

Reprinted from *WORLD WATCH*, November/December 1999

Action on the Front Lines

by Curtis Runyan

© 1999 Worldwatch Institute

Action on the FRONT LINES

Nongovernmental organizations around the world are proliferating at a phenomenal rate. Can these groups make up for government and corporate shortcomings?

by Curtis Runyan

FOR MONTHS, THE CITY OF SEATTLE, WASHINGTON has been bracing itself for the World Trade Organization. The WTO—one of the planet's most powerful and most controversial but least visible and least accountable organizations—is preparing to launch its latest round of free trade negotiations here on November 29, and officials have been racing to check security and procure accommodations for the more than 5,000 trade ministers, dignitaries, and delegates expected to pour in from more than 150 countries. But behind the scenes, several coalitions of activist groups have been preparing to greet those delegates with what may be the largest protest against free trade the United States has ever seen.

These coalitions—bringing together environmentalists and AIDS activists, farmer advocates and labor unions—are organizing rallies, marches, press conferences, concerts, and teach-ins. Together with thousands of national and international groups, they have been intensely lobbying the world's governments to heed their concerns. Peace activists such as the War Resisters League protest that military spending has been exempt from WTO rules, leading to dangerous arms buildups in developing countries. Groups like Consumers International protest that the current trade rules allow multinational corporations to strong-arm governments into ignoring consumer protections. Labor organizations, from steel workers to longshoremen, worry about a loss of jobs and a weakening of workers' rights. And environmental groups warn that as things are going, national environmental standards and international treaties, such as those protecting biodiversity and the ozone layer, could be out-

lawed. All of these groups and more—the Zapatista-originated Peoples' Global Action is bringing caravans of indigenous people from around the world—will be gathering in Seattle whether they were officially invited or not, to try to influence the WTO's agenda. (See "Challenging the WTO," page 22.)

If recent efforts are any indication, they may actually succeed, at least to some degree. Last year, 600 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from around the world joined forces—using the Internet to rally international opposition—to shut down preliminary, closed-door negotiations among the world's richest 29 nations gathered in Paris to establish a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). The protesters, including many of the same groups that will be waiting in Seattle, were concerned that the MAI—aimed at eliminating barriers to the flow of investment money across international borders, just as the WTO wipes out barriers to free trade in goods—would spark a global "race to the bottom" in environmental and labor standards for investing.

"We honed our skills on MAI and, in the next round of WTO talks, we'll hone them further," said Charles Arden-Clarke of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. The WTO and other international institutions "are learning that they have to talk to us at the beginning. If they come up with an agreement without doing this, NGOs can swing votes back home."

Arden-Clarke's remark isn't just bluff. The past few years have seen a remarkable growth in the number and prominence of such groups and their ability to precipitate change. They have cajoled, forced,

joined in with, or forged ahead of governments and corporations on an array of actions as disparate as the decommissioning of nuclear reactors, brokering cease-fires in civil wars, and publicizing the human rights abuses of repressive regimes. These not-for-profit organizations are now influencing decisions and helping to set agendas that were once the exclusive business of corporations, governments, or “inter-governmental” bodies like the United Nations or the World Bank. Johns Hopkins University’s Lester Salamon, who has closely tracked the development of the nonprofit sector, believes that we are in the midst of a “revolution” of NGOs: “a massive upsurge of organized private voluntary activity in literally every corner of the world.” Many NGOs have sprung up in response to inaction and oversights of both governments and corporations on pervasive issues such as environmental degradation, human rights abuses, poverty, and inequality.

It may seem naively utopian to expect groups of like-minded individuals working all over the world, without any centralized coordination, to be able to offer the solutions to these dilemmas. Compared to well-funded corporations and governments, NGOs—many of which operate on shoestring budgets—are at a distinct disadvantage. But corporate and government leaders often are more a part of the problem than the solution. “People don’t expect politicians to do anything—I don’t expect politicians to do anything,” said Tim Wirth, a former U.S. Senator and Under-Secretary of State who is now head of the nonprofit UN Foundation. “That’s why more and more people are moving toward grassroots activities.” Through their international connections and networks, NGOs are giving local concerns global platforms—connecting the hundreds of millions of people who belong to grassroots, community organizations that are working in small but significant ways to change the status quo. This chaotic “third sector” is charting a new course deep into the waters long ruled by nations and corporations. And increasingly, its swelling numbers, size, complexity, and effectiveness are compelling the two traditional sectors to change.

Upstarts

ON THE NIGHT OF OCTOBER 2, 1968, thousands of students gathered in Mexico City’s Tlatelolco Plaza to protest the army occupation of a local university and to demand protections against police abuse, the release of political prisoners, and the “right to associate”—to form activist groups without fear of repression. Within hours, army troops and police moved in and ordered the protestors to disband. A gun shot echoed through the square and a flare lit the sky, and seconds later the soldiers began shooting indiscriminately into the crowd. The massacre killed an estimated 300 to 500

young people and wounded 2,000 others.

