

Living in an NGO world

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In thirty years a new global political force has emerged almost from nowhere. It rivals parliamentary parties in influence yet is vastly more trusted by voters. It is led by some of the most capable people in reformist politics. It drives media agendas, discomforts governments and humbles multi-billion dollar corporations. Worldwide it has been estimated to employ 19m people and enjoy an annual income of \$1,100billion.¹

This is contemporary activism, aka non-governmental organisations or NGOs, pressure groups, not-for-profits, "civil society". One has only to intone the casualty list - Shell, Monsanto, McDonald's, Nike, Nestlé, Huntingdon Life Sciences, the World Trade Organisation - to remind ourselves that NGOs collectively represent one of the most powerful political forces driving public opinion today.

In most Western democracies activism is the most influential extra-parliamentary movement after the media. While public confidence in business, after a sunnyish period in the mid-80s, has fallen to new lows thanks to accounting scandals and company pensions anxieties, support for NGOs has never been higher. Moreover the gap is constantly widening. The divergence in public support for big business versus NGOs during the 1990s is a re-run of the period in the 1970s when the image of multinationals was badly tarnished by the Lockheed and ITT corruption cases. (Then corporations were criticised for trying to influence the actions of foreign governments. Now they are criticised for not trying to influence the actions of foreign governments.) The upshot is that NGOs usually top the public's list of most credible institutions, while governments and big business invariably come bottom.

Not to recognise the impact of NGOs in 2003 would be like not accepting the status of trade unions in 1973. Indeed, activism in Britain and the US effectively occupies the power zone once dominated by trade unions. Then unions saw NGOs, and especially environmental groups, as a threat to their members' jobs. Today they seek alliances with such groups in campaigns as diverse as cheap third world contractors in the garment industry, support for the steel industry and the promotion of organic farming.

NGOs thrive in a world where supranational politics is supplanting the self-sufficient state, a change they have been instrumental in bringing about. Kyoto, the Montreal protocol on protecting the ozone layer, CITES for protecting endangered species, and the Cartagena biosafety protocol on biotechnology in food and agriculture were all NGO-inspired treaties. An estimated 44,000 NGOs are internationally active today. In 1978 there were just 9,500; in 1956, a mere 985.²

The developing world is experiencing an even bigger NGO explosion. India is said to have some 1 million national NGOs, Brazil 210,000³. A Thai politician said last year that his small country was now home to 12,000 pressure groups - and Greenpeace recently established its pan-Asia office there. Not only do large NGO networks impact indigenous policymaking, they are convenient points of entry for rich first world NGOs. They have been forming policy alliances and financing local campaigns on pet issues such as genetically engineered food. Corporations may have globalised trade, but NGOs are globalising politics.

One way to measure the enormous power of modern NGOs is to look at the volunteer networks that underpin many of them. In the US it has been estimated that nonprofits mobilise 20 billion volunteer hours "worth" one quarter of a trillion dollars a year.⁴ Far from all of this effort is deployed for campaigning, but its scale helps to explain why when a corporation or industry gets into a fight with a well organised, focused activist group, even just a locally formed one, it is the commercial or government interest that often comes off worst.

The biggest NGOs like Greenpeace and Amnesty have become global “super brands” like Coca-Cola and Sony, recognised the world over. More significantly, they are competing for, and winning by the bucket load, that most valuable attribute of the healthy corporate brand – trust. NGOs now win a higher level of trust on environmental, human rights and health issues than governments, the media and corporations combined.⁵

NGOs have globalised causes. Through their efforts and their worldwide networks – the Internet has been invaluable - issues like oil industry abuses in developing countries and the use of child labour in cocoa plantations can be used to embarrass corporations and investors in rich countries. Even the remotest indigenous tribe can no longer be considered a “far-away country ... of whom we know nothing” as Neville Chamberlain infamously described Czechoslovakia when justifying Britain’s indifference to its fate in 1938.

