

**NGOs and Social Movements:  
A Study in Contrasts\***

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From the perspective of research on new social movements, NGOs present a challenge because, like the social movements, they are also often grassroots organizations. They act autonomously, they form networks, and they pursue partially similar goals such as environmental protection, support of people in the developing countries, and gender equality.

Social movements are bound to a national social space, even when they deal with global interdependence, or the “planetarization” of action.<sup>1</sup> They presuppose a national political public through which they are mediated and sometimes even created. The mobilization of protest is aimed at influencing local or national political institutions. Usually, specifically national forms of problems and conflicts are being attacked; for example, federal or state projects such as nuclear power plants, roads or airports. Even deeply rooted and enduring power mechanisms, such as sexism, appear in the context of national patterns of the welfare state and the political public sphere. As a result of language difficulties, scarce resources and different political circumstances, transnational cooperation between social movements is, as a rule, laborous and short-term.<sup>2</sup> This has epistemological consequences: As a rule, social

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<sup>1</sup>Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present* (Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1989), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Dieter Rucht, “Think Globally, Act Locally? Needs, Forms and Problems of Cross-national Cooperation among Environmental Groups,” in Liefferink,

movement research focuses on national social movements and engages in comparative studies at the most. Transborder social movement cycles are rarely the object of analysis.

In contrast, NGOs are associated with what is described in the German press as a new internationalism. In addition to purely local NGOs, there are international and supranational NGOs and northern NGOs which interlink with southern NGOs. For example, organizations such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International, which have members in any number of countries and not only think globally, but also act globally. Thus, certain categories of NGOs, distinct from social movements, operate at an international level right from the start.

The appearance of such NGOs has caused some authors to speak of a “non-governmental movement” in the Third World, and even worldwide.<sup>3</sup> NGOs are considered by many to be a form of global social movement. Ulrich Beck argues in this way with respects to the actions of Greenpeace against the sinking of Brent Spar and the atomic tests in the Pacific. These types of NGOs take on specifically global political, ecological and social problems and mobilize a world-wide public against the particularism of national governments. They politicize global society and by-pass the nation-state system. By promoting the self-organization of individuals these NGOs tend to set all spheres of social action in motion. By means of broad-based consumer boycott, for example, they organize wholly new constellations in social and political alliances.<sup>4</sup> There is some talk that the NGOs that have developed since the 1970s represent a fourth evolutionary step in the learning process of modern liberation movements. The first was the union movement; the second the old-style citizens movement; the third consisted of the new social movements and the fourth now are of the NGOs. The NGOs get their new international character through their extensive horizontal interlinkages and their involvement in the processes of global political decision-making within the framework of international institutions and conferences.<sup>5</sup> Much about these

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Lowe, and Mol, eds., *European Integration and Environmental Policy* (London and New York: Belhaven Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>Julie Fisher, *The Road From Rio: Sustainable Development and the Nongovernmental Movement in the Third World* (Westport: Praeger, 1993); Commission on Global Governance, *Nachbarn in Einer Welt. Der Bericht der Kommission für Weltordnungspolitik* (Bonn: 1995), p. 281.

<sup>4</sup>Ulrich Beck, “Was Chirac mit Shell verbindet,” *Die Zeit vom*, September, 8, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>Matthias Kettner, “Die Angst des Staates vorm Einspruch der Bürger,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, October 16, 1995.

observations is correct, but the question still arises whether these NGOs actually comprise a new and global social movement given that new social movements are considered to constitute milieus with common lifestyles, collectively shared frames, weak organization, decentralization, network formation, and self-reflexivity about methods of action and mobilization; that is, which encompasses different social spheres. New social movements are a process of collective action, which consolidates a large number of identities into one actor and confronts this actor with a symbolically constructed antagonist. The goal is a democratic break with previous collective forms.

Rather than being a novel phenomenon, NGOs, including internationally active NGOs, have existed for a long time. To a certain extent this arises analytically from the term NGO itself. With the modern capitalistic separation of economy and politics, the opportunity for a third sphere of collective action took the form of organizations or spontaneous alliances of citizens with the purpose of generalizing self-determined goals. In the broadest sense, NGOs are voluntary, non-profit groups which are independent from government and made up of active citizens. Many NGOs, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICCR), unions, trade associations, and church organizations, can look back on decades of operation. Nevertheless, new developments are unmistakable.

