

We NGOs: a controversial way of being and acting

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Like it or not, we NGOs are now increasingly present on the social and political scene worldwide. As the name implies, we are not governmental, but we do claim a role in promoting the common good and defending public interest. We are heterogeneous: we come in many shapes and sizes, and we are generally minuscule when compared with governmental or multilateral agencies. Embracing apparently lost causes, we are often rather more committed and militant than efficient in what we do, and above all we are an irritant to the establishment, be it the State or the private sector. The question is, however, are organisations like these still needed?

My reflection on NGOs is from an insider's perspective (derived from my experience in IBASE, based in Rio de Janeiro) in terms of our relationships and alliances – with other NGOs, with other civil-society organisations, with social movements, and with governments and companies in Brazil and abroad. Our personal circumstances inevitably affect our perspectives. I recognise, then, the limitations of my viewpoint, but I would argue that it is a legitimate and important one, in that it contributes to an analysis of the factors that shape the existence and purpose of NGOs.

I shall focus on various questions that I consider essential to an understanding of NGOs. On the one hand, we have the changes in our social relationships and social structures; the problems of exclusion and inclusion, with the concomitant persistence of poverty and greater inequality; the expansion of public space and the new context for political action. These circumstances are fundamental to an understanding of how NGOs have emerged and evolved. On the other

hand, I will try to show the specificity of NGOs in the context of the development of civil societies, and the challenges and agendas that they will need to face in the near future. I will then highlight the conditions that underlie the legitimacy and impact of NGOs as autonomous political actors.

Societies change: looking beyond the neo-liberal wave

It is particularly opportune today to remind ourselves of Galileo's words, *eppur si muove* ('and yet it does move'), to affirm that amid all the economic and financial turbulence and uncertainties that hang over us, there are alternatives to the *pensée unique*¹ and its model of globalisation, given that human beings continue to change and create, producing their own lives and history. What we need to identify and free up is the potential of the movement that is being born and is renewing itself through a whole range of struggles to affirm humanity itself. In other words, we need to transfer our attention from the agenda of the 'global casino' and cast our eye on real societies, in which human beings are re-inventing living conditions in the here and now. If NGOs are as buoyant and optimistic as they are, it is simply because they are conditioned from birth to look at the world in this way. This is one of their secrets.

It is beyond our scope here to make a critical analysis of globalisation. I start from the premise that such an analysis is a common reference point for the readers of this volume, and that the more important challenge here is to point out the possibilities that present themselves at the start of the twenty-first century, particularly to NGOs. It is important, however, to stress that the neo-liberalism which spurs the current form of economic and financial globalisation, in spite of the power of the discourse and its real impact, is in fact the expression of a crisis of capitalism, not of a durable 'solution' for it. Right now, the cracks are more than visible. In almost three decades of neo-liberal policies, what stands out is the crisis of destruction, of demolition, the fragmenting impact of the need for 'flexibilisation', all in the name of the market and large corporations. Maybe the clearest image of neo-liberalism is the violent tide of the market, with its terrifying waves crashing on to the beach, and destroying the very protection system that humanity had been setting up to deal with the wounds of capitalism. Much has been destroyed; there is much to rebuild. Alongside the all too real threat that this has meant, and still means, for at least 80 per cent of the world's poor, the worst effect has been

the risk of dismantling more universal ideas and values. It is worth highlighting the need to rebuild a utopia of a more egalitarian society, one that is just and participatory. NGOs have a role to play in this task.

As Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, in terms of human history the twentieth century started late and finished early. Before the official end of the century, we were experiencing the movement of crisis for humankind at the birth. What is this movement? Where is all this taking us? ‘Solutions’ are always human inventions and need not be followed slavishly. Not even history repeats itself. If what moves us is a universal humanistic perspective, founded on the values of equality, liberty, and solidarity, then we need clearly to define the tasks that we have ahead of us and get involved in achieving them. We need, above all, to understand the essential newness of the moment: that new problems are being confronted and that new solutions are being born in the struggle of human beings to create decent living conditions at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These questions are particularly crucial in understanding the reason for NGOs’ existence.

