

Joint action, however tentative, needs to be guided by some insight into the direction in which it is desirable to move. Where do NGOs want to be 10 or 15 years hence? What do NGOs expect to be achieving at that time? What mechanisms do they expect to be using?

These are questions worthy of very careful study. Similar studies have been made in other fields which have noted the possibilities of dramatic changes in organizational life generally.

How can an NGO act now to ensure that it will be relevant to the problems of the near and more distant future? As an indication of how such an objective is formulated, the following is cited from the preface to a study by the Committee on Bibliographical and Documentation Services. (Chairman L Larry Leonard), of the needs of members of the International Studies Association (USA):

** Those in quest of a more effective information system in their field can now be guided by an image of the ideal drawn in bold strokes by the National Academy of Science's Committee on Information in the Behavioral Sciences under the Chairmanship of David Easton. The ideal is here portrayed as*

*a * computer analogue of the available, intelligent, and informed colleague ». Such an ideal colleague would read widely, have total recall, evaluate what he read; he would be able to reorganize materials, recognize fruitful analogies, and synthesize new ideas.*

In addition, the ideal colleague would always be accessible and available to all, either in person or by phone. Finally, he would be aware of the general interests and current problems of each

scientist, and he could adapt both the content and style of his communications to each researcher's knowledge, skills and habits.

To approximate this ideal, and perhaps one day achieve it, requires the fashioning of a complex of components incorporating computer and telecommunications technology ».

An NGO Collective Long-term Objective

This shows the scholar's ideal environment. Could NGO's define their own ideal working environment as a guide both to their own actions and to those of the governmental bodies with which they are in contact?

It is curious that NGOs, who are so forward thinking with respect to the desirable changes that need to be made in the world, are so reticent and apparently lacking in courage on the question of the impact of these changes on their own methods of organization, operation and cooperation

— whereas paradoxically it is the organizations which are least concerned with the future of the world as such (rather than for their own benefit) that are most creative and imaginative in the evolution of new and more adequate organizational forms. Advocators of change should be more than willing to prepare their organizations and mode of operations for the consequences of the changes they advocate — or else find their resolutions faced with the retort « Physician heal thyself ». It is precisely this remark which may emerge from the debate within the UN on the function of NGOs and the consultative relationship. In the following sections an attempt is made to summarize some of the features of an ideal NGO working environment to stimulate debate on these matters.

LEGAL RIGHTS

The activities of international NGOs should be facilitated by international conventions covering such points as the following:

Organization rights

- international legal status (whether « recognized » by UN Agencies or not) and special status in the countries in which it has its offices.
- right to be informed of programmes, problems and organizations affecting its area of subject, programme

- or problem competence.
- right to exercise activities in other countries.
- right to negotiate and be represented at governmental meetings on its special field of competence.
- right of participation in the formulation of programmes to combat social problems which are its special field of competence.
- right of its national member bodies to participate fully in international programmes.
- right to inviolability of offices as well as correspondence and telephone conversations.
- right to protection of funds and assets against intervention by public authorities.
- right of access to media of mass communications.
- right to protection against any discrimination in matters of affiliation and activities.
- right of access to voluntary conciliation and arbitration procedures.
- right of members to further education and training.

These rights should be recognized as a natural extension of human rights, necessary for the adequate protection of the latter. (This list, with the exception of the first two points, is an adaptation of that established by the Committee on Trade Union Rights of the International Labour Conference, 54th Session (1970) in a resolution on trade union rights and their relation to civil liberties. The ILO Director-General is instructed by the Governing Body to « undertake further comprehensive studies and to prepare reports on law and practice » in relation to these rights with respect to trade unions. See also: « The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Human Organization; an experimental extension of the, Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man ». International Associations, 1971, January, p. 7-26).

Rights of NGO staff

- rights to certain privileges and immunities during the course of their service with the NGO, particularly with respect to travel documents, residential requirements, taxation, social security and pension rights.

