7. The primacy of non-governmental organisations in humanitarian relief

Eric James and Ernest Ogbozor

INTRODUCTION

A crucial part of civil society is non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that play a vital role in humanitarian relief. It is now more important than ever to comprehensively understand the devastating effects of armed conflicts, climate emergencies, and collapsing economies on vulnerable communities worldwide. The present time is plagued by these hazards, along with the largest refugee population ever (UN-OCHA 2023) and continual high-profile wars that bring untold human suffering.

NGOs have a long history in humanitarian relief. Their diversity is clear, but the role they play varies. This ranges from being first responders and technical experts to campaigners and activists. Because they have also been identified as colonial agents and government lackeys, their role has been fraught with controversy. At the same time, different types of organisations can lump entities that are not NGOs – such as businesses, international organisations, and UN specialised agencies – into the same category. In any case, it is remarkable that NGOs that focus on humanitarian issues predate the United Nations; they are nearly a pervasive business, and working for them can be a dangerous situation. Careful analysis reveals distinctive patterns that emerge and are key to fully grasping the landscape of international aid.

This chapter aims to provide an in-depth review of this vital actor in humanitarian relief. It will introduce NGOs from the perspective of how they have changed over the years and how they can be engaged in the future to save lives, reduce suffering, and foster resilience. To better understand these issues, this chapter will define NGOs and examine their origins, roles, and impact.

WHAT ARE NGOS? DEFINITIONS AND TYPES

NGOs exist because of social concerns that governments and commercial entities do not address. The public and private sectors are meant to provide basic and advanced needs through the social contract and market mechanisms. As a result, people suffer from poverty, deprivation, exclusion, and vulnerability. This dramatically increases the impact of natural hazards and violent conflict. Therefore, establishing the 'third sector' has been necessary to address the failures of these two groups.

NGOs address wide-ranging concerns – from the environment and health to consumer protection and human rights. Within International Development, NGOs work on virtually all aspects found in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other aspects of development, such as good governance. The chapter focuses on a subset of these groups, NGOs that provide humanitarian relief. With this understanding, NGOs have emerged as critical players

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in the crisis, providing emergency assistance, among other activities, including healthcare, shelter, food aid, protection, and livelihoods.

If one were to think of mainstream development and relief NGOs, there might be a 'typical' NGO. However, NGOs are notoriously difficult to classify because of their diverse roles. Specific criteria have been elusive and need further definition so as not to include any group or non-state actor. These factors are:

1. Formed solely for humanitarian purposes.
2. Abide by at least some humanitarian principles.
3. Operate independently from the government.
4. Do not retain/distribute profit.
5. Belong to a more extensive network, even if not active.

Common acronyms include local NGOs (LNGOs), international NGOs (INGOs), and 'big' international NGOs (BINGOs). Even with these criteria, there are some overlaps and nuanced distinctions (Table 7.1). As Fowler (1997) explains, among the many NGO labels, quasi-NGOs established by the government are known as QUANGOs, commercial NGOs are called

Table 7.1 NGO typology

Acronym	Full Name	Description	Example*
LNGO	Local Non-Governmental Organisation	(1) Broad category incorporating all types of NGOs, (2) Smaller 'local NGOs' that may be less formal and unincorporated	Afghan Aid, Polish Humanitarian Relief
BINGO	Big International Non-Governmental Organisation	Large INGO that us capable of handling large programmes with significant amounts of funding	Save the Children, CARE, Oxfam, MSF
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation	NGO that is multinational or operates globally	International Rescue Committee, Danish Refugee Council
ENGO	Environmentally focused Non-Governmental Organisation	NGO formed to address ecological concerns such as conservation and sustainability	WWF, Heifer International
RINGO	Religious Non-Governmental Organisation	NGO that focuses on humanitarian issues but has a religious affiliation, some more than others	ACT Alliance, Caritas, Norwegian Church Aid, Islamic Relief, World Vision
GONGO	Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation	Organisation that is formed by government to carry out services similar to NGOs but fails to meet the criteria of humanitarian NGOs	GIZ and IHH (Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation)

Note: * There are thousands of different NGOs so this is just a concise list of illustrative examples.

