

INTERNATIONAL NGOS IN HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM

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Abstract

Human rights are fundamental rights and freedoms that are inherent to all individuals, regardless of race, sex, nationality, religion or any other status. However, despite their formal recognition in international law, these rights are not always guaranteed in practice. Countless individuals around the world continue to suffer from systemic discrimination, injustice, violence and the denial of fundamental freedoms. In such contexts, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as key actors in the promotion and protection of human rights. Operating independently of state institutions, NGOs play a multifaceted role: they raise awareness of human rights violations, provide legal aid and psychosocial support to victims, monitor abuses, and hold governments and other powerful actors accountable. Their efforts often extend beyond advocacy to include outreach, research, education, and policy development. This paper examines the expanding role of NGOs within the international human rights framework, highlighting their diverse functions and their growing influence in shaping both local and global responses to human rights abuses. The discussion also considers the challenges these organizations face, including political resistance, security risks, and financial constraints, as well as ongoing efforts to advance justice, accountability, and dignity for all.

Keywords: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Human rights system, Leading International NGOs, Advocacy, Legal Assistance, Challenges, Types of non-governmental organisations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Legitimacy.

1. Introduction

The modern international human rights system is complex and evolving architecture consisting of norms, institutions, actors which contribute to the global pursuit of dignity, justice and freedom. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are specifically dynamic and multifaced among them. Non-governmental organizations vary in size, focus and scope of operations. Their work involves researching and documenting the violations of human rights, advocacy and lobbying, providing support for victims of human rights abuses, raising awareness and educate people on human rights and freedoms.

The rise of NGOs in the human rights arena must be understood within the context of both historical development and normative evolution. While the significant codification of international human rights began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the institutionalization of NGOs as key actors in the system did not occur until the second half of the 20th century [14]. Organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Federation for Human Rights have since helped document violations, mobilize public opinion, lobby international institutions, and provide support to victims of violations. Unlike intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), whose activities are constrained by the political interests of states, NGOs operate with a degree of independence, allowing them to challenge established power structures and draw attention to atrocities that are ignored or silenced [11].

The legitimacy of NGOs within the human rights system stems not from formal legal authority, but from a combination of factors: their access to information on the

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ground, their ability to represent marginalized voices, their ability to represent transnational networks, and their moral authority. Through field research, shadow reporting, strategic litigation, and capacity building, NGOs have created a parallel accountability and oversight ecosystem that complements (and sometimes competes with) the efforts of states and international institutions. Their work often fills critical gaps left by weak or politicized enforcement mechanisms within the United Nations and regional human rights institutions [6].

The role of NGOs is undeniable in observing the human rights and combating the crime in the international context. For instance, according to the Resolution adopted in 1994 by the International Association of Criminal Law at the 15th Congress held in Buenos Aires, the maximum protection of individual rights must be provided in the sphere of international criminal-law cooperation, and also priority must be the protection of human rights in the context of obligations relating to mutual cooperation in criminal matters during conflict and obligations relating human rights [1].

However, the role of NGOs in the human rights system is not without controversy. Their effectiveness, impartiality, and accountability are increasingly being scrutinized, particularly in the context of changing geopolitical environments, the rise of authoritarianism, and the growing insecurity of civil society. Critics have raised concerns about the Western-centric orientation of many mainstream NGOs, potential biases in reporting, and the risk of dependency or distortion when NGOs are intertwined with donor agendas or government partnerships. Furthermore, NGOs in many parts of the world face a shrinking civic space as governments enact restrictive laws, persecute activists, and frame international advocacy as a form of external intervention. Nevertheless, NGOs' normative and practical contributions to the human rights system remain significant. They have played an indispensable role in drafting international legal instruments such as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and various United Nations treaties and conventions. International NGOs also serve as a bridge between local struggles and global advocacy, bringing local realities into the international discourse. This dual function of both observer and advocate puts them in a unique position to influence policy, shape public opinion, and accelerate institutional reform.

This article analyzes the evolving role of international NGOs in the human rights system, their contributions, limitations, and future prospects. The article begins by outlining the historical development and theoretical foundations of NGOs in international law and global governance. It then examines the different strategies they employ in advocacy, monitoring, and capacity building, using case studies that illustrate both successes and shortcomings. Finally, it considers critical perspectives such as legitimacy, accountability, and power asymmetry before assessing the future trajectory of NGOs in a world of increasing global inequality, technological change, and political polarization.