Ten days later, the Olympic Games began in Mexico City—devoid of almost any international condemnation of the murders. Indeed, the Mexican government denied that any such attack had ever occurred. One reason this massacre did not provoke the kind of international outrage that would explode 21 years later after the very similar Tiananmen Square crackdown in China was that, as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink write in their book *Activists Beyond Borders*, “the international human rights network, and the human rights consciousness and practices that it created, did not exist in 1968.... Because there was no credible independent source, the Mexican government was able to control information about the event.” To this day, the Mexican Defense Ministry’s files on the killings—including five hours of 35-millimeter film shot at the square on the night of the massacre—remain locked away “for reasons of national security.”

In the 30 years since that night in Mexico City, the role of NGOs across the globe has metamorphosed and amplified. These groups have developed wide-ranging, international networks, fundamentally shifted public opinion on such issues as human rights and the environment, and developed a growing level of independence from and influence over governments. The trend toward citizen action that was sparked by groups like the Red Cross in the nineteenth century has accelerated hugely in the last few decades of the twentieth. What we’re seeing now is a web of networks and contacts that connect thousands of small, grassroots organizations with international coalitions. These coalitions, in turn, are increasingly included in negotiations over international treaties, and can bring pressure to bear on national governments and corporations alike.

The environmental movement is an important case in point. A hundred years ago, protecting nature was not a prominent political concern. If you had asked about the environment in a particular region, you would probably have been referred to a weather forecast in a farmers’ almanac. There were almost no treaties, conferences, or international debates on the subject. The first international nature groups were just forming in the 1890s—the International Union of Forestry Research and the International Friends of Nature.

By 1990, however, rough estimates indicate that there were more than 100,000 NGOs working on various aspects of environmental protection—and most of those were started as recently as the 1980s, estimate researchers Thomas Princen and Matthias Finger in *Environmental NGOs in World Politics*. In addition, environmental groups—especially the international organizations—experienced a boom in memberships. For example, between 1985 and 1995, the number of

members supporting the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) grew from 570,000 to 5.2 million.

More generally, in 1909 there were 176 international NGOs (groups with offices and constituencies in several countries), according to the *Yearbook of International Organizations*. As of the yearbook's 1996 count, that number had grown to more than 20,000. (See figure, page 16.) And the number of NGOs operating within countries has grown even more quickly. In 1960, the average country had citizens participating in about 122 NGOs; by 1988, that number had grown to 485. Half of all NGOs operating in Europe were founded in the last decade. And in the United States, where the number of NGOs is now estimated to be 2 million, seventy percent of the groups that filed tax returns last year are less than 30 years old.

This proliferation may be just as dramatic in parts of the developing world, though a lack of data and wide-ranging differences in how influence is wielded in different cultures (see "Fighting Pollution in Vietnam," page 28) make this more difficult to gauge. In India, which has a tradition of community voluntarism inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, more than a million independent groups now take part in grassroots development efforts alone. For example, organizations like India's Chipko movement, which originated as a spontaneous protest of mostly peasant women against logging abuses (the women would embrace trees, placing themselves in the path of axes and saws), now boast thousands of supporters, and have experienced important victories, such as regional bans on clear-cutting and recognized participation in the government's management of natural resources.

As a growing number of developing countries have shifted toward less-centralized governments and larger middle classes, NGOs have proliferated. Groups concerned with the environment, human rights, and women's issues played an important role in pro-democracy movements in Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines, and have since seen their ranks swell. Several high-profile cases of industrial pollution in the early 1990s in South Korea helped galvanize the pro-democracy sentiments by further eroding the ruling regime's legitimacy. Today, there are about 260 active environmental groups, according to Taehwa Lee of Green Korea United. Similarly, in Indonesia environmental groups played an important role in bringing about the fall of the dictator Soeharto. Their efforts helped spark political and economic reforms by documenting the corrupt practices that have caused extensive environmental destruction, such as the massive forest fires that have been allowed to ravage the rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra to open up more land for government-connected plantation owners.

Similar inroads have been made in former Eastern

bloc countries, where more than 100,000 nonprofit groups were set up between 1988 and 1995. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster sparked the birth of groups like the Czech Republic's Hnutí DUHA, now affiliated with the international coalition Friends of the Earth, which originally focused on pressing for democratic reforms and now works on forestry, mining, and energy issues, such as halting construction of the Temelin nuclear power plant.