First of all, the recent increase in the number of international NGOs is remarkable. According to the Commission on Global Governance, the number of NGOs that operate in at least three countries grew from 176 in 1909 to around 29,000 in 1993. The decisive spurt in growth began in the 1960s, and by the early 1980s the NGOs included about 100 million persons. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates the number of participants in the early 1990s at approximately 250 million.<sup>6</sup>

The growing importance of the NGOs can also be measured in terms of financial spending. According to UNDP's statistics, in 1993,

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<sup>6</sup>Rodger Wegner, "Zur Rolle von Nichtregierungsorganisationen in der 'Neuen Weltordnung': Entstaatlichung der Sozialpolitik oder Bürokratisierung der NRO?" in Wolfgang Hein (Hrsg.), *Umbruch in der Weltgesellschaft. Auf dem Wege zu einer "Neuen Weltordnung"?* (Hamburg: 1994), p. 326.

development-oriented NGOs from the North spent about \$10 billion, or over 10 percent of the official development aid of the OECD states.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the status of the NGOs in relation to international political institutions also has changed. In the period between 1949 and 1993, the number of accredited NGOs in the UN Economic and Social Council increased from 41 to 978. At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992, there were 1,420 NGOs, and in the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD), which was subsequently set up by UNCED, there are 548 accredited NGOs. NGOs also participated in large numbers in other UN world conferences during recent years. The World Bank has been working with NGOs since 1987 and, because of their efficiency and knowledge, it is currently trying to intensify this cooperation. According to one World Bank source, "Because of their unique abilities and close ties with beneficiaries, the Bank undoubtedly will expand its co-operation with NGOs. These ultimate goals would establish effective relationships that include NGOs, the Bank, Governments and other development agencies, to identify and execute development efforts that directly and completely meet the needs of the people."

The international, normative regulations that resulted from the UNCED process, and also from the pressure exerted by the NGOs, are of particular importance. In Agenda 21, it is expressly recorded that the global goal of sustainable development can only be achieved if national governments recognize NGOs as democratic partners. Agenda 21 states: "The United Nations system and governments should strengthen [their efforts] to involve non-governmental organizations in decision making." In order to facilitate co-operation with NGOs, restructuring of national political institutions is recommended.

Finally, the nature of the activities of the NGOs itself is changing. The World Bank recorded the fact that, in the area of development, the NGO movement has begun to shift from a "care and welfare" to a "change and development" role. "This new role places emphasis on working with people, rather than simply providing for them....As this shift posed challenges to established ethics, the relationship between NGOs and government changed," states one source.

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<sup>7</sup>Peter M. Schulze, "Nicht-Regierungsorganisationen und die Demokratisierung der Vereinten Nationen," in Klaus Hufner (Hrsg.), *Die Reform der Vereinten Nationen* (Opladen, 1994), p. 132.

What is new, therefore, is not the institution of the NGOs as such, but rather their social function in an altered historical context, their political role, and the new expectations of them.

NGOs are actors undergoing a process of change in an international context which is also undergoing a transformation under globalization. This process of globalization is a result of the transnationalization of financial capital and commodity markets, of new technologies, of a globalized consumer and media culture, and of global environmental problems and world-wide migration.

Today, globalization does not lead to the formation of a homogenous cosmopolitan sphere or world-state, but rather to new social and spacial borders, and fragmentation. Economically, large, block-like spheres such as the Asian Pacific Economic Co-operation, EC and NAFTA are formed, and entire regions, even in the richest capitalist states, are excluded from globalization and left to immiseration.

The North not only loses part of its sovereignty with globalization, but it also changes its political architecture.<sup>8</sup> Decision-making competence is ceded to supranational, or sub-national agencies. Representation through parties and associations becomes less significant. Numerous different actors, including the NGOs with their expertise, are included in decision-making processes which are frequently polyarchical. Hierarchical patterns of negotiation and decision-making are replaced by co-operative network-like types of negotiation and bargaining.

The states of the South are also changing. As a result of the debt crisis, state activities have been reduced. Welfare services are often no longer provided. NGOs assume a quasi-official role, or directly take over state functions. In Bangladesh alone, where 5,000 NGOs are involved with literacy programs, a child will more likely become literate with the assistance of an NGO than through a state organization.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as a result of the reduction of state welfare functions, large numbers of academics and experts formerly employed by the governments in the South are now forced to offer themselves as mediators to financial donors. This meets the needs of the international

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<sup>8</sup>Edgar Grande, "Die neue Architektur des Staates," in Roland Czada and Manfred G. Schmidt (Hrsg.), *Verhandlungsdemokratie, Interessenvermittlung, Regierbarkeit. Festschrift für Gerhard Lehmbruch* (Opladen: 1992).

