Collaboration with Other Non-Governmental Organisations of the World during the United Nations Year of Cooperation 1965

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It is a very great privilege to be asked to give a paper to the 1964 conference of World Union. I deeply regret my inability to be with you in person but you may be sure I am with you in thought and spirit and that your discussions and planning have my deep and sympathetic interest. I look forward to hearing the fruits of your labours and send my warmest greetings and good wishes to you all.

You have set me a formidable task. At this time committees of Non-Governmental Organisations (may I use the term NGO’s which has achieved an almost universal currency) are being set up in a number of countries around the world to consider this very subject—how may the NGO’s promote the ideals of international cooperation in 1965. Many minds with wide experience of voluntary work of all kinds, national and international, are focusing on this theme. They will especially be giving attention to the formulation of such practical schemes as will encourage the development of travel and exchange programmes, “twinning” between towns in various parts of the world, and the growth of all kinds of voluntary service work. I have no doubt that each one of you, given half an hour and a piece of paper, could list at least a dozen worthwhile and practical ventures which, if implemented, would make worthy contributions to this year of international cooperation. I do not therefore think that it should be the function of this paper to discuss such matters, except perhaps incidentally. This is particularly the case since the details of these schemes will vary according to circumstances in different parts of the world.

As many of you will know, the original proposal for a year of international cooperation was made by the late Prime Minister of India, addressing the General Assembly of the United Nations in November 1961. On November 21 1963 the General Assembly passed with acclamation a resolution designating 1965, the twentieth year of the United Nations, as International Cooperation Year, and called upon Member States, the Specialised Agencies, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Non-Governmental Organisations concerned as follows:

a) To take note of the designation of 1965 as International Cooperation Year.

b) To publicise to the widest extent feasible the activities of international cooperation in which they have been and are at present engaged and their
efforts to strengthen and expand these activities.

c) To formulate such plans and programmes as seem to them appropriate to promote the purposes of international cooperation year.

The invitation to make 1965 a memorable year for international cooperation comes therefore from the highest of all human forums. No one pretends that when 1965 is over the need for effort to develop cooperation will have passed. Nor is there any presumption that man's earlier efforts have somehow been wanting. As one of the statements in the UN debate on the resolution said: "After all, the whole purpose of the United Nations is to tackle the gigantic assignment of replacing historical patterns of national and human conflict with international cooperation. Cooperation...is a way of making the world safe for diversity." But there are times when a united focus and drive on a special theme can have great practical as well as symbolic value. I believe this to be the case with International Cooperation Year, or ICY, as I should like to refer to it for the rest of this paper. It gives us all a very special opportunity to find the linking thread of unity among our diversities, by the practice of cooperation.

A Spiritual Event

There is one other, and to me very special meaning, to this year. Mankind seems to be getting the habit of nominating days, weeks and years to commemorate or signify special occasions or efforts. International Geophysical Year was the first year which attracted world attention and coordinated world effort. World Refugee Year was the next event, and during its course millions of men and women of good will combined their energies to ease and to some extent to eliminate the refugee problem. More recently we have been involved in the world-wide Freedom from Hunger Campaign, spanning five years, and the nomination of the 1960's as the Development Decade. All these plans and programmes have been immensely important and worthwhile. But they have been concerned primarily with man's physical environment and with man's physical needs. ICY however focuses attention on the actual operating principle underlying all these efforts. We can do and achieve nothing without international cooperation. International Cooperation Year recognises one of the fundamental principles of all life, and as such the year becomes an overtly recognisable spiritual event. For perhaps the first time in history the whole of humanity is being asked to observe and work consciously with a fundamental spiritual principle on an international and worldwide basis, not just for a day, nor for a week, but for a whole year. It is this fact which makes this year such a dramatically potential occasion for me.

It is equally clear however that unless we think very fundamentally about the nature of cooperation as a life principle, about the nature of what is spiritual, about the present and future role and function of NGO's in the world, and about some of the pitfalls that must be avoided, we shall
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miss the real opportunity which ICY offers. It is therefore about some of these things which I shall try and deal in this paper. You will appreciate that I can do no more than sketch a few ideas, and suggest what I believe to be some fruitful lines of thought. It will be up to you, in discussion and conference, to develop and extend these ideas, or other better ones that may emerge. If my remarks serve as an adequate introduction to your discussions I shall be well satisfied.