Destruction, inequality, poverty, and social exclusion

One of the most visible paradoxes marking the emergence of this new century is the contrast between the extreme ease and speed with which financial capital circulates around Planet Earth and the barriers of all kinds that are erected to impede the migration of human beings. The question of migrants is only the most visible tip of the iceberg of the globalisation-driven exclusion of the greater part of humanity. It is an exclusion that repeats itself from the global to the local level. There is not room for everyone in the world of economic and financial globalisation. The inclusion of a minority, their access to goods and resources, implies the exclusion of the majority. Among the included are those who, in effect, are deepening inequality and poverty, thereby generating social exclusion. Apart from this, this ‘exclusionary inclusion’ is based on the degradation and destruction of the environment, the very basis of all life on earth. The appropriation and use of natural resources from a perspective of gain at any price, and on a global scale, exacerbates environmental destruction and generates unsustainability and social exclusion.

This is something new, as much in terms of structure as of awareness. The logic of inclusion–exclusion is structural; it is a basis for the

functioning of the system. For this very reason it is unsustainable, if it is not actually producing massive destruction. At the same time, an opportunity to promote a new awareness of the excluded is being developed by the recognition of the global nature of the problem, an awareness that exclusion is not a temporary state, something between a previous situation and a new, but as yet unresolved, situation; that it is indeed a permanent way of being and living in the South, North, East, and West (notwithstanding the huge asymmetry in power and riches). More radical still, one has the basis for bringing together creative struggles of societal alternatives for a new century, when one realises the relationship between the logic of structural social exclusion and the destructive forms of the production–consumption system. In fact, this is what is happening throughout the world, via social movements that are constituting real barriers to environmental destruction, exclusion, and poverty at the local level. Struggles are mushrooming all over the place, fragmented and dispersed, coloured by the cultural and political diversity of their societies. However, we cannot fail to grasp their core significance: they are struggles that enable us to foresee a ‘global-ness’ based on human beings and planetary citizenship.

We are faced with new relationships and forms of socialisation. It is no longer only inclusion in the processes of production that opens up one’s chances of being a part of society. The struggles against this very exclusion and environmental destruction take on a fundamental role in defining the basic conditions for belonging to real societies. The question of poverty and the struggle against it demand particular attention here. Essentially, we are no longer faced with an absolute lack of goods and resources, but rather with a denial of access to them, be it through the concentration of resources within the control of a minority, or through a predatory form of production and consumption. To be poor is above all to be excluded, because without the power of access and influence in the use of (what should be) collective goods and resources, the economic and political system works to serve only a minority.

Human rights, sustainability, plus democracy: basic points of reference

The emergence of a planetary awareness capable of feeding new dreams and social projects for a new humanism will not be automatic. But it is possible. Indeed, behind the diversity of the current struggles, we can gather the threads and identify a common point of reference that will be

needed in creating a broad movement of opinion, a wave of triumphs and constructive changes. I would highlight in particular the significance that human rights and the question of sustainability are assuming as common threads running through struggles throughout the world.

My concern here is not with the yet unresolved debates relating to human rights. What I want to hold on to is their universal adoption as points of reference for those who are actually struggling for rights. In this sense, in immediate terms, more important than the philosophical and judicial formulation of human rights is their transformation into a practical category, an ethical and moral reference point for millions of human beings, especially the poor and excluded majorities. This is a new and fundamental fact in terms of the social relationships that have become possible at this stage in our history, and which is of particular importance for civic action concerned with constructing alternatives to the prevailing (dis)order. Like it or not, human rights are a global reference point with a huge capacity to mobilise and transform our societies. They are a common platform. The work of NGOs has a lot to do with this. We turn human rights into a basis for a global movement. Indeed, the greatest merit of human rights is to show the mass of humanity that we are united, even across our diversity of gender, age, race, culture, and context.

I highlight three practical dimensions of human rights that can be identified from different struggles that are taking place in the most diverse settings. In the first place, human rights tend to be a reference point in the building of awareness. It is in the light of human rights that groups of the poor and excluded organise their perception of reality. Second, human rights tend to be a barometer against which to measure and evaluate the social relations to which these groups are subjected. For this reason, they are an instrument with which to identify and define the problem that the group wishes to address. Finally, human rights bring the struggles of various individual groups under one banner, which is the struggle for rights that have been either denied or stolen.

The other basic reference point, which also emerges from real, living movements, is that of sustainability. Again, more important than the conceptual debate is its mobilising capacity as a political issue. In reality, what actually mobilises people is not the difficult notion of sustainability itself, but the widespread perception today that the exploitation of the environment is a fundamental issue, affecting the lives of everyone.

This new awareness is one indisputable success of the environmental NGOs, since the concept of sustainability embodies any proposal for

what should be done and what can be done. The challenge is to weave together the perception of the importance of the environment, in terms of the quality of life for the majority of the world's poor and excluded, with the concept of sustainable production and consumption of natural resources. Once again, we can identify important indicators which are coming out of actual social movements. A new socio-environmental awareness is starting to develop, centred on human rights, where the right to environmental resources is also a fundamental right.

