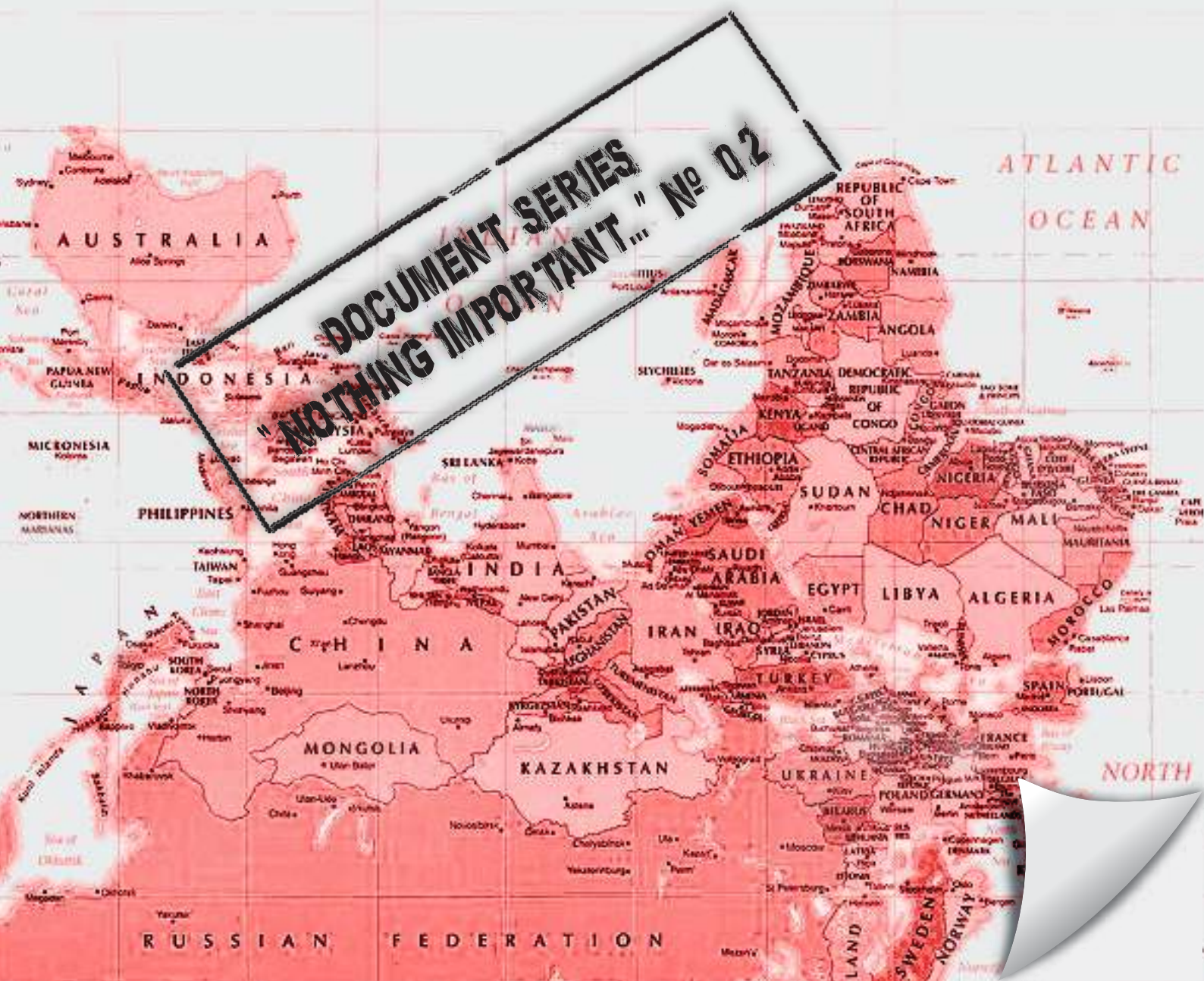




REPOLITICISING NGO's

THOMAS GEBAUER



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“Nothing important ...” - in 1969 Henry Kissinger, then a key-figure of US-foreign policy, told the Chilean foreign-minister, that: “Nothing important can come from the South.” He was of the opinion that the ‘axis of history’ went from Moscow, over Bonn and Washington to Tokyo. What happened in the South was of no significance for US-imperialism. With this new series of RLS publications from New Delhi, we would like to present documents we feel are important for a broader audience in South-Asia and beyond. Certainly there is a lot to learn from struggles, analyses and movements from so called ‘Global South’!