I think it is important that we all share a common understanding of what constitutes a non-governmental organisation. It is one of the prime functions of government, even in the most "laissez faire" system, to ensure that the structure, administration, and good organisation of society is maintained and developed. The law of the land provides a basic framework within which all activities proceed. Central, regional and local government, and the various ministries of housing, education, science, industry, foreign affairs, health, agriculture and the like provide the means for directing and controlling the forces of a nation's life. At the international level the United Nations organisation and the various specialised agencies, and such regional organisations as are being developed, are beginning to perform similar coordinating, controlling and directing functions. Admittedly these new organs of international coordination lack the power to enforce their decisions, and are often limited in their operations to certain types of activity—economic for example. But they are beginnings.

Humanity is experimenting with different types of supranational institution. The outlines of what may eventually form a world federation of nations can be faintly seen.

Paralleling this official and governmental structure there are the voluntary and non-governmental organisations which may be said to provide the breath of life and the sparks of spiritual fire without which the official structure would quickly crystallise, become moribund and die.

An "NGO Movement"

An NGO is a voluntary association of people who join together for a common purpose, and these common purposes are as varied and diverse as life itself. The interesting fact for us is that all new trends and movements of thought result from the efforts of the few who almost invariably form an association to promulgate their ideas. In this way the few mobilise the attention and interest of the many, and eventually affect the public at large. Sooner or later the ideas of the successful movement influence government and their proposals become the law and practice of the land. Until comparatively recently most new movements took years to extend their influence beyond national boundaries, or reach the mass public. But new movements today quickly become international, and if their objectives have a ready and popular appeal, reach a mass audience almost overnight.

Once an NGO becomes established and its ideas are accepted, it ceases to be just a pressure group, and becomes
a partner of government. In the technologically advanced societies of the West, local and national governments seek the advice and aid of voluntary societies both when considering new policies and also when implementing them. This process can be seen at work in every field of human activity—in education, welfare, medicine; in science, the arts and with human rights; in economics, finance and even in government itself. The NGO is a means by which society renews itself, and the importance of NGO's is such that we may even speak of them as forming a "movement".

The emergence of an "NGO movement" (and I assure you that the phrase is somewhat used and is not just my own invention) is one of the most significant developments in this 20th century. It has occurred because every significant NGO today is international, and because in their totality they form a worldwide and highly interrelated network of groups. Separate "national" organisations and groups, existing in many countries, combine to form international federations, confederations, and other types of international non-governmental association. These meet regularly and coordinate their policies. The more important among them have an established and recognised status with the United Nations and the various Specialised Agencies. The United Nations has stated on many occasions that it considers that the NGO's play an essential role in the community of international life. The UN counts on the NGO's to create a climate of public opinion favourable to progressive international policies. More often than not NGO's provide from among their ranks the people who carry out the practical work of the UN Agencies. May I refer you back to the UN resolution designating 1965 as International Cooperation Year. It called upon Member States, Specialised Agencies, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Non-Governmental Organisations. NGO's are not just "also ran's". As a movement, as a group, they are mentioned in the same breath as Member States.

It must be stated, in fairness and for the record, that there are many organisations whose members have combined for purely selfish and even anti-social purpose. At the worst therefore NGO's represent the organised forces of self-interest. But at the best they represent the pioneering forces of human altruism at the world level. The "NGO movement" is in the most profound sense that I know a spiritual movement. "Truth of the Spirit"

When writing to invite me to prepare a paper for this conference, your joint Vice-President, A. B. Patel, suggested that I should bear in mind the fact that "World Union is working for human unity, realising the truth of the spirit, and that collaboration with organisations who aim at a realisation of world unity on a spiritual basis is likely to prove more fruitful." I think there is much truth in this observation, and I want to say something more about it when I come to discuss what

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