

NGO – the questionable charm of being defined by what you aren't

A call for renaming an important group of actors¹

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When at the age of 8 I founded a nature protection association, I thought this was a positive thing. I recruited 10-12 members, mainly from among my close family, issued membership cards and invited them to my lectures on different bird species. When I started my university studies and was ready for new activism, I joined a newly founded citizens' initiative composed of a group of citizens concerned about the environment. Together with my friends I built this initiative to become an association with a few hundred members. The city gave us a building in which we established an environment center where we could hold our meetings, had a library and offered open hours to citizens who wanted to complain about environmental problems in their neighborhood, discuss issues or ask how they could engage. We became an institution that was consulted by the city and respected by local politicians. Again, I thought this was a positive thing.

In my German native language, the little association I founded would be called 'Tierschutzverein', an association for the protection of animals. The second grouping in which I engaged later was called "Bürgerinitiative", expressing that it was voluntarily formed by concerned citizens who were ready to take initiative. We knew what we were going for, we had positive goals and the names expressed what we stand for. At that time, citizens' initiatives in Germany looked beyond their local neighborhood and soon discovered that issues of national dimension have to be addressed. So we joined together and founded 'Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz' which translates into Federal Association of Citizens Initiatives for Environment. Again our name expressed what we stood for and again we felt it was a positive thing. During these times it never occurred to me that we could define ourselves as being 'non-governmental.' After all, our motivation was future-oriented positive change rather than distancing ourselves from or being opponents of the public sector.

Together with friends I even founded an association of the citizens' initiatives at the state level in Lower Saxony. Both the state and federal level associations raised their voices and

were heard by the governments. I remember having participated in numerous hearings and consultations where the federal government considered it appropriate to involve groups like ours in order not to miss out on understanding our concerns but also as an early warning system to find out from which direction our next critical comment or attack would be.

We also played an active role in the 'Bürgerdialog Kernenergie' – a central government-sponsored citizens dialogue on nuclear energy – and were respected partners to the governmental sphere.

In a later stage of my professional life, I became a part of the founding assembly of an association of local governments for sustainability known as ICLEI. Officially founded at the UN headquarters in New York in 1990, the organization was given a name that expresses clearly what it stands for – International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. In 2003, we renamed the organization to become ICLEI – *Local Governments for Sustainability*, to reflect what our member local governments are going for. Our first interaction with the sphere of the United Nations happened from the outset, as ICLEI was asked to provide input to what then became Agenda 21.

¹ ICLEI Papers present views, thoughts and comments from ICLEI representatives based on their unique personal experience, however these views, thoughts and comments do not necessarily present the position of the organization.

The shock

The shock came when some bureaucrats stamped us 'non-governmental.' I found this very odd because we were an association of local governments. Until today my brain is too small to understand why local governments would be or should be non-governmental. But this is for the UN to explain to the world.

They were right. Our association as such was non-governmental. But it was also not a church. So we could have been legitimately called a Non-Vatican-Organization or as we didn't produce cars, a Non-Carmaker-Organization. We were also non-partisan, non-commercial, non-violent, and non-profit. How proud could we be to be practically nothing! But one could have seen us also as being in the non-fishery, non-aircraft, non-construction and non-dairy industry. And how proud could we be to be non-military, non-artisan or non-acrobats!

The pride of being 'non'

Honestly, I had my difficulties with being defined by what we were not. But to my appeasement our friends from environmental action groups and nature conservation societies were bearing their badges 'non-governmental organization' quite proudly and in the UN conference halls they gathered with pride behind the plaque 'NGO.' They were pouring into the room when an NGO consultation was announced and attended meetings of the Summit Chair with NGOs.

The discomfort of Mayors

I have been mainly looking at the role of local governments in the concert of stakeholders as this is the area of my professional responsibility. I observed the members of the local government delegation, Mayors of large cities that had previously held high-level positions in government feeling fairly uncomfortable being categorized non-governmental and figuring as part of the 'non' in the fringe of the UN meetings.

Feeling uncomfortable with classifying Mayors as non-governmental, I looked for examples in the business world. But, as I had expected, I found Coca-Cola presenting themselves as 'Coca-Cola' and not as 'non-Pepsi'. IBM presents itself as computer manufacturer and not as 'non-dairy company.' Starbucks appeared as a new type of coffee shop and not as a 'non-supermarket'. These people know how to brand themselves - **the positive way!**

Distance to governments as a value?

What I still haven't understood is why environmental organizations, conservation associations, indigenous people, youth, women, trade unions and local governments would accept to be tagged as 'NGO.' Maybe it was their pride to be not in any way part of the UN system.

The assumption that these important stakeholders get the most positive branding by being as distant as possible from the UN bureaucracy could be a cause for concern. Why would the UN support such a development by maintaining the label 'NGO'?

The world of NGOs

But looking into the history, I must confess that what was new to me in the early 1990s,



The world of NGOs.

had its roots in the UN Charter of 1949. Article 71 of Chapter 10 provided for a consultative role for organizations that are neither governments nor member

states. The term 'international NGO' (INGO) appears for the first time in a UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution in 1950. It's interesting to note that it was the World Bank who defined and classified NGOs in an Operational Directive of August 1989.

The real rise of the notion of 'NGO' came with the adoption of Agenda 21 at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 which contains Chapter 27 on 'Strengthening the role of non-governmental organizations: partners for sustainable development.' We had reasons to be proud as this chapter starts with the statement "*non-governmental organizations play a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy*". But then, reading Agenda 21 carefully, I noted that there are distinct chapters for women, youth, indigenous people and their communities, local authorities, workers and their trade unions, business and industry, scientific and technological community, farmers, ... and non-governmental organizations. So maybe local authorities were never meant to be categorized as non-governmental but already at that time meant to be recognized in their 'local governmental' role?

