

An important dimension of NGO involvement in peacebuilding is that they are capable of filling gaps that neither international organizations, nation states or local institutions can address. In this regard, it is important to differentiate the spheres of humanitarianism and politics. While both are vital to the fulfillment and sustainability of peace, their role in peacebuilding is quite distinct. Dr. James Orbinski of *Médecins Sans Frontières* recently stated:

Humanitarian action takes place in the short term, for limited groups and for limited objectives. This is at the same time both its strength and its limitation. The political can only be conceived in the long term, which itself is the movement of societies.

Humanitarian action is by definition universal. Humanitarian responsibility has no frontiers. Wherever in the world there is manifest distress, the humanitarian by vocation, must respond. By contrast, the political knows borders, and where crisis occurs, political response will vary because historical relations, balance of power, and the interests of one or the other must be measured. The time and space of the humanitarian are not those of the political.¹¹

However, as one distinguishes humanitarianism and militarism in peacebuilding, one must also discover how they can work together. Clearly, both have limitations and their respective strengths must be maximized in harmony to advance the peace agenda. Although NGOs bring a great deal to the table, their work is not a substitute for definitive political will and action. As Orbinski declared: "No doctor can stop a genocide. No humanitarian can stop ethnic cleansing, just as no humanitarian can make war. And no humanitarian can make peace. These are political responsibilities, not humanitarian imperatives."¹² Thus the challenge to NGOs are both to address the difficulties of the contemporary world, but also to overcome the frequent neglect of the political. Perhaps the greatest difficulty in present peacebuilding operations is an apparent withdrawal by the U.N. Chastened by its experiences in Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti, the United States is hesitant to lend its leadership or support - both financial and political - to peacebuilding operations and has withdrawn its financial support of international organizations. The result has been that NGOs are faced with not only filling the gap of political action, but assuming - by default - many of its responsibilities.

There has been a great increase in the roles and tasks for NGOs in peacebuilding efforts. As the world faces more complex and difficult forms of conflict, NGOs represent great potential as peacebuilders. The questions remain: Has the potential been realized? What are the particular challenges facing the realization of this promise? How can the peacebuilding efforts of NGOs be improved?

¹¹ Dr. James Orbinski, President *Médecins Sans Frontières*, Nobel Peace Prize Speech, 14 December 1999.

¹² *Ibid.*