By examining both the promise and the perils of international NGOs within the human rights system, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how non-state actors are reshaping the boundaries of global justice and what this means for the future of human rights in the 21st century.

II. Types and main roles of NGOs

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) take a significant part in civil society and constitute a key factor in promoting and protecting human rights globally. These organizations are characterized as non-profit organizations as they operate

independently from government influence and the main purpose is more than having financial benefit. NGOs play a crucial role in raising awareness about human rights abuses, ensuring support to marginalized groups and holding governments accountable for their action [7]. They observe and document human rights violations by making reports and campaigns. They provide legal support to the victims of human rights abuses and encourage them to seek justice [11].

In today's world NGOs have a great impact on international landscape thanks to the globalisation. As a result, they become more professional in various fields, especially in human rights system. Unlike governmental organizations, NGOs can respond to changes quickly. They NGOs often maintain strong local connections that allow them to effectively identify and respond to the specific needs of local communities – needs that are often overlooked by government institutions due to bureaucratic constraints or centralized decision-making processes.

Although there is no universal definition of the term “non-governmental organization”, the role of NGOs in human rights system is undeniable. They engage in different human rights issues, such as civil and political rights, economic and social rights, gender equality. NGOs play a vital role in fighting against human rights abuses directly or by supporting certain “test cases” through relevant courts [3]; giving legal support to the victims of human rights abuses; promoting awareness, respect for human rights among people.

According to their functions, NGOs are differed into various types, such as advocacy, service-based, research-oriented, charitable organizations.

Advocacy organizations – They are considered significant Human Rights NGOs that focus on promoting and protecting human rights by influencing public policy, raising awareness on human rights abuses, and holding those accountable who took part in human rights violations. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are famous advocacy Human Rights NGOs [9].

Service-based organizations – These organizations operate at the grassroots level, providing direct support to communities, especially where government services are lacking. They often act as first responders, coordinating medical assistance during disasters, implementing awareness-raising initiatives for underserved communities, and distributing essential resources during crises. Typically run by volunteers and deeply embedded in local networks, these organizations are agile in addressing immediate needs while also contributing to long-term social and sustainable development goals.

Research-oriented organizations – These organizations act as knowledge centers, focusing on the collection and analysis of data on a variety of social and environmental issues. Their findings often inform the strategies of advocacy and service-oriented NGOs – for example, research on the health impacts of natural disasters can guide relief efforts. Beyond being purely academic, their work supports evidence-based decision-making and promotes collaboration within the NGO sector [13].

Charitable organizations – Charitable human rights NGOs provide aid to vulnerable groups, addressing issues like poverty, healthcare, education, and legal support. Organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch combine advocacy with humanitarian assistance, often influencing policy responses to rights violations. Through public campaigns and fundraising, they mobilize support, while their legal autonomy enables swift action and long-term advocacy despite occasional regulatory challenges.

Environmental NGOs – These organizations focus on preserving the planet's natural resources. They deal with various issues like climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss and etc. Environmental NGOs play a crucial role in raising awareness about climate change and bring everyone together to influence the process. Environmental NGOs play a vital role in conserving biodiversity and promoting long-term sustainability. In short, NGOs represent a diverse group of organizations committed to addressing social, humanitarian, and environmental issues through advocacy, direct services, and systemic action. Each contributes to the well-being of society and the broader realization of the Sustainable Development Goals [8].

NGOs existed in different forms in the history and operated various roles. NGOs had a crucial role in policymaking in cases to provide human rights protection. They also took part in drafting some pivotal international and regional human rights documents, such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and etc. After World War II and the beginning of the United Nations, NGOs actively participated in improving human rights standards. According to William Korey, “the establishment of international norms by which the conduct of states can be measured or judged – was the primary preoccupation of NGOs” [10, p. 55].

In 1945, Article 71 of the UN Charter officially acknowledged the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the UN activities and processes, even several NGOs actively contributed to the Charter's drafting [4, pp. 1056-1062]. However they have become more influential since 1980s. In 1993, at the UN World Conference on Human Rights, also known as the Vienna Conference, more than 800 NGOs from various parts of the world participated considering themselves as working on human rights issues [3].

III. Challenges faced by the NGOs

Although the NGOs have a great impact in social, economic and environmental matters, they frequently face some challenges which impede the efficacy and sustainability of their work. The main challenges they face are related to lack of funds, human resource challenges, lack of awareness, legal challenges and so on. Most of the NGOs depend on external donations, government fundings that are uncertain and focused on specific projects.

