

# RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE MAIN ACTORS FROM THEIR ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract:** NGOs can continue defend their operational independence in evolutionary conditions that imply from their behalf an important vigilant activity.

The financial prosperity of big NGOs owes a lot to their conversion to direct marketing techniques, from the beginning of 1980s. This activity can be compared to a research activity of the financial partners, whose transaction costs are explicit, while they imply the forming of a folder of donors to whom there are sent messages of different form and periodicity.

International financiers ask from their associative partners a proved professional reputation. It is clear that an assistance action financed from public funds and meant for the assuming of tens, even hundreds of thousand persons, leaves the area of symbolic intervention in order to enter the area of complex programs of assistance.

In a general way, written and audio-visual press justifies in an advantageous way NGOs action and, indissociable, their institutional image.

The attitude of the great public towards the NGOs is more ambiguous. The public opinion is bad informed concerning the help for development and humanitarian action.

Half private companies, half public administrations, NGOs prosper because of a reputation which, without absolving them from applying a concrete action, absolves them from producing an explicit utility. While institutions on the market prosper on an economic rent and the public institutions benefit from a statutory rent, NGOs - especially the most important – exploit a “symbolic” rent which strongly structures their administrative situation.

Because they are the producers of some utilities and of some guarantees, NGOs can continue defend their operational independence in evolutionary conditions that imply from their behalf an important vigilant activity. The institutional prosperity of NGOs depends on the active administration of their external relationships, so that their expectations represent for them the administration compulsions with which their management has to deal. So we will run over the situation of administrating the NGOs in report with their financiers, with the actors from their political and social environment and with the actors from their operational environment. Then there are presented the main threats, on medium term, of these various environments.

## 1. Relationship between NGOs and their “financers”

It has to be made the difference between private donors and financiers from public funds.

### *Donors*

The financial prosperity of big NGOs owes a lot to their conversion to direct marketing techniques, from the beginning of 1980s (Williamson O.E. 1994). This activity can be compared to a research activity of the financial partners, whose transaction costs are explicit, while they imply the forming of a folder of donors to whom there are sent messages of different form and periodicity. Once formed and

prospected the target, the organization succeeds in establishing a contractual relationship on medium or long term whose adapting and renegotiation costs are low. Indeed, if the prospecting is expensive, creating lawful customers seems to be very profitable even if the coverage percentage of the associative campaigns tend to lower in the past years. Taken into account the decisive character of this direct marketing activity in the progress of big NGOs, we can surely talk about a technological mess.

The report of the donors with the problem of NGOs operational efficiency was itself approached. Direct marketing does not represent a technological innovation whose efficiency could be postulated *ex nihilo* (Queinnec Erwan, 2004). It is first based on a general environment which favors the receptivity of a large audience to “sold causes”. Direct marketing efficiency cannot be separated from a collateral institutional communication which mobilizes the participation of a certain number of actors of first importance in the organizations’ environment.

It is true the fact that the donors are those who rather solicit the effectivity of humanitarian action than the efficiency, just as we suggested. This request, which could be satisfied through a few indicators, allows NGOs to keep the control upon their operational activity form and fund (Alter N., 1990). It is not less true the fact that this opacity implies a supposition that presses on the reality of their abnegation and honesty. So that, it is important for the NGOs to have susceptible signs for activating this supposition, fact that happens, first of all, through a control of their actions’ conformity with the values they publicly show.

#### *International financiers*

To a great extent, international financiers solicit an operational effectivity that allows them to motivate the utilization of their subventions. Still, waiting for the imposing of an identification concept and the measure of efficiency criteria to which it could be submitted the action of financed NGOs, the financiers ask for *capacities*. They also have very definite demands concerning the financial *reporting*.

International financiers ask from their associative partners a proved professional reputation. It is clear that an assistance action financed from public funds and meant for the assuming of tens, even hundreds of thousand persons, leaves the area of symbolic intervention in order to enter the area of complex programs of assistance. The justification of the assigned funds has to be founded especially on formalized operational projects. Showing a capacity and a professional competency constitutes, without any doubt, an advantage that the financiers keep in mind when choosing their operational partners, advantage that constitutes an acceptable substitute for exhaustive information. For NGOs as for the financiers that have to report to their tutelary authority, owning an operational expert appraisal or abundant information is more important than its exploitation. These capacities play the same role as a scanner in a hospital: they constitute a signal of competence and, consequently, an attraction pole for new resources.