Together with the radicalisation of democracy – a civilising task par excellence – human rights and sustainability seem to me to be the basis for a post-neo-liberal reconstruction. The very existence of these concerns within our social movements should be attributed largely, though not exclusively, to NGOs. This achievement alone would already be sufficient to justify the existence of NGOs, and their renewed mission at the start of the new century.

Expansion of public space and the new conditions for political action

Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of civil society to take account of political action beyond the politico-military sphere of the State proper. The idea of 'trenches' to characterise these new forms of struggle, taken from the experience of resistance in the First World War, does not however account for the huge complexity that struggle and political action have acquired in our societies. The development of civil societies, as a space for public rather than State action, is one of the most striking features of recent political history. It should be emphasised that this did not happen either by substituting for – or dispensing with – the State, but as a result of a significant increase in public space. The undeniable crisis of the nation-state model is not the result of the development of so-called civil societies, but of policies derived from the neo-liberal focus on the globalised market as the basic mechanism to regulate societies. In this sense, neo-liberalism also threatens the very development of civil societies as an autonomous political space, something that is essential for the radicalisation of democracy.

The point to underline here is that NGOs should be seen both as one of the products and as one of the contributory factors in this expansion of public space. What I am referring to here is the increased organisation and action arising from the diverse initiatives of different social groups, of ordinary men and women, be it to defend their immediate interests or to

work for the common good. This has heightened the tension in the contradictions implicit in social relations, and is transforming these into possibilities for the emergence of new kinds of citizen, the building of social identities, of proposals, of new organisations, and forms of struggle. Civil society is enriched through the very diversity of social, political, and cultural life. It is, however, far from representing an alternative in and of itself. We are simply witnessing a political manifestation, not exclusively of political parties or of the State, but rather of the diversity of contradictions and subjects that make up real-life society.

NGOs are a minute fraction of the organisational and active universe that constitute civil societies. To confuse them with civil society itself is to ascribe to them capacities and a legitimacy that they do not possess, in addition to making it impossible to see what their real role is. Worse still is to project civil society as an alternative, in itself, to the dominant processes in our societies. In fact, civil societies are simply contradictory and tense spaces of non-State political action, wedged between the State (power) and the private sector (economy).

It is undeniable that new spaces and new conditions for political action are opening up. The dismantling of the State practised by neo-liberalism and its accompanying form of globalisation is a huge challenge today. An urgent task is to re-establish the State as the underlying basis for those universal public policies of which only it is capable. There are, however, tasks above and beyond the State, which are specific to civil societies and their process of transforming human beings into collective entities, diverse and contradictory as they are. NGOs are merely a part of this. However, within their limits as political actors, they do have some potential.

We are faced with both constraints and opportunities. A citizenship which promotes a new democratic universalism based on human rights and sustainability is now coming face to face with real processes, be it the dismantling of the State and its policies, or a market logic that is both exclusionary and destructive. To address social exclusion, poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction requires either a State that is committed to doing so, or organised citizens struggling to achieve such a goal, or, better still, that they both work together. In any case, the processes that generate exclusion, poverty, and destruction, as well as generating their eventual transformation, are situated beyond the local sphere. The latter fragments, disperses, and localises processes that are wide-ranging and multifaceted. The structuring thread of citizen action

needs universal reference points, given the destructive and exclusionary dominant logic that it must confront. In practice, such a historical perspective has to be constructed beyond the local level. Needs can only be perceived as a denial of rights if one has a universalising and global perspective that casts them in this light. Action is effective – and NGOs know this very well – when it influences the local level in a practical way and with real results. However, its effectiveness commonly depends on the links between this concrete local level and the structuring processes that extrapolate from this and are shared more widely.

This is a real tension that the expansion of the public sphere and new forms of political action bring with them. NGOs feel it particularly sharply, given that their own action is permeated with such tension. They have a somewhat more far-reaching strategic perspective, but this does not mean that they do not get involved in local-level, practical struggles. The more universal reference points do not always serve to galvanise action at the local level, in such a way that marginalised groups or sectors explicitly challenge the issues of democratisation and sustainability. However, we must recognise the possibilities for new ways of ‘doing’ politics, in order to understand the new century as well as to see what real scope we have to shape its development within our perspectives of justice, liberty, solidarity, and participation.