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CONGOs, and criminally run NGOs are called CRINGOs. However, these are not NGOs according to our criteria.

There can be overlap between these different types of NGOs. It is possible to be both a BINGO and an INGO, and it is possible to be both an INGO and a RINGO. National differences have been noted between different NGOs such as those in the US (e.g., Mercy Corps, International Medical Corps, and Relief International), the UK (e.g., Oxfam, Save the Children, and Action Aid), and France (e.g., Premier Urgence, Action Contre la Faim, Humanity & Inclusion). There is also often confusion – in practice, not necessarily in the literature – between NGOs, International Organisations (IOs), and intergovernmental organisations. IOs are primarily made up of the Red Cross Movement and other entities backed by international treaties. The Red Cross Movement has oversight responsibilities for the Geneva Conventions. Intergovernmental organisations are made up of government entities. The United Nations (UN), with its specialised agencies (e.g., UNICEF, World Food Programme, and UNHCR), is a prime example. There are others, such as NATO and the European Union. Because of the criteria detailed above, none of these are NGOs.

Also worth noting is that this list does not include commercial entities such as Abt Global, Chemonics, and Development Alternatives because they do not meet the criteria, particularly with the focus on profit-making through government contracting. These groups carry out 'NGO-type work', which causes confusion. In the US, these commercial development-focused entities are sometimes nicknamed 'Beltway Bandits' because they have positioned their headquarters offices close to the government to facilitate contracting applications and negotiations. Registered as commercial companies, formed primarily to service government contracts providing goods and services, they may be seen as 'lackeys' of the government, which many NGOs work hard to avoid.

HOW DID NGOS EVOLVE? ORIGINS AND HISTORY

The impulse to help fellow humans runs deep and has a long history (Dunant, 1986). NGOs have existed for hundreds of years (Davis 2014), albeit under various names such as associations, commissions, committees, councils, and foundations. Following this history, the formation of civil society runs parallel to the twin developments of modern state governments and commerce. Some of the earliest groups to help others formed mutual aid associations and foundations to help specific vulnerable groups, such as anti-slavery and anti-cruelty societies.

To be concise, it helps to look at this history over the last century. During the First World War, numerous groups came to the aid of victims of war. This included, for instance, the UK-based Save the Children in 1919. A leading figure in forming these groups was the-then future US President, Herbert Hoover, who established numerous relief agencies inside and outside the US to assist war-stricken Europeans (Nash 2017). The growth of NGOs dedicated to war relief continued through the Second World War, with groups such as Oxfam in 1942 and CARE in 1945. Notably, the International Rescue Committee was founded in the lead-up to the war to help those fleeing Nazi persecution in 1933.

The term 'non-governmental organisations' can be traced to Article 71 of the UN Charter 1945 and was further refined in Resolution 288(X) of the UN Economic and Social Council on 27 February 1950. To the UN, these were considered international organisations that were 'not

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founded by an international treaty'. This stressed the 'non-' aspects of their existence, further built on in the 'without borders' ethos that came a couple of decades later.

In the decades that followed the Second World War, NGOs also expanded their presence outside Europe in response to the wars in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia. World Vision, for instance, was established in 1950. Africa, too, witnessed a gradual expansion of NGOs across the continent as colonial rule transitioned out. In some cases, NGOs filled voids left by European rule. As a result, critiques arose that incorporated NGOs into the post-colonial regimes. From this point of view, it is not hard to see NGOs as part of an imperial continuum (Barnett 2011). With their focus on service delivery and providing resources (this includes everything from funding, hardware, and technology to knowledge, information, and ways of working), NGOs transferred the ways of working across the Global South. They expected standards that were in many ways consistent with the colonial enterprise.

The civil wars that plagued the African continent continued the support for humanitarian relief, where NGOs had a prominent role. One important example was the Nigerian civil war in Biafra (1967–70), which led a group of French doctors to split away from the Red Cross to form Médicine Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). Their position, in sum, was that neutrality was untenable in the face of atrocities. They argued that there was a right to interfere, that is, it was necessary to speak out when there were apparent human rights abuses. This formed one of the persistent tensions between different ethical positions in humanitarian relief (Slim 1997). On the one hand, the humanitarian community clings to the rhetoric (and sometimes practice) of neutrality. On the other hand, many feel that it is itself an injustice not to speak out in the face of inhumanity. In these cases, it is necessary to interfere (i.e., not remain neutral) and, at times, seek solidarity with those who suffer.