The contributions in this series reflect the opinion of the author(s) – we would like to discuss them with you.

Dear Readers,

We discussed if it was appropriate to print a text which was written from an author living in the 'Global North' within this series "Nothing Important.." Yes we do!

Thomas Gebauer is heading "Medico International" and thereby is an institution in himself, which for more than 40 years is dealing with organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin-America.

The thoughts that Thomas has expressed in his contribution for the conference in Cape Town in July 2007 at the "people's Health Assembly" can be seen by no means in isolation from the work "Medico" has done since so many decades with their partners all over the world and especially in the so called 'Global South'. Even if the following propositions are his own thoughts, they certainly owe a lot to the mutual exchange and discourse Thomas has had over many years. Therefore, the final product are his thoughts which have developed within the struggle for better health conditions for the people worldwide and especially in the interexchange with those who are working in the 'Global South'. We are thankful to Shankar Gopalakrishnan that he has agreed to introduce the theses of Thomas with some preceding thoughts which link the discussion with the South Asian debate.

Carsten Krinn

(Resident Representative,

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Preface

Thomas Gebauer's short note on "re-politicising NGOs" is useful for a number of reasons. First, while its key points are not new in the global South, it is significant that they are being made by someone from the North - and that too not by an academic critic or in a Marxist analysis, but in the form of a presentation to an NGO forum by the head of a large organisation. Even here in India such debate is not as widespread as it should be, with the media actively promoting notions of an undifferentiated, positive "civil society" whenever it suits them; and this is far more true in the North, where Southern nation-states are typically portrayed as consisting of corrupt governments, irrationally violent political movements and noble professional NGOs. From 1989 onwards endless media reports and academic



studies have appeared with glowing descriptions of how NGOs "promote democracy", provide social services and generally act as the "conscience of society." The fact that NGOs are not necessarily an instrument of democracy, and certainly not one of social change, is a fact that receives altogether too little attention.

Yet the fundamental truth of Gebauer's theses, and the similar critiques made repeatedly in the global South, also raise a fundamental question: *why* do NGOs function in this manner? Why is it that, however radical their leaders and however revolutionary their rhetoric, they (with very rare exceptions) always stop short of crossing certain boundaries? It cannot be the case that their leaders and staff are all corrupt cynics or cowardly sell outs; while some are, many are deeply committed to their work and to their vision of a better world. Clearly there is a structural issue at work.

A first step in identifying this structural issue is to more clearly define what an "NGO" is. The term itself is unhelpful; everything from a card club to a guerrilla army is a "non-government organisation." Yet these are obviously not NGOs in any meaningful sense of the term. A second definition, popular in an earlier era, is that NGOs are "non-political" bodies engaged in "voluntary work." Yet this too is clearly off the mark. NGOs engage in political pressure from both the left and the right and can hardly be called "non-political." Further, most of the bodies we consider NGOs today have paid professional staff, and some of them have budgets that rival those of corporations.

In reality, the key distinguishing mark of an NGO - particularly in the South - is much more prosaic. NGOs, unlike political organisations, people's movements, unions, etc., receive institutional funding from grant agencies established for the purpose. These agencies may be either within the country or outside it. There are, it is true, a few organisations that describe themselves as NGOs but raise money entirely through memberships or donations (most such groups prefer terms such as "mass organisation" or "movement" to the term "NGO", at least in India). But the vast majority of NGOs fall within this definition. It is this key feature of NGOs that, in turn, determines the structural limits to their activities, giving rise to the phenomena that Gebauer refers to. These limits are set in two ways.

The first is more obvious. In practically every country, bodies receiving institutional funding are subject to specific regulations on the receipt and use of such funding. Such regulations do not have to, and usually do not, take the form of overt censorship or repression of dissent. Rather, they generally require NGOs to be "apolitical", to refrain from inciting "disorder" or "illegal" activities, and otherwise set 'reasonable' limits to ensure that funding is not 'misused'. But such limits are inherently vague, and they offer plenty of space to threaten an NGO that becomes troublesome with de-registration, termination of funding or criminal prosecution. The vast majority of NGOs can be counted upon to self-regulate themselves to avoid such consequences.