NGOs already out-smart and out-think corporations and governments in many critical issues - environmental and habitat protection, health impacts of pollution, indigenous peoples rights, trade with poor countries. They are the quintessential “experts with attitude”.

Now NGOs are moulding progressive thinking. Their leaders have been instrumental in constructing a new policy agenda for the radical Left which has embraced the environmental movement as the route to its own revival after two decades of post-Soviet languor. Issues like trade equity, environmental global commons, sustainable development, indigenous peoples’ rights and the governance of multinational corporations dominated the debate of the “anti globalisation Left” at the recent European Social Forum (Genoa, November 2002). The political space in which corporations and other policy makers have to operate is changing and for once, they are not the ones changing it.

Quangos and Fangos

The clearest evidence that NGOs really do pull the levers of public opinion is the naked imitation by their natural opponents. Governments started the process by inventing the Quasi NGO or Quango. In Britain the Commission for Racial Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission are typical Quangos, created in the late 1970s to allow policy development and public influence wholly funded by, but constitutionally detached from, the Government of the day (to the extent that Quangos freely attack their funder’s policies).

Now the false NGO – perhaps we should call it the Fango – has arrived. The Fango looks like a real NGO -- independent, media savvy, campaigning orientation, a grand-sounding name -- but unlike an industry association, hides the source of its funding and motivation while promoting policies helpful to its backers. A Fango may be funded by an industry or sometimes just a single company. The Association for Competitive Technology, the Independent Institute, National Taxpayers Union and “Citizens for a Sound Economy” were all alleged to be Microsoft-funded policy fronts designed to sway critical opinion during its long-running US anti-trust case.⁶

Meanwhile the established NGOs seem to be polarising towards three main types: in addition to “Superbrands” already mentioned, like Greenpeace and Amnesty International, there are what might be called the “Technicians” – eg. WWF, Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam -- and the “Ideologues”, typified by Friends of the Earth (FoE) and PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals).

Technician groups are distinguished by their outstanding specialist expertise and technical resources. They are respected for effective positive change, not just talking about it. Ideologues are motivated by an intensely felt (utopian?) vision of the future. FoE wants a planet in which environmental considerations are paramount. PETA’s goal is a worldwide end to the exploitation of animals (at least by humans).

Technician groups, and to some extent the Superbrands, tend to be pragmatic. They will undertake collaborations with corporations and governments to progress common objectives. Thus WWF works with multinationals like Unilever to reduce the impact of palm oil plantations on Indonesian rainforests. Greenpeace sits on Tesco committees about GM food. Ideologues however seek surrender. If compromises are made, they are part of a policy ratchet. PETA campaigned aggressively against McDonald's until it agreed to make meat suppliers raise welfare standards for animals (for a long time McDonald's management resisted on the logical grounds that vegans were not exactly their core market). It then went after Burger King and Wendy's (which rapidly gave in) and is now tackling KFC. Yet these restaurant chains knew that once they had all conformed, PETA would start the whole round again with even tougher demands.

Micro Activists

Recently a fourth type of NGO has become significant: the Micro Activist. Micro Activists are the political children of the Internet. Organised in cells or individuals connected intellectually and ideologically rather than physically, the Internet is both their glue and their wherewithal. Websites of a mainstream and a one-person NGO are not only hard to distinguish nowadays, they cost a fraction of traditional printed brochures and glossy reports. Moreover, the Internet is superb at attracting and mobilising like-minded people in worldwide campaigning efforts against selected targets.

On issues like GM foods, animal rights and anti-capitalism/anti-globalisation, Micro Activists have achieved much of the campaigning effectiveness of mainstream groups without the managerial and organisational trappings. They have activated the kind of politically conscious individuals, especially the young, who would have been repelled by the hierarchies and "compromises" of donation/foundation grant-hungry NGOs (although Micro Activists share many of the beliefs of the Ideologues). Far from emulating mainstream NGOs, they are embarrassing them with "in-your-face" tactics and a greater willingness to confront the perceived perpetrators of wrongs, not merely conduct symbolic direct actions.