<sup>9</sup>Caroline Fetscher, "Der Mythos, Greenpeace und das Lob der privaten Helfer," *Kommune*, H. 6, 1996, p. 44.

development agencies and northern NGOs, which mistrust state administrations because of their inefficiency, corruption and distance from the population, hence which prefer to rely on NGOs. These often work as “public service contractors,” with headquarters in the large cities, far removed from the problems of the population, sturdily professional and apolitical. The agenda for the aid is, in fact, frequently determined by the self-interest of these organizations.

Thus NGOs form a component of the changing architecture of state organization in the North, as well as in the South. They are involved in planning, decision-making, and implementation processes. This practice of forming political networks, however, causes the NGOs themselves to change and allows the less political and non-critical, technical and modernizing NGOs to gain center stage.

The interlinking of NGOs and alternative communications such as the Association for Progressive Communication contribute to a bottom-up globalization.<sup>10</sup> The Keynesian national welfare state can no longer adequately regulate a large number of economic, political, cultural and ecological processes, and, as a result, it relinquishes political authority, both upwards and downwards. Instead, the state subjects itself to international regimes and institutions. It is only logical that democratic actors attempt to politically influence such international institutions. According to one student of NGOs, “Whatever the size, structure and concerns of these groups, there seems to be a general trend (a) towards more, though not necessarily formally defined, collaboration and (b) towards more specialization and professionalization, which then results in an implicit division of labor.” Internationally interlinked and transnational NGOs fight for a specific and global view of particular problems and for political and economic solutions. Examples of this are the NGO preparation conferences for UNCED, where discussions between southern and northern NGOs led to the Yawananchi resolution, or the counter-forums to the UN world conferences.

But just as the globalization process as a whole is characterized by inequality and fragmentation, so, too, is the globalization of the democratic actors. Inequality can also be discerned with respect to the NGOs. Financial, technical, and information resources are available to the NGOs of the North. They act as advocates, with mere humanitarian

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<sup>10</sup>Ronnie D. Lipschutz, “Reconstructing World Politics: The Emergence of Global Civil Society,” *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 21, 3, 1992.

intent. This can result in a paternalistic helper syndrome which requires the existence of global problems of poverty and environmental destruction in order to maintain its rationale for existence.<sup>11</sup> Often the NGOs do not take into account the systemic logic of the global economic and political relationships which lead to impoverishment, overpopulation and ecological degradation. These asymmetries can also be observed in the international conferences themselves. In Rio, of the 1,420 accredited NGOs, 20 per cent came from the U.S. alone and an additional 25 per cent from Western Europe. Only 17 per cent came from the whole of Asia. The selection of the NGOs which represent a country is also very arbitrary and results in the privileging of elite NGOs with special access to resources. The danger of yuppie-NGOs (a jet-set civil society) forming at the global level is not insignificant.

Through their interlinked and transnational activities, the NGOs contribute to the formation of a civil society, actively and on their own initiative. Frequently the NGOs take on a quasi-state character because of the status conferred on them by state recognition and licensing. Gramsci's concept of the civil society makes it clear that this is not necessarily a contradiction. According to Gramsci, civil society is part of the integral and expanded state. Private initiatives in the sphere of civil society contribute to the formation and continuation of the state apparatus. This involves a process of power and control. Under conditions of social inequality and class domination, civil society is the place where a class generalizes its lifestyles and social goals. This generalization is achieved by hegemonic struggle over the categories in which society is being thought and lived, what should be regarded as the shared reality of the social actors and where the borderline between private and public is drawn. By means of struggle between forces of unequal power, a consensus is established about collectively shared social relations, which include the political institutions where short-term conflicts can be resolved and long-term goals (e.g., stable expectation horizons) can be pursued.

Applied to the globalization process, this means that in global civil society a consensus is formed through numerous activities, from both above and below, which is the foundation for transnational political and state elements. According to Gayatri Spivak, an example would be the discursive staging of the South at UN world conferences, resulting in the formation of an apparatus made up of the UN, donor

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<sup>11</sup>Heike Walk, and Achim Brunnengraber, "Netzwerkbildung bei Nicht-Regierungsorganisationen," *Prokla*, 97, 1994; and Fetscher, *op. cit.*

consortiums, governments and elite NGOs.<sup>12</sup> The international institutions, which clearly recognize the problem of internationally controlling and regulating the financial and capital markets, and welfare and ecology, are also aware of the need for intermediary organizations. With NGOs they form complex political networks and negotiation systems. The result can be described as global governance.<sup>13</sup> Inter-governmental institutions change and expand into a complex steering system which, together with a large number of social actors, defines problems, negotiates goals, and plans and implements projects.

