

# The Role of NGOs in the public debate and international relations

## Elements for a Definition of a “Non Governmental Diplomacy”

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The situation of the nearly three-quarters of humankind who live in the continents of the South is inadmissible. There are thus no grounds to accept it. This is the very simple fact shared by international-solidarity organizations. The first manifestation of this refusal of the unacceptable is a determination to act as closely as possible to the realities and the actors involved. This first mission has led to two others: the ambition of bringing the citizens or the organizations of our countries closer to partners of the countries of the South, and the need to analyze the rules of the international game and to make them change to become more equitable.

These three missions—local action, reinforcement of North-South connections, and advocacy for more equitable rules—are closely related. The legitimacy of lobby and advocacy actions is rooted in the involvement of organizations and their partners in a variety of local realities. To become professional, NGOs have become more specialized, but the unity of these three tasks is found today in the collectives to which everyone brings the fruit of their experience and their skill. If advocacy NGOs were cut off from local action, they would run a twofold risk: that of basing their positions, no longer on tangible experiences, but on approaches of an ideological nature, and that of short-circuiting their partners of the South and of considering international issues only from their standpoints as organizations of the North..

In this paper, we will focus on the role of NGOs in international negotiations. Advocacy actions aimed at public opinion, on the one hand, and lobby actions aimed at negotiators on the other hand, are trying to generate an environment that is favorable to the evolution of world regulation toward more fairness and sustainability. Whether at intergovernmental events—United Nations conferences, general assemblies of the Bretton Woods institutions, G8 meetings—or at nongovernmental events—the World Social Forum, for instance—NGOs, in protest as in proposal, are acting in a much more open negotiation space. The time of pure intergovernmentality is over. Diplomats, who have always kept the hand in negotiations, are working today in a field of forces where a huge variety of economic, social, territorial, or scientific actors are operating. Before taking place around a green, felt-covered table, a negotiation is won or lost in the public opinion. Another approach to diplomacy, open to new actors and new forces, is seeing the day.

Before considering the specific action of NGOs in the field of the public debate and that of international negotiations, some issues on contemporary diplomatic action and on the context in which international relations appear today need to be brought up.

# **International Relations and Intergovernmental Relations**

## **International Relations, a Battlefield**

International relations sometimes take on the form of armed conflict as a last recourse. Most often, it is on the diplomatic stage that the rules of the international game are defined and international life is organized and regulated under a more civil manner. For diplomats, it is always about trying to make national values and interests prevail and about negotiating laws favorable to their own countries. The daily battle is economic, cultural, scientific, and technical: fields where competition is the rule. The organization charts of the ministries of Foreign Affairs provide a very explicit list of the battles for which national actors must prepare. The central battle today is economic and financial. The economy and, even more so, finance have succeeded in extracting themselves from the yoke of the political and territorial frameworks and interactions featuring organized social forces. They can flourish according to their own logic without having to worry, in addition, about the consequences of that logic on the political, social, or environmental fields. The history of this world-economy—the birth of which is placed by F. Braudel at the beginning of the fifteenth century with the Venetian proto-bankers—and of its struggle to extract itself from political, social, and territorial constraints have led today to what it is appropriate to call globalization. It is true that this independence and supremacy have been encouraged and protected by a dominant ideology, by a language become international, by the all power of the regulatory international organizations born in Bretton Woods in the immediate postwar period and, on occasion, by a hegemonic military strength.

Competition and cooperation are therefore closely intertwined, but the objective, for both, is clearly to make national interests prevail on the different battlefields. For certain countries, because it is their culture and their history, the order of competition will win out. Only they will be credible as the foundation for security and peace. For other countries, which don't have the same history or simply because they are weaker, it is the order of cooperation that they will push for. For them, in the international power struggles, only cooperation will allow them to come out heads up. Yet everywhere, history, such as it's told to children, is first violent history, even though the violence is always portrayed as a civilizing force. War and diplomacy appear in binary interpretations of the world: the believer and the pagan, the civilized and the barbarian, and today, in a return to a classic interpretation, good and evil. The binary nature of good and evil justifies all wars and all diplomacy, which, whatever they do and whatever form they take on, will declare to be working for good.

The battle: it is purposely that a military term is used, and behind the term the whole logic underlying war. There are, behind diplomacy: an objective, which is to make one's laws, values and interests prevail; an ideological, cultural, scientific, economic or, simply, military strike force; designation of the enemy and the search for allies; the conquest of positions from which one will be able to dominate the battlefield or fields. There is, finally, strategic (and/or diplomatic) thinking, which collects all these ingredients to make them serve, together, the major objective: the defense of national interests.

## **The Diplomatic Battle**

The diplomatic battle has a specific objective: to ensure that the rules of the game, international law, and global governance are favorable to the national actors it represents. In bilateral relations, it is also used to help these national actors in their own struggles.