The international conventions required should not function so as to favour the creation and continued existence of permanent organizations (tending to decay into a « series of memorials to old problems ») but should be structured so as to facilitate the formation and operation of ad hoc, transient, short-life bodies constituted and dissolved rapidly in response to specific problems. Hopefully legal recognition of both national and international bodies can be automated to the point at which (possibly provisional) registration of both the organization and its interests can be made at one of many

computer terminals (such as will be found in post offices) in a manner somewhat analogous to the current automated issue of flight insurance contracts at air terminals.

The:

- transient nature of organizations linking a rapidly-changing network of bodies and individuals
- need for rapid legal recognition
- need for sophisticated weighted voting procedures to permit the existence of more complex organizational patterns (on this point see International Associations, 1970 February, p. 67-79).

and the relationship of all three to the future world-wide computerized information system, require careful re-examination of the legal concept of « organization » in relation to the rapidly evolving operational definition — particularly in so far as an outdated legal concept could severely retard, rather than facilitate, the evolution of organizational forms adequate to the problems and opportunities of the future.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS

NGOs should be able to eliminate all the current delays in their contacts with intergovernmental organizations, other nongovernmental organizations, multinational corporations and the mass media, whether these take the form of initiative from the NGO or from outside in response to the NGO's programme. In particular the relationship between organizations and potential members, supporters or users of the NGO's information should be considerably accelerated. It is very important when an outside body desires to make contact to be able to respond before the interest « wears off » as it tends to do rapidly at the moment with the delays built into the postal system and the procedures before a letter can be appropriately answered. The goal for NGOs is to be able to respond to an inquirer before his « thinking momentum » in relation to the NGO's activities is dissipated.

Whilst such delays and hindrances are accepted, many potentially valuable contacts are lost — this loss represents a loss of resources and support for the whole international network of organizations.

A few years ago, the UAI offered to give some publicity to a booklet on NGOs issued by one of the NGO conferences. The horrified response of the person responsible was. « But we do not want any publicity ». And yet Curtis Roosevelt, Chief of the ECOSOC NGO Section, has repeatedly stressed that government delegates still do not know what NGOs are, what they stand for, or what they

contribute to the UN system (or any government operation, for that matter). This is a major reason for the negative votes on NGOs in government assemblies.

Some form of common public relations programme could be envisaged which would establish continuing professional contact with the press and news media around the world — regularly feeding them copy on NGOs. A fundamental problem is that NGOs lack a public image and operate in a vacuum of recognition at the transnational level. Not only do they lack a public image, but NGOs in general do not respond to the label « NGO ». NGOs with one concern tend to view those with another in the same manner as governmental officials view NGOs as a whole.

SHARED SERVICES

Each NGO should be able to have access to a pool of shared services in the cities in which it has offices. These services might, as appropriate, take the form of any or all of the following :

- low cost rental in a modern office centre reserved for internationally active non-profit organizations. Such a centre could also house :
 - UN and UN Agency Information Offices, and in the developing countries, the UN Agency Representative responsible for coordinating country-level international activity. This would facilitate IGO-NGO interaction and would ensure optimum use of UN information, especially if an integrated library-information service could be developed with INGOs. This approach would counter the current tendency for information services to be underused and therefore ineffective.
- National Commissions of UNESCO and other Agencies.
- National NGOs with international activities.
- National inter-NGO organizations. This would facilitate interaction between the national and international levels.
- Foundations interested in international activities. This would improve understanding between fund sources and programme-implementers.
- National institutes of international relations (and the associated libraries) to facilitate interaction between academic and operational programmes.
- International press agencies, both as a source of information and a means of increasing knowledge of NGOs and their programmes.

b) special services, possibly in the

See also, separate article Shared NGO Services, this issue, p. 155.

above centre, for organizations not requiring full-time permanent office accommodation :