In the 1980s and 1990s, several trends further contributed to the expansion of NGOs in humanitarian relief. First, the conservative backlash against government institutions, notably by the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the US and UK, respectively, meant that approaches outside government were actively sought. The explicit assumption of this trend was that 'government is the problem' and that policy actions such as deregulation, privatisation, and letting the 'invisible hand of the market' solve social issues were good remedies to high taxes, red tape, and perceived dependency. This push was not directed at NGOs specifically, yet it had a profound impact by increasing the role, number, funding, and arguably the importance of NGOs.

There was an increased need to address the humanitarian catastrophes brought about by the end of the Cold War. These 'New Wars' of the 1990s saw a change in the nature of warfare, focusing on civilian populations (Kaldor 2012). Numerous NGOs came to the fore in this era and continue to the present. Some countries saw an outsized role for NGOs. One notable case is Haiti, which some have called the 'Republic of NGOs' (Cunningham 2012). Similarly, Somalia and other countries saw the growth of war economies, where aid was a key driver. Indeed, in some countries, the non-profit sector is so widespread that its role and impact are assumed and taken for granted. In the US, the third sector is particularly robust and engages swathes of the country in everything from healthcare to religion and social well-being. Reliable numbers are hard to come by, but according to Humanitarian Outcomes (2020), 5,146 humanitarian organisations were operating worldwide.

Several other trends have focused on professionalisation, consolidations, and innovation in recent years. The first trend towards professionalisation has taken several decades and is marked by training and education, the codification of standards, and the formalisation of

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networks and institutions (James 2016). For instance, the US-based consortium InterAction and ICVA based in Europe explicitly focus on humanitarian issues. Some consortia deal with specific issues such as the UK-based Start Fund and the European Interagency Security Forum. Earlier efforts, such as the Sphere Project standards,[1] have been continually updated and extended into areas such as education and managing livestock in emergency settings and now form an essential part of nearly every response.

Founding an NGO is an entrepreneurial endeavour that consists of many of the same impulses that their commercial counterparts hold dear, such as a desire to do something different and address an unresolved need or fill a uniquely identified gap. The founding of new NGOs that address specific issues, such as Wateraid.org, or incorporate improved methodologies (e.g., localisation), such as the NGO, Field Ready) while working within the larger community of NGOs has been a significant development. Some of these groups are meant to be disruptive iconoclasts, and some are meant to work within and transform existing practices and structures.

This short history has focused on Western/Global North NGOs, but there are many more, and it is essential to note that this history continues to be formed. Understandably, in countries where more conservative, authoritarian, and totalitarian forms of government exist, the list of NGOs is correspondingly low or nonexistent. Conversely, the role of the third sector is important within countries where poverty and suffering from disasters are pronounced. The formation of local NGOs in Syria is therefore notable. China has also been making inroads into disaster response where there is capacity and interest, particularly in Asia and in events such as the 2015 earthquake in Nepal (Li and Dong 2017).

HOW DO NGOS WORK? ROLES AND CONSIDERATIONS

In 2023, 1,900 humanitarian partners provided life-saving assistance to 128 million people, underscoring the vital role of NGOs in humanitarian relief (UN-OCHA 2023). Humanitarian aid is crucial in providing resources for vulnerable groups and victims of disasters. NGOs save lives during crises and help restore a sense of purpose, community, and well-being. Humanitarian NGOs provide immediate relief efforts and other steps along the disaster cycle: recovery, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and risk reduction. Some also advocate for better policies and work in adjacent areas (peacebuilding and development, alongside humanitarianism) in what is known as the 'triple nexus' (Joireman and Haddad 2024). For NGOs in this sector, doing something may not always be better than doing nothing, hence the need to 'do no harm' (Anderson 2010). All need to navigate this landscape while keeping their organisations safe, viable, and relevant concerning their mission.