Political theorists attribute the current rise of these groups in part to a shifting economic and political architecture worldwide—as most visibly manifested by the end of the Cold War, rapid economic globalization, the increasing power of international corporations, and the proliferation of cheap communication technologies. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the meaning of national security has begun to shift away from the military defense of borders. Indeed, international warfare has become increasingly rare (of the 101 conflicts that raged between 1989 and 1996, 95 were between factions within a single country). Instead, social and environmental perturbations like population growth, small arms proliferation, pollution, water scarcities, and persistent poverty—issues high on the agenda of many NGOs—loom as far more pervasive threats to security than that of military invasion. In addition, a significant number of once-repressive countries throughout the world have begun to shift toward more democratic forms of government, often giving activist groups greater prominence and access to decision makers. Countries once controlled by dictators or unbending military regimes, from The Philippines and Korea to Chile and Brazil, now provide NGOs new ground in which to flourish.

Another shift has been the growing power and influence of corporations. In 1970 there were about 7,000 transnational corporations. Today, there are at least 53,000 with more than 449,000 foreign subsidiaries. As international corporations have grown in size and number, "states have become less able and less willing to regulate them," according to a report on NGO-business relationships by the London-based Control Risks Group. Governments interested in attracting international investment are sometimes hesitant to regulate industries, hoping to gain a competitive edge by accepting lower labor, environmental, and other standards. "The limitations on the power and influence of states and multilateral institutions" like the World Bank and the U.N., finds the report, "have enhanced the importance of NGOs, which argue that they are fulfilling a vital role when they call attention to commercial abuse or injustice which might otherwise be ignored."

And nonprofit groups themselves are now better connected, informed, funded, and able to mobilize support than ever before. While the groups can trace

their roots to the kind of community action that was once almost solely a function of extended families, church groups, and community organizations, they now have the ability to participate in global networks and to transform local dilemmas into global issues. “The most powerful engine of change in the . . . rise of nonstate actors is the computer and telecommunications revolution,” says Jessica Mathews, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

in her 1997 article in *Foreign Affairs*. “In every sphere of activity, instantaneous access to information and the ability to put it to use multiplies the number of players who matter and reduces the number who command great authority.”

While it is clear that NGOs are proliferating at an explosive rate, what is more difficult to discern is what these groups are, exactly. Most broadly defined, they are private (not part of a national or interna-

NGO Activists

- 1 Yul Choi, founder of South Korea’s first environmental group, has organized against nuclear power and industrial pollution.
- 2 Evaristo Nugkuag has organized coalitions of Peruvian indigenous peoples to successfully fight for local and national land reform.
- 3 Cesar Chavez organized the United Farm Workers union in California to fight systemic injustices and dismal and dangerous working conditions in the fields.
- 4 Medha Patkar is a key organizer in efforts to halt the Sardar Sarovar dam in India, which will flood the homes of half a million villagers.
- 5 Ken Saro-Wiwa, the prominent Nigerian writer and activist, was executed for struggling against human rights abuses and environmental destruction caused by oil development.
- 6 Alexander Nikitin, a former Soviet naval captain, has been charged with treason for sharing information to help spur cleanup of abandoned nuclear vessels.
- 7 Wangari Maathai started Kenya’s Greenbelt Movement, which has planted 20 million trees to halt soil loss and provide fuel wood.
- 8 JoAnn Tall founded the Native Resource Coalition to help Native American tribes fight proposed waste dumps and incinerators.
- 9 Chico Mendez, who was murdered by cattle ranchers, organized Brazil’s rubber tappers to fight for land rights and against destruction of rubber-producing rainforests.
- 10 Samuel LaBudde played a key role in forcing U.S. companies to shift to dolphin-safe fishing practices—documenting massive dolphin slaughter by tuna fishers.
- 11 Sviatoslav Zabelin has helped create environmental awareness in Russia, working on nuclear waste cleanup and protecting endangered species.
- 12 Laila Iskandar Kamel has started several projects to help provide education and better pay for poor Egyptian communities that work recycling garbage.
- 13 Ralph Nader, the United States’ leading consumer advocate, has reformed regulations from food laws to auto safety rules.
- 14 David Brower, the “Arch Druid” of the U.S. environmental movement, founded Friends of the Earth, League of Conservation Voters, and Earth Island Institute.
- 15 Luis Macas masterminded a nation-wide protest of indigenous people for land reform in Ecuador, gaining tribal ownership of more than 3 million acres.

For more information on some of these activists, see www.goldmanprize.org.



DETAIL OF COVER BY RAPHAEL SCHNEPF

tional government body), not-for-profit (not a traditional business) organizations (self-governing institutions) with a voluntary component (participation in them is not mandatory and they attract some level of volunteers or contributions). By this commonly used definition, these groups are categorized largely by what they are not. Indeed, there is a pressing need for a more specific nomenclature to help delineate these groups by their funding sources, membership, and stated goals.

