

NON GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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An NGO can be defined as a group of like-minded individuals who meet together to pursue specific objectives, not usually associated with party politics or religion. This definition includes such disparate organisations as photographic societies, tennis clubs and philatelic societies as well as the more well-known international groups such as Rotary, Soroptimists and the IFUW (the International Federation of University Women formed at the end of the First World War). The last-named is the focus of this discussion.

At the end of the Second World War it was decided to attempt to form a type of world government i.e. the United Nations. It must be noted in passing that one of the founders of IFUW, Virginia Gildersleeve, was also one of the founders of the United Nations, and was the person who insisted that the preamble to the Charter should read "We the people of the United Nations....."

The premise on which the United Nations was founded was that democratically elected governments should send elected representatives to the United Nations, so that it could express the will of the world's people. Unfortunately, until the fall of communism, democratically elected governments were in the minority. Even today, given that China and much of Africa do not enjoy democratic elections, the balance is only slightly democratic.

It has been realised, however, that whether or not governments are reasonably democratically elected, NGOs with specific mandates may be able to offer insights into problems and solutions that are valuable, and may even be more insightful than government suggestions. It has also been realised that conferences with specific themes may deal with matters that are central to human welfare, but that are outside the usual deliberations of the General Assembly and the Security Council. Thus we have conferences on Women

(more than half of humanity), Racism, Sustainable Development, Habitat, Higher Educations etc. At these conferences recognised NGOs may be allowed to make presentations to the main body, usually as a result of co-operation between like-minded NGOs, and may also participate in separate NGO conferences running parallel to the main conference. IFUW has been prominent in forming (and often leading) Congos (Committee of NGOs) not only on the Status of Women and Higher Education but also on other relevant topics such as Habitat. Thus, matters discussed at SAAWG Branches may be passed on to the National Executive, which will bring these matters to the triennial conferences of IFUW and thus provide input into United Nations deliberations.

This system is all very well in the case of recognised and responsible NGOs such as IFUW, ICW and Soroptimists, but the system has often been hi-jacked by unelected people with anarchic tendencies, whose main purpose appears to be the disruption of Conferences of which they do not approve. Thus we have had the riots in Seattle in 1999, in Davos and in Milan in 2001.

We are now faced with a serious dilemma – who represents "the people"? Elected governments or unelected, somewhat dubious, NGOs? Elected governments obviously have a mandate to speak for their people. But when you have the institutionalised thuggery practised in Zimbabwe and other African states, and the total lack of democracy in some Middle and Far Eastern countries, can those governments indeed speak for their people? At the same time, some NGOs have very definite mandates from their members to speak on their behalf, and those members often represent a large number of people in many countries. IFUW can speak on behalf of educated women in 67 countries, and most reasonable people would probably agree that it should be allowed a say in any deliberations of international bodies dealing with matters directly affecting educated women. (It is a pity that resolutions passed at the Graz Conference in 1998 on the behaviour of the Taliban towards women in Afghanistan were ignored by most governments. Earlier condemnation of their behaviour might have prevented the World

Trade Centre disaster and/or the harbouring of Osama bin Laden).

licence before it leads to tragedy and the loss of precious human rights.

The United Nations protocol which allows observer status to selected NGOs and also allows them to make input into Conferences, seems a wise one, but what is to be done about the anarchists who disrupt any discussion dealing with globalisation? Are they really speaking on behalf of large numbers of people, or are they purely bent on destruction in an era where there do not appear to be any great causes to attract them? It is surprising that these people cannot find any great causes, given the numbers of people living in poverty in the world. Unfortunately, the problem of poverty has been erroneously laid at the door of globalisation by its detractors, when reliable research has shown that the more a country accepts globalisation the greater its growth rate.

What I am suggesting is that, while democratically elected governments can speak for their people, responsible NGOs also have a part to play in setting world agendas. In particular I would like to commend IFUW, which believes in study and action, does not take up positions about issues on which it is ignorant, and calls on the considerable expertise of its members worldwide before offering its opinions even on the topics which most concern it – namely the opportunities for higher education available to women and the optimal use of educated women in all spheres of activity.

It would be a great shame if NGOs like IFUW were not heard in international fora, but at the same time it is a greater shame when modern technology allows anarchists with dubious credentials to muster their rabble to defeat the necessary discussions on matters of worldwide concern. In a democracy there is a need for healthy parliamentary discussion and for an active parliamentary opposition, but also for a healthy civil society of NGOs using acceptable methods to convince other people of the virtue of their particular causes. There should be no place for anarchists, with their narrow agendas, in modern democratic society.

Each society in the new century will have to develop tools that encourage NGOs, but must also find ways to thwart unbridled