Above all, Micro Activists have demonstrated the power of the Internet in contemporary activism. Mainstream groups know the Internet is there but seem unable to extract the same value. Greenpeace claims to have signed up some quarter of a million "cyberactivists" worldwide but as even it admits, to little effect. Their mistake may have been in seeking quantity rather than quality. Micro Activists can be potent even when they number just a handful, provided they are all whole-heartedly committed to winning the issue. Ideologue groups like Friends of the Earth have recognised this and have been assiduous in drawing functioning Micro Activist networks into their own campaigns.

Micro Activists have attracted the interest of foundations and endowments, in America a vital source of income for small non-profits. Not only do foundations get a lot of campaigning 'bang for their buck' with Micro Activists, but being numerous and diverse, there are plenty to choose from. Or a new group can simply be started up. The US "donor advisor" organisation, Tides Center, which annually handles around \$40million in foundation grants, reportedly incubates 350-odd projects – sponsored campaigns or single issue groups – of which some 30 were allegedly created at the behest of a donor.⁷

Europe vs North America

Due to their different political cultures, Europe and America have distinct NGO scenes. For example, because most European countries elect parliaments under proportional representation, minority parties like the Greens can achieve a significant political voice for the environmental movement. In North America and the UK it must rely on extra-parliamentary activism, although even in Britain the Greens are making progress as the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly now all use proportional representation.

The politicisation of environmentalism has advanced furthest in Germany. There the Green Party is large, having roots in both the peace/anti-nuclear movement and environmentalism. Similarly, Greenpeace Germany is the biggest national organisation in the Greenpeace network, generating around 40% of the NGO's worldwide income. (Greenpeace Netherlands generates a further 20% and even receives state aid via the Dutch Post Office national lottery).

In countries with strong consensual traditions – especially the Germano-Nordics -- NGOs have been formally included in public policy making, especially when friendly social democratic parties are in power.

That said, widespread state ownership and coddling of industrial interests has until now hampered campaigns for serious legislative change. Unlike America where the courts are widely used as an adjunct to public opinion campaigning, European NGOs can only in a very limited way judicially challenge government and corporate decisions.

It is striking that Amnesty is the only major NGO that is strong in both the US and Europe. With the possible exception of WWF/World Wildlife Fund, there are no major environmental NGOs that are equally well represented in both regions (not even Greenpeace). This has allowed the European NGOs to take an overtly anti-American position on issues like Kyoto/climate change and genetically engineered food which has appealed to European public opinion.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Europeans have come to feel relatively positive about big NGOs. In a recent study by Edelman⁸, Amnesty, WWF and Greenpeace were trusted by 62% to 76% of Europeans, whereas in America they never got more than 43%. By contrast, in America Microsoft was more trusted than any big NGO, but lagged badly behind them in Europe. (This cannot easily be put down to anti-Americanism. The German chemical company Bayer was less trusted in Europe than either Microsoft or Ford).

However on the major global policy issues the big NGOs worldwide have coalesced regardless of location; only tactics and priorities differ. European NGOs have pushed GM food much harder than American ones, but this largely reflects public traction: having had their confidence shattered by BSE and a raft of other food scares, European consumers were much more ready to believe the worst about GM foods than their American counterparts. US NGOs are far from giving up the struggle however.

In the firing line

Companies and governments with “controversial policies or activities are the traditional targets of NGO campaigning. While well established NGOs are usually seeking to mould government policy in the long term – for example, environmental groups want more pro-Green legislation – their focus is usually on specific goals or policy objectives, chosen for being both realisable and within the reach of public acceptance. Thus in Germany, while the effort to reduce waste, increase recycling and reduce landfill and incineration is continuous, the most recent NGO focus has been for a law mandating manufacturer refunds for returned drinks bottles and cans. Ostensibly this will save cities having to clear up millions of the things left in the streets by drinkers.

