

## SPECIAL COMMENT

NGOs are, and should be, partners with governments and international organizations on numerous issues. In many instances NGOs have an essential impact and carry out work that other actors are unable or unwilling to do. Yet their role and work may sometimes be disputed, problematic and not always understood. For example, some actors do not want ‘watchdogs’ following their actions and associate all NGOs with this function. In the disarmament and humanitarian fields, I have experienced NGOs being supportive and constructive advocates and implementers. Regrettably, their potential is not always fully recognized or utilized.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) fulfil a variety of roles. They can be advocates for good causes, facilitators or implementers. Often a combination of these roles can be very effective. Although not all NGOs are equally constructive and competent, many NGOs have specialist expertise and serve as resources for governments, international organizations and the media.

One of the great assets of NGOs is that, if they are sufficiently resourced, they can move quickly and thus can effect change in urgent situations—especially in the field of humanitarian assistance and conflict resolution. This is something that large bureaucracies such as governments and international organizations can find very difficult. It is therefore worthwhile to see how we can fund effective NGOs so that they have the necessary resources to act rapidly in order to prevent a grave situation from becoming worse.

NGOs have the additional benefit of sometimes being seen as more politically neutral than international organizations or individual governments. They can often take account of and work with actors in ways that a government might be unable to. Because they are usually issue-based and are frequently seen as experts, NGOs are harder to ‘position’ on the political spectrum. In many cases, their motivations are viewed as being above the narrow self-interests often ascribed to states. Thus NGOs can play a useful facilitating role, bringing together parties that otherwise would find it politically impossible to meet. Meetings and projects administered by NGOs may be perceived as being inclusive, whereas similar projects carried out by governments might be seen as excluding or biased. In this respect governments and NGOs can form important partnerships—the government providing resources and advice and the NGOs providing the expertise, contacts and impartiality.

Another strength of NGO participation in policy formulation and policy implementation is the ability of NGOs to act both as independent organizations and as part of an ‘umbrella group’. For example, during the Ottawa Process it was important that the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) was able to unite so many NGOs—large and small, from diverse regions and backgrounds—behind one simple, effective message. However, some issues lend themselves more readily than others to a ‘more the merrier’ approach. This is particularly true in the early days of policy formulation on an issue, when broadly embracing as many views as possible provides a greater range of ideas from which to choose.

NGOs with on-the-ground, practical experience are especially useful partners. This was one of the most important contributions of the NGOs campaigning against anti-personnel landmines. Their authority came from their direct, personal experiences. Their voices were heard because they had first-hand knowledge. Although NGOs working on small arms have yet to fully appreciate this lesson, it is beginning to happen and it was gratifying to observe how many NGOs from conflict-afflicted regions came to tell their stories at the July 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. We need to hear more of these voices. Governments and their bureaucrats need to be told time and time again just what is the *real impact* of their policies on *real people*.

One dilemma in dealing with NGOs is the issue of accountability. Unlike democratically elected governments, NGOs are generally not accountable to the wider public—only to their like-minded supporters. Their constituency is often only a portion of a greater public. Of course, many NGOs are accountable to their funders—but to whom are the funders accountable? Government policies can be susceptible to undue influence from unrepresentative but well-financed or vocal NGOs that punch well above their true weight. These NGOs might pressure governments into supporting or adopting undesirable policies.

For the most part, however, the NGO-government partnership works well. It might work even better if NGOs were better financed, more accountable and transparent, and had better access to governmental and international processes and information. Several of the contributors to this issue of *Disarmament Forum* reflect on how these changes could be identified and implemented.

It is essential, however, that NGOs retain their independence from governments. Too close an association would lead to a loss of NGO credibility and effectiveness. This is a fine distinction—NGOs should work with governments and international organizations but must be able to clearly voice their concerns without losing their independence, access or respectability. They are not there to ‘rubber stamp’ the views of international organizations or governments or simply to lend credibility to top-down processes.

UNIDIR acts as an important bridge between NGOs and government representatives to the United Nations. I am grateful to UNIDIR for providing this timely and much needed discussion of NGO participation in the field of disarmament and security. If ever there was a topic that was in dire need of energetic input from NGOs, it surely is disarmament in the early twenty-first century.

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