

Pseudo-Issues Paralyzing Transnational Association Action

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Yesterday and today some of the key issues of concern to the activity of transnational associations have been discussed, I want to list them quickly with the object of showing that, from a very realistic and practical point of view, there is very little that can be done about them at this point in time. My purpose is to show that we have to find ways of by-passing these issues, if we are to act at all. Such issues must be understood as constraints on any action strategy, rather than the prime policy concern in connection with such associations — as tends to be the case in intergovernmental and political science circles. Hopefully these issues will be resolved in one way or another, but international action cannot afford to be delayed by them. The organizational instruments for action may in many cases be imperfect, but concentrating attention on their imperfections may obscure the fact that they are already quite adequate for many tasks — and that the imperfections are in large part a circumstance of the times rather than of their nature. Improving their ability to perform their functions may will be the quickest method of reducing their imperfection.

The issues are in no particular order :

1. Proliferation of NGOs

The number of organizations is increasing. This is a reality which corresponds to a need for individuals and groups to associate. Can we really imagine some legislation or regulation to reduce the number of such bodies ? What agency is going to permit or forbid the creation of an

organization and by what right ? Is a form of « birth control » or « family planning » for organizations a credible possibility ? If I wish to initiate the creation of an organization in some area of interest to me (let us say for « left-handed individuals »), why should my concerns be questioned by some if others consider them relevant?

— provided, of course, that its aims and activities respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is strange that we can admit the existence of 4,000 million individuals, but we are uncomfortable if the number of organizations representing them exceeds a few hundred.

2. Representativeness

Many nongovernmental organizations are considered to be unrepresentative, namely when all the member countries and regions of the UN are not represented in them.

It is vital to make some distinctions here.

— firstly, African, European, Asian and other such regional organizations by definition do not have representatives from other regions. Is it useful to question, the right to exist of such bodies or the value of their activity ? The fact that there are more such bodies in Europe is a reality resulting from the relative degree of economic and social development of Europe.

— secondly, there is a functional distinction. Is it realistic to expect that the African and Latin American continents should be well represented in the International Association for Arctic Agriculture ?

— thirdly, there is a distinction linked directly to the presence or absence of national counterparts in some coun-

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tries due to the relative degree of economic and social development. Is it realistic to expect the Maldives to be represented in the International Association for Nuclear Fusion Research ?

— fourthly, there is the non-representativity forced upon organizations by the problems of communication and transport between distant points on the surface of the planet. Is it reasonable for a national body to allocate funds (possibly equal to or in excess of its own annual budget) to the cost of transporting its representatives to the distant meetings of an international body ? — and this problem arises whether the meeting is in a developing country or in Europe, and whether the national body is based on a developed economy or not. At a time when travel costs are increasing rapidly and subsidies are increasingly hard to obtain, it is therefore natural that the viability of regional bodies may in many cases be greater than that of multi-continent organizations — to say nothing of the effect of increasing postage costs and the 8 week or more delivery time for inter-continental surface mail. An argument which ignores these problems, particularly when nothing is done to alleviate their effects by direct of indirect subsidy, cannot be taken very seriously,

3. Efficiency and effectiveness

To some, many nongovernmental organizations are of questionable effec-

tiveness and characterized by doubtful efficiency. They are not powerful, they are financially weak, etc. Who makes these judgements and by what right? Agreed an organization may have an annual budget of \$ 2,000 and according to financial criteria may be of questionable importance. But what if operating costs are in fact absorbed into the budgets of some national members or sponsoring bodies, as is often the case (e.g. the Club of Rome has never had « a budget »)? What if the organization requires very little funds, as is the case with many opinion forming bodies? And are the members content with the effectiveness of their organization? And is not the notion of effectiveness a very Western managerial concept of questionable relevance to some organizations concerned with relations between people and exchange of experience. The relation between the effectiveness of an organization and its right to exist is surely determined by its ability to continue to attract members and not by some externally imposed criteria.

4. Diversity of interests and form

For some, the very diversity of international NGOs, namely that their structures do not conform to a limited number of models, reduces ability to understand them and consequently reduces their credibility. For others, the fact that the interests of NGOs do not correspond to the priorities currently in fashion in the major intergovernmental agencies is an indication of their irrelevance.