The NGO way of working: support, monitor, defend, promote, unsettle

The notoriety and political presence of NGOs in our societies cannot be separated from the emerging struggles in a world that has been globalised by neo-liberalism. There are certainly NGOs that have been in existence for much longer. However, it is over the last decades that they have multiplied and diversified, and acted with greater significance and impact. Proof of this is in the cycle of major international conferences convened by the UN, which were a privileged opportunity for NGOs to have international influence. It is also worth mentioning the events organised alongside international governmental meetings, at which NGOs were not welcome but where they made their presence felt as a counterpoint; as for example in the Uruguay Round of GATT, the creation and implementation of the WTO, the recently aborted Seattle meeting, the regular meetings of other large multilateral organisations (the World Bank, the IMF, the Inter-American Development Bank), and in the always closed-door sessions of the G7. This is without taking account of all the

regional processes, such as the EU, Mercosur, and other regional economic blocs. Despite their involvement at the very local level, NGOs are out front in promoting an unprecedented form of civil internationalism.

But what do we NGOs bring to real-life societies? Obviously, we don't change anything, and don't have the capacity to do so. Or rather, we are only part of the changes, no more than small links in a process that can only be one of huge mass movements. That we unsettle things I have no doubt. For lack of a better metaphor, I would compare us to fleas. As NGOs, we are minuscule political animals, sometimes difficult to locate, but who bite and irritate. In other words, we annoy the established elephantine system. As we annoy it, we make it walk or move itself, even if this is to fight us. Governments, multilateral organisations, companies, and huge civil-society organisations, small local powers, politicians, and the media, all of them may be bitten by the little NGO fleas. Indeed, we form a 'colony', and so can really make them itch. We are there where we are least expected, and we attack without warning.

Beyond this flea metaphor, however, I believe it would be a big mistake to think that our influence on societies is due to any special financial or organisational capacity. Perhaps what we have is a certain degree of creativity mixed with big ideas, peculiar to activists, which find strength when combined with our fundamental quality of uniting ethics with analytical capacity. What characterises us is the capacity to identify uncomfortable but nevertheless undeniable causes of social problems. We identify and construct our reading of these causes on the basis of ethical precepts and analysis, data, experiences, etc., to support them. We create arguments for political action from these causes, which the public then take up, demanding actions of all those who have any involvement in the issue. Our weapon, our bite, is this mix of ethical argument and analysis. We do not represent anything, other than the groups of men and women who unite around the cause. However, we argue, appeal, provoke, suggest options, and support the organisations of those who are affected by the problem. We give value to the issue being fought for, and we monitor and put pressure on those who are supposed to be in a position to solve the problems. We are, in a word, both promoters and defenders of the causes of the dispossessed.

Activism, the strength and weakness of NGOs, cannot be compared to the grandiose and sometimes destructive sectarianism of cultural and religious fundamentalists, or to what in general fires the social movements themselves, i.e. the legitimate defence of their members'

interests. Neither is it pure activism of the type akin to that of party-political ideology. NGOs tend to constitute themselves around the concerns and shared values of a collectivity. It is vital also to stress that NGOs have no monopoly on the values of justice, equity, solidarity, and participation; nor on a strategic vision of democratic and sustainable human development for Planet Earth. However, we would not be NGOs if such values and strategy ceased to be our driving force. This radically and fundamentally distinguishes us from very many other organisations, be they State or business, or other non-NGO civil-society organisations. Many consider us to be part of the so-called Third Sector, but above all we are citizen bodies, practising direct and participatory democracy. We are not a homogeneous bloc, and we do not wish to be, but we do defend our common identity, built on the basis of values and a way of acting that are essentially and exclusively oriented to fighting for the public interest. This does not mean to say that we do not make mistakes, or that we are not shot through with contradictions in our way of being and doing. On the contrary, we NGOs want to be held to account for the things we claim to be, and for what we actually do – but not for what others attribute to us.

The ‘NGO way’ should not be confused with the supply of goods and public services when the State or other organisations stop providing them. When we do take on a service-provision role, we try to build visibility; that is, we ‘rescue’ the causes of marginalised or excluded groups, of people who are wretched, so that society as a whole recognises its responsibility to them. Thus, we work as an amplifier for these groups. We transform their problem into a question for our own organisations, and through them to governments, politicians, journalists, intellectuals – in short, to the élites with decision-making power and influence over our social processes. We want to contribute to the movements for change in society and not merely to ‘compensate’ for what the dominant paradigm cannot do.