Such state regulations represent the visible limits on NGO activity. However, there is a second, more dangerous, and considerably more subtle effect of institutional funding. This can be seen if one compares institutional funding models to 'earlier' (though still extant) models of solidarity, mutual assistance and international left organising. In these other models, the basis of financial support is a shared political ideology. Put crudely, if the assisting group or individual feels that the assisted group is on the "same side", they provide support through various channels. Ideally, the accountability of both



the assister and the assisted is to the shared ideology, and there is also an element of mutual accountability. The old Internationals offer one particularly well known example of such assistance. The fact that they rarely had actual mutual accountability - with disastrous consequences - does not change the fact that the groups they "assisted" (for instance, the trade unions and communist organisations of much of the developing world) did not and do not look anything like NGOs.

Today's institutional funding does not work on the basis of shared ideologies; indeed it explicitly (though falsely) claims to have no fixed ideology, beyond mainstream notions of "human rights" or, at most, being "progressive." Funding today is given on the basis of "results." In order to receive funding for their activities, NGOs have to show that they have made a difference, that their actions have produced "outcomes", which in turn are measured with "indicators." These indicators and outcomes are checked on a regular cycle (perhaps yearly or every few years) and funding is renewed or terminated on the basis of the NGO's "performance."

On the face of it this seems perfectly reasonable. But it has massive consequences. With institutional funding, an NGO now has to justify its actions not only to its own social constituency (or membership), but against the indicators set by its funders. However, whether they are conscious of it or not, all NGOs are engaged in one way or another in political activity, since every social intervention is political. In order to result in progressive social change, what is hence required is *conscious* political action. But such political action is inherently incompatible with funding indicators at two levels: at the *epistemological*/level of "measurability", and at the *temporal*/level of a "funding cycle."

The first incompatibility is easier to see. Funding standards, however well meant and thought out they may be, cannot actually measure political impact in any meaningful way - as such impact is not quantitatively measurable, and moreover rarely occurs within the space of a funding cycle. This often results in absurd situations. An NGO involved in a land rights movement was asked how many people had received land titles in the previous year; as anyone engaged in such struggles knows, they do not succeed in a year, and hence the number was zero. Another was asked to justify its campaign for public health by showing changes in the body mass index of those in the area. A third, engaged in work on laws on natural resource rights, was asked how their work had impacted the resource management regime across India (a question to which the only honest answer is "Not at all").

Such problems may seem a minor irritant. But, over time, for groups dependent on institutional funding, the other contradiction – the "funding cycle" issue – results in these problems becoming insurmountable obstacles. At a basic practical level, conscious political action of any kind usually requires long periods of quiet, strategic engagement with very little impact at all (measurable or otherwise), and the work itself is often anonymous and sometimes secret. It involves setbacks, mistakes, and sudden explosions of mass struggle, leading eventually to victories that would not have been possible without the previous preparatory work. But an NGO that seriously tries to do this will incur the wrath not only of the state (which at least is to be expected) but also of its own donors, since it will either have nothing to show, or, worse, negative "indicators" within its funding cycle. The result is not that NGOs collapse. Rather, one gets the consequences outlined in Gebauer's note.

Thus, most NGOs have to constantly promote themselves, for how else can they show an "impact" from



their work, as opposed to someone else's? Those engaged in "rights" work have to appear to be "critical" of governments - as otherwise there is no reason to fund them - but they have to do so in a manner that both appears to have immediate impact (in order to meet "indicators") and that also does not fall afoul of regulations. Most NGOs are tempted to engage in "humanitarian" activities, since the "outcomes" are obvious and measurable, rather than in trying to address "deeper causes", which may or may not lead to any tangible results within the prescribed time frame. They are also tempted to take over state functions, since these fit all of the above criteria without posing a threat to anyone. Finally, they eventually drift away from accountability to their own social base, which sooner or later begins to note that its priorities are being replaced by artificial agendas imported from donors.

The net result of all of this is most apparent in the above-mentioned "rights" NGOs, many of which end up practising a kind of surreal simulacrum of real politics. To an outside observer they appear immensely active, constantly staging meetings, making press statements, distributing material, "raising awareness" and "empowering people"; when in fact most of these actions are meaningless spectacles that give the *appearance* of political action, without being linked to any conscious political *process*. In their own way, such pantomimes are as dangerous as openly reactionary politics, as the combination of busy activity with no ultimate result encourages cynicism and depoliticisation.