Nevertheless, using this broad definition to get a



Number of International NGOs, 1956-96

general perspective of the third sector, the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Civil Society Studies examined 22 industrial and developing nations and found that in 1995 the nonprofit sector spent in excess of \$1.1 trillion (equal to the GDP of the United Kingdom), employed 19 million workers, and utilized 10 million volunteers. In most countries, the majority of NGOs provide education, health, and social services. Two-thirds of all nonprofit employment is devoted to efforts to facilitate such services as primary and secondary education, hospital and health care, income support and emergency aid and relief.

The vast majority of organizations in this sector are not high profile activist groups that tend to grab headlines, but are groups focused on more local, down to earth issues: neighborhood watch groups, religion-based charities, farmers' co-ops, health care organizations, athletic organizations, and so on. Still, a good number of these groups are part of the swelling citizen participation increasingly being referred to as "civil society." As the U.S. Agency for International Development's Thomas Fox puts it, "Civil society can be defined as the functioning of the NGO sector with the 'good of society' in mind." And groups working on the environment, human rights, civil rights, development, indigenous rights, etc.—so-called "social change organizations"—have found themselves at the forefront of this emerging civil society.

Pushing the right buttons

ON JULY 30TH, 1999, AN EXTRAORDINARY STORY ran on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. From a New York City apartment, the article reported, Greenpeace employee Charles Margulis had faxed a single-page questionnaire to the Gerber Corporation, one of the world's largest producers of baby foods. The one-page fax requested answers to a few questions, including: "What steps have you taken (if any) to ensure you are not using" genetically modified ingredients in your babyfood?"

Bearing the Greenpeace letterhead, the fax quickly wound its way up the corporate chain of command to Daniel Vasella, CEO of Novartis, Gerber's parent company in Switzerland. The letter left Vasella with a dilemma: while U.S. consumers have been less vocal about concerns over the safety of bio-engineered foods than citizens in Europe, the company sensed that the public outrage dogging biotech companies pushing their products in Europe, such as Monsanto, might quickly spread to the United States. After two weeks of internal debate, the company decided that it would not risk using altered foods—and the possible black eye that could be caused by growing U.S. consumer distress about them. Less than a month after Margulis fed his letter into his fax machine, the company was taking steps to ensure that its line of baby foods, which saw \$1 billion in sales last year, contained no genetically modified products, announcing that it would drop any corn and soybean suppliers using genetically modified crops.

In the past two decades, activist groups like Greenpeace have experienced a succession of remarkable victories—remarkable given their limited role in governance and their limited resources with which to influence international decision making. "The resources of even the largest [international] NGOs, which number their members in the millions, pale in comparison to the capital, incomes, and personnel of other world actors, especially state and transnational corporations," writes John Boli in *Constructing World Culture*.

Despite this, many groups have proved more adept than both governments and businesses at responding to social and environmental problems threatening human security—including lacks of access to food, shelter, employment, education, and health services. In Bangladesh, for example, a child is more likely to learn to read with the assistance of one of the 5,000 NGOs working on literacy programs than through a state school or other organization. Meanwhile, NGOs have also been granted wider acceptance into international negotiations since the U.N.'s Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Rio was a watershed event in the democratization of global environmental governance—the conference drew together

20,000 activists, academics, and grass roots leaders, engendering a kind of participation in the international negotiations that continues to grow to this day.

These gains have not come easily, however. Because public-interest groups have limited constituencies and resources, they have needed to develop innovative strategies to prod governments and businesses into action—or have simply taken the lead on their own. In a 1998 article in the journal *Foreign Policy*, P.J. Simmons describes generally the tactics used by many organizations: “NGOs affect national governments, multilateral institutions, and national and multinational corporations in four ways: setting agendas, negotiating outcomes, conferring legitimacy, and implementing solutions.”