One of the main challenges NGOs face is poor communication and poor networking. This often leads to repetitive efforts, conflicting policies at the community level, limited sharing of practical experience, and failure to address the root causes of underdevelopment at the local level. In addition, fierce competition for resources can undermine the credibility and effectiveness of NGOs, leading to distrust, secrecy, and a lack of transparency in the sector. Many NGOs, both large and small, operate in communities without first conducting proper community mapping or taking into account existing local initiatives. As a result, tensions often arise between organizations – some have resources but no community involvement, while others have strong local connections but limited funding [2].

Just as the economic crisis has pushed NGOs to find new funding methods, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought positive changes to social care, such as more digital tools, online training opportunities, and greater respect for social workers (Bódi, 2022). However, NGOs face two main challenges – securing stable funding and managing staff, especially volunteers. These issues are closely linked and essential for the success of any NGO. Staff shortages and heavy workloads often make it difficult to attract funding and

manage the complex demands of international projects (Sawadogo, Lewis, Bryant, & Robertson, 2022) [5, p. 223].

One of the challenges that NGOs face is about human resource management. As NGOs frequently operate under restricted financial resources, that makes it difficult to recruit experienced or skilled professionals. Most of them depend on volunteers or low-paid workers with short-term commitments and it leads to unclear roles, lower motivation and reduce productivity. Training opportunities, regular workshops can raise motivation among staff and develop efficiency.

As Monica Krause indicates in her book "The Good Project: Humanitarian Relief NGOs and the Fragmentation of Reason" (2014), humanitarian NGOs often focus on what appears to be "good project", the implementation of donors, and measurable achievements. This leads to the fact that more complex but vital problems are ignored. The main NGOs are divided real needs and donor requirements. NGOs are often compelled to operate primarily in accordance with donor priorities. Whenever donor funding is directed, the work of NGOs is also directed in that direction. This often creates a flow of resources to projects that donors are interested in, rather than to areas where the need is greatest. As a result, inequality and fragmentation arise in the humanitarian aid system. Krause notes that humanitarian NGOs are increasingly becoming management-oriented, technical and bureaucratic institutions. While professionalization suggests certain advantages, this process often weakens the ethical spirit of humanitarian work and distances organizations from the real situation of people. However, donors and the public often demand numbers, indicators and reports. This makes NGOs to focus on measurable outcomes rather than real impact [12, p. 92-125].

The rapid change in global and local conditions also poses serious challenges for NGOs. Factors such as pandemics, climate crises, and shifting donor priorities can quickly render organizations ineffective or unsustainable. To adapt to this situation, NGOs must be open to innovation, use technology and new communication methods, and conduct continuous research to stay abreast of international trends. At the same time, emergency preparedness plans should be established in advance, and projects should be designed in such a way that they can be flexibly updated to changing public needs. This approach increases the resilience of NGOs and makes them more effective in a changing environment.

Over the years, NGOs work so hard for social development and growth. However, for being successful they face various challenges related to management, transparency and funding. To promote and develop the work of NGOs partnerships, accountability and innovation play a crucial role.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, international human rights NGOs play a vital role in upholding human dignity, justice, and freedom around the world. Despite differences in focus and approach, from legal advocacy and humanitarian aid to medical care and anti-slavery efforts, each organization makes a significant contribution to the protection and promotion of fundamental rights. By conducting research, engaging in advocacy, providing essential services, and holding violators of the law accountable, these NGOs remain important actors in the global struggle for human rights and social justice.

Through intensive research, strategic advocacy, public education, and direct service delivery, international NGOs have significantly influenced international norms, shaped public discourse, and empowered local communities. They often serve as watchdogs

when state institutions are weak or complicit, acting as a key conduit between victims and international accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, their ability to mobilize transnational networks and exert pressure on governments and corporations has made them indispensable actors in the struggle for global justice.

However, their growing importance also raises critical questions about legitimacy, representation, and accountability. International NGOs must continually navigate complex terrains such as geopolitics, donor influence, and state resistance, while ensuring that their work is grounded in the needs and voices of the people they aim to serve. As the global human rights landscape becomes increasingly polarized and contested, the role of international NGOs will need to adapt, balancing advocacy with pragmatism, independence with collaboration.

In summary, while not without limitations, international human rights NGOs remain crucial actors in the evolving human rights system. Their continued presence and activities are essential to addressing ongoing and emerging challenges to human dignity around the world.

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