In a more explicit way, the financiers ask from the organizations of the persons that receive allowance extremely detailed financial information, this formalism even being reproached to them, as we have seen. It is obvious that the financiers bring here again the control demands to which there are subordinated the internal procedures. It also seems that there is an important difference between the financiers' expectations and the capacities of the majority of the NGOs, concerning this aspect, so that it generates real tensions between the institutional partners.

The investment of a nongovernmental organization in important professional capacities, certified through their “technological” departments, constitutes at the same time anticipation and an answer at the demands of a humanitarian help financed from public funds. It is doubtful, as we have seen, that this accumulation process subordinates to a rigorous strategic planning. Still, today it is permitted to the big NGOs to use certain “requests in technology” in a competitive way, relating their meaning, this precaution allowing them to maintain their indetermination right.

In a simultaneous way, the organizations appealing to public funds, they have constituted important financial administration services. The partnership between organizations and financers constitutes a strong instigation to structuralize and rationalize the administration procedures, on the financial and operational level.

## **2. Relationship between NGOs and social environment**

Contractual victories obtained by big NGOs are based, to a great extent, on a social reputation. This was built on the basis of the relationships that big NGOs established with institutional actors that possess important resources in producing opinions, ideas, values and social norms. We can identify here five of the main actors (Queinnec Erwan, 2004):

### *Press*

In a general way, written and audio-visual press justifies in an advantageous way NGOs action and, indissociable, their institutional image. Press’ sympathy for the humanitarian action it is not unconditioned: it seems to have culminated at the beginning of 1980s and 1990s, and has decreased during the decade. Although this situation deserves a private exam, it seems that the regional press is more devoted to the symbolic valorization of the humanitarian action than a more specialized press in dealing with the problems. The narration of the assistance facts seems to be favorable in the public image of NGOs.

### *The great public*

The attitude of the great public towards the NGOs is more ambiguous. The public opinion is bad informed concerning the help for development and humanitarian action.

Still, the credit of big NGOs remains big enough so that the resources represented by the “civil society” (volunteers, donors) do not lower. The symbolic attractiveness of big NGOs mainly influence their recruitment; indeed, generally, big NGOs do not confront with a scarcity of vocations, even if the adapting to their needs in real time raises a problem concerning to certain specialties.

### *Public powers and international institutions*

Public powers and international institutions put a value on humanitarian action and the organizations that apply it. This sympathy is translated as giving certain statutory advantageous (recognizing the public utility, for example) and honorary distinctions (Peace Nobel Prize awarded in 1999), which sort of plays the role of a public label; the consultative function given to the NGOs in certain national or international instances represents another recognition manifestation.

So that public powers and international institutions explicitly admit the legitimacy of a humanitarian civilian whose values are congruent with the philosophic basis of west societies. If the relationships between public authorities and organizations feed themselves with the atavistic antagonism that exists between “politic” and “civil”, humanist values contribute a lot to strengthen the connections.

### *Science institutions*

Science institutions have taken hold of theoretical and ideological problems that have their origins in the humanitarian actions. Some universities propose concepts dedicated to this activity, focusing their words on some discipline or another: international law, politic science, public health, but also administration. In a general way, NGOs are opened for the world of research and contribute to certain fields (public health, especially) at scientific publication. People publish works that the executives or volunteers of the NGOs reproduce, showing the problems and ambiguities of contemporary humanitarian action. Although the controversies concerning the situation of certain countries seem to have lost the audience in the intellectual debate in proportion to the beginning of the 1980s, they still offer subjects to the publications, forums and seminaries.

### *Strategic function of the "speech"*

If the visibility of the operational action remains confidential and circumscribed to certain "initiated" institutions, the speech about humanitarian action is largely distributed. It addresses to a varied public and to varied institutions, in forms that were different for their ambition, the sophisticated words from the approached angle; but it is always about presenting the humanitarian action in a symbolic way gratified and/or stimulative from an intellectual point of view.