This brings up a first remark: the attitude of countries to regulation is largely a function of their power. Hegemonic power, confident of its force on the different battlefields, will prefer a compliant multilateral framework that will allow it to exercise its leadership without too many restrictions, or even to assume in the name of the community of nations a mandate of global governance. Medium-scale or regional powers will speak of a multipolar framework. The poor or small countries will look for the protection of a powerful leader and will seek the institution of a consequent multilateral framework. As a general rule, but rules always have convincing exceptions, force and competition are the weapons of the powerful, the law and cooperation, those of the weak. Here we find some of

the debates of the moment: the one on unilateralism, multipolarism and/or multilateralism, the one on globalization and/or regionalization, the one on free trade and/or national sovereignty or, still, the one on market mechanisms and/or Human Rights.

In the building process of a world regulation—which, in the present times, often seems more like a destruction process—the question of alliances, that of galvanizing public opinion, and that of the places and the fora for negotiations on world regulation are decisive:

- **Alliances** are above all diplomatic. The constitution of a camp, whether ad hoc or more lasting, is necessary for the success of a negotiation. Adopting a resolution at the United Nations Security Council or an international Convention in Rio, in Cairo, or in Rome supposes a majority, the importance of which will depend on the rules of the game in force in the concerned arena. Nonetheless, the constitution of camps and the voting are only the last stage of a much more complex process, especially for the governments of democratic countries, which have to submit to many, often contradictory interactions with organized federative actors. Economic actors, union or social actors, and territorial actors increasingly interfere in the general alchemy and in the search for results that are acceptable to the majority of the stakeholders. The relative influence of the different categories of actors varies according to their respective power or according to their lobbying or advocacy capacities. The major economic actors and NGO collectives, international networks or national platforms, have acquired, for example, the power to put pressure on diplomacy, which now has to factor them in. In some cases, when the negotiation is technical, which it most often is, and when the arguments are expounded publicly, the scientific battle can be fundamental. This is the case for the major environmental negotiations (convention on climate change) or trade (harmfulness of GMOs or hormonized meat). Modern diplomacy must know how to mobilize these many different actors and incite them to be active in the international networks of which they are members. The fact that the positions defended by national diplomacy and those of the different categories of actors are sometimes or often in contradiction, just as the fact that these different actors often defend contradictory positions and interests, must not be an argument to underestimate them and to avoid involving them in the enlarged negotiation process, or even worse, to drive them into the enemy camp. There is such a thing as “diplomatic engineering,” just as there is agricultural engineering or a maritime engineering, which consist precisely in combining independent forces and obtaining positive results. There is “participatory diplomacy” just as there is “participatory democracy.” It guarantees the democratic value of the positions taken in the name of the nation—no small task—and makes it possible to count on broad support when the time comes for implementing the decisions that were made. It is also an educational experience for the actors and the citizens, by which they acquire responsibility and learn the need for compromise. This does not, however, lessen in any way the responsibility of the diplomats, who have a mandate granted by officials elected by universal suffrage.
- **Negotiations stand in an environment fashioned by public opinion, sometimes world public opinion.** The “battle for public opinion” is indeed one of the keys of negotiations. Diplomacy needs to be concerned about it. There would not have been any significant advances in Rio at the 1992 Earth Summit if awareness of the importance of global-environment issues had not emerged. There would not have been a Convention against land mines nor any progress on the access to medicine, if campaigns had not been organized to sensitize world public opinion. The question of agricultural subsidies would not have acquired the importance that it has in international diplomatic bargaining, if the liberal camp had not succeeded in persuading public opinion of their iniquity and harmfulness. There would not have been a diplomatic battle at the UN on the blank check demanded by the United States on the Iraqi question nor any warning given on the danger of getting bogged down, if on February 15, 2003, there had not been some 10 to 15 million citizens in the streets the world over ... Press coverage of international events and, today, of international negotiations, awareness of the impacts of economic and financial globalization on the daily lives of citizens, the development of interactive communication thanks to the Internet, and the networking of organizations are all powerful information and mobilization vectors, which diversify communication and contradict information policies or propaganda implemented by the governments and the major economic actors. Negotiators, and this is new, must justify themselves before a world public opinion who understands that international agreements have a direct impact on everyone’s living conditions and that in a globalized world, you cannot deal with questions by isolating

them from one another. Negotiators have either to yield to this new force or, if they take contrary position, to refer to the higher interests of the nation: a generally uncomfortable position.

- ***The places and bodies of governance and exercise of regulation*** are not neutral. The struggle, explicit or not, between UN agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions, between the Washington institutions and those of New York, the constitution of an international arbitration body or the scattering of places of governance, the construction or dismantling of the instruments of multilateralism, the constitution of international law or the juxtaposition of more-or-less contradictory commercial, social, or environmental laws, or even the proclamation of preference for an absence of governance and international law, are not insignificant subjects to be tossed from one meeting to another and left to the good will of a few specialists. The construction of international law, international governance, and international instruments and institutions requires permanence in the positions asserted from one negotiation to the next. From this point of view, one of the priorities is to put some consistency in the “legislative processes” that produce international law and in international law itself.

### **The International Context in this Beginning of the Twenty-first Century**

This last decade—the one that goes from the UN Conference on environment and development (Rio, June 1992) to the 5th Ministerial Conference of the WTO (Cancún, September 2003)—has been marked by three simultaneous negotiation cycles; an economic and trade cycle, a social cycle, and an environmental cycle.

