrive by supplying essential supplies into crisis areas in return for these cash payments from people in affected communities. Drones and robotics may well find many new applications within humanitarian assessment, civilian protection and in research on environmental risk.

NGOs will be at the forefront of new forms of environmental adaptation as vulnerable communities cope with and avoid the worst effects of climate change, environmental degradation, and predatory land acquisitions for industrialized farming and mining. NGOs will begin to work much more directly with migrating communities, or with communities vulnerable to migration. Infectious diseases will continue to be a strong focus for research and innovation as malaria and HIV are reduced, and growing resistance to antibiotics becomes a global problem.

Mass forms of civil resistance that reach out and synchronize across the globe will represent innovative new forms of activist politics, and may involve disruptive forms of hacking, mass demonstrations and cyber resistance. These campaigning innovations may place NGOs in a double bind as they support such advocacy action, and then feel the need to respond in humanitarian mode to the violent backlash it

attracts or the disasters arising from crowd surges, accidents and hardship brought arising from these methods.

Over the period up to 2035, INGOs will continue to develop their commitment to issue innovation. They will work hard to spot the new burning issues in global poverty as they arise, and shape them into practical development agendas and campaigns. INGO global campaigns will be much bigger, much noisier and aim to leverage citizen movements across the world.

### **Accountability**

NGOs will face calls on their accountability to private donors, government donors and states in which they operate. NGOs will need to show more regularly and more publicly that they are delivering on their fundamental humanitarian and development missions. This mission accountability will be complemented by demands for deeper progress monitoring and financial auditing from government donors and consortia partners. A key part of this accountability will be the need to provide ever harder evidence of NGO efficiency and effectiveness.

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