On the surface, there are activities that an organisation says it does, such as providing health services, distributing food and vouchers, and 'saving children' from suffering and protecting them from abuse. The difference between what an organisation does and what it says it does is referred to as 'bureaucratic hypocrisy' (Mellquist and Sörbom 2023). Moving away from these surface-level marketing terms, explicit roles include service provider, advocate, witness, and resource transferrer. These can be spelt out more directly as falling into the following categories:

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1. Materials transfer: food and non-food items, equipment and supplies, speciality items, and construction.
2. Labour: direct labour, community labour, contract labour, self-help.
3. Information: advocacy, awareness and promotion activities, local information centres, campaigns.
4. Monetary support: market interventions, cash, vouchers, and financial mechanisms (insurance, loans, and guarantees).
5. Quality assurance: technical assistance (supervision, expertise/advice, planning), capacity building.

In practice, any organisation that sets up operations is going to hire people, rent and buy property (including office and living space as well as vehicles, generators, and the like), procure food (and go out to restaurants), and use utilities such as water and electricity (to the extent that they exist). This can be a helpful inflow for a local economy. These groups will also be required to pay fees, taxes, and other expenses that go to those running services, which is most often, but not always, the government. Many NGOs also provide funding to others acting as 'resource enhancers' (see, e.g., Kellow and Murphy-Gregory 2018).

This paints a complicated picture. Some scholars (see, e.g., Duffield 2007; Barnett 2011), describe a process whereby NGOs play a complicit role in the politicisation of aid and instruments of global governance. Some have described multi-sided issues of 'marketisation', 'politicisation', and 'securitisation' (Jacoby and James 2010). Marketisation occurs with the commodification of life-saving assistance within the globalised aid industry. When NGOs are enveloped into government agendas, they become part of a process of politicisation which can have detrimental effects on their missions and mandates. The inclusion of concerns that are not traditionally related to the military – namely, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief – has resulted in securitisation and 'a narrower humanitarian space, less independence, and the blurring of lines between the civilian and military sectors' (Jacoby and James 2010, p. 1). All of this is part of extensive criticism of NGOs being part of post-imperial structures and military agendas. As another example, Polman (2010) pointed out that NGOs face ethical dilemmas despite wanting to do good, and she highlighted examples of compromised results from their best intentions in various operations worldwide. The issue of assessing NGO impact and the need for proper methodologies come to the fore as NGOs have gained prominence.

WHAT IMPACT DO NGO HAVE? INDICATORS AND RESULTS

The focus now turns from the origin and roles of NGOs in humanitarian relief to the complex issue of measuring their impact. Assessing the impact of humanitarian aid, both in the short and long term, is crucial. One helpful definition of impact is that it measures 'both positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, whether intended or unintended' (OECD-DAC 2002, p. 24). Blankenberg (1995) defines impact as the lasting and sustainable changes brought about by an intervention, which can relate to both the specific objectives of the intervention and any unforeseen outcomes. Similarly, Roche (1999) describes impact assessment as the systematic analysis of significant and enduring changes, whether positive or negative, intended or unintended, in people's lives resulting from a given action or series of actions. These sources acknowledge the importance

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of both anticipated and unanticipated impacts, with the latter being equally significant. For instance, a study examining the impact of a prominent foreign NGO that provides essential health services in rural Uganda raised concerns about the potential unintended negative effects of NGOs on government services in areas with a shortage of skilled labour (Deserranno et al. 2020).

Much of the literature assumes that NGOs would have a positive impact due to their close relationship with their beneficiaries. For Hoffmann et al. (2004), it is not enough to simply do good; it is necessary to demonstrate the impact of actions in specific sectors and communities and to assess whether there are unintended consequences or side effects. However, this assumption has been subject to rigorous scrutiny over the years. Therefore, the impact of humanitarian relief, whether positive or negative, is a matter of intense debate. According to Edwards and Hulme (1995), the increased popularity of NGOs and the rise in government funding they received had implications for their performance and accountability. The issue of accountability for funds has remained crucial due to donor demands. The humanitarian relief community has long sought better evidence on the effective use of funds (INTRAC 2001). NGOs are improving their accountability to beneficiaries and altering communication with funders through digital tools. However, these risks widen social divides and leave vulnerable groups behind (Cordery et al. 2023).

