

There are many diverging opinions on the fundamental causes of conflict in the post-Cold War era, however one thing seems clear: the nature of conflict has shifted from confrontations between states (interstate conflicts) to struggles for dominance and power within states (intrastate conflict). These internal struggles bring with them a number of implications as they often pit ethnic group against ethnic group, religion against religion and neighbour against neighbour which not only impacts on said country, but often on the region as a whole as refugees pour into nearby countries. Significantly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that respond to the humanitarian crises in these situations are often trapped in the midst of the conflicts as they carry out their relief and development work. NGOs have found themselves going beyond their traditional relief objectives of providing emergency aid -- in the form of food, water, health care and sanitation -- to serving as a substitute for local government, encouraging the growth of civil society and using negotiation skills to bring rival parties together. As NGOs become increasingly involved in these diffuse roles it has become increasingly recognised that their work forms an important part of the humanitarian interventions and strategies for dealing with conflict. Therefore, the changing nature of both conflict and humanitarian relief has led NGOs and officials of the UN and its member countries to re-examine the roles that NGOs can play in these complex emergencies.

In light of the above, this paper will examine the changing roles of NGOs in the post-Cold War era in order to suggest that NGOs can assume four fundamental roles: 1) the relief and rehabilitation functions that are normally associated with NGOs; 2) human rights monitoring; 3) conflict prevention through early warning; and 4) mediation and reconciliation functions that can be labelled as peace-building functions. Each of these roles will be examined critically in order to demonstrate how NGOs can contribute to achieving long-term peace and security in various conflict areas while minimising potential problems that their involvement may cause. By drawing examples from cases of humanitarian intervention, such as in Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, suggestions about the usefulness of NGO co-ordination with the military, regional organisations, and the United Nations will be made. In the end, the aim of this paper is to develop an introductory proposal for tapping into the potential strengths of NGO participation in international, regional and local efforts to help resolve increasingly complex conflicts.¹ One should note, however, that due to the length restriction of this paper, the suggestions made below are largely an introduction to possibilities for the future role of NGOs and are designed to stimulate discussion.

Before speaking about the changing roles that NGOs have begun to play in the post-Cold War era, it is first necessary to define two terms that will be used repeatedly throughout this

¹ The author makes little claim for originality as many of the ideas expressed here have been raised elsewhere; although, not necessarily in the same fashion.