The global civil society, upon which this steering system of global governance is based, reveals ambivalent tendencies. The NGOs are a contested terrain. On the one hand, they are critical and democratic, aim for empowerment, and seek to change the political institutions. On the other, they are subordinate, mere implementation organs, which subject themselves to the deregulation of collective welfare and social security, as well as to the privatization of social and ecological problems. A highly conflicted search process is involved with respect to both the national and international political institutions, on the one hand, and the NGOs, on the other. International political institutions and the nation states are being altered by the globalization process and are moving from government to global governance. Formally authorized institutions increasingly turn to networks of independent activists which contribute, from below, to stability and to the transformation of domination. The formal institutions thus either lose the classic state character of opposition to society, or don't assume it in the first place. Just like the formal political institutions, the NGOs have to change as well. They have a plurivalent contradictory significance. This applies, firstly, to their function of organizing, supporting and protecting the grassroots activities of people and criticizing social relations and political institutions and, secondly, to their function of acting as a new form of self-observation of an economic and political system in crisis, and also searching for efficient means of solving the local, national and

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<sup>12</sup>Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Die 'Frau' als Theater," *epd* Entwicklungspolitik, Materialien II/96 *Radical Philosophy*, 75, January-February, 1996.

<sup>13</sup>See, Dirk Messner and Franz Nuscheler, *Global Governance. Herausforderungen an die deutsche Politik an der Schwelle zum 21. Jahrhundert*, Policy Paper 2 der Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (Bonn: 1995); James N. Rosenau, "Governance, Order, and Change in World Politics," James N. Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel, *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).



global problems which have been caused by the system itself. NGOs provide competent information about the system's weaknesses, and convey knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable or only available at high cost, and also implement political measures at low cost and organize social consensus in the crisis. The NGOs thus enhance the rationality of national and international political institutions in two ways: by creating democratization and by contributing to a consensus-based domination. The result is that the NGOs become bureaucratized and apolitical, losing much of their self-organizational and critical significance, and, finally, also their efficiency. It is for this reason that the NGOs do not constitute a social movement. Following Ernesto Laclau, they do not consolidate different practices of social protest and social identities in order to articulate an antagonism between the movement and an opponent impeding progress or emancipation. They do not constitute a break which will create a new complex of social relations. Instead, the NGOs disarticulate protest into a wide range of negotiation and implementation processes. As decentralizing institutions,<sup>14</sup> they have critical significance vis-à-vis the bureaucratic centralism of elites, but they do not promote a movement of democratic self-empowerment or effective systemic problem and crisis solutions.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up: Even if NGOs partly emerged from the protest cycle of the new social movements, they are *not* a social movement. They constitute a different type of social action. I would like to illustrate this with a list of opposites which emerge from the preceding arguments:

<u>New Social Movements</u>	<u>NGOs</u>
self-determined goals, self activity, self-reflexive	social aid, operational functions, advocacy, instrumentalization
founded endogenously and molecularly	frequently founded exogenously and strategically
involve all social classes, but middle class orientation	involve all social classes, but often rural, plebian and/or bourgeois

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<sup>14</sup>Peter Moßmann, "NRO als Stütze für Demokratie?", Rolf Hanisch and Rodger Wegner, Hrsg., *Nichtregierungsorganisationen und Entwicklung* (Hamburg, 1994)

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 346; Laura Macdonald, "Globalising Civil Society: Interpreting International NGOs in Central America," *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 23, 2, 1992.

scarce financial resources	large volumes of finance
financially independent	financially dependent (on donations, on governments)
political, conflicts over interpretation and needs	frequently apolitical, expert technical orientation
low level of professionalism, organization is temporary and discontinuous	high level of professionalism, organization is continuous and formal
without formal membership	organized (members)
decentralized	centralized
non-bureaucratic	bureaucratic
distant from state and frequently anti-statist	close to institutions, frequently dependent
critical of the system, conflict-oriented, confrontation-oriented, (civil disobedience, demonstration)	reformist, governance, global governance (lobbying, expertise, negotiation)
symbolic identity as collective actor	symbolically non-integrated, corporate identity as organization
sub-national and national	internationally interlinked

Despite the frequently grassroots character of the NGOs, there are numerous features that distinguish them from real social movements. This distinction is not intended to imply, however, that NGOs can not often have a considerable democratizing effect, manifested in the transformation of the relationship between the state and society. In conclusion, in view of the rather contradictory picture of NGOs and global development, those conducting research on civil society, NGOs, social movements, international relations, state theory and elites should look beyond the boundaries of their subject area, as well as the limitations created by focusing merely on national societies.