

Peacekeeping and the Coming Age of NGOs

by Giovanni Rufini

For the past few years, there has been wide debate on NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), both in peacekeeping and developmental issues. These organizations seem to have acquired an increasing importance in international relations, however, comments toward them are not always favourable. Nevertheless, PK doctrine must give them consideration as, at present, NGOs are among the main actors on the international stage. There is still much confusion on this topic primarily because most concerned persons are not yet acquainted with such entities. Thence, it may be useful to summarize briefly some of their features.

The term NGO is vague and includes a platter of organizations both in the northern and southern hemispheres. We choose to refer only to those based in OECD countries, which are operating in the once called "Third World". They number approximately 2,500.¹

As NGOs we mean non profit private agencies, active in the north-south relationship as promoters of development programmes, humanitarian aid, human rights, environmental projects and research. Some NGOs are highly specialized while most are interdisciplinary, since an integrated approach to problems is widely considered more effective in almost all of their activities. Their methodology is usually "participatory". This means that problems are confronted at the community level, and the same beneficiaries are involved in the identification of needs and of solutions. In developmental doctrine this is known as the approach that can give the most productive and durable results. This explains why some international institutions, such as the UN and the World Bank², recommend the utilization of NGOs in order to reduce costs and increase the effectiveness of international aid.

Although some NGOs have a strong political or confessional background, most of them are simple expressions of social solidarity between the north and south. They normally rely on a mix of private, governmental and international funding. In European NGOs, private financing normally amounts to 25-50% of total budget, so that organisations are more bound to public/international funding. Therefore, they are more obliged to comply with standards of transparency, effectiveness, legal status and overall professionalism as required by the financing institutions. This condition makes some NGOs more reliable than many others.

Resources available for NGOs certainly vary but the aggregate is impressive: in 1993 only, their contribution to international aid amounted to more than 10 billion US\$, benefitting 250 million people.³

¹ Bennet, J., *NGO Coordination at Field Level*, Oxford 1994.

² see World Bank Annual Reports 1990 and 1991

³Bennet, J., *op. cit.*

All NGOs are different but in European Union there is a certain degree of homogeneity, which helps to identify those characteristics common to a vast majority of them. This is due to the role played by the EU Commission, whose effort to create a common ground and coordinating bodies is highly appreciable. Finally, it is improper to define NGOs as "voluntary organizations" as they are increasingly employing qualified professionals, although still highly motivated.

Both development and relief require time, which makes it necessary for the absolute majority of NGOs to work in the long term. Five to ten years is the average duration of a development programme; thus, NGOs tend to work in the same area for a very long period. Moreover, organisational and relational needs normally induce organisations to remain in a country where they have invested years and money to set up headquarters, train staff, create positive relationships with local partners and acquire a deep knowledge of the local culture and systems. Therefore "friction can result when soldiers assume that they are in command of a situation where NGOs may have been engaged for years prior to the military's arrival."⁴ The concern is also about the future: what will happen after the military's departure? What situation will they leave on the field? What perception of NGOs will locals have after a military intervention? Will soldiers be cautious not to spoil NGOs' hardily-achieved goals?

"The proliferation of NGOs has magnified coordination problems in recent peace operations, but they also bring significant new resources."⁵ This assertion is absolutely true. Coordinating NGOs between themselves, or with militaries, requires enormous efforts: in recent years, many attempts to create coordinating bodies have been carried out with modest success.

Networks of NGOs have sometimes produced good results; for example take *Link* in Mozambique and NENGOOT (Network of European NGOs in the Occupied Territories) in Palestine and Gaza. For European organisations, the dependence on public financing seems an important incentive to improve networking. In this perspective, the Assembly of European NGOs is an important permanent body to foster connection at the international level. A more autonomous organisation such as the Geneva-based ICVA (International Council of Voluntary Agencies) is still at its first, though promising, steps. Permanent forms of linkage, however, particularly with the military component, have shown severe constrains.

At the field level, some positive outcomes have come from the experiences in Somalia and Rwanda, with the establishment of CMOC (Civil Military Operation Center) and OSOCC (On Site Operation Coordination Center): involved NGOs have reacted positively and a high level of coordination has been reached. Far from the theatre of operations, however, the situation changes.

An organization like American OFDA (Office for Foreign /disaster Assistance), for instance, has serious limitations. In fact it has creates too tight a linkage with governmental resolutions by subduing NGOs' action to national interests and to a dual military-diplomatic authority. This is a contradiction, because NGOs are non governmental and international by definition and the national interests of OECD countries (US in particular), seldom coincides with that of affected populations, the latter remaining the objective of NGOs' actions. Moreover, when the coordination is delegated to

⁴ Last, D.M. and Vought, D., *Inter-agency Cooperation in Peacekeeping Operation: Conference Report*, Washington 1994.

⁵ Last, D.M. and Vought, D., *op. cit.*

governmental authorities, the time requested for a political decision seriously restricts the rapid-reaction capability of NGOs. Nevertheless, the American experience of DART (Disaster Assessment and Response Team) represents an interesting tool for a rapid assessment.

Even more promising are the Australian and Canadian experiments: creating a joint background for civilian and military personnel by establishing common training centres. In this sense, the experience of the Canadian International Pearson Peacekeeping Training Centre is a decidedly positive approach to the problem. The British attempt to develop joint campaign plans and the cross attachment of officers may also help to create the necessary cooperative climate. Instead, Although useful, but still too weak, has been the French Army's decision to provide each level of command with its own Civil Affairs cell.

The fundamental problem remains cultural, and lies in the difficult relationship between the military and the NGO parties.

Sometimes the genesis of NGOs brings the earmark of a refusal of the political choices of their country. Most of such organisations were born during the Cold War, when Soviet Union was the major sponsor of most developing countries and was backing liberation movements all over the world. At that time many people, sensitive to the problem of aid and solidarity, found quite unacceptable the support to fascist dictatorships in Latin America and Africa that was, until the late 1970's, a feature of western policy. Far from any sympathy for communism, nevertheless, they strongly believed that the West had the historical responsibility of the sufferings of many populations left in the bloody hands of cruel military juntas (remembering that only 20 years ago, even western Europe was afflicted by fascist dictatorships in Spain, Greece and Portugal). NGOs were born at that time, as a tool of democratic societies to amend this shame. While military culture was totally involved in the fight against the eastern block, sometimes with the strong feeling that even dictatorships, and their consequences, were acceptable to reduce soviet influence in the Third World. This created a cultural gap that still waits to be filled, affecting the relations between the two, although with a decreasing intensity.

Better mutual knowledge remains the major instrument to overcome the cultural obstacle and encourage trust and cooperation. In this sense, the experience of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre is absolutely fundamental as it is helping establish the sense of a common goal, a common interest and a mutual understanding. Working together, establishing personal relationships, learning from each other, in peacekeeping as in life, is still the way to achieve a true and confident partnership.