- temporary offices on an hourly or daily basis for small organizations requiring only a part-time secretariat and for visiting representatives of organizations based in other countries.
- letter boxes for the mail of organizations without fixed permanent offices but requiring a permanent mailing address.
- temporary offices for ad hoc, project or campaign organizations, particularly those constituted at short notice in response to natural disasters.
- shared use of high-quality modern office equipment (duplicators, offset, photocopy, addressograph, accounting machines, franking machines, etc.) which are not economically justifiable for a single organization.
- services which can be associated with the presence of many NGOs in the same building (telephone exchange permitting « conference calls », receptionist, porter/messenger/handyman /concierge, cafeteria /restaurant, travel agent, bank, post office, telephone answering service, telex, reception area/reading room, library, film, library, videotape library, photograph library, record fire/theft/ security vaults, etc.)
- joint services which can be run under contract for groups of interested NGOs (mailing and despatch services, accounting / book-keeping, duplicating and printing, copy typing, typing of letters dictated onto tape, office cleaning, secretariat administration, use of computer time for mailing and research, publication sales and distribution services, bulk purchases of office stationery and supplies, etc.)
- professional services (accountant, lawyer/tax consultant, translators, interpreters, congress organizers, fund raisers, agents to obtain paid advertising for insertion in NGO periodicals, public relations officer, press and information service, librarian, abstractor, consultants on the formation, organization or programme implementation of NGOs, consultants on governmental relations, etc.)
- shared addresses for distribution of periodicals or sales literature (e.g. conference reports to UN Agencies, or publication lists to libraries) or for the galvanization of a network of agencies and fund sources in response to natural disaster.
- collective or shared representation services, particularly to resolve the problem of adequate NGO representation at meetings of UN Agencies with which they have

consultative status. (This rather resembles the type of representation which a country's diplomatic service offers its many government departments, businesses, cultural organizations etc.). Also the need for effective lobbying. Such services could also be made available on a reciprocal basis to NGOs which do not have their offices in that city, in exchange for representation at Agency meetings in other cities.

— shared meeting rooms with simultaneous interpretation and audiovisual equipment.

Any or all of the above services could be run as a cooperative. This is a thoroughly explored formula for partially associating independent agents in a limited collective enterprise. (Undoubtedly the views of the International Cooperative Alliance would be most valuable on this point). It is very important to note that the more services that NGOs succeed in pooling the more their overhead expenses will be reduced whilst at the same time diverting funds from the commercial sector into the cooperative itself — such that the cooperative profits to the benefit of the grouped NGOs as a whole (e.g. the case where NGOs spend funds in their own cafeteria / restaurant). There is no reason why the existence of the cooperative should not be the basis for a number of other services :

— sharing of some staff over holiday periods.

— group insurance and pension schemes for secretarial and other staff in the centre who might otherwise be tempted to seek employment where there is greater long-term security.

Nor is there any reason why the centre, as a cooperative, should not come to an agreement with other centres in other countries to facilitate :

— mobility of secretariats and the establishment of regional or subsidiary offices.

— staff mobility and professional advancement without loss of financial benefits.

— operational contacts (e.g. telex links) to facilitate coordination of activities initiated at different centres (e.g. New York and Geneva) or between international centres and there national equivalents.

If it is desirable that NGOs should be strong and effective in their chosen domain, then any problem or weakness they may have through being forced to work as follows, should be eliminated :

—in inadequate office accommodation which may discourage important contacts as being a symptom of functional inadequacy.

— with out of date equipment which

produces poor quality results slowly.

— without the benefits of a multitude of ancillary services.

— physically isolated from other NGOs with whom frequent contact could be of benefit to the NGO's operations and the initiation of joint activity... research on creativity shows that a certain minimum number of people active in the same domain need to be subject to frequent face-to-face contact (e.g. coffee breaks) to provide the « critical mass » necessary for new and imaginative solutions to a problem to be envisaged. It seems to have been forgotten that NGOs, collectively, contain amongst themselves all the expertise, in the form of professional services, needed to make their combined operations highly successful. NGOs should perhaps consider these points in relation to the needed, imaginative, multi-disciplinary, multi-agency programmes which must be developed and implemented in response to increasingly complex global problems. A network of international centres is a step in the right direction.