The best of NGOs is their action as a ‘colony’ through the networks and forums in which they participate. The strength of minuscule NGOs lies in their involvement as very local points of a vast network, a social fabric of monitoring and denunciation, proposal and action: networks with clear universalising trends, as a result of their global reach; voluntary and horizontal networks of information and strategy formulation, that feed on local action and give it potential, giving it a more global and universal dimension. This movement back and forth from the local to the national to the international ends up as being the basis for NGO action.

The examples are numerous, but what come to mind first through my experience in IBASE are the Social Watch network and SAPRIN (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network). Indeed, it is through participation in various networks and forums that NGOs create a global dimension in the non-State public space. Further, it is through them that common reference points are being drawn from diverse and dispersed struggles across the Planet. NGOs, without monopolising these fragmented struggles, are drawing them together into a perspective of universal citizenship and sustainability.

By way of conclusion: some immediate tasks to be faced

Seeking to demonstrate our *raison d'être* as NGOs, I have been pointing out the challenges and a concrete agenda that this new century sets out for us, and emphasising what seems to me to be the essential. However, there are three elements that I would highlight as a way of concluding a reflection which is, above all, an effort to take stock of what I myself am doing. These are immensely challenging tasks, and they need to be tackled immediately and collectively.

Our perspective, which stresses the importance of concrete social struggles, needs to be put into action. We must therefore equip ourselves to bring out into the open what we see in the areas where we work. I sense a lack of research, reflection, and especially, strategy among NGOs. I have argued elsewhere for the need to make a map of the world of citizens' struggles. We need to develop the capacity to put forward our point of view. For example, it is possible to point to concrete struggles for resources throughout the world: struggles which involve very specific groups of poor and excluded people or those who suffer threats of destruction; struggles that stand out as much for their needs and immediate problems, as for their particular cultures and way of life; but struggles nevertheless that are profoundly universal in what unifies them. We need to develop an awareness of this. A map of such struggles can help to strengthen our approach, our points of reference. But most of all, it could give us a powerful means of demonstrating the universality of the causes that we defend and promote.

As NGOs, we cannot deny that our most intimate *raison d'être* is solidarity. We ourselves are the tangible fruit of solidarity, since no NGO as such has its own resources. We carry out public action with the resources of those who believe in us, resemble us, and are together with

us in the causes that we defend. In this way we are part of a chain of solidarity between the societies of which we are a part, and of the world. Today's solidarity has a clear international dimension. International co-operation is, for many of us, its concrete expression. We have an ethical obligation to contribute to the re-establishment of solidarity at the beginning of this century. In the context of globalisation, co-operation has tended (and still tends) to be a prisoner to the production–market agenda, which reduces the ideas of equality, liberty, solidarity, and participation to competitiveness and efficiency of economic production. We must not fall into the trap of looking for immediate results without taking into account the causes that motivate solidarity. We need to recover – and this is the challenge ahead – that sense of complicity among international activists as a basis for co-operation among people driven by common values and ideas. The aid agencies of the North and the NGOs of the South are pivotal axes of the same movement, a call to renew the task of planetary citizenship against all forms of destruction and social exclusion.

Challenging the philosophical and theoretical order is at the heart of what NGOs do. In the final analysis, it was the NGOs who lent their radical nature, and above all raised the banner of equality in diversity, which has since been taken forward by many movements. Indeed, on the basis of concrete struggles at local level, and through their networks, NGOs gave more visibility to the idea of diversity and equality as a right. But in diversity of gender, race, age, culture, or any other difference, we do not accept an exclusionary view of inequality. NGOs' action and proposals have also contributed to condemning any interpretation of equality that crushes people, or denies the right to be different.

This is not as simple as it seems. A humanist utopia of equality, liberty, solidarity, and participation cannot be reconstructed today without also being criss-crossed by the dimension of diversity. More than anything else, diversity is life. It is through diversity as life's driving force that, in philosophical, political, and historical terms, we bring in the dimension of sustainability, which is fundamental today in conceptualising our humanist utopia. This is obviously a huge challenge. The question is: are NGOs responding to this challenge with enough urgency? Our future existence largely depends on our answer.

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Note

1 The phrase '*pensée unique*' was coined in 1995 by Ignacio Ramonet, editor-in-chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and refers to 'the translation into ideological terms that claim to be universal of economic interests, particularly those of international capital' (Ramonet 1997:179).

Reference

Ramonet, Ignacio (1997) 'The one and only way of thinking', in M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree (eds.) *The Post-Development Reader*, London: Zed Books.