

Most NGOs try to achieve and maintain a relationship with the local players – local leaders, host governments, religious groups – that will do the least harm to themselves and their beneficiaries. Impartiality (even-handed treatment of groups), is the method that most NGOs use to achieve this goal. In effect, they try to stay ‘above the fray’. There are two reasons for this approach: 1) to enhance the security of their staff and material assets; and, 2) so that local populations and beneficiaries do not become pawns in the conflict (Shenstone 1998, 5). Unfortunately, in recent conflicts where the "control, manipulation, and even extermination of entire populations are the very means of war..." impartiality is very difficult to maintain and legitimise (1998, 5). Many believe they have a duty to speak out and to take a strong position through advocacy towards host governments and international players. Therefore, NGOs must always think about the social and political implications of their activities as well as their associations and partnerships between international groups. Despite these challenges NGOs have a crucial role to play in human rights monitoring due their familiarity with the dynamics in the given societal context which allows them a unique sensitivity to the situation. This sensitivity may allow them to recognise, earlier than others, shifts in society that potentially indicate human rights are about to be encroached upon.

This changing set of circumstances and unique connectedness that NGOs can develop leads us on to the third potential role for NGOs in humanitarian efforts – early warning. NGOs are often well placed to play a key role in early warning and preventive action by alerting the international community to possible deteriorating conditions in a country’s governance or in intergroup relations (Aall 1996, 437). This advantage comes from NGOs having many connections within local communities. These connections give their relief and development workers the opportunity and ability to identify deteriorating conditions that may lead to conflict. NGOs, through their information, early warning and peace-building actions, can help the international community move from simply responding to crises to preventing their occurrence. Issues for which early warning (6-12 months forewarning) can be deemed beneficial could include: intrastate conflict escalations, genocide, refugee flows, internal displacement of persons, imminent state failure, minorities at risk and impending famine (Aall 1996, 437). Those who receive the information from NGOs can include a combination of the following: prospective victims (in order to warn them), the perpetrators themselves (in order to deter them), intergovernmental and UN agencies, regional organisations, the Secretary-General of the UN, other NGOs, mass media and influential individuals who can lend credence to the warning (Gurr and Harf 1996, 80). However, as many suggest, the lack of early warning may not be the real problem in preventing conflict; rather, it is the lack of political will.

NGOs can also play an active role in helping to create the political will necessary for action at various stages of conflict resolution. They can encourage political action from major players through their advocacy functions which include increasing media attention and the attention of governments to particular issues.

Some suggest that early-warning and preventive action have not been effective in addressing conflicts in the past because the methods used in response to the warnings have been ill conceived. This critique brings us to the fourth and final role that will be addressed in this