- ***The economic cycle*** corresponds to the end of the Uruguay Round, to the Marrakech agreements instituting the WTO, and to the start of the Doha Development Round. That, too, of the Washington Consensus become without much change the Monterrey Consensus, which provides the guidelines for IMF and World Bank policies. Economic and trade negotiations, organized essentially within the WTO, are entirely devoted to the liberalization of the economy. The numerous trade agreements signed in the former GATT framework or in the more recent one of the WTO all aim to contribute to liberalization, to developing trade, which, according to the liberal assumption, is supposed to lead to economic growth, social progress, and environmental conservation. The march toward an increasing commerce of goods, services, and money is accelerating. The least that one can say is that this march, so sure of itself, is advancing blindly, with no serious assessment of the impacts of the previous stages of liberalization, and under pressure from the powerful countries and economic actors, who are naturally interested in having open markets. It would be nice to know who wins and who loses in the process, which groups of countries or territories, which families of economic or social actors manage all right or, on the contrary, are sucked into impoverishment or environmental deterioration. It would be nice to know in which political, economic, social, or territorial conditions the virtuous spiral claiming that “trade growth leads to production of wealth leads to social progress leads to environmental conservation,” the Anglo-Saxon “win-win-win-win” formula, actually gets underway. Failing evaluation, we shall not know. The different actors are supposed to be content with celebrating liberalization as God’s Gift to Man or with condemning it as a punishment of the Devil. At most, we can take a look around and simply observe that the planet is in a sorry state and that social unbalances, national and international, are growing. The reason, however, for these very mediocre results is the subject of a new controversy; for some, these results are explained by too little liberalization and/or too slow, for others, by too much liberalization and/or too fast. The case of agriculture, which occupies a central position in trade negotiations, is significant. It involves the future of half of humankind and the greatest part of natural resources. Liberalization, which, in addition, is unequally and disloyally applied by the most powerful countries, does not bode well for the farmers who are seeing agricultural prices collapse and their poverty growing.
- ***The social cycle*** has gone through many stages in this decade, stages proposed by the United Nations Organization and its different agencies. The UN Conferences of Cairo (Population), of Istanbul (Habitat), of Peking (Women’s Rights), of Rome (Food), repeated five years later to make a first assessment and to find, in general, that the perspectives drawn up and approved by the community of governments

remained dead letter, led to the New York Millennium Conference and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals, which are of a social character, are expressed simply: to reduce poverty indicators by half by 2015—a 50% reduction of the number of people suffering from hunger (evaluated at 800 million people), of non-schooled children, especially girls, of people not having access to water (the Johannesburg Conference added “to sanitation”!), of infant mortality ... These objectives are simply a reminder of the social rights considered as universal and recorded in an additional international Pact linked to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While they were at it, the agencies involved estimated the budgets deemed necessary to achieve these goals at 30 billion dollars to reduce hunger, 200 billion for access to water, etc. The UN, which, failing the sense of arithmetic has the sense of reality, and an ambitious reality at that, reached the conclusion that it would be necessary to double Official Development Aid (ODA) and, therefore, to balance the MDGs at 50 billion dollars with, granted, a complementary call for private investment. In the past three years, none of the numbers corresponding to social indicators and official aid have moved in the desired direction. There has been a breakdown of international social policies or policies of international solidarity and the world-economy continues to exclude hundreds of millions of people from it, without their having any possibility of rehabilitation in increasingly destructured local economies. They have also continued to exploit natural resources savagely, without the least concern for their renewal.

- **The environmental cycle**, which was supposed to be the big theme of the decade, was initiated in Rio (Earth Summit, June 1992) and has been temporarily concluded in Johannesburg (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, September 2002). During this past decade, the governments and the nine families declared to be major actors were supposed to cooperate in the implementation of a plan of action—Agenda 21—and two major international conventions—the Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Each year, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) met at the UN to evaluate the progress of the implementation of the recommendations of Agenda 21, while conferences were organized by the bodies in charge of the application of the two Conventions. The Kyoto Conference on the one hand, and the Leipzig Conference on the other laid the foundations for the implementation of the two Conventions. Specific negotiations, such as the one on the caution principle leading to the Cartagena Agreement or the one on the exploitation of phytogenetic resources, provided some theoretical advances. Nevertheless, it is now evident that, after ten years of negotiations, the major agreements have not even been ratified by a sufficient number of countries, and not even by some of the major countries, which are also responsible for the most serious attacks against the global environment. It has turned out that environmental reasoning must step aside when it contradicts trade logic, which is practically always the case. Environmental law is not taken into consideration unless it does not contradict commercial law. And yet environmental awareness keeps springing up every time a natural or accidental disaster (oil spills, storms, floods, or heat waves) strikes one of our countries. A few events are organized and speeches are made to reassure citizens that the governing authorities are also aware of the terrifying dangers that the planet is running.

