

## **History of NGOs**

NGOs became strongly associated with the world of international aid during the last decades of the twentieth century, but if we see history, it becomes clear that NGOs are a far from recent phenomenon. Ideas about NGOs can be seen to have emerged from longer-term traditions of both philanthropy and self-help common to all societies.

The concept of ‘philanthropy’, defined as ‘the ethical notions of giving and serving to those beyond one’s immediate family’, has existed in different forms across most cultures throughout history, often driven by religious tradition. A range of local organizations and initiatives have operated in most societies for generations in the form of religious organizations, community groups and organized self-help projects in villages and towns.

At the same time, the colonization by European powers of large areas of the less developed world brought missionaries whose activities often included prototypical (typical example, or form) NGO initiatives that attempted to bring about improvements in the fields of education, health-service provision, women’s rights and agricultural development. These included both ‘welfare’ approaches that stressed charity and relieving of hardship, and more ‘empowerment’ approaches that focused on community organizing and bottom-up community development work.

Many of the UK’s best-known NGOs had existed for many years before they became large, internationally known organizations from the 1980s onwards, and had been focused on relief work in Europe. One of the first such organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross was founded in 1863. Save the Children Fund (SCF) was founded in 1919 after the trauma of the First World War. Oxfam, which was originally known as the Oxford Committee Against the Famine was established in 1942 in order to provide famine relief to victims of the Greek Civil War. The US agency CARE was originally engaged in sending US food packages to Europe in 1946 after the Second World War.

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Charnovitz (1997) has traced the evolution of Western NGOs in seven stages. He outlines the 'emergence' of NGOs from 1775 to 1918 and concludes with a current phase of relative NGO 'empowerment' that has been in evidence since the UN Rio Conference in 1992.

Stage	Example
1. Emergence (1775–1918)	Anti-Corn Law League founded in 1838 in Britain to campaign against unfair tariffs
2. Engagement (1918–1935)	International associations given representation in the newly established League of Nations
3. Disengagement (1935–1945)	The League of Nations falls into decline as Europe falls into authoritarianism and war
4. Formalization (1945–1950)	Article 71 codifies selected NGO observer status at the new United Nations under ECOSOC
5. Nuisance value (1950–1972)	NGOs generally marginalized as UN processes dominated by governments and Cold War tensions
6. Intensification (1972–1992)	NGOs play ever higher profile roles in a succession of UN conferences from Stockholm 1972 onwards
7. Empowerment (1992–?)	The Rio Environment Conference marks the new ascendancy of NGOs in development and international affairs

Source: Constructed from Charnovitz (1997)

The history of Western NGOs begins with the growth of a range of national-level issue-based organizations during the late eighteenth century, such as those focused on the abolition of the slave trade and the peace movements. By 1900, there were 425 peace societies active in different parts of the world, and debates over labour rights and free trade were creating new types of interest group which were background of what today we would term NGOs. For example, in the US the first national labour union was the International Federation of Tobacco Workers, which was set up in 1876, while in the UK, between 1838 and 1846, the Anti-Corn Law League campaigned in favour of free trade against what it saw as the restrictive system of tariffs. From the opening of the twentieth century, NGOs now had associations to help them promote their own identities at national and international levels. For example, at the World Congress of International Associations in 1910, there were 132

international associations represented, dealing with issues as varied as transportation, intellectual property rights, narcotics control, public health issues, agriculture and the protection of nature.

A growing level of involvement of NGOs continued during the League of Nations period in the 1920s and 1930s. International Labour Organization (ILO) was founded in 1919 as part of the League of Nations. But from 1935 onwards, the League became less active as growing political tensions in Europe led towards war. NGO participation in international affairs began to fade into a phase of ‘disengagement’, until in 1945 the newly established United Nations led to a new stage of post-war ‘formalization’.

Article 71 of the UN Charter formalized NGO involvement in UN processes and activities, and there were even NGOs contributing to the drafting of the UN Charter itself. Among the various UN organizations, UNESCO and WHO both clearly provided for NGO involvement in their charters. However, the reality was that Article 71 merely codified ‘the custom of NGO participation’ and constituted very little advance from the relatively low levels of participation that NGOs had experienced under the League of Nations. After the Second World War, NGOs tended to underachieve after this fairly promising period of renewal. Although they were active, NGO influence was hampered by Cold War tensions and by the institutional weakness of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the body that was to coordinate with NGOs under Article 71, with the result that NGOs were rarely contributing much more than ‘nuisance value’.

The 1970s, however, marked the beginning of a big change in which there was an increased ‘intensification’ (to become more stronger) of NGO strengths and activities. This was evident from the role NGOs played in a succession of UN conferences, such as the Stockholm Environment Conference in 1972 and the World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974. NGOs played a key role in drafting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since

1992, NGO influence at the international level has continued to grow, as shown by the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio. The Rio conference approved a series of policy statements relating to the role of NGOs. In Agenda 21, the need to draw on the expertise and views of non-governmental organizations within the UN system in policy and programme design, implementation and evaluation was formally stated as never before. For Charnovitz (1997) the era of NGO 'empowerment' had begun. More recently, Martens (2006) argues that NGOs now form an integral part of the UN system.