In recent years individual corporates have been more heavily targeted, sometimes, in the case of the animal rights movement, with physical aggression and intimidation. NGOs perceive that companies are not only extremely sensitive about adverse publicity but increasingly keen to show they are the good guys (or at least not the bad guys) on issues like environmental protection and human rights. Firms may be selected because they are the principal offenders, but sometimes they are targeted simply for tactical effect. Such targets seem to fall into four groups: “Injured Antelopes”, “Tethered Goats”, “Weakest Links” and “Red Tabs”.

“Injured Antelopes” – eg. Huntingdon Life Sciences, Shell – firms with damaged reputations from the past and which therefore remain targets of choice for activists who (like lions sensing the weakest animal in the herd) sense their continuing reputational vulnerability.

“Tethered Goats” are firms that are involved in an “objectionable” industry but do not have the strength to overcome sustained attack. Because of animal testing the pharmaceutical and medical research industry is hated by animal rights campaigners but it is the small contractors – the specialist breeders and animal lab equipment suppliers -- who are being driven out of business.

“Weakest Links” are suppliers that are vital to a targeted industry but where the importance of the relationship is not reciprocal. Farmers need someone to ship animals across the Channel, furriers need retailers to sell furs, all firms need financial institutions – but not the reverse. If the business is relatively small but the reputational risk or hassle is great, the supplier becomes vulnerable. Thus ferry companies no longer carry live animals, department stores no longer sell furs and, as several banks, stock brokers and even the world’s largest insurance advisor found to their cost over Huntingdon Life Sciences, financial services institutions have become the target of choice for ideological activists.

Firms whose position enables them to put pressure on the rest of the supply chain are also natural "Weakest Links". For this reason retailers are a favourite target of food, health and farm animal welfare groups. Not only are there relatively few of them per country, but if a retailer can be persuaded to take up an issue – after campaigning at their customers (or threatening to) -- they know the new policy will ripple through the supply chain, if needs be down to individual farms.

Snipers in WWI were encouraged to try to shoot at senior officers, easily identified by the red tabs on the lapels of their uniforms (a sartorial practice soon abandoned, at least on the front line). Thus "Red Tabs" are firms that are targeted precisely because they are the biggest or best known. The logic is that their pre-eminent position makes them vulnerable, and if they can be made to succumb, rivals will have to follow suit. Thus Tesco's is targeted by FoE, Exxon by Greenpeace,[do you mean Starbucks?] Starbucks Coffee by the organic/anti-GM food groups and McDonald's by PETA.

The future

As NGOs become more influential and the biggest groups wield obvious power and media attention, they are attracting more frequent criticism, from within and without. Many supporters find themselves philosophically at odds with NGOs behaving like capitalists, occupying fancy glass headquarters and paying high salaries to senior staff. That said, with such a variety of NGOs the seriously unhappy could easily find more congenial billets. Although they often collaborate, Friends of the Earth has a distinctly more laidback and less hierarchical culture than Greenpeace. War on Want is more overtly anti-capitalist than Oxfam despite having similar development agendas.

Paradoxically, high profile successes are also threatening the basis of NGOs' original credibility as "Davids" confronting industry's and governments' "Goliaths". Greenpeace is especially fond of this image which it sustains with photos of protestors (always described as "volunteers") in rubber dinghies being mowed down by supertankers. But it begins to look a little odd when the public keeps seeing companies buckling before its campaigns.

National news outlets have criticised Greenpeace for posturing and wasting donations on staff perks. And while Greenpeace was widely applauded for campaigning for a ban on CFCs which were destroying the ozone layer, its grandstanding over the deep sea disposal of Shell's Brent Spar oil rig was widely criticised, not least because Greenpeace seriously misled the public about the amount of polluting oil Shell had left in the structure. Greenpeace was quick to admit its mistake but too late to stop the damage to its credibility. Subsequently the British media flagellated itself for broadcasting without editorial or critical comment Greenpeace's own video footage from its rig occupation.