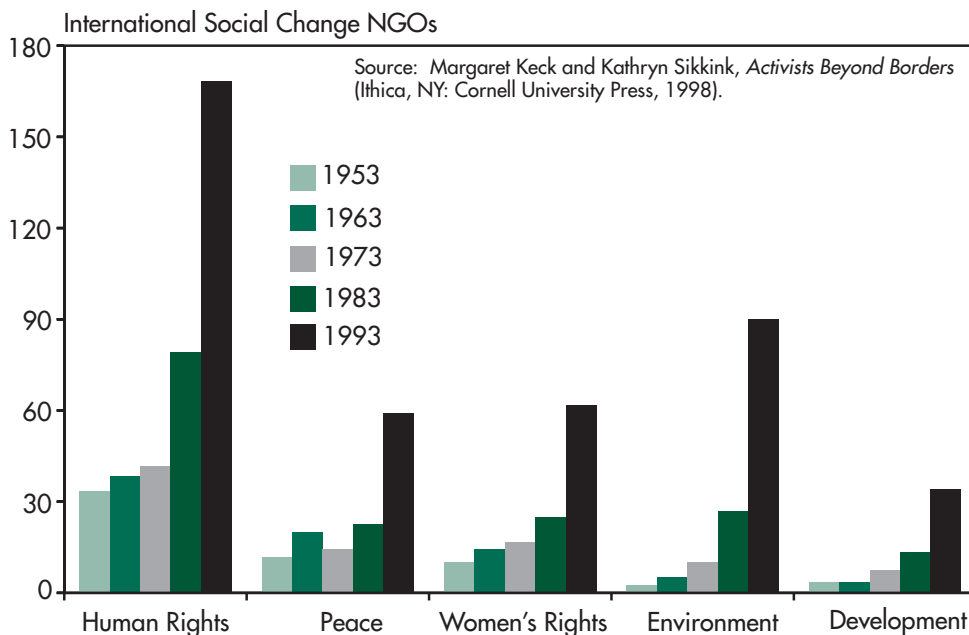
Advocacy organizations from women’s suffrage groups in the 1800s, to peace activists today have worked to set the agendas of businesses and governments by staging myriad protests, strikes, marches, consumer boycotts, acts of civil disobedience, letter-writing campaigns, and other pressure tactics. One of the most stunning successes in recent history has been the Nobel prize-winning campaign to enact a global treaty banning the manufacture, use, transfer, and stockpiling of antipersonnel landmines. Despite staunch opposition from the United States, China, and Russia, the ban went into effect in March 1999, seven short years after a coalition of 350 human rights, relief, veteran, and development groups joined together to push the issue onto the international agenda. With the political support of Canada, financial support from philanthropist George Soros and publicity from the likes of Great Britain’s Princess Diana, the campaign gained a momentum rarely seen in international treaty negotiations.

The scientific expertise and innovative thinking of

many NGOs has given them a strong hand in shaping and negotiating the outcomes of political or industrial decision making. Groups like the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature were critical players in producing an international ban on trade in ivory, using their resources to document and monitor the drastic decline in African elephant populations, and to inform the public. Groups like Friends of the Earth, in addition to participating in negotiations on the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances, helped garner industry support—or capitulation—by threatening a boycott of products that continued to release such substances.

NGOs play an important role in conferring legitimacy on many government and business activities. There are, for example, the stamps of approval some groups offer to products and services that meet specified environmental criteria—such as those of SmartWood, Green Seal, or the California Certified Organic Farmers. By withholding or conferring public support, activist organizations have affected policies of the world’s most powerful institutions. Environmental groups’ criticisms of China’s Three Gorges Dam, which will cause widespread ecological destruction and displace 1.3 million people, have convinced the World Bank and the U.S. government not to fund the project.

Many groups provide leadership by helping to implement solutions, from providing education and health services to monitoring trade in ozone-depleting chemicals and endangered species. Increasingly, governments are relying on the services of nonprofit groups to help tackle daunting problems. Development groups have been entrusted with a lion’s share of foreign aid funds, and now disseminate



more development assistance than the U.N. “Famines are perhaps the most clear example of how NGOs have been successful,” says Michael Woolcock, a social scientist working for the World Bank. For example, Bengal’s unrelenting drought in 1941 killed more people in one year than were killed in the holocaust. The government was paralyzed by the scale of the disaster, while the international community lacked information. Relief organizations were unable to rally an adequate response. Today’s growing number of relief groups, the resources available to them, and their ability to communicate immediately through networks of similar groups, have managed to halt a repeat of such a massive famine, and to create a disaster safety net that countries can draw upon worldwide.

What these four categories of influence don’t include, however, is all the innovative steps that public interest groups have taken independent of the business and government sectors. The Bangladesh-based Grameen Bank, for example, has simply bypassed traditional government responses to poverty alleviation by providing its own small-scale loans for those in need. This micro-lending approach has been so successful that it has impelled many major aid donors to rethink the model of massive-scale development projects. Pursuing another novel strategy, Virginia-based Ashoka offers small stipends to individuals around the world who are social innovators, in an effort to facilitate local responses to social and environmental problems.

International NGOs such as the Third World Network and Friends of the Earth have had great success in forging ahead of governments and corporations. A landmark case came about in 1991, when many prominent nations did an about face on plans to divide up Antarctica for mineral development. The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) of more than 200 NGOs had crafted a counter-proposal to set the continent aside as a world park, using information from Greenpeace’s Antarctic monitoring station to track how easily development could destroy this fragile land. The mining negotiations had concluded in 1988, and countries needed only ratify the treaty. But the park proposal proved so compelling and had gained so much public support that the mineral treaty was abandoned and Antarctica was soon declared a world park. Without the innovative thinking of these nonprofit groups, however, negotiators would never even have considered a park, let alone made it a reality.