To these three ten-year cycles, we can add a **geopolitical or political-diplomatic cycle**, which began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and is still ongoing. The end of the Soviet empire opened a wide door to an undisputed American hegemony. In the early nineties, this was experienced as something that would make it possible to gather the community of Nations around the resolution of the major problems of humankind and of the planet: peace and security, sustainable management of the global environment, economic development, and social progress. This was still the dominant vision when the Heads of State met in Rio in June 1992 around President Bush Senior. But rather than to trying to solve these great global issues, the meeting was a triumphant celebration of neoliberalism and led to a considerable acceleration of liberalization, and financial and economic globalization—resolution of the global problems was supposed to follow. This boisterous victory was that of the multinational corporations, which are the quintessence and the very advocates of this plan for a world-economy finally integrating all the markets of the world. The first blow to this deregulation and market-integration process was struck by protest movements that managed first to block the signature of a multilateral agreement on investments (MAI), which had been negotiated without any form of democratic debate, and then, following the same momentum, succeeded in questioning the different components of global governance, which had been established without any real dialogue. This protest was pursued against the WTO ministerial conference meeting in Seattle, against IMF and World Bank general assembly meetings, and against G-8 meetings. Another obstacle came up in the geopolitical field between on one side, the United States and their closest allies and on the other

side, the countries or networks recalcitrant to the *Pax Americana*. It was obviously the September 11, 2001 attack that confirmed the nature of a new "war," presented as global, which was being prepared and which, from that point on, was able to develop in full light: the war against international terrorism. President Bush, Junior, supported by the formidable American military power, developed a vision of international relations in which the agents of good were up against the agents of evil, and he acted accordingly. For more than one year, the international community, usually so divided, gathered around three consensuses: the fight against terrorism consensus in the geopolitical field; the Monterrey consensus in the economic field; and the emotional compassion consensus in the social field. The diplomatic process, which was supposed to lead to a mandate granted by the United Nations to the United States to lead the war on Iraq, put a brake on this apparently consensual state of the international community. A few powers, called medium or regional compared to the American superpower, led a diplomatic battle that was to force the Americans and their allies to go to war without an international mandate. This was the first flaw in the new post-September-11 diplomatic order. The future will tell us whether this was something that history would throw out or the beginning of a lasting reorganization of international life.

In a few necessarily broad strokes, such is the world in which NGOs are acting and wish to introduce solidarity ... in fact, international solidarity.

## **International Solidarity Organizations and International Relations**

There is a discrepancy, perhaps a paradox, in advocating international solidarity in this world of competition. When intervening in international relations, are not NGOs either overstepping their boundaries or acting in contradiction with the values that they display? To have some influence in the international debates and diplomatic battles we have presented, NGOs must have a perfect command of the rules of the game and get international solidarity to be admitted both as an ethical value and as the only realistic stance. The behavior of the actors presently dominating international negotiations most certainly promises us a completely obstructed future. The reeling growth of social unbalances, the accelerated deterioration of natural resources, the discretionary power of the financial powers and the recourse to military force to maintain order and the security of the powerful is leading humankind and the planet straight into a wall! It is together that we will have to stand if we wish to match the global challenges that we are facing today.

### **The Major Battles of NGOs**

Once they have accepted the paradoxical nature of their commitment, NGOs need to say more about the positions and proposals that they wish to have adopted in the social, environmental, economic, and geopolitical cycles of international negotiations and on the more specific goals than they wish to press for.

They need to fight on four fronts: social, environmental, economic, and geopolitical.

- ***In social negotiations***, NGOs are trying to defend economic, social, and cultural rights as they have been recognized by the international community and as they are recorded in the Pact for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR, 1986). The Millennium Development Goals could be considered as a possible tangible translation of these rights: it is therefore advisable to recognize these too, recognition that would not be of any consequence unless means are set aside for what could be considered as global social policies. As things stand today, we are a very far shot from the necessary means, since international solidarity only mobilizes half of the 0.7% of the GNP promised by the OECD countries nearly thirty years ago. Although this 0.7% may seem like an inaccessible objective, it is in fact ridiculously low: a country like France devotes close to 45% of its GNP for the production of public goods and for solidarity at the French level and, more modestly, the European level, and it only sets aside 0.35% of its GNP for international solidarity, in other words a hundred and thirty times less to solve problems a hundred and thirty times more important and difficult. NGOs are therefore pressing to

activate all the mechanisms of financial transfers from the North to the South: increasing Official Development Aid to at least the promised 0.7% of GNP, dealing with the debts of the countries of the South, especially those that are strongly indebted, implementation of an international taxing system, institution of market mechanisms, increase and stabilization of the prices of basic (tropical) products, etc. We will not reach 40 or 50% of global GNP, but by increasing transfers of means for funding, we will make it possible to begin to implement some of the global social policies and be able to move toward the Millennium Development Goals. To go any further, it will be necessary to tackle the model of economic growth, to invert its tendency to exclude, and to advocate instead its capacity to facilitate the reintegration of those who have been excluded.