In sum, given that the essence of their material base is managerial, it is no surprise that NGOs fail to challenge neoliberalism. As with any generalisation, there are exceptions to this, but this is the overall tendency. What, then, can be done?

Mutual assistance and solidarity remain as necessary today as they always were. Ultimately it is my view that it is both required and necessary for such assistance to be given on the basis of true solidarity and shared political consciousness (i.e. without measurement of "results"). But where this is not on the cards, at the least, it would be better avoid tying political work to institutional funding. People can be supported for their individual expertise, in the form of awards / fellowships, for other professional work that they may have skills for, etc.; in short, in any manner that does not result in them reporting to the donor regarding their actual 'social' (i.e. political) work. It may seem an odd stance, but only in this way can one at least reduce the damage done to both the organisations in question and to political struggle in general. In an era of austerity, repression, injustice and brutality, such damage is a loss that we can ill afford.

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Re-politicizing NGOs - Aiding change or abetting crimes

1. NGOs – and their growing importance as a reaction to Neo-liberalism

Why talk about NGOs? Why challenge civil society organisations that many of us see as the light of change and not as a problem? I hope that by the end of my presentation I would have convinced you of both the need to have a critical look at NGOs and that it is high time to reconsider civil society.

Since the 1980s, a steadily growing number of NGOs has entered the political stage; taking part in local initiatives, independent associations, non-profit charities, international human rights organisations, multinational eco-activists etc. – an estimated number of 50.000 – 100.000 worldwide. They all claim to act selflessly; promoting the interest of others, if not those of the whole mankind.

NGOs have their roots in different settings and times. Some emerged from the labour movement in the 19th century. Others have their origin in religious communities and churches. Most of today's NGOs, however, arise as a reaction to the enormous political transformations that came about in the context of the neoliberal globalisation.

There are two points that I would like to raise. An important element of the neoliberal strategy was (and still is) to tell people that "there is no alternative", that politics is determined by economic constraints and state entities, charged with social affairs, can be dismantled and replaced by market forces.

"There is no such a thing as society" stated Margret Thatcher in the 1980s, promoting the idea that there is no need for politics that aims at shaping social life. Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, spoke of a "policy of de-politicisation" that belongs to the essence of neo-liberalism. It has been this policy that led to the privatisation of state entities and fostered private initiative – including that of NGOs.

The second reason for the growing importance of NGOs is economic globalisation, or better: the global unleashing of capitalism. As the deregulation of the economy advanced, the room for political governance decreased. Multinationals began to defy the control of national governments, and they at the same time increasingly failed to find an answer to emerging new problems such as climate change, shadow economy, the financial system, illicit arms trade etc. In contrast to the economic globalisation at the political level no "world state" was formed. This gap was partly filled by NGOs. They stepped into the vacuum of missing international regulations and began to strive for a more rational way to govern the world.

With some noticeable success, NGOs played a crucial role in the implementation of the International Criminal Court, the improvement of access to antiretroviral medicine, the prohibition of landmines etc.



2. NGOs as double edged actors

The prefix: non-governmental does not imply that NGOs oppose state-based policy. On the contrary: NGOs usually seek cooperation with states and quite often do the job that governments are supposed to do.

They assist in identifying emerging problems and take care of the “agenda-setting”. They mobilise the knowledge for possible solutions and arrange proper planning. They serve as early warning systems and are in charge of charity and social welfare services that states aren’t able or willing to provide any longer.

As NGOs advanced governments could abandon their obligations. Seen from that perspective NGOs cannot be perceived as a gain of democracy only; they also have to be understood as an expression of lacking democracy. The privatization of states goes along with NGOs becoming “state entities” – with an important difference. NGOs are not formally obliged to meet the needs of the people or respond to their entitlements, as little as an individual can make a claim addressing NGOs.

And the problem goes even deeper. By alleviating the humanitarian effects of existing inequalities, some NGOs, the aid organisations, – at the end of the day – are stabilizing the unequal status quo and hence even justifying the political systems.

Thus NGOs are both: they are part of the solution and – at the same time – part of the problem. This thesis may irritate some; obviously it requires further explanation.

3. NGOS as part of the “Extended State”

You may all agree that NGOs belong to what we call civil society. The uncertainty comes when we try to define civil society. There are quite a few concepts to explain “civil society” I prefer that of Antonio Gramsci who didn’t conceptualise civil society as completely separate from the political sphere of the state. On the contrary: the political sphere (the administration, the regulatory and legal apparatus of states) is closely linked with the civil society (the political parties, the media, trade unions, grass-root organisations, the corporate sector, the NGOs, the World Social Forum as well as the industry driven Davos International Forum on Economy).