With regard to the form, why is it assumed that there should not be a wide variety of organizational forms? Is it not important to seek innovation of organizational forms? With regard to area of interest, who is to say that a seemingly irrelevant NGO today should not be relevant tomorrow. (The best example is the existence of environmental NGOs several decades before the Stockholm conference in 1972.)

5. Western model

For some, most NGOs are based on a Western concept of organizational structure and as such are suspect. Agreed it would be valuable to make use of non-Western models of organization at the transnational level. The problem is that such models have not yet been sufficiently developed. Even regional organizations in Africa, Asia and Arab countries tend to be elaborations of the Western model rather than alternative models. The design of airplanes is governed by principles elaborated in developed countries. Whilst it would be delightful to travel in an intercontinental airplane designed in a developing country, there are none. Is this to mean that those desi-

gned in developed countries should not be used in developing countries?

6. Headquarters in Western countries

For some, the fact that the headquarters of many NGOs are in Western countries renders them suspect. However this condition is also characteristic of IGOs. It is in fact linked to the relative degree of development of the different continents and to the associated problems and costs of communication and transport between them. It should never be forgotten that the travel costs and times between many developing countries and Europe are in fact less than those between neighbouring developing countries.. The unsatisfactory asymmetry is in fact a consequence of the development problem with which many of the NGOs are concerned. It is also linked to the considerable legal problems of establishing such organizations in non-Western countries.

7. Legal status

For some, the fact that NGOs have no status in international law makes it impossible to give any serious attention to them. They are international « outlaws » and as such are suspect. This argument is only credible to those for whom the existence of an organization can only be defined in legal terms. For such people however even the multinational corporations have no existence as such. Such arguments are of limited value from a sociological perspective and NGOs are above all a social rather than a legal phenomenon.

8. Lack of coordination

For some the fact that NGOs are unable to group together into powerful inter-NGO federations with a common position is an indication of their weakness and questionable value. This condition is however also characteristic of IGOs and particularly the Agencies of the UN-system and is in fact a general problem of our times. But why should it be expected that NGOs should group together in this way? In whose interest are such groupings at a time when there is pressure for functional and regional decentralization?

9. Duplication

For some, the fact that there are more than one NGOs concerned with the same subject or problem area constitutes wasteful duplication calling for rationalization and mergers. Again, however, this condition is characteristic of all organizations at this time. (It is reputed that there are over 30 bodies within the UN family res-

possible for inter-Agency coordination.) There are many reasons for such duplication, ranging from the political through methodological specialization to classic problems of personality differences. Thus, although duplication may be a criticism of organization in general, it is not specific to NGOs. In addition, research on research and innovation has shown that duplication is in fact beneficial in some instances.

10. Political impact

For some, NGOs may be considered to be of no consequence because they are perceived as having little political impact. But what is political impact in this context? Does it mean the ability to ensure that the wording of an intergovernmental resolution is changed or that a new programme is undertaken within an intergovernmental agency? What is the fate of most such resolutions? (One study showed that only 3 % of intergovernmental resolutions resulted in new action). To the extent that many NGOs are working in areas not yet recognized as significant by IGOs or governments, they are preparing the way for a political impact which will be legitimated (possibly years later) by their work (e.g. the UN discovery of the environment issue in 1972). It is ironic that such arguments concerning political impact are made by political scientists, often within the framework of some international NGO or one of its national members. It is therefore legitimate to ask what is the political impact of the International Political Science Association or of one of its members such as the American Political Science Association? It is equally ironic that remarks by government delegates on political impact are made by individuals who themselves are often members of national professional or technical associations linked to international bodies.

11. Administrative problem

For some intergovernmental agencies, the number of NGOs which are in some way engaged in activities relevant to their own programmes constitutes an administrative, or even political, problem. As such efforts are made to limit contact with them in order to simplify the already difficult tasks of operating the agency. The inability of such agencies to recognize that NGOs are first and foremost a social phenomenon and only incidentally an administrative problem is an indication of the ability of such agencies to comprehend the nature of the international community within which they attempt to function. (Examples are the inability of the International Labour Organization to maintain statistics on trade unions, and the inability of Unesco to recognize the

usefulness of social studies of national and international NGOs — after 30 years of consultative relationship with them through a designated administrative unit.)