The GM foods issue has spurred even louder accusations of abuse of power. Shocked by the near-collapse of the world's nascent ag biotech sector, over 3,000 scientists, including 19 Nobel Prize winners,⁹ condemned NGO-inspired absolutist opposition to GM crops. High profile refuseniks like the former president of Greenpeace Canada, Patrick Moore, and Bjorn "Skeptical Environmentalist" Lomborg, and even some US NGOs like the Rockefeller Foundation and Center for Science in the Public Interest, say NGOs are being ideological and irrational. Questions are being raised about how an organisation like Greenpeace that boasts strong scientific credentials can have decided it was right – or even possible - to throw away an entire and rapidly evolving field of technological progress.

Greenpeace and other campaign groups see the GM issue as fundamentally about who controls world food production - farmers or big business. Their critics hope that the fruits of biotechnology will expose the "hypocrisy" of powerful rich country environmentalists in trying to deny a technology essential to the sustainable nourishment of developing countries. The issue has already exposed a serious fault line between European and American policymakers. It could yet trigger a similar division in the NGO world.

Implications for policymakers

NGOs can no longer, for practical let alone democratic reasons, be excluded from policy formulation. Policymakers must engage with NGOs but must first understand their underlying ideological motivations and factor how policy positions will play against internal politics.

All major corporates, and many small ones in controversial sectors, can expect to receive the attentions of NGOs. Increasingly campaigns will be personalised and cover a range of sensitive pressure points, from employees and potential graduate entrants to suppliers to investors. Are these stakeholders being engaged before NGO pressure is felt? Will they be supportive or indifferent? Can they be involved in policy development to insulate the organisation from unreasonable demands?

NGOs are feared for their power but where does this power really come from? Size of membership? Income? Public endorsement? Commitment? NGOs vary hugely on these parameters. Policy makers need to be more sophisticated in analysing the range of forces they appear to be working against.

Many NGOs want to see positive results and are willing to work with corporations and others who share the same goals, and are prepared to negotiate not merely exchange views. They can contribute valuable expertise and ensure collaborative projects are not only publicly validated but properly executed. Collaborations also build mutual appreciation and break down ideological rigidity on all sides. Understanding what motivates oppositional NGOs and their strengths and weaknesses can help guide the best choice of partner.

The public are willing to see NGOs become more influential because they appear to counterbalance political and corporate power and prevent policy hegemony. But as they become more obviously powerful, the public will begin to demand "protection" from abuses (as they did with trade unions in Britain during the 1970s).

Policy makers and political institutions have yet to grasp the opportunity to rein in NGO extremism by demanding higher and enforceable standards of transparency and internal democracy. But the more thoughtful NGOs are already acknowledging that poor accountability is their Achilles' heel.

Checklist for starting your own NGO

Goals decide structure – Is your purpose short-term and well-defined (eg. to stop a proposed development) or long-term and broad (eg. to defend the interests of an indigenous people)? Short-term campaigns need lots of effort and resources immediately, long term campaigns can be built up gradually as awareness and expertise deepen.

Committees are great for broadening support, networking and helping to raise money but they can bog down campaigns in bureaucracy. Day-to-day decisions should be in the hands of a small executive team ie, the people doing the work.

Fix a strategy and stick to it. What must happen to make your campaign successful? There is usually one, perhaps two, critical decisions or events that determine the outcome of a well defined campaign. Are you concentrating your efforts on making sure these go your way?

Do you need to prove you have wide public support? Are you engaging your most obvious potential supporters (other NGOs like environmental, wildlife groups, the local community)?

You are probably not alone. An Internet search will quickly reveal other groups and campaigns on similar issues, and often a wealth of off-the shelf campaigning materials.

Do you need money to pay for publicity materials, staff? Broad-based long running campaigns should approach foundations but to succeed you will have to demonstrate a clear need and unique approach. Short-term campaigns rarely require much cash – physical help is more important - unless legal action is contemplated eg. to appeal planning permissions (seek a sympathetic lawyer who will work for you pro-bono). Local businesses directly affected by the issue can be helpful with money or services-in-kind. National NGOs like Friends of the Earth sometimes will resource important local campaigns if a point of principle is at stake.