According to Gramsci both the political society and the civil society together form the “extended state”.

It would be absolutely misleading to perceive civil society just as being comprised of the good. In fact, civil society isn’t about particular actors, it is rather a place. It is the place of the society where opinion-making happens, where political decisions are prepared, where - as Gramsci put it - the struggle for “cultural hegemony” takes place.

In the past three decades the “cultural hegemony” was occupied by the neo-liberals. Media, universities, politicians, even quite a few of those who suffered the negative consequences of neo-liberalism have been convinced that public institutions based on the concept of common goods and solidarity aren’t effective and have to be replaced by private initiative, by business and entrepreneurship.



Today there is a slight tendency in the opposite direction. With a view to the multiple crisis that has affected today's world, people have begun to realise that neo-liberalism isn't a saving idea but a highly destructive one.

The public dispute that occurs in societies in the course of defining the guiding political frame perfectly describes the struggle for cultural hegemony. Gaining cultural hegemony is the precondition for change. The success stories that I already mentioned: the HIV movement, the landmine campaign e.g. have won their cases because they managed to change the public opinion. The HIV movement started with a few activists, involving affected communities. Later students joined the struggle; journalists began to cover the issue, and then a growing public awareness pressed politicians to tackle the issue in parliaments etc.

4. NGOs between public and private interests

As you know the political sphere of states is by no way committed to public interests only, but much more to those actors that dominate civil society. The current efforts of governments to resolve the financial crisis describe that. States act in favour of private interests, the banking system. They do it even better than the banks themselves. With good reason states - as they are - can be describes as the ideal personification of national capital.

On the other hand, civil society actors such as NGOs can be engaged in both: public und private interests. Even if they aim at a radical change NGOs cannot act separate from the prevailing political and economic system. They have to deal with economic constraints, staff members need to be paid, funds must be raised, etc. Some accept extensive funding from state donors and get into dependency, others are directly organised for example by by pharmaceutical companies in asking for more pills and other technical solution organised by commercial companies.

To keep their public profiles, NGOs tend to search for activities that could make it easier to approach the media. A spectacular natural disaster is much easier to cover than structural problems, such as international migration. Because of their own economic constrains NGOs aren't free to publicly raise any issue.

Thus, it isn't that simple to divide between private and public, when private stands for bad and public equals good. That is the reason why I prefer a more political distinction. Instead of classifying actors by just referring to private and public, I draw the line between those that are committed to social justice, institutionally based on common goods, in other words: that are committed to "social/public property" and those that first and foremost seek for their own profit, for "private property". "Public property", by the way, doesn't necessarily require the presence of state institution, it can be perfectly organised through co-operatives etc.

If you take a look at the WHO, it becomes obvious that both tendencies can even affect the same organisation. As a public agency, the WHO internally struggles with competing conceptualisations of health. Some still consider health in the context of human rights and health equity, others only see it through the lens of bio-security, consumerism and business.



5. NGOs – open for instrumentalisation

One of the main problems of NGOs is that they are not beyond being instrumentalised. Their engagement in social change can be interfered by opposed objectives. Instead of supporting people to overcome misery and dependence NGOs may unintentionally even assist those who are responsible for the precarious state of the world.

The risk of being exploited by others is higher, if NGOs do not realize the political frame that is set by the economic and political power. There is plenty of evidence that NGOs can be instrumentalised for security policy; commercial interests; and to overcome the lack of political legitimacy.

6. NGOs as “force multipliers”

It was the former US-Minister of Foreign Affairs Colin Powell who – at the beginning of the war in Iraq – openly defined humanitarian NGOs as “force multipliers and an important part of the troops”.

Yes, it should not be surprising that NGOs - active in times of war - also influence the course of conflicts - for better or for worse. It is well known that humanitarian aid provided by charity organisation to civilians is also an important economic and political resource used by all warring parties. Aid can contribute to improve the image of military forces and to expand their reach of action. Also the denunciation of human rights violations can contribute to shift the balance of power that exists between parties of conflict.

All over the globe military personnel have learned that lesson. Since a few years they seek a systematic involvement of NGOs in civil-military cooperation. Field manuals of the US-army explicitly classify aid as a non-lethal weapon system.

