

How to Build a Successful International NGO

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July 25, 2013



It has long been clear that many non-state actors have more influence on international policymaking than a great many sovereign states. No one doubts the impact that major multinational corporations and terrorist organizations can have, for better or worse. But the role of a number of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) has been more significant than is generally recognized, and what makes the best of them tick is worth exploring.

According to current estimates, there are some 40,000 NGOs operating internationally, with the overwhelming majority focusing primarily on health, education, welfare, economics, industry, energy, the environment, human rights, social policy and governance and development-related issues. A much smaller number — a few hundred at best — work primarily on peace and security issues, though some primarily human rights-focused organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are influential here.

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Those that seek to influence foreign-policy outcomes can be typecast, perhaps unkindly, as "thinkers," "talkers" or "doers." In other words, they tend to be pure think tanks, research institutions or policy forums (like London's Chatham House); overwhelmingly campaign-focused advocacy organizations (like Human Rights Watch); or field-based operational organizations engaged in mediation, capacity-building, and confidence-building (like Search for Common Ground).

The organization with which I was associated, the International Crisis Group (ICG), is an unusual combination of all three categories. It is field-based in a way that most operational organizations are, but that think tanks and advocacy organizations are not. It focuses, as policy-oriented think tanks do, on analyzing complex conflicts and potential conflicts around the world and identifying workable solutions. It campaigns for the adoption of these solutions, but less at the grassroots level and more by direct access to high-level - policymakers.

Measuring INGOs' impact on policy outcomes is more an art than a science. The most successful, like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have high visibility among policymakers and produce analyses and arguments that — whether publicly acknowledged or not — regularly become part of the currency of debate. Their perceived ability to make a difference is usually reflected in their capacity to raise funds, whether from governments or the private sector.

What does it take for organizations like these to become and remain successful? My own experience, as both a government insider and INGO outsider, has been mostly in the area of peace and security, but I think the lessons are generalizable. Four criteria seem to be essential:

First, INGOs must add value, meeting a need that is not currently being met well or at all. The primary unmet need seen by the founders of the ICG, for example, was to compensate for governments' growing incapacity — for both security and budgetary reasons — to develop an accurate picture of what was happening on the ground in conflict zones. Open-source reporting and commentary by the media were not doing much to fill the gaps, because resource shortages, particularly in the quality print media have long been dumbing down international coverage of sensitive and difficult situations.

Second, successful INGOs are marked by the clarity of their mission. The most successful NGOs tend to be those that find a clear niche and stick to it. When Amnesty International broadened its focus from traditional political and civil rights to the whole range of economic, social, and cultural rights, it seemed for quite some time to lose direction and impact. The most insidious temptation to muddy an INGO's mission occurs when money is potentially available for some project that is not part of its core business, and for which it does not have

readily available internal expertise. In such cases, diversion and dilution of resources and loss of focus is the inevitable result.

Third, INGOs require real independence. Any INGO in the business of giving advice must be scrupulous about being — and being perceived as — immune from influence by vested interests. Some organizations, like Human Rights Watch, solve the problem by refusing to accept any government funding. The ICG doesn't do that, but it has always been absolutely insistent on saying whatever has needed to be said. In practice, governments have been remarkably tolerant of specific criticism provided it is well-supported and well-argued.

The final criterion that a successful INGO must meet in order to be taken seriously, at least by government policymakers, is total professionalism. If you want to meet governments on their home ground you have to provide a product that — in terms of the depth and accuracy of its research and the style of its presentation — the best of them are accustomed to and demand. And your management — of finance, personnel and governance — has to be sustained at the level of global best practices.

The best INGOs develop strong reputations quickly, sustain them indefinitely and exercise real influence on policymaking. But they operate in a highly competitive environment and will be on a fast track to losing their way if they come to be seen as no longer meeting real needs, remaining sharply focused or being uncompromising in maintaining their independence and professionalism.

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