Don't forget the media. The cheapness and accessibility of the Internet can lead campaigners to think conventional media is no longer important, but websites can end up preaching to the converted. Short-term campaigns should especially cultivate local media contacts (a single point of contact is best). Campaigns must create their own publicity – reacting to the opposition is not enough. Create stunts, do surveys, mount demos, focus on micro-issues – anything to create new stories that will keep your campaign in the public eye.

Don't stop fundraising. Many campaigns, especially local ones, depend on local retirees and students because they have plenty of time and energy. But they still need money to pay for materials, telephone calls, computer supplies. You should expect to be seeking money constantly from the public and other sources.

Checklist for dealing with an NGO

Are you the ultimate target of the NGO campaign or merely a tactical objective? Use the analysis suggested in "In the firing line" above to find out.

Study the aims and objectives of the NGO and its allies. How are they differentiated? Are some less radical (more "reasonable") than others? Perhaps you can work with the latter and develop compromise or cooperative solutions. This will help split the common front and reduce public support for extremist ideas.

Local campaigners often claim to represent the whole of their community. In fact they probably represent only 10%, but the silent majority may be giving them tacit support for historical / political reasons or simply because they do not like to see a 'done deal' in your favour. Avoid ending up trading insults with your direct opponents. It may be satisfying but you are probably bypassing your most important audience – the majority. How are you going to win them over?

Are your relationships with the media and the public as good as your opponents? If you are only thinking about this now, it may be too late.

Your employees, suppliers or customers may be targeted with pressure, sometimes even intimidation. Are you doing everything you can to protect them? Are they informed about the issue and are you helping them to help defend you?

Campaigners like politicians use emotional messages and images to convey their opposition. These are highly arousing to the public, grab attention (at least in the short term) and demand a response. Corporates, especially technology based ones, communicate rationally, relying on facts and what to them are logical arguments. The two styles are incompatible. In the public mind it is easy to end up appearing like you are wriggling and avoiding addressing the real issues. Emotional arguments must be opposed with emotional counter-arguments, not "facts".

If public opinion is the ultimate decision maker, then trust decides everything. Unfortunately NGOs, by definition, invariably start off being much more trusted. It is hard to reduce public trust in an NGO short of showing they are being deliberately fraudulent, so attracting trust to your own case is essential. Openness, responsiveness, engagement with critics, clear leadership, direct and uncomplicated communication and co-option of trusted institutions eg, doctors in a health issue, farmers in a food issue, are all important.

Dealing with a NGO campaign can consume huge amounts of management time and distract senior staff from running the business. If the opposition is very hot, it is worth setting up a special management group with the authority and resources to coordinate the counter campaign. It should not become the preserve of the Chairman although if suitable he or she might be its public face. As in all public relations work, time invested in relationship building with media, customers, employees, etc, before issues arise will pay for itself many times over when there is a crisis.

- ¹ **NGOs find success brings problems** Quentin Peel, Financial Times, 12 July 2001
- ² **Union of International Associations** <http://www.uia.org/uiastats/ytb299.htm>
- ³ Ford Foundation cited in **NGOs find success brings problems** Quentin Peel, Financial Times, 12 July 2001
- ⁴ **The Nonprofit Piece of the Global Puzzle** Dr Susan Raymond, Changing Our World, Inc. 15 Oct 2001
<http://www.onphilanthropy.com/op2001-10-15.html>
- ⁵ **Relationship between NGOs, government, media and corporate sector** Richard Edelman, March 2001
http://www.edelman.com/people_and_perspectives/insights/ngo.ppt
- ⁶ **Oracle defends Microsoft spying** BBC News online, 29 June 2000
- ⁷ **Activistcash.com** <http://activistcash.com/>
- ⁸ **Relationship between NGOs, government, media and corporate sector** Richard Edelman, March 2001
http://www.edelman.com/people_and_perspectives/insights/ngo.ppt
- ⁹ **Scientists in support of agricultural biotechnology** Petition organised by Prof CS Prakash of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama <http://www.agbioworld.com>