

The Story Retold Visiting the Role and Mission of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Decision Making and Policy Formulation Process

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ABSTRACT

The mission of the present study is to establish a robust and reliable reference framework on the ecosystem of Non-Governmental Organizations and the Third Sector for literature review in scholarly contributions and publications. Two goals are set: first, to re-establish the importance of Nongovernmental Organizations as integral key players on the arena of social welfare in an era that is largely defined by globalized economies, debt-ridden states, limited resources, increased competition for donations and volunteers, and enhanced needs related to poverty and acceptable standards of living. Second, to position NGOs on the sphere of political influence where they negotiate agendas, form coalitions with local and international partners, mobilize constituencies for policy change, and ultimately engage in all stages of the policy process. Finally, the absence of a concrete evaluation system is pointed out: an accountability framework is fundamental to the assessment of NGO performance and impact on their intended beneficiaries.

KEYWORDS

Activism, Advocacy, Donors, Environment, Human Rights, NGO, Non-Profit Sector, Poverty, Public Service, Relief, Third Sector, Volunteers, Welfare

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is twofold: First, to re-establish the importance of Nongovernmental Organizations as integral key players on the arena of social welfare in an era that is largely defined by globalized economies, debt-ridden states, limited resources, increased competition for donations and volunteers, and enhanced needs related to poverty and acceptable standards of living. Second, to demonstrate NGOs' position on the map of political influence where they form coalitions with local and international partners, negotiate agendas, mobilize constituencies for policy change, and ultimately engage in all stages of the policy process (Mably, 2006). Peacekeeping, conflict resolution, environment protection, development and advocacy on human rights fall in the NGO court to handle; outstanding management skills, strategic thinking, fundraising capabilities and lobbying mastery are mandatory skills for these organizations to fulfill their mission.

A critical view of the NGO operational framework highlights concerns about their dependence from political interests and engagement with underlying agendas. The need for accountability is

pressing as no credible regulatory framework is in place to evaluate NGOs' performance and impact on the populations they serve. Globalization and the increasing easiness with which issues transcend national borders can transform operational and participative challenges to opportunities for NGOs to raise their significance through successful planning and governance structures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW, A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

International NGOs go as far back as the early 19th century, the anti-slavery movement and the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1932. Through the Article 71 of Chapter 10 of the United Nations Charter, NGOs were officially recognized and appointed as participating organizations with a distinctive consultative role that differentiates them from governments or member states. The term INGO was first defined in resolution 288 of ECOSOC in February 1950 as "any international organization that is not founded by an international treaty".

The fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, coupled with the rise of globalization in the 20th century and the disruption in the delicate balance between the welfare state and the classical liberalist model of the western countries—in total favor of the latter—amply demonstrated the gap between the minimized standards of living provided by free economies and the actual needs of the weaker strata within populations. NGOs were assigned the vital role of counterbalancing this trend, emphasizing humanitarian issues and sustainable development, struggling to keep societal interests into sharp focus. The World Social Forum, a rival convention to the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, is a striking example of an alternative move to compensate for the unilateral attribution of primacy to capitalist interests (Hallward, 2008).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s conservative governments in Britain, America, and other countries, reduced the roles of government in direct service provision in alignment with the privatization of public sector. By funding NGOs, governments were able to avoid service provision and direct, regulate and overlook their strategy and performance. Governments obtained a "social approval" through their collaboration with NGOs, promotion and use of volunteerism, and contributed significantly in their growth through channeled funding over the last two decades (Kim, 2010) (see Figure 1).

The dramatic growth of the nongovernmental sector in the 1990s is attributed to three forces. First, governments are radically cutting back welfare budgets leaving the private nonprofit sector to take action. Second, international nonprofits have become increasingly instrumental and reliable sources for implementation and sustenance of major social interventions. Third, countries that have recently emerged from the former Soviet Union or "behind the Iron Curtain" are in urgent need of mechanisms that will replace welfare programs formerly provided by their centralized totalitarian regimes. While NGOs were underestimated as unimportant, utopian, or obstructionist, interest in them grew impressively, particularly in Europe where the most trusted brands are nonprofits: Amnesty International, World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, and Oxfam (Andreasen and Kotler 2008).

2.1. Exploring the Territory: Definitions and Typology

There is no general agreed legal definition for Nongovernmental Organizations except that they are established and operate independently from any governments, under a non-profit status and they occasionally overlap with grassroots organizations, social movements and civil society. Professor Peter Willets from the City University of London defines NGO as "*an independent voluntary association of people acting together on a continuous basis for some common purpose other than achieving government office, making money or illegal activities.*" The United Nations also coined the term "major groups" in the 1992 Rio "Earth Summit" to encompass societal sectors of critical importance to the environment and development (Stephenson, 2005). Social movements and grassroots organizations are usually broader segments, seeking to resist social change or mobilize their members to take action on specific issues, such as civil rights or disarmament. The rise of civil society marked the end of the

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