I remember dozens of UN meetings where the signs at the entrance divided the world: ‘Delegates’ directed towards the right track, ‘UN and International Organizations’ towards the central track and ‘NGOs’ towards the left track. So where would local governments go? There was no other choice but to go into the NGO track.

As we found ourselves rubbing elbows with renowned organizations and distinguished personalities, we knew we shouldn’t complain. It has been more than enriching to meet the NGO community and its variety of organizations: BINGOs, CSOs, DONGOs, ENGOS, GONGOs, INGOs, QUANGOs, TANGOs, TNGOs, GSOs, MANGOs and NGDOs. (I must say TANGOs and MANGOs sound best)².

However, we from the local government have somewhat become confident that our status in multilateral settings may change. The Cancun agreements on climate change for the first time refer to local governments as ‘governmental stakeholders’.

But what I will never understand is why the variety of organizations covered by the above acronyms – from Greenpeace to ISO, from Oxfam to the Huairou Commission, from ITUC to Slumdwellers International, from Amnesty International to WWF – accept or even appreciate being stamped as ‘NGO’ by the UN or the World Bank.

Positive self-branding

Why don’t we take charge of branding ourselves? Why aren’t we saying *what we are* instead of *what we are not*? Why don’t we have more self-confidence? To take local governments as an example: a single megacity today is larger than each of the 150 smaller UN member states in terms of population - certainly a fact that merits being defined in one’s right rather than as a “non”?

ICLEI, a leading association of cities and local governments, with a bottom-up global mandate and democratic governance, is considering itself as a local government organization, a LGO, which by definition cannot be an NGO. We have claimed this status and asked for its recognition many times. We are sure that one day this will have to be officially recognized. The international community usually takes years to come from insight to decision. In this decade where the world discusses new forms of global governance, would it not be



NGOs at the session hall. © Greenpeace 2010.

an idea that our friends from environmental action groups, nature conservation associations, women’s groups, youth organizations, social movements, *et cetera* would consider giving themselves a new brand: *self-defined, goal-oriented* and *positive*?

We should not underestimate the nexus between mission, self-esteem, brand and positioning. Remaining in the ‘non-corner’ might not be the best place to be in the global landscape of organizations that are competing for influence and effectiveness.

The ‘nons’ in global governance

Global governance, I think, determines who shall hold responsibility for which global common good. Who will hold decision-making powers, who shall be involved and consulted, who shall have veto rights, who shall provide legitimacy to the actors, and for what and to whom is which actor accountable? – Where do the ‘nons’ fit in?

One might be inclined to see the governance of global common goods in the hands of a global organization. The United Nations may come to mind. But this is an inter-governmental body composed of, and mandated by, sovereign nation states. And these prevailingly act in pursuit of their national interests.

On the national level, the strength and weakness of governments is that they are bound to a territory. However, in the cause of history, country-boundaries have changed. Countries have occupied each other people. And people – often from several nations or tribes artificially defined as one country – became tokens in the power politics of the mighty. Some countries became rich because they sat on a wealth of ores, forests, fertile land, and oil and gas reservoirs. Others were successful through the industriousness, ingenuity and business skills of their people.

²An explanation of the abbreviations and types of NGOs is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-governmental_organization.



Let's abandon the notion of NGOs.

Yet others failed in spite of rich natural assets due to corrupt elites or had no chance because of colonialism, external suppression or other circumstances. Therefore the current division of

the land surface of our planet into countries and the current governments in these countries may have been seen as the only structure through which global issues could be addressed.

But these structures have also proven to be incapable of protecting the global common goods like the climate and the oceans.

At the same time not only businesses but also societies are globalizing, and the official world of governments stands outside of such dynamic developments. Neither have governments created a global regime for the capital market nor an effective global climate regime nor are they key players in the global digital revolution.

There is an increasing divergence between the notion of the primacy of nation-states and the rule of government on the one hand, and the current social, environmental and economic realities on the other hand. The borders of states are often not drawn according to functional areas determined ecosystems, market linkages or ethnic unity.

Some governments are democratically elected, others have secured formal majorities but are not supported by their people, yet others are self-appointed and or are based on historical or hereditary leadership.

Nature conservation unions, environmental organizations and city associations can organize themselves irrespective of national boundaries. They can define their boundaries according to the issues they are addressing or ecosystems they are concerned about. They can adjust their structure, size and mandate to the issues at hand. They are mostly not impeded by election periods and party politics. Therefore they can be adequate and effective actors in fields where nations are struggling.

The strength of these organizations lies not in that they are 'non-governmental' per se, but that due to their unique governance, legitimization base, mission, mandate, goals and means, they can be the most effective actors in addressing a specific issue of global concern.

It follows that in order to find the right place for each of these actors in the future global governance system, each organization needs to identify and show its unique profile in a positive way.

In the light of this insight, the name I gave my first association wasn't bad at all: 'Tierschutzverein', or animal protection association. Or the name of my later playing field, 'Bürgerinitiative' or citizens' initiative. These names clearly communicated who we are.

My proposal therefore: Let's abandon the notion of 'NGO' and move towards a positive branding and presentation. Let's be strategic and lay the ground for defining the role of each global actor in the institutional framework for sustainable development. Named in a positive way.



The author

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