12. NGO naivety

For some NGOs and their representatives are simply naive in their response to political and scientific realities as formulated by intergovernmental and « serious » academic bodies. It is only too easy to accuse a body of naivety when it seeks to defend some subtle human value ignored by some well-supported agencies pursuing a politically non-controversial programme. Concern with peace and disarmament in the midst of an arms race is surely naive. Concern with the protection of some species threatened by industrial development is also surely naive. As is concern with the rights of a minority group neglected by a democratic majority. The creation of an International Astronautical Federation in 1950 could only be considered naive by the majority of the academic and intergovernmental community, as must be the recent concern expressed within the International Astronautical Union that attempts to send radio messages to distant planetary systems might attract unwelcome (rather than welcome) attention.

But the irony of the assessment of NGOs as naive is that more often than not it is a reflection on the assessor rather than the assessed. When an IGO representative complains that the NGOs that make contact with him (or come to his meetings) are naive, he may even be correct. Intergovernmental agencies have set up such an unfruitful environment for contact with NGOs that many NGOs and their representatives avoid such contact because there are more effective forms of action - those that do not either have special introductions (and are therefore labelled « effective ») or are in the process of learning what a waste of time such contacts are. The latter group may perhaps be legitimately labelled as naive, although the assessment is about as useful as labelling a high school student as naive before he has graduated. A representative of the Club of Rome (itself an NGO) recently assessed NGOs as naive in the light of the actions of those that participated in the recent debate in Algiers on the new international economic order. This assessment would seem to say more about the Club's ability to generalize from an inadequate sample, and its understanding of social as opposed to economic phenomena, than it does about NGOs in general.

More tragic is the situation when powerful NGOs enter into relationships with intergovernmental agencies (under category A or I consultative status) in which it is of benefit to them to label

other NGOs as naive in order to reinforce their own position.

The Challenge

Now whether or not the above issues constitute real problems or merely convenient excuses for inaction and sterile, IGO-NGO dialogue is irrelevant. It is however a fact that none of these issues is likely to be resolved in the short term even if it is possible to accomplish something in the medium or long term. It is also questionable whether the solutions would be better than the problems, particularly in the case of legal status. If none of these issues is likely to be resolved, what is to be done in the short term? Some will feel free to ignore NGOs. The NGOs will however continue to exist in one form or another.

The problem is however how to bypass these issues and to find some way of ensuring that all possible organizational resources are brought to bear on the many problems to which the world appears to be exposed. I would like to suggest that not only is it of limited utility to focus on the 700 NGOs with consultative status, rather than on the 2700-5000 international organizations, but equally it is of limited utility to focus on the latter rather than on the whole universe of organizations including those at the national and sub-national level. There are as yet uncounted number of such organizations — possibly several million. Why are they important? It is through such organizations that people associate, work and express themselves.

And yet these uncounted organizations constitute one of the last unexplored resources of society with which to respond to the problems with which we are faced. Whilst the governmental and business organizations are now well accepted, the associational world is poorly understood — despite its well-documented contribution to all aspects of human affairs. The denial of the importance of the continuing role of these associations now leads governments to believe that they can create a new international economic order alone, ignoring the social dimension which is the special concern of these bodies. How can we facilitate the action of this immense network of organizations given constraints such as those noted above? How can we facilitate whatever action is possible, whenever it is possible between whatever coalition of organizations is possible, with whatever degree of coordination is possible? How can a network organizational strategy emerge?

It seems to me that this can be achieved by the facilitative use of information networks — basically by decentral-

izing information of relevance to the strategic decisions of organizations. This is not to recommend any form of organized anarchy, for where hierarchical structures continue to exist or can usefully be created, the desired structure will be present. Nor does this constitute a replacement of organizations by information systems. But an adequate information system to support and facilitate the action of all organizational activity would provide the framework within which organizational structures could be continually adapted and reformed in response to changing circumstances.

Why is it for example that every major city now has a - Yellow Pages Commercial Telephone Directory » but none has one for social action? What action does the absence of such a tool prevent?

What other tools can be envisaged to increase by several orders magnitude the degree of organizational action? I would like to suggest that only by exploring practical, low-resource possibilities of this kind will we have any hope of significant response to the existing and emerging problems. What we need are tools which respect the diversity and flexibility of organizational forms and action rather than imposing forms and methods of limited utility.

The UIA's contribution has been its various reference books and in particular its recent experimental *Yearbook of World Problems and Human Potential*. The latter attempts to show the relationship between the problems and the organizational and other resources which can be brought to bear upon them. But this is far from enough. The quality and quantity of such information must be improved and its comprehensibility increased. This is the immediate challenge for us.