- ***In environmental negotiations***, NGOs are pushing for the implementation of the global environmental agreements (GEAs) and are trying to tackle the root of the problem, i.e. the present forms of consumption and production in the rich countries and adopted by the wealthy populations of the different regions of the world. On the production side, major questions such as the non-sustainable exploitation of natural resources, energy, transportation, and intensive agriculture need to be considered simultaneously. On the consumption side, there needs to be some in-depth thinking on “wealth,” a critical view focused on the propaganda or advertisements surrounding consumer goods, and the offer of “information” instead of material goods or services. The reduced consumption of material goods and services needs to be compensated by that of non-market goods and by reactivated or new social links. In fact, it is impossible to encourage developing countries to shun the production and consumption models of the developed countries if the latter don’t adopt new ones themselves. Here again, it will be everyone or no one.
- ***In economic and trade negotiations***, NGOs are placing development as a priority, particularly the development of the countries that have the most economic difficulties. Rather than the acceleration of economic and financial globalization, which are driven by the liberalization of the trade of goods, services, and money, NGOs support specific models that allow a local, national, or regional development process to start up and grow increasingly stronger. Competition of all the economic agents of the world in the framework of an integrated world market can be profitable only to those that have the means to dominate others. It punishes the weak. To be constructive, competition, if there has to be competition, requires that handicaps are factored in and there has to be regulation to override the law of the jungle. On the subject of regulation, NGOs are defending equity, which does not mean that everyone should be submitted to “the same rules,” but that everyone should have the “opportunity to develop.” To seize this opportunity, the weakest economic actors have to have an “economic playing field,” i.e. access to the factors of production and to a market where they can sell the goods or services they produce. World-economy is not made for the poorest economic actors, and yet they represent the largest part of humankind, starting with the farmers, who constitute half of the world population. NGOs are leading campaigns against the pressure of the most powerful countries and of the international financial and trade institutions, and against the bias of the structural adjustment programs, defined in a context of indebtedness, which pushes countries to adopt policies of integration into the world economy without any concern for the conditions that could make this integration work as a positive factor in national development.
- ***In political negotiations or critical situations for human rights***, NGOs are laying down the basic rules for a democratic governance, which is to feature the participation in global governance of the presently underrepresented countries and actors. Even though the permanent members of the Security Council have a more favorable position, the United Nations model, from this point of view, gives everyone a place, which is not the case for the Bretton Woods institutions, especially the IMF and the World Bank, where the share of governance held by each country is proportionate to its share of capital in the institution. The issue of the institutional development of global governance is important, but other issues are just as fundamental for NGOs: the issue of the consistency of international law and the relative importance of the different families of law—social, environmental, commercial, and cultural law, families of law built by different bodies and often according to different rationales; the issue of the applicability of the law, which would require the concomitant and independent existence on a global level

of the three powers that are the foundation, according to Montesquieu, of modern democracies—legislative power, judicial power, and executive power; the issue of the actors who don't respect the rules of the game, for example the governments that scorn universal human rights or the international Mafia or terrorist networks; finally, another issue of special interest to NGOs, the position and the role of civil-society organizations and actors in a "world participatory democracy." The relationship between representative democracy and participatory democracy, already a difficult question to deal with at the local and national levels, is particularly complex at the global level. Actually, all of these questions are complex, but if we do not wish globalization to be left exclusively to the transnational financial and economic powers, they have to be asked and, beyond that, to be answered. Another NGO concern is the question of peace and the restriction of war or force, a burning issue. Peace keeping around the many conflicts developing in the countries of the South but also the new American punitive wars are the subject of debate in the international arenas, in the media, and among public opinion. On the one hand, the issue of managing the contradiction that can come up between national sovereignty and respect of human rights and on the other, that of the possible application of the "the duty of humanitarian intervention" are all the more sensitive that the relative importance of the categories of law is not established or not respected. If democracy were recognized as a right for all the citizens of the world, then the different forms of dictatorship would be illegal. NGOs, which are founded on the right to organize, are fighting for the universal application of this right, which is the foundation of democracies at a local or national level. The response of NGOs to the question of the fight against arbitrary power is their determination to establish an interaction between international law, which NGOs wish to be as specific and as binding as possible and should serve as a common reference to all the peoples of the earth, and local democratic dynamics founded on the right to organize. It is at these two levels—the progress of international law and support to local democratic dynamics—that organizations wish to act.

In line with the negotiation cycles, where progress of international law and regulation are the stakes, NGOs are pursuing three broad objectives. These emerged as priorities from the first World Social Forums. Even though these forums should not be considered as the conventions of a world citizens organization, which does not exist, they have made it possible to formulate collective stands.