This complexity has only deepened, with the increase in bilateral and multilateral development aid leading to a surge in critiques of the impact of NGOs in humanitarian relief in the past decades. Negative changes can occur in any effort due to external factors beyond managers' control (INTRAC 2001). Donors, governments, and other stakeholders can add expectations and requirements. For many, the success of an impact assessment depends on what is done and how it is done (MSF-Holland 1996). Hallman (1998) further noted that impact questions should not just be addressed during evaluations but also during ongoing monitoring processes, as well as through techniques such as real-time evaluation.

Theory of Change (ToC) embodies both a procedural journey and its resultant product: the process entails collaborative sessions among practitioners and stakeholders, facilitated by a skilled leader, culminating in a documented change model depicting the hows and whys of goal attainment (Taplin et al. 2013). ToCs are evident through underlying assumptions, articulated strategies, and interconnected actions within a project, aiming to guide communities or organisations towards positive transformations. When these theories are effectively encapsulated within logical or results frameworks, programme managers can articulate programme objectives and the requisite pathways to achieve them. Similarly, logical framework analysis ('logframes'), which encapsulates a ToC, establishes a structured hierarchy of objectives or results, outlining how project or programme designers envision change unfolding (Levine 2007, p. 2). According to Taplin et al. (2013), testing theories of change through monitoring and evaluation can yield compelling evidence regarding the success or failure of initiatives.

Hallam (1998, cited in Hoffmann et al. 2004, p. 2) identified three broad approaches to impact assessment: 'the scientific approach, which generates quantitative measures of impact; the deductive/inductive approach, which is more anthropological and socio-economic in its methods and approach; and participatory approaches, which gather the views of programme beneficiaries'. Among these overarching methodologies is an extensive spectrum of instruments tailored for impact analysis, typically categorised into qualitative and quantitative realms. Such tools encompass surveys, interviews, workshops, discussions, direct observation, participatory research, and case studies (Roche 1999).

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Typically, two types of indicators are used, including those that measure the implementation of programmes (input, process, and output indicators) and those that evaluate the programme's effects (outcome and impact indicators) (Davies, 2012). NGOs commonly rely on a combination of indicators that align with their monitoring and reporting systems, as well as the specific role of the indicators. The Sphere Guidelines, as well as some donors, have extensive items that can be measured. Because saving lives is at the core of NGO efforts, mortality rates are often used as a starting point. The collaboration between the government, society, and various civil society organisations and institutions can also be examined (Sayarifad et al. 2022).

A question of emphasis is important to consider where the point of humanitarian aid is addressing the failures of development. The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG 2003/04) notes that the literature examining the effects of aid programmes focuses on international development aid rather than humanitarian aid. As a result, the available literature serves as an essential and valuable point of reference (HPG 2003/04). Simultaneously, new management systems emphasising results have been introduced in the public sectors of Western countries (Macrae et al, 2002, as cited in Hoffmann et al. 2004). There remains a need for more systematic learning from humanitarian efforts using rigorous theory-based impact evaluations, given the higher number of humanitarian emergencies and the substantial financial resources allocated to humanitarian relief (Puri et al. 2015). Despite this, it is clear that more attention is paid to the impact of NGOs than to many government programmes, which can be based on political whim and commercial offerings that are there for profit without social return.

CONCLUSION

NGOs have long been involved in humanitarian relief, but this is not without controversy. Support from the government and supporting government aims, and in some cases, working to speak out against what they have witnessed while providing aid, has brought criticism. Questions about their impact are also present. As a large and diverse group, NGOs have, at times, defied categorisation. This chapter has provided an in-depth review from a historical perspective, defining their composition, roles, and impact. Despite having noble intentions, resource constraints, security risks, and political constraints can hinder their efforts. They navigate complex political dynamics, and, in some cases, may have to compromise their principles to reach vulnerable populations. Because NGOs are the workhorses of international humanitarian relief, understanding their past, position, and influence is important.

NOTE

1. For more information, please see: https://www.spherestandards.org/.

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