In addition to charting ahead of governments, many NGOs are relying on international coalitions—working simultaneously at the local and global levels—to make changes they could never have spurred alone in their own countries. Using the Internet, fax machines, or meeting in person, they have brought to

bear large-scale international scrutiny and condemnation. For instance, after Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor in 1975, pro-independence sentiment was violently suppressed, and local groups could not hope to campaign against Indonesian control. But by teaming up with international human rights networks, which kept their struggle alive in the international media and pressured the U.N. and foreign governments to scrutinize Indonesia’s East Timor policies, this tiny territory secured the promise of a vote on independence. Despite Indonesia’s brutal, loose-cannon reaction, the pro-independence vote and the message it carries constituted a striking victory for the region’s long-suffering people, and the human-rights groups that waged a tireless, decades-long campaign on their behalf.

It is now commonplace to find grassroots organizations working together with global networks of similar organizations throughout the world—not because it is fashionable, but because NGOs tend to be most effective when they work on both local and global levels. Facing government or corporate inaction in their own countries, groups can call on international NGOs or foreign governments to bring additional pressure to bear—a process that has been called the boomerang effect.

Faced with concerns of the global commons—climate change, human rights abuses, biodiversity loss—NGOs are unwilling to wait for the action of governments awash in bureaucracy, and they are skeptical of industries beholden only to fat-cat boards, shareholders, and bottom lines. “The fact is, governments simply can’t solve all these problems of population and poverty and human rights and the environment from the top down,” says the World Federalist Movement’s William Pace in *Planet Champions*. “Citizens are the ones out there delivering vital services in humanitarian emergencies and creating all kinds of successful projects.”

Walking a Thin Line

NEGOTIATIONS WENT POORLY EARLIER THIS YEAR for the coalition of environmental groups operating in Bolivia. A consortium of energy companies, led by U.S.-based Enron, were close to getting the funding they needed to push a pipeline through one of the most endangered forests in the world—so close, their crews had reportedly started cutting down trees along the route. Enron’s natural-gas pipeline was slated to run straight through the heart of the Chiquitano forest, the world’s last remaining “closed-canopy” tropical dryland forest. Aside from the disturbances caused by the construction, environmentalists feared that the pipeline would create a corridor funneling loggers, miners, homesteaders, and assorted fortune hunters into one of the most isolated areas left on Earth.

NGOs are making big changes across the planet. Here are some of the more effective groups, the changes they are making, and the impact they are having:

Land trusts: In the United States, grassroots land trusts have spurred remarkable growth in the protection of open spaces—buying land outright or setting up conservation or development easements that give landowners such as farmers incentives not to sell their property in the face of encroaching urban sprawl. The amount of land these nonprofit groups have helped set aside has more than doubled, from 2 million in 1988 to 4.7 million in 1998. In the same period, the number of trusts has grown from 743 to 1,213.

Green Belt Movement: In 1977, activist Wangari Maathai launched a grassroots tree planting organization in Kenya to combat deforestation and desertification. Made up largely of women, the Green Belt Movement aims to curb soil erosion, promote more sustainable use of fuel wood, and create income-generating activity for rural communities. Today there are more than 5,000 nurseries throughout Kenya and over 20 million trees have been planted.

Rainforest Action Network: For more than two years this San Francisco-based NGO has organized country-wide protests and pressure tactics in an effort to get the building supply giant Home Depot to stop selling products made from old growth timber. In August 1999 the company capitulated, announcing a complete phase-out of sales of such wood by 2002.

Grameen Bank: In 1976, as part of an experiment, economics professor Muhammad Yunus lent the equivalent of \$27 to 42 impoverished stool makers and other workers in a village in Bangladesh, giving them the capital they needed to get on their feet. Yunus was repaid and the test was a complete success, giving birth to the micro-credit phenomenon. Yunus set up the Grameen Bank, which has loaned money to 2.3 million poor borrowers, 94 percent of them women. To date more than 2.4 billion dollars have been given out with an average loan size of \$175, and a repayment rate of 97 percent. While the bank is not a nonprofit organization per se, it is a “social-consciousness driven enterprise” that is modeled after a credit union or a co-op, being owned by the people who borrow from it.

Rural Advancement Foundation International: With a staff of just a few dozen people, and some thrifty use of the internet, this international group has raised serious questions as to the viability of genetically modified crops around the world—and has led the way in debunking seed company claims about this new technology. RAFI helped derail the industry’s plan to introduce a genetic technology that would prevent harvested seed from germinating, forcing farmers into a sort of “bio-serfdom” in which they would have to purchase new seeds each year rather than using part of their harvest to reseed. The group coined the phrase “terminator” to describe this new technology, creating a PR nightmare for the industry.

