
NGO OVERREACH: GREENPEACE POURS OIL ON TROUBLED WATERS BUT CAN'T CLEAN IT UP

—————CROCKER SNOW, JR.—————

Volunteer groups. Nongovernmental organizations. Civil Society. During the short span of the 1990s, these organizations, which have elected themselves the watchdogs of human rights, the environment, the World Bank, corporate misbehavior or government welfare policy, have changed their names, improved their status and moved from the back room to a seat at the head table.

These single-issue, special interest groups, most commonly referred to as NGOs, focus on influencing public opinion and public awareness. They operate as not-for-profits, depending on voluntary donations, membership fees or foundation grants—and are thus accountable primarily to themselves.

The early heavies in this movement, Oxfam, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Sierra Club, have metastasized. NGOs have proliferated around key global issues and, like many international movements, have migrated from North to South. Today indigenous NGOs are multiplying rapidly in countries from Mexico to Malaysia, Pakistan to Poland.

First officially sanctioned by the United Nations during the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, in June 1992, the NGO community has come to anticipate—and expect—its own parallel summit at all the big U.N. bashes: the Social Summit in Copenhagen, the Women's Summit in Beijing, the Population Summit in Cairo. Arguably, the NGO summits have fostered more real debate, attracted more public attention and had more ultimate significance than the official ones they paralleled.

More often than not, NGOs have been able to avoid the political paralysis of governments in advancing their causes. They are "one-note Charlies" that serve a special interest and have both the advantages—and afflictions—of tunnel vision. As their star is rising, they are filling voids left by retreating governments. In some cases, NGOs have even become involved in traditional government activities, such as standard-setting, regulating and policing.

Crocker Snow, Jr., is editor in chief of The WorldPaper, president of World Times, Inc., and a Pulitzer Prize nominee for foreign reporting in Asia.

In this context they have had some notable successes: At the biannual International Development Conference in Washington, D.C. in January, Jessica Mathews, of the Council on Foreign Relations, cited a critical coalition of NGOs as the key factor pushing governments at the Rio Summit to the breakthrough Global Climate Treaty. She praised the group, saying they were "way ahead of governments" in bridging North-South differences that had seemed insurmountable. As a result of their work, the treaty was realized in what Mathews described as "warp speed"—16 months from beginning to end and over the original opposition of powerful nations like the United States, the then-USSR and Saudi Arabia.

But, there is trouble in NGO paradise. There are signs that various NGOs, founded as a kind of communal conscience, are becoming secretive, power

Many of the boldest NGOs revel in raising questions about the accountability of powerful public and private institutions without accepting the same accountability for their own actions.

hungry and close-minded. Some are, horror of civil society horrors, guilty in their bureaucratic ways (if not means) of emulating the very institutions they critique. The giants can be difficult to access and hard to influence with a fresh perspective. Other NGOs, especially those with an environmental focus, are guilty of foisting Western values onto their sometimes unsuspecting counterparts in the developing world.

Many of the boldest NGOs, again with the environmentalists leading the way, revel in raising questions about the accountability of powerful public and private institutions—without accepting the same accountability for their own actions. Greenpeace's involvement in the Shell Oil Brent Spar incident in 1995 is a case in point.

Greenpeace UK took the position that Shell's plans to demolish the aging oil platform at sea were calamitous, a position based on the belief that some 5,500 tons of oil sludge trapped within the Brent Spar piping would contaminate the sea when released by the demolition. Shell's

studied denials were lost amid a Greenpeace-generated press campaign and a made-for-TV helicopter skirmish on the Brent Spar platform. Faced with a Greenpeace-inspired consumer boycott that started in Germany, Shell chose to cut its losses. To the embarrassment of the British government, whose own studies supported Shell's, the oil company agreed to tow the huge platform from the Outer Hebrides to a fjord in Norway for a much more expensive, time-consuming, and potentially more environmentally troubling demolition than the original at-sea plan.

When the battle was over, however, the truth came out. Two months after Shell capitulated, Greenpeace UK admitted that its toxic sludge charge was erroneous and unsubstantiated, and publicly apologized to Shell for the mistake. But, the damage had been done—by an NGO campaign that had outma-

neuvered both the British government and one of the world's largest oil companies, and had misled much of world opinion. Now, two years later, the Brent Spar platform remains moored in an isolated fjord and Shell is considering 11 different proposals for the most efficient and effective disposal of the installation. Heinz Rothermund, a Shell senior executive in the United Kingdom, said judging these schemes is a balancing act between environmental, cost and safety concerns. As late as January, he called the original deep-sea disposal plan "the only one that is technically feasible."¹

The Shell-Greenpeace incident has meaning beyond the particular details. Most NGOs with Western bloodlines are decidedly adversarial. They have matured as ombudsmen for, and even in opposition to, multinational corporations, multilateral institutions and governments. They are full of conviction, but they are not always right.

As role models for grassroots movements in the developing world, the "bright lights, big city" Western NGOs don't always cut it. Developing world NGOs often operate in an environment in which government is seen as more good than bad, more constructive than stifling. In the NGO movement, as in so many others, there is a significant division between the dogmatic and those with modest goals, modestly pursued. Today, the NGO community has its own hierarchy, its own zealots and its own divisions, along traditional North-South lines and between the haves and have-nots.

If NGOs are in some manner to be viewed as an alternative to government, then let the buyer beware. NGOs, like the very governmental organizations they augment, may need their own truth-in-advertising and consumer protection watchdogs.

Notes

1. As cited by *The Financial Times*, 14 January 1997.