- **Obtain the reorganization of financial channels and compliance with the rules of the international game.** The double standard applied to the international behavior of the developed countries next to the discipline imposed on the developing countries and the duplicity of legal channels serving illegal practices—both of these being features of present-day international life—play in favor of the powerful. The Mafia networks connected to drugs or arms trafficking, but also to the exploitation of natural resources, as is the case in Africa, in the Andean countries, and in Central Asia and which, today, involve all the regions of the world; the tax havens, which have introduced "soft law" areas and destroy the rule of law; the speculative financial movements, which destroy the true economies that produce values; the agricultural subsidies or the unbalanced trade systems that are imposed on the poorest: these are among the many forms of cheating that siphon off unfairly gained wealth and despoil the poor even beyond legal despoiling as defined by organized competition in the framework of the global market. This first battle of the NGOs consists in at least making all countries, all the economic actors and all citizens respect the rules of the game and, generally, to obtain the application of the decisions taken in the international conferences and to recall the promises made on podiums and in speeches. This is the first of the NGO battles.
- **Take social rights and objectives seriously and restore a balance in the financial exchange between the North and the South.** The financial transfers between the North and the South are negative for the South. Every year, billions of dollars leave the South for the North through the financial mechanisms in force: debt reimbursement, the deterioration of the terms of trade, capital flight, the repatriation of company profits, and even a significant proportion of Official Development Aid, which either doesn't leave the countries of the North or when it does, comes back to it after privatization operations. Development is therefore not financed and consequently there are no serious means to undertake a fight against the crying manifestations of poverty. NGOs are pushing for the activation of all the mechanisms of North-South transfers: bringing ODA up to 0.7% of GNP, canceling or restructuring the debt for the countries of the South, increasing the prices of basic commodities, opening the markets to processed products from the South, implementing an international taxing system and in particular taxation of speculative practices and of goods and capital trade, etc. Beyond the volume of the transfers, however, NGOs must focus on their quality: they must look to the quality of aid, the fairness of the calls to tender, the fight against corruption, and the transparency of private

investments. They must make sure that the public part of aid is invested as it should be in the social sector to fight against the different manifestations of poverty. From this point of view, NGOs make timely and untimely reminders of the social rights to which the governing authorities and the international community are committed, and of the Millennium Goals, which these latter are supposed to pursue seriously. NGOs, from this point of view, exercise a “democratic control” over the executive powers.

- **Promote responsible economies in democratic societies.** NGOs are trying to put pressure on economic actors to incite them to adopt socially and environmentally responsible behavior. The promise of an efficient economy governed by the market and given ex post facto corrective social and environmental policies is no longer credible. The means necessary for the implementation of such corrective social or environmental policies on a world scale would be considerable and totally disproportionate to the ridiculously feeble part of national GNPs dedicated to ODA. There is therefore no other solution than to try to force economic actors to become responsible and to comply with social and environmental specifications, which means having to produce social and environmental progress at the same time as goods and services. The responsibility in question here is not or not only related to the “quality” of the social and environmental policies of companies, it requires the production of positive social and environmental “externalities,” which, alone, can make economic growth, social progress, and environmental conservation compatible. To weigh in favor of an evolution in this direction of the economy, NGOs are committed to two complementary action families: on the one hand, advocacy of economic alternatives—socially responsible finance, responsible consumption, fair trade, etc.—often gathered under the label of “economy of solidarity,” and on the other hand, the demand for the adoption of social and environmental “specifications” that would serve to circumscribe or guide company activity. Such alternatives today are the subject of many experiments, both in the South and in the North of the world. World cooperation, networks of experiences and actors, or even worldwide alternative channels or systems, are developing and entering into interaction with the financial, trade, and economic systems dominating the world today. The move toward corporate responsibility, which affects considerable interests, is much included in the rhetoric of political leaders and major economic actors, but we are a very far shot from the international legal instruments and the institution of independent control, which, in this case, are the only credible actions. NGOs today are determined to attack on these two fronts, convinced that they must complete their action in the social field with pressure on the economic engine that is at work in companies, especially in multinational corporations.

### **The Limits and Weaknesses of NGOs in Actions Challenging Governmental Negotiators**

The role played by NGOs in the public debate and international negotiations is far from being negligible. The positions that have been conquered are especially manifest in the social and environmental cycles, and more modest in the trade negotiations or in the major geopolitical files. At present, however, the front lines are moving swiftly and extensively. This evolution, which is positive for civil-society organizations, is not welcomed kindly by all the traditional actors of international negotiations, particularly the governmental actors. The most modern diplomacies know how to interact with these new actors in international negotiations. The diplomacies of the more centralized or more conservative countries, and, of course, the diplomacies of the countries under dictatorial régimes are more reluctant to accept this new deal. They are the first to challenge NGOs and to underscore what can appear as their limits or their weaknesses. Four main questions are being addressed to the NGOs to reduce their ambition to more modest proportions. These are in fact good questions, and NGOs should take them seriously and try to answer them. They concern their legitimacy, their representativeness, their diversity, and their forms of financing.

