

Mixed Results

Possibly one of the greatest concerns with the role of NGOs as peacebuilders in the 1990s has been the potential politicization of their action. At the most basic level, the very presence of a foreign individual or organization in a conflict zone is a political gesture. However, it is the nature of recent conflict, where control, manipulation, and even extermination of entire populations are the very means of war, which makes the impartial stance of NGOs increasingly difficult to maintain.¹³ The confusing nature of intrastate conflict is one where belligerents are rarely concentrated or visible; and where it is often difficult to distinguish between civilians and soldiers or enemies and allies.¹⁴ Unfortunately, NGOs, with the best of intentions, can be caught in the middle and the doctrine of neutrality is challenged. Moreover, many organizations feel they have a duty to speak, to "bear witness" and to take strong positions of advocacy towards host governments and international stakeholders. Conflict zones present a dilemma to impartiality, particularly in situations wherein domestic authority is contested and no faction has been collectively branded as the aggressor.¹⁵

The record of NGOs as peacebuilders in the past decade has demonstrated that conflict presents political minefields for all concerned. Commentators note that in such conflicts as Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Angola, the Sudan and Mozambique, humanitarian aid was manipulated by belligerents.¹⁶ In some cases the boundary between the political and humanitarian erodes and suddenly - without any intention - NGO action can have an influence on the military and political character of conflicts. In considering the issue of politicization, Hugo Slim makes an important observation by stating:

NGOs' effectiveness in responding to the suffering of civil wars is heavily dependent on the quality of its people. To operate effectively within the international, regional and local politics of today's civil wars, NGO workers must embody a combination of political sophistication, humanitarian principle and operational imagination. Unless they have adopted a position of solidarity, they must be nonpolitical, but must have a detailed political analysis which informs their work. They must have an understanding of conflict and the role of third parties within it.¹⁷

Another difficulty often cited with NGO involvement as peacebuilders, is based on the sheer number and variety of agencies involved in response to civil conflicts. Lines of coordination and responsibility in such situations are often blurred and accountability becomes a

¹³ Barbara Shenstone, "Civilian Roles in Peace Support Operations."

¹⁴ Stephen John Stedman, "The New Interventionists," *Foreign Affairs* (Winter, 1993-94), p. 14.

¹⁵ John Gerard Ruggie, *Winning the Peace: America and World Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 100.

¹⁶ Abiew and Keating, "NGOs and UN Peacekeeping Operations: Strange Bedfellows," pp. 104-5.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 105.