The poor working conditions described above should be eliminated.

FUNDS

NGOs have four problems with regard to funds which should be overcome :

Locating fund sources
NGOs should be able to use an information system to locate individuals, foundations and governmental programmes interested in making funds available to NGOs in specific programme areas rather than depend on chance contact as at present. Similarly the information system should permit the NGO to be located by such bodies. The time taken for communication to be established should be reduced to a matter of days or, in the case of natural disaster, to hours.

Locating channels for programme funds
Similarly, NGOs should be able to use an information system to locate the most appropriate international and national bodies through which to make available funds for a specific programme. As above, in the case of natural disaster, the time for communication to be established should be reduced to hours.

Fund redistribution

NGOs should be able to overcome the difficulty whereby funds are voted every two or more years for programmes which may become irrelevant during that period in comparison with the need for new programmes adapted to newly detected problems in the NGO's domain. Flexible fund alloca-

tion and distribution techniques developed from the programme planning and budgeting system (PPBS) should permit rapid and continuous modification and funding of programmes in response to new problems as they evolve.

Fund transfers

NGOs should be able to reduce the current crude and expensive exchange of correspondence which occurs before a potential member or supporter transfers funds for dues or in support of a particular programme. Each action of the NGO reported through the information system should result in automatic fund transfers from supporters to the NGO's account (and from there to programme accounts). This would be done as an extension of the current use of credit cards to permit fund transfers to be registered via computer data links across a city.

COMMUNICATION REQUIREMENTS

NGOs should be able to work with communication equipment which can overcome the following barriers to communication:

Distance

The geographical separation of NGO main offices (e.g. New York, Geneva, Paris, London, Brussels, etc.) and NGO regional and national branch offices (e.g. the developing countries) should be significantly reduced as a factor hindering NGO activity. This could take the form of : subsidized direct telephone lines between NGO centres permitting «conference calls », subsidized telex lines, data links, etc.

Locating appropriate contacts

The momentum of NGO activity should not be lost at any stage because it is impossible to obtain the contact address of a person or organization (known or unknown) responsible for a given topic or programme. This should apply not only with regard to single contacts but also to multiple contacts (e.g. locating people or bodies which might wish to participate in a given project; setting up a mailing list for the distribution of a fact sheet during the life-cycle of some crisis). A series of international referral centres may be an intermediate step.

Locating key problem areas

The momentum of NGO activity should not be diverted temporarily into operational cul-de-sacs at any stage because of assumptions (known by some NGO in the organizational network to be incorrect) about the relationship or lack of relationship between, subject, programme or problem areas. The communication equipment should guide the NGO user across discipline boundaries in loca-

ting the key problem areas (and corresponding contacts) where use of minimum resources has a maximum chain-reaction or « multiplier effect » on the solution to a series of dependent problems.

Information overload
NGOs should be able to use the information system to register (on a daily or weekly basis) precisely

- those fields in which they are interested
- those fields which some consider relevant to their own but in which they are not interested with the assurance that this will ensure that other bodies will automatically send documents, etc., corresponding to these limits — thus eliminating the need to receive and read piles of documents to locate a few items of relevant information. The interests registered by the NGO may be interpreted by other bodies as being related (in terms of their perspective) to other subject, programme or problem areas in which the NGO should be interested and, about which it may not be aware. The receiving NGO should recognize that it is essential for it to remain « open » to information sent on the basis of any such new understanding of the relationship between problem areas.

Inability to understand
It should be possible to use the information system to guide the user, as a « learner », to greater understanding of a particular subject, programme, or problem area as it proves increasingly significant to his NGO. This feature will become increasingly important as specialization, organization and the pace of change oblige everyone to re-learn continually to be able to respond to advances in understanding in their own fields.