Most of the NGOs still reject the idea to get involved in military strategies, but there are already some that are proud to be allowed to cooperate with the army. Particularly US-NGOs are forced to play a role in joint strategies if they accept public funding.

However, even those that oppose civil-military-cooperation can be unintentionally instrumentalised. By drawing the public attention to a refugee emergency relief organisations may contribute to increase the public acceptance of military interventions.

These dilemmas cannot be resolved by reducing the reality of wars just to a humanitarian problem. Insisting on a neutral position, as many NGOs do, seems to be rather an illusion. Security policy does not strive for social justice. Its main objective is to effectively keep the status quo. For this purpose the European Union has defined a “Common Foreign and Security Policy” that explicitly combines military and police action with economic cooperation, development aid and even human rights policy. The latter isn’t seen as an own value any longer but only as an instrument to “averting a danger”.

If NGOs do not reject the attempts of being involved in security strategies they run the risk of becoming a hostage to a security policy that only aims at stabilizing existing privileges and misery. At the end of the day, NGOs contribute to a kind of permanent “crisis management” that is replaced the idea of “social justice” by controlling the social gaps that day by day become deeper.



7. NGOs as promoters of commercial interests

The instrumentalisation of NGOs does not always occur in such a direct manner. NGOs can be also co-opted indirectly.

If ecologist groups spend own resources – let's say – on developing an energy saving automobile, the industry must not be scared. The industry may save own development expenses and can be ensured that the concept of mobility based on private cars isn't challenged.

If health initiatives concentrate their activities on just calling for drugs and other technical solution instead of focusing on social and political change for health, NGOs can make a most welcome contribution to the interests of pharmaceutical companies. As much as drugs are needed, the pure promotion of bio-medical solution can also open up new opportunities for profit.

Knowledge is a prerequisite for the realization of economic and political interests. With their expertise NGOs can assist to stabilize the prevailing economic model, but they can also oppose it.

A special look has to be taken at those civil society actors that are called „philanthrocapitalists“. I am referring to, for example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that is the most important private funder of health activities all over the world by now. However, philanthrocapitalists do not provide money only, they also influence global health strategies. Business people like Gates are used to handle problems in terms of investment and return; they calculate input and output. Their philosophy is that any problem - also social problems – can be resolved by an efficient linkage of market forces, science and techniques. The participation of affected groups, on the other hand, does not seem to be really necessary.

Gates enjoys himself in the role of an action man who does not need to spend much time for deliberation but goes ahead. That is what I call the "can-do-attitude". Recently, Gates announced to concentrate his efforts on the development and the allocation of vaccines: "we can save 10 million lives". No doubt, vaccination programs are important, but they cannot overcome the scandalous health inequalities.

Those who praise the "can-do-attitude" of business people oversee that e.g. Gates generates his revenues out of investment. A big chunk of the 25 billion dollars that Gates could invest in health comes from the money he made during the last ten years as a shareholder of notoriously known pharmaceutical, chemical and food producing companies.

8. NGOs as agencies to create political legitimacy

In the meantime, many other NGOs have been affected by the aforementioned "can-do attitude". Like Gates, they prefer a pragmatic approach. For example, they do not ask for the root-causes of hunger, but limit their activities on providing food-aid.

Of course it is an ethical must to help starving people, but if NGOs ignore the circumstances that have caused hunger they are perfectly contributing to the neo-liberal ideology that "there is no alternative", that hunger cannot be abolished but only alleviated, that losers are inevitable.



The impact of such an apolitical approach is usually measured by the quantity of delivered aid and the number of people reached. It is an action that aims at avoiding death, without improving life ("we can save 10 Million lives", as Gates said).

It is this can-do attitude of NGOs that helps the political system to overcome its lacking legitimacy. A world that seems to be divided in people providing aid and others receiving aid appears much more acceptable than a world that is divided in privileged and socially excluded people.

But to be just, the pragmatism that is guiding many NGOs today isn't a problem of only the NGOs. The wrong idea that social change can be measured by business assessments and economic comparison calculations is widely spread. The McKinsey have not stopped before the doors of NGOs. Unfortunately the NGOs too are mixing up effectiveness with efficiency today.