- **The first question put to NGOs is that of their legitimacy** in participating in international negotiations. Governmental powers, especially those that can hardly be said to have any democratic legitimacy, deny NGOs the right to speak in the name of “civil society,” at most they should be allowed to express themselves in the name of the members of their general assemblies. Contrary to parliamentary representatives, elected through universal suffrage, and to governments, which can be checked by parliamentary representatives, NGOs are not, according to this position, representatives of civil society, but lobbies at most. A government of NGOs would indeed be anything but democratic. The question of NGO legitimacy is serious and NGOs must not take a mistaken position. The legitimacy of NGOs comes from their experience of the problems being dealt with and from their partnership relations with the communities involved, experience and relations

that often act as a reference in information campaigns, in media interventions, and, basically, in raising the awareness of our fellow citizens. This completes a full circle and the governing authorities can feel the indirect pressure of NGOs on the global awareness that is more-or-less forcefully expressed at the major international conferences and meetings. Legitimate or not, NGOs have weighed on the major negotiations of the past decade. Nonetheless, NGOs must avoid confusing the issue and must claim only the legitimacy that is theirs.

- ***The second question is that of their representativeness.*** This is also a serious question and is directly related to the question of legitimacy insofar as NGOs are sometimes assimilated to ordinary pressure groups controlled by governmental, economic, religious, or even sectarian actors. In fact, the right to organize being unrestrained, nothing stops a government, a multinational corporation or a church from setting up one or a hundred NGOs to press for their own ideas. This is, indeed, a very real danger. To avoid it, beyond the true representativeness of every NGO, which is to represent its members, it is necessary to consider the family of NGOs as a whole insofar as it is organized as such. Networks, collectives, and platforms or federations of national international-solidarity organizations will guarantee a much broader representation than any NGO on its own, and even than the juxtaposition of NGOs. National federations are the best obstacles to the possible manipulations of lobbies or NGOs instrumentalized by third powers. Insofar as they are themselves democratic and transparent, they can express themselves in the name of the family of NGOs and thus avoid expressing interests that are too specific. This strategy is for the moment more difficult at the international level, as there is no world platform that can impose a charter or a code of conduct on international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) nor allow the different movements to participate fully in the definition of the positions and proposals presented at the international level. A bottom-up construction of the INGO movement at national, regional, then world levels is a priority: if it is democratic, it will make it possible to answer the difficult question of representativeness.
- ***The third big question is that of their diversity*** and that of the obvious contradictions among the extremely scattered NGOs and the necessary unity and simplicity of the messages addressed at international events. NGOs, which have their roots everywhere in the world in local and varied realities, consider this diversity as a given and as an asset. The common positions and proposals that are likely to challenge world regulation will have value only if they do not contradict the diversity of the world and, even further, only if they make it possible for local and varied initiatives to develop. The definition of these collective and international messages, like the construction of national, regional and world collectives, must comply with the methods that allow everyone to participate in these building exercises and to be certain that they are reflected in the final positions and proposals. Nevertheless, in the reality of exchanges, the world's cultural diversity challenges any message that claims to be global, including that of the universality of rights as essential as the equality of the citizens, that of men and women in particular, or the right to organize or the freedom of thought and meeting ... not to mention the differences in the perception of social, economic, and cultural rights. Every culture and every community thinks it is able to express the universality of rights and duties. The universality of rights, although admitted as the basis of the United Nations Organization, is often called into question.
- ***The fourth and last question is that of the forms of funding of NGOs.*** Private funding for corporations and public funding for administrations and public services are well established and consistent with the missions and the working rationales of the entities involved. As for NGOs, they benefit from private and public funding, which are both, in a way, foreign to their operations and activities. This funding is uncertain, subject to fashion, or granted in terms of the donor's interests, which do not usually have much to do with the aims of the organization or with the interests of the final beneficiaries. There are, indeed, in the forms of funding of NGOs, many indirect ways of diverting them from their missions and making them serve the interests of third parties. There is behind the funding question an essential question, that of the independence of NGOs. Failing sufficient clean funds, from the contributions of the members of the organization, independence can only develop through the multiplication and hybridization of funding sources. Unfortunately, this solution entails extreme complications in fund raising and requires the constitution of financial-engineering skills in the organizations. In the area of funding, there is a need to imagine socially responsible financial mechanisms to mobilize private funds or savings and to have the work of the organizations recognized as producing general interest in order to justify public support. This task, for the moment, has hardly begun.

## **The Two Conditions of Efficiency for the International Action of NGOs**

To prepare for the battles that we have presented here and offset the weaknesses that we have acknowledged, NGOs must meet two challenges: on the one hand, the challenge of organizing and establishing an “international collective solidarity actor,” and on the other hand, the challenge of defining common positions and proposals.