Each NGO, and eventually each individual, should be able to participate in a two-fold continuous process of interaction with a world-wide information system :

- supplying specialized data to the system within its field of special competence for the benefit of its members and other users
- retrieving information from the system on matters which it considers relevant to its field of competence or essential to the administration of its programme.

Supply of information by NGO

Each NGO should be able to supply to the system the details of :

- its future meetings and the substantive matter topics to be discussed
- topics of resolutions arising from meetings
- topics of new projects or pro-

grammes on which the NGO is engaged

- new problems which it believes it has detected
- topics of new reports which it has produced
- names and addresses of contacts of the NGO who should be alerted automatically if information on a given topic enters the system anywhere around the world,

Each NGO should feel assured that every < event > which it supplies with reference to a given topic is automatically signalled to IGOs, NGOs, governments, universities, etc., around the world which have already indicated continuing interest in that topic to the system.

Due to increasingly rapid evaluation in understanding of the many fruitful alternative ways of categorizing, ordering, and interrelating disciplines and problems, each NGO should feel confident that each of its new insights into significant interrelationships across accepted subject boundaries can be made known to the system in order to draw the attention of other bodies automatically to new opportunities or dangers related to matters in which they are currently interested.

Retrieval of information by NGO
Each NGO should feel entirely confident that it will automatically be alerted concerning any of the following events around the world on a given topic :

- plans for or invitations to meetings
- proposals for or action on a programme
- proposals for the creation of an organization
- reports or documents
- resolutions formulated
- names and addresses (where non-confidential) of persons or organizations active on a given topic
- contracts or funds availability for programmes.

In addition each NGO should feel confident if a new problem is detected in some other subject area which in any way affects its own field of concern,

then this relationship will be automatically signalled so that the NGO can begin to receive information on events concerning the new topic as they affect its field of competence. Furthermore, given the increasing complexity and jargonization of issues and relationships between issues and the need for continuous re-learning, each NGO should feel confident that if issues or relationships are signalled by the system which, though supposedly relevant (due to some one's new insight), cannot be comprehended, then the system can be used in such a way as to make the relevance clear, using audio-visual instructional techniques. Each NGO should be able to make

use of such a sophisticated information system in the full knowledge that the cost to the NGO of entering any event into the system will be shared equitably between the NGO (wishing to inform certain categories of persons or organizations) and persons or organizations (wishing to be informed on the topic in question). And in addition, when neither the budget of the NGO nor that of the bodies desiring to receive the information (i.e., low resource bodies or those of « borderline relevance »), from the sender's viewpoint) will ensure that the information is transferred, resources from agencies interested in subsidizing communications on the topic in question should automatically be drawn upon to maximize the number of bodies contacted.

The existence of such a world information system would be a disaster rather than a boon if provisions were not made for the following features :

- means of insuring that the very existence of the system does not create an elite of users and a multitude of organizations and persons excluded from participation because of costs or other criteria (creating a further gap between developed and developing countries).
- means of administering the system to be as loose, open, and democratic as possible, such that no group can control its use or misuse the data it contains.
- means of using the system such as to permit NGOs to detect, make known and democratically counteract use made of it which they, consider unbeneficial.

The stress has been placed upon the perspective of the nongovernmental organizations. But clearly such a world information system would be of diminished value without the full participation of governmental and profit-oriented bodies, with programmes on problems of significance to society as a whole. Given the increasing importance of ad hoc bodies and the shorter life cycles of organizations, it is essential to extend participation to active individuals who as potential members, executives, consultants, representatives, initiators of new programmes, or detectors of new problems, are the key to society's response to crisis, as well as being, in many cases, the sole continuing link between a series of ad hoc organizations on a given topic. (In this way the currently immutable organization is established within the information system as a temporary pattern of relationships between individuals or other organizations — to be dissolved in favor of more useful or fulfilling patterns when the members so choose.)
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