

Our action is to help people in situations of crisis. And ours is not a contented action. Bringing medical aid to people in distress is an attempt to defend them against what is aggressive to them as human beings. Humanitarian action is more than simple generosity, simple charity. It aims to build spaces of normalcy in the midst of what is profoundly abnormal. More than offering material assistance, we aim to enable individuals to regain their rights and dignity as human beings.

- Dr. James Orbinski,
President Médecins Sans Frontières
Nobel Peace Prize Speech
December 14, 1999

In this brief essay I assess the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)¹ as peacebuilders in the 1990s. A new world order has emerged in which NGOs have been called upon to play a significant role. As the paradigm of global politics has shifted, as the ability or willingness of states to intervene - unilaterally or multilaterally - is reduced and as NGOs offer clear strengths and capabilities, NGOs enjoy an increased prominence in peacebuilding efforts. In short, the efforts of NGOs comprise a vital part in contemporary efforts to eliminate conflict and preserve peace. Nevertheless, many observers assert that to date, this action has had mixed results. They point to a failure between state, institutions and NGOs to properly co-ordinate efforts, the limited capabilities of certain NGOs, of the politicization of NGOs and a lack of accountability and transparency.

The paper will first look at the new context of NGO involvement. To this end, the paper discusses the new world order and the complexities and challenges presented by modern conflict. Second, I examine the contributions NGO have made to peacebuilding over the past decade. Third, the paper critically analyzes the complexities and challenges presented by NGO participation in interventionist activities. Last, I conclude with a few remarks on how NGOs might work towards finding their niche as peacebuilders.

¹ NGOs tend to be as diverse as their function and the services they provide. For the purpose of this paper, the term NGOs will be primarily in reference to international non-governmental organizations. While the paper is not intended to survey the disparity of NGOs in the field, it is important to remain conscious that NGOs are not solitary. Moreover, it is essential to take into account the varying funding, goals, membership, political/cultural affiliation and practices of NGOs, as they also vary greatly.