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Non-Governmental Organizations

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Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is a term coined in the mid-1940s. As the phrase implies, it refers to a group of like-minded individuals, unaffiliated with any government, who seek to affect public policy and/or provide services to a community. NGOs operate locally, nationally, and internationally, and they address issues that range from human rights and environmental sustainability to disaster relief and economic development. This diversity makes it difficult to generalize their goals and characteristics. Most, but not all, are not-for-profit organizations. Although the vast majority of NGOs are independent of governmental control, some are not, especially in authoritarian countries, and NGOs often receive financial support from governments. Many NGOs supplement this money with private donations or funds from international organizations. Although political parties and guerilla organizations are not considered NGOs, some NGOs represent people who are not members of a state, and therefore operate as quasi-governments.

Where did NGOs come from? They existed long before they took their current name. Since at least the early nineteenth century, NGOs thrived in the liminal spaces between modern national states, cultivating awareness about the cross-border dimensions of the day's scientific and moral dilemmas. As government policymaking grew more bureaucratic in Europe and North America after the industrial revolutions, nongovernmental advocacy emerged as a cosmopolitan counterweight to nationalism. Focused on the tension between border-making and long-distance travel, many NGOs organized their activities around the question: How could the national state—blessed with new powers yet plagued by self-interest—safeguard humanity in an age of interdependence?

Early NGOs were not reflexive antagonists of government. Quite the contrary, they thrived because of the support they received from the world's great powers. In 1803, for instance, the Royal Jennerian Society advanced a straightforward solution to the smallpox epidemic: society-wide inoculations. Rather than toiling at the margins of political life, the Society's scientific expertise led to partnerships with governments around the world, including fourteen European monarchs, the Ottoman Sultan, the Mughal of India, the Pacha of Baghdad, the American President, and the Pope. Even more influential was the anti-slavery movement, spearheaded by the Quaker-inspired Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, which created a network of moral activists that advocated for anti-slavery legislation on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to playing a role in crafting the British Slave Trade Act of 1807, the movement influenced a series of international conferences that effectively ended the Atlantic slave trade during the mid-nineteenth century.

These nascent efforts blossomed during the late nineteenth century. That era, which saw Europe conquer much of Eurasia, Africa, and Asia, witnessed unprecedented efforts to curb the excesses of industrialized warfare. The Red Cross, for instance, formed in Geneva in 1863, married science and morality as it lobbied European governments to let medical personnel care for wounded soldiers on the battlefield. Red Cross organizations proliferated in Europe and North

America in subsequent decades, eventually leading to the establishment of an international committee that coordinated medical aid in warzones and petitioned governments to recognize the neutrality of Red Cross workers. The late nineteenth century also saw the establishment of the International Council of Women, the International Federation of Trade Unions, the International Olympic Committee, Rotary International, and the International Socialist Bureau, among many other organizations. These early NGOs shared a common aversion to European nationalism and militarism, and worked to promote humanitarian causes across state borders.

During the twentieth century, international organizations professionalized the activities of NGOs. The League of Nations, created to prevent the recurrence of world war, codified the nation-state's centrality to global life, but it also recognized citizen-based organizations as essential sources of information and technical expertise for League members. By the mid-1920s, letters, telegrams, and resolutions from NGOs were featured regularly in the League's published reports, and, after 1924, the Secretariat distributed summaries of its correspondence with NGOs to the League's executive body. Some NGOs, such as the International Labor Organization, even participated alongside diplomats in the League's meetings.

After World War II, the United Nations professionalized nongovernmental activism further. In addition to giving NGOs their name, the United Nations, which supplanted the League as the world's preeminent international organization after 1945, invited citizen-based organizations to participate in its Economic and Social Council, which was tasked with identifying cross-border solutions to the world's social, economic, and environmental problems. By the mid-twentieth century, NGOs had carved a niche: they shared technical expertise with governments and cultivated common values among U.N. members.

Some NGOs challenged this status quo during the late twentieth century. Many stateless actors, for instance, rejected their marginalization from political arenas such as the U.N.'s General Assembly and Security Council. During the 1960s, antiapartheid NGOs, casting themselves as the true representatives of South Africa's nonwhite population, successfully established a voice at the U.N.'s General Assembly and Secretariat. Since that breakthrough, like-minded organizations—including the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Greenpeace, and countless others—have similarly used the United Nations to legitimize political claims and challenge the nation-state's monopoly over international diplomacy.

In contrast, other NGOs rejected the United Nations as the natural outlet for nongovernmental activity. During the 1970s, for example, Amnesty International raised awareness about torture by lobbying politicians in Europe and North America and distributing ideas through television and media. Convinced that the Cold War had undermined the U.N.'s effectiveness, and frustrated by the organization's limitations, Amnesty instead focused energy on public policy in the United States and Western Europe — where power truly resided.

Today, NGOs are somewhat enigmatic. There are more of them than ever before, and they continue to thrive in the space between nation-states, engaging in activities that range from sustainable development to human rights. However, despite this continuity with the past, the recent growth of NGOs has prompted questions among activists and scholars: Do NGOs affect change? Why have they proliferated so quickly since the 1970s? Have they advanced or checked European imperialism? Regardless of the answers, NGOs will remain as important to the study of international society as national states.

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