Only recently, a group of NGOs published a call for universal health coverage. The call also strives for efficiency which brings in business thinking. Following that call it is to be feared that at the end of the day coverage will be measured just by the percentage of people covered. Such statistical figures however don't tell you anything about the quality of health coverage.

We all agree that health isn't a commodity; but in our own strategies many of us have already accepted a business perspective. Also NGOs get more and more used to speaking of stakeholders, controlling mechanisms, impact analysis, managerial business etc. - despite the fact that social change cannot be planned on a drawing board.

It is no surprise that business-influenced NGOs are less hesitant to cooperate with the corporate sector. When medico together with the DGH coalition opposed the idea of establishing a World Health Forum at WHO, bringing together main actors, such as the industry, international institutions like the World Bank and some NGOs, we got in conflict with NGOs that explicitly call for such a forum. Obviously these NGOs didn't realize that it would contribute to legitimate the influence of the business sector on global health policy.

9. The Perspectives of NGOs - How to avoid instrumentalisation?

Also the NGO movement has reached a crossroads. In order to avoid further instrumentalisation NGOs have to fundamentally revise the role that they play within global health policy. There are five principles that can assure the re-politicisation of NGOs:

First, NGOs have to develop a critical understanding of their own nature. NGOs stand for growing democratic participation but at the same time they are also an expression of an increasing lack in accountability of public institutions. Some NGOs claim to represent those who have no voice. Yes, NGOs can do advocacy, they can raise the issue of the poor, and it is great if they struggle alongside the excluded, but NGOs do not formally represent the excluded, the poor. NGOs are not formally obliged to meet the need of people.

Second, NGOs have to realize that they do not act separately from the prevailing political and economic power relations. Only by taking a political stand can the NGOs assure that their activities aren't misused. The concept of Universal Coverage goes beyond technical improvements; if it is taken



seriously it is a highly political matter that clashes with the interest of those who are still making a lot of profit out of the existing health inequalities. Thus, NGOs have to understand that Human Rights are not given by governments, they do not embody a quasi sacred affair, that can be brought to an imaginary world court, but must be taken in possession by the people themselves, and it is up to societies (not states) to establish the institutional frame that guarantees equal access.

Third, NGOs should seek maximum independence. Change will only come about if NGOs stop following those who demand realism. We have to go beyond pragmatism. Observing all that is happening in the world in the name of realism, realism has turned out to be insipid since long.

And there is a window of opportunity for change. The TINA-principle doesn't convince people any longer. Change is possible if there is "desire for change", actively expressed by an engaged public, by social movements, community organisations, and NGOs – forming a countervailing power that gain cultural hegemony.

Only by establishing this countervailing power the involvement of NGOs in governance structures makes sense. Only if there is a strong public that gives governments a hard time there will be the "diplomatic space" that allows NGOs to influence policy.

Fourth, NGOs should never forget their roots. It is not just the professional expertise that has made NGOs into an accepted actor; but it is the public that has empowered NGOs and is still backing them. Only if NGOs continue to be aware of being rooted in movements that oppose the prevailing political system, can they really make a difference.

Fifth, since change requires joint strategies and joint actions, NGOs should actively seek networking – even at the costs of getting less visible. Political effectiveness has nothing to do with the frequency a particular NGO logo is shown. Those NGOs that pit success against their own visibility are already trapped by the market.

**10. For too long we have only affirmed civil society in various ways;
the point is to change it!**





Health – Social Support – Human Rights

medico works... with partners

The assistance provided by medico is more than the supply of relief goods in emergency situations. We see our work as an element within comprehensive social action that aims at the implementation of the right to health. Our concern is to cooperate in a spirit of solidarity and trust with people who are autonomous partners and anything but mere recipients of aid. Our common point of departure is marked by the political and social aims that we share with our partner organizations in the South.

medico works... in context

Wars and affliction are never a bolt out of the blue. They have underlying reasons that must be challenged. Those who through avoidance of important political and cultural linkages do not understand the root causes of human distress will not be able to react adequately to such distress. The aim of our efforts is not simply targeted at alleviating humanitarian crises, but at overcoming them permanently.

medico works... for change

Any assistance granted to people leaves traces that will remain long after the original intervention. Therefore, assistance aimed at overcoming the status quo presupposes a socio-political vision of a different and more just world. It must develop strategies that can serve as a roadmap. There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian crises. We believe that assistance is an element within social action that fights for democracy, social justice and respect for human rights – together with the victims of destitution and despotism.



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