

The Activities of NGOs

There is little doubt that NGOs are having a mounting impact on policy making at the national and international levels. In essence, NGOs are organized interest groups that operate singly or in combination with one another to promote their causes. In the realm of environmental politics, for example, there are such groups as Friends of the Earth International, headquartered in the Netherlands. It coordinates a transnational effort to protect the environment and also serves as a link among Friends of the Earth member groups in 67 countries and 21 affiliated groups, such as Amigos de Terra in Brazil. Similarly, Greenpeace International, which is also located in the Netherlands, has regional and national offices in 41 countries. Just like more conventional interest groups, NGOs try to promote their goals by such techniques as attempting to raise public awareness and support for their causes and by providing information and argumentation to policy makers in national governments and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), international organization, in which the members are states.

At least one measure of the increased activity of NGOs and their presence in the international policy-making process is their participation in major multinational conferences convened by the United Nations and other NGOs to address global problems. Since the early 1990s, all such conferences have two parts. One is the official conference that includes delegates from governments. The second is the parallel NGO conference. The first major conference to follow this pattern, the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, brought not only government together in Brazil but also approximately 15000 delegates representing 1.100 NGOs. Three Years later, the NGO Conference that paralleled the fourth UN World Conference on Women (WCW) in Beijing attracted about 30.000 delegates from 2.000 NGOs. More recently, the 2002 World Conference on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg South Africa, also included an NGO Conference that drew some 41.000 delegates from more than 6.600 NGOs.

These conferences are both the result of the work done by NGOs and a vehicle that promotes their role by enhancing their visibility and by serving as a place where they can create transnational advocacy networks (TANs) groups of NGOs and IGOs that share an

interest in a specific aspect of global society. For example. The partnership for Principle 10 (pp 10) is a IAN that includes government agencies (from Africa, Europe. and Latin America), transnational groups (such as Corporacion Participa in Chile). And IGOs (such as the UN and World Bank). The TAN is dedicated to accelerating implementation of Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration (1992). That clause expressed the view of the 178 countries attending the conference: "Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens and every-one" shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities".

The Impact of NGOs

It is hard to measure the impact of NGOs or any other single factor on policy making, but there is evidence that NGOs are gaining recognition as legitimate actors and are playing an increased role in the policy process. One measure is funding. The amount of private and government aid flowing through NGOs to economically less developed countries (LDCs) increased from \$1 billion in 1970 to more than \$7 billion in 2001. As part of this increase, the U.S. Agency for International Development increased its funding of the civil society" (NGO) sector from \$56 million in 1991 to \$230 million in 1999.

NGOs have also helped move some of their causes to the center of the political stage. Fifty years ago, the environment received little political attention. Now it is an important issue that generates World conferences (such as those in Rio in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002). It is a frequent topic of conversation among heads of government, and it is the subject of numerous international agreements. For example, one indication of the implementation of the Rio Declaration's Principle 10 is the Aarhus Convention, named after the city in Denmark where it was signed in 1998. The convention, which so far has been ratified by 26 European countries, pledges its adherents to grant access to environmental information to citizens of any of the adhering states and to promote public participation in making environmental laws and regulations.