Grupo Ecologico Sierra Gorda: Faced with the systemic poverty and ecological deterioration of the fragile yet spectacularly diverse Sierra Gorda mountains in central Mexico, the group has rallied local communities to support the designation of the 400,000 hectare biosphere preserve. The group’s 47 staff members and 23,000 community volunteers have planted 3 million trees, helped to promote the recovery of wildlife, and enabled impoverished women establish small-scale enterprises. Central to the group’s efforts has been the education and participation of the 100,000 peasants living inside the boundaries of the preserve. With the help of high school students, the group now gives presentations on the preserve to about 16,000 preschool children each month.

Supporters of the international criminal court: As negotiations over the international court came to a head in 1998, hundreds of NGOs rallied behind the countries pushing for a strong mechanism to prosecute, across borders, perpetrators of genocide and war crimes. Despite strong opposition from the United States and China, the treaty passed by a vote of 120 to 7. The treaty will not come into force until 60 countries ratify it, but there have already been major changes in the international community’s willingness to prosecute those who commit serious crimes against humanity—as seen in the arrest in London of Chile’s former dictator Augusto Pinochet earlier this year. This changing mindset has given NGOs a powerful new tool in bringing those who commit human rights crimes to justice.

In its efforts to receive an investment from the U.S. government, Enron had found a loophole in U.S. president Bill Clinton's promise that government money would not fund destruction of old growth forests: a few, isolated parts of the forest had been had been contracted out to loggers decades earlier, and therefore, the company argued, didn't officially count as old growth. While very little logging had actually occurred, and forestry experts attested to the essentially pristine nature of the forest, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC)—the U.S. government's pro-development funding mechanism—was easily swayed by Enron's argument that the forest had been somehow degraded by these logging contracts. On June 15, 1999 OPIC agreed to hand over \$200 million in loans for the project. (See *Environmental Intelligence*, page 10.)

Meanwhile, international environmental NGOs were furiously working to simultaneously halt the deal and to secure funding to mitigate the pipeline's impacts if it were to move forward. The negotiations over the future of this pipeline were led by the South American affiliate of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). But when WWF closed a deal with Enron for \$20 million in environmental compensation—to be paid regardless of whether the pipeline went forward—local NGOs and indigenous leaders cried foul. "At a time when we were uniting our forces of opposition against the original project plans," said the local indigenous coalition in a written statement, international environmental groups "undertook parallel negotiations, with the sponsors of the Project, in order to give their support in exchange for money, thereby manipulating our efforts to their advantage in their negotiations."

To be fair to WWF, the conservation settlement was made independent of the negotiations for the future of the pipeline, and the group continued to lobby against the project. But the damage was done—local groups perceived WWF as being bought off by the energy companies. Rather than forging a strong coalition of local, national, and international NGOs, the negotiations divided the stakeholders and worked in favor of the project.

"For all their much-vaunted flexibility, nonprofit organizations remain organizations," writes Lester Salamon in a 1994 article in *Foreign Affairs*. "They are vulnerable to all the limitations that afflict other bureaucratic institutions—unresponsiveness, cumbersomeness and routinization, lack of coordination." Groups with nonprofit status may be less prone to the bureaucratic pitfalls of government and the myopic shortsightedness of the corporate bottom line, but they are not immune to the tensions between funding and effectiveness, grassroots control and administrative accountability.

Aside from conflicting interests between NGOs

and the careful balancing act that international coalitions demand, there is increasing concern about the potential for abuse. There are groups that are completely unaccountable or receive grants and disappear into the night. Even well-intentioned groups are not immune: in the recent Rwandan genocide, warring factions forced aid workers supplying and operating refugee camps to assist soldiers. There are no laws requiring groups to reveal their funding sources, and there are no guarantees that NGOs must have altruistic motivations: by some definitions the Mafia, neo-Nazi groups, and organizations like the National Rifle Association (which the U.N. tried strenuously to deny official status as an NGO), fit under the same rubric as Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, and Planned Parenthood. And the long-term success of NGOs remains to be seen: despite the best efforts of dedicated people, species loss continues at a record pace, poverty and income disparities are growing, the human population continues to surge, climate change looms, and human rights abuses continue apace.

Some observers worry that the current enthusiasm surrounding the rise of the third sector is, in effect, "undermining the state,"—allowing governments to shirk their social and ecological responsibilities by pawning off their duties to private groups and charities. This scenario has played out to an extreme in Africa, where many governments are being overwhelmed by foreign NGOs, which command a powerful position in their role of providing foreign aid supplies and services. In the typical African country, the nonprofit foreign aid industry is the second biggest employer (often surpassed only by the government), reports Nicholas van de Walle of the University of Michigan. In response, civil-society proponents like CIVICUS, the world alliance for citizen participation, argue that "For the nongovernmental sector to function properly . . . not less, but more and better public initiative is needed in today's complex societies." It still remains to be seen whether civil society will stimulate a revitalization of tired governments or only hasten their demise.

