

Consultative status at the UN for NGOs

As a result of pressure, primarily from American groups, the United Nations Charter contains Article 71, providing for the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to consult with NGOs. In 1950, the Council formally codified its practice, in a statute for NGOs. It recognized three categories of groups: (1) a small number of high-status NGOs, concerned with most of the Council's work; (2) specialist NGOs, concerned with a few fields of activity and having a high reputation in those fields; and (3) a Roster of other NGOs that are expected to make occasional contributions to the Council.⁴ Since then the term NGO has, for diplomats, been synonymous with a group that is eligible for ECOSOC consultative status.

The UN definition of an acceptable NGO

The ECOSOC statute and the way it has been applied embodies six principles:

- 1 An NGO should support the aims and the work of the UN. However, it is very rare that objections are made to the political purposes of NGOs.
- 2 Officially, an NGO should be a representative body, with identifiable headquarters, and officers who are responsible to a democratic policy-making conference. In practice, many highly prestigious NGOs, particularly development and environment NGOs, are not membership organizations.
- 3 An NGO cannot be a profit-making body. Individual companies cannot gain consultative status, but trade federations of commercial interests are recognized as NGOs.
- 4 An NGO cannot use or advocate violence.
- 5 An NGO must respect the norm of 'non-interference in the internal affairs of states'. This means an NGO cannot be a political party, but parties can, like companies, form international federations. Also, NGOs concerned with human rights should not restrict their activities to a particular group, nationality, or country.
- 6 An international NGO is one that is not established by intergovernmental agreement.

Many NGO activists believe the UN should be more restrictive and only accept groups that are 'true' NGOs,

contributing to 'progressive' social movements. Environmentalists are often upset that business federations are accepted and the whole NGO community at the UN agitated over the National Rifle Association being admitted to the Roster in November 1996.

Globalization and the expansion of NGOs

The creation of a complex global economy has had effects way beyond the international trade in goods and services. Most companies, in each distinct area of activity, have formed organizations to facilitate communication, to harmonize standards, and to manage adaptation to complex change. Equally, the employees have found they face common problems in different countries and so trade unions and professional bodies have developed their own transnational links. Any form of international regime to formulate policy for an industry, whether it is non-governmental or intergovernmental, will encourage the strengthening of the global links among the NGOs concerned with its activities.

For most of the twentieth century, any individual could travel in person or communicate in writing to most parts of the world. The technical revolution in recent years lies in the increased density, the increased speed, and the reduced cost of communication. The political revolution lies in these changes bringing rapid global communication within the capabilities of most people. This includes even the poor, if they band together to fund a representative to articulate their case or gain access to the news media. Changes in communications constitute a fundamental change in the structure of world politics. Governments have lost sovereignty over the transnational relations of their citizens. They may attempt to monitor or control trans-boundary communications, but closing the border is no longer technologically possible.

The shift of NGOs from the local to the global

One effect of the globalization of communication is to make it physically and financially feasible for small groups of people to establish and to maintain cooperation, even though they may be based thousands of miles apart from each other. Thus it is very easy for NGOs to operate transnationally, but not all NGOs make this choice. They vary