- ***Organizing NGOs and instituting collective national, regional, and global solidarity actors.*** The extreme diversity of NGOs, their decentralized roots and their scattering require, if they wish to be heard, an organization effort. The organization of NGOs, i.e. the institution of national, regional, and global collectives, must be governed by least three principles: it must be the result of a bottom-up construction, it must not skip any stages and never break its linkage with the local and the global, and finally, it must take place in transparency and democracy. Bottom-up means that the different stages going from the local to the global must be cleared in an ascending geographical order. The multiplicity of NGOs, which were not set up according to any plan but were decentralized initiatives, calls for them to be grouped together according to themes or important regions, philosophical affinities, or trade-union needs. These collectives will respond to common and targeted needs, but they will not dissipate the need for NGOs to build a national federation or platform that will allow the NGO world, which is devoted to the development of international solidarity, to speak in a single voice and to interact with national or international partners. In the same way as for governmental organizations, national NGO platforms must federate at the regional level. Thus is born a confederation of national platforms, which can represent NGOs with regard to regional bodies and participate in a world body—a distant idea for the moment, but its need is being felt. The institution of “national, regional, or global solidarity collectives” is a real challenge, and it appears inaccessible to some and dangerous to others. What we have already, at the international level, are INGOs, networks, and forums. These different forms of organization have made it possible to develop communication among the nongovernmental actors of the different parts of the world but, due to North-South unbalances in particular, but not exclusively, they have given a practical monopoly of public expression to the major international NGOs of the North. This is a very undemocratic slant, which reproduces in nongovernmental cooperation what is observed in intergovernmental relations, except that the international organizations are governed by very specific rules, which is not the case for the nongovernmental world. The creation of nongovernmental collective actors is therefore a need if we wish to answer the questions of legitimacy, representativeness, and diversity, and of the ambiguity of funding, questions that are put to NGOs and that these must raise for themselves.
- ***Defining common positions, proposals, and demands.*** The diversity of NGO orientation is infinite. This diversity, which is directly connected to the right to organize—available to any citizen—is an asset. It is on this huge foundation of experiences and skills that the common positions, proposals, and demands of the NGOs must be built, constructions that are absolutely necessary if they expect to be able to participate in the international debate and to provide international negotiators with proposals. The construction of common positions is the same as for collective actors, it must respect the same principles, those of the identification and chronology of the geographical scales, transparency, and democracy. In fact, the two processes are connected: the construction of collective actors makes it necessary to enter into a debate on the substance of the positions and on the definition of common proposals. The events of the official agenda—UN conferences, G8 meetings, assemblies of the international financial and trade institutions—and those of the “socially responsible” agenda—world and regional Social Forums—have pushed NGOs to define their positions, proposals, and demands. The truth is that even though the local scale must remain the reference for NGOs, the positions are going to become clearer thanks to an interaction between the local references and the analysis of the global systems. This “macro” analysis of what is at the heart of the dynamics of the evolution of the world, i.e. the analysis of the central mechanisms of “economic and financial” globalization, has become a common reference for NGOs, which have to take a stand with regard to how this central engine of the economic, social, and environmental evolution of the world operates. It is according to this framework of analysis that local experiences, conducted by NGOs and their partners, will take on all their meaning. These central mechanisms of globalization, which are at the source of some of the main geopolitical problems of our time, are at the heart of international negotiations. It is with regard to them that NGOs, like any economic or social actor, have to determine themselves.

## **Acting in the International Arena**

With the strength of an organization and common positions, proposals, and demands, NGOs and their collectives can act efficiently on a global scale. In the scuffle constituted by international relations, we propose to define three complementary types of action, which aim to accumulate local references, to encourage the emergence of a socially responsible global awareness, and to push negotiators toward decisions that support equitable regulation and international solidarity.

- ***To accumulate local and varied references.*** NGO means, energy, and skills are essentially committed to local actions. In a context of unacceptable and dramatic situations, the first objectives of these actions are local. They must also endeavor to contribute to identifying the impacts of the international systems and to enable the clarification of local solutions or prevention. In fact today, in the wake of the structural-adjustment policies and given the dissolution of all local and national protection, interaction between the large international systems and the local economies is direct and immediate. The screens that separated the local markets from the global market and those that protected traditional economic actors from the powerful international actors have become almost non-existent. The ubiquity of the global systems confers ample exemplarity to every local experience. Such references, elaborated locally and in a decentralized way, are therefore essential elements for the definition of the positions of NGOs, for their main arguments in the battle for world public opinion, and for their interaction with the governments.
- ***To champion the emergence of a socially responsible global awareness.*** One of the dramas of our time is the discrepancy between a very globalized economic and financial world and the embryonic character of socially responsible global awareness and the construction of a global political and social forum. NGOs must enter into the “battle for world public opinion,” a battle to be fought at every geographical scale. We are speaking of development or environmental education, but this is also in particular about supporting the emergence of the awareness of world citizenship, which does not contradict—quite the contrary—local, national, and regional citizenship. It is the first stage and the matrix of a possible world democracy. It is also an educational method that must rouse the attention of our fellow citizens to the importance of the subjects dealt with by the negotiators, whose most frequent tendency is to consider the technical character of their work and limit their interactions to the major economic actors, who have known, for a long time, the importance of the regulation measures that are taken.
- ***To push negotiators toward decisions that bolster the emergence of an equitable world regulation and a world of solidarity.*** Then, and then only, comes the ultimate aim: to bolster the emergence of a law, a governance, in sum, a regulation that is the foundation of a world in solidarity. With the strength of an organization and common positions, of proposals of action that NGOs are committed to carry out, and of demands that they address to governmental authorities, legitimized by experience and local and varied partnerships, all of this in the context of an awakening of global awareness, NGOs will then be fully legitimate and particularly strong actors. They will be in harmony with the societies that compose humankind and with the universally felt need to clear out of the dead ends into which the planet and humankind have already amply entered.

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