In addition, a growing number of nonprofit organizations are funded and controlled by corporate interests. The Environmental Defense Fund was recently criticized for its ties to industry in a report that raised questions over appropriate NGO-corporate partnerships and cooperation. Industry is playing a larger role than ever in the third sector. Indeed, nonprofit industry and trade groups employ four times as many people as environmental groups do. Take the Global Climate Coalition as an example. Using the media this special-interest group—funded by mining, oil, coal industries—has used its multitude of resources to attempt to stifle legitimate debate on climate change. One of its most heavily funded campaigns, for example, has focused on false-

ly characterizing the hesitation of scientists to talk in absolutes as evidence of scientists' "uncertainty" about whether climate change is really a problem.

Having observed the effectiveness of grassroots groups, industries are setting up front groups that attempt to make use of these same channels of influence. (See editorial, page 2.) Greenwashing groups like the National Wetlands Coalition (which represents developers who would like to fill in more wetlands for building sites) and Consumer Alert (an industry front group that fights product safety regulations) hope to appropriate the reputation of public-interest groups by mimicking the good name of legitimate grassroots organizations.

NGOs walk a tenuous line. At their best, they represent the concerned public—they are democratic representatives of communities acting as scientific and policy experts on behalf of "the public good." At their worst, they are unaccountable, opaque, and deliberately misleading in their pursuit of narrow goals, funded by hidden interests.

While the majority of NGOs have little public oversight, answering only to the individuals, boards, members, foundations, governments, or corporations that hand them checks, this independence is also central to the strength and diversity of these groups. Clearly, greater transparency is called for to keep these groups honest.¹ Ultimately, pigeon-holing these groups is not a simple matter, cautions Cornell University's Norman Uphoff: "We can't think of NGOs as good or bad, but as a broad spectrum of differing organizations that can change things over time."

Making a difference

IN MAY 1999, WHEN ALEXEI YABLOKOV, President Boris Yeltsin's former environmental advisor, tried to register his Moscow-based Advocacy Coalition for the Environment and Human Rights, the government refused to accept his registration. A year earlier the Russian parliament had passed a law requiring civil-society groups to register with the government by July 1999—ostensibly to take a head count. But as NGOs began to apply for registration, several state governments refused to accept their applications, saying that the protection of human rights and the environment is the role of the government, not public organizations.

"The situation is absurd," Boris Pustintsev, chairman of the Russia-based human rights watchdog group Citizens' Watch, told the *St. Petersburg Times*. "Around the world, it is the state that most often violates the fundamental rights and political freedoms of

its citizens." So far, reports Pustintsev, the government has shut down more than 3,000 NGOs throughout Russia.

While the Russian government's reaction is extreme, it is not alone in its confused attempt to figure out just how NGOs will interact in decision-making, governance, and in society in general. However, one thing seems certain: countries and businesses can expect to see a continuation of the growing demands for participation from NGOs and civil society.

While not without its troubles and weaknesses, the NGO milieu seems to have the potential of a thriving ecosystem, containing a broad yet intricate web of nongovernmental organisms in which some fail but many are flourishing. On the whole, they have developed the resiliency of a robust biological system. The strength of civil society lies in the innovation, flexibility, and ingenuity it affords—and the sheer diversity of views it represents. Cumulatively, the success of this third sector has been in helping to counter what NGO researcher Julie Fisher calls the "narrow political monopolies" of governments and entrepreneurs. Compared to nonprofit groups, governments are rigid, limited by political monoculture, and are painfully slow to react (except militarily), change, and grow. While more innovative than government, businesses tend to favor mergers, mass production, and homogeneity—fostering uniform consumer values, fashions, tastes, and intellectual thought. The surging number of rag-tag nonprofit groups stands to play an important role in the future, as they collectively push for changes and set the course—while retaining their all-important diversity.

As Cornell's Norman Uphoff warns, "It is really important not to deify civil society—it is the actions that are significant, not the existence of the sector." With this caveat in mind, NGOs are the most current embodiment of the kind of citizen action that has driven some of the most monumental peacetime changes in recent history—helping to abolish slavery, advance women's rights, overthrow colonialism, and so on. Arguably, the role they play in the next few years—pushing governments and industries to truly confront the realities of population explosion, widespread poverty, the surging spread of small arms, climate disruption, continued human rights abuses, biodiversity loss, and the many other colossal problems taxing humanity—will be even more momentous.

Curtis Runyan is assistant editor of WORLD WATCH.

¹Worldwatch Institute lists all of its funders on the inside cover of this magazine. We receive about half of our funds from foundations and individual contributions, and about half from sales of our publications.