Producers of speech, testimony, reflections changed in public, NGOs master the concept, production and distribution of the humanitarian action, not only in their operational sector, but also in the dimension of the social and cultural value (Foy C., 1996). If the institutional prosperity of the big NGOs leans without a doubt on the charitable dimension of their assistance, the humanitarian action has other philosophic ambitions: it is being built as an integral part of the democratic ideal and it has his roots in a historiography of solidarity.

This strategy of social institutionalization is based, as we said, on mastering a global rhetoric and, in a pretty classical way, on producing a teaching, admitted as such by the social environment. Nor the humanitarian action, neither the organizations that apply it mustn't be possible to be attacked. It is interesting to notice that the majority of "informed" critiques formulated about the humanitarian action, are formulated by the organizations' responsables themselves: it is especially about mentioning the ontological ambiguity of the humanitarian aid (helping the victims with the risk of maintaining the conflicts), just as its ethical vulnerability (the possible hiding of the benefit of the purposes, others than the strictly emphatic ones), dispensing the organizations, at least the big ones, whose fundamental legitimacy is "naturalized" and whose operational dysfunctions are minimized.

This critical activity allows adding the intellectual authority to the moral authority without restoring the essential. Otherwise, how to push the sacrifice until giving up an incontestable action from a moral point of view, like that which consists of saving threatened human lives? The rhetorical strategy of the associative authors refers to the "problem" of the humanitarian action, her putting in the system's dimension (international organizations and, most of all, using the humanitarian action for political purposes are often referred to), without disputing the philosophical necessity.

This organizational attitude for rhetoric asks for incontestable capacities of formalization, an access to the public communication and an irreproachable control oh its own actions. We cannot refrain from remembering the role of the organizations' leaders in mastering the speech about humanitarian action.

### **3. NGOs and their equals**

Big international NGOs and, generally, the actors from the aid system, have learnt to know each other by frequenting the fields where the action takes place (March J.G. 1991). At operational level, logic of cooperation theoretically supervises the relationships they have, because the needs that have to be fulfilled are so diverse and so acute that the aids' efficiency cannot be without an ad hoc repartition of the activities or population helped between diverse present operators.

As “enterprises”, big NGOs are in competition on goods market, as well as on international market of public funds. The competition strategy of the organization is ambivalent; on one hand, it is about being as different as possible, especially with the financers and international institutions, so that it obtains a place in the club of the main actors from the aid system; on the other hand, the competition does not have to lead the organizations to denigrating themselves (Mintyberg H. 1996). Also, the critiques between the organizations are reserved for the restricted public (university forums, internal debates), their object also referring to the consolidation of an enterprising culture highly specified.

The acquisition of material and human resources passes through a strategy of symbolic differentiation and which is not aggressive from a public point of view. Their image community, their reputation of lack of interest, their convergent interests have to stimulate the NGOs to the cooperation and/or avoidance of the confront strategies. If the differentiation depending on costs does no constitute another competition advantage within the organizational world, NGOs still remain subordinated to showing off the relatively important operational budget.

These remarks lead to taking a look at function of the ethics in institutional communication of NGOs (especially of the most instituted). The problem of their marketing ethics, especially, brings about complex interventions, a part of which could be analyzed in terms of “the rule of competition game”. Blaming every method of aggressive communication on the specific reason of its incompatibility with the respect owed to the helped population, “installed” NGOs add – to strategies and arguments – something susceptible to protect them against the attack of an ambitious new-come (Queinac Erwan, 2004). This reflection sets the problem of the conflicting report between “norms” and competition and it invites to the appreciation of reference at ethics in a less naive way (or less univocal).

### **Conclusions**

The situation of the humanitarian NGOs may decline, if we refer to the numerous dialectical tensions, classic in administration: institution/project, public/private, interior/exterior, bureaucracy/constructors, increase/maturity, and etcetera. We tried to approach each of these dimensions, yet emphasizing our presence concerning the dissociation between the institutional existence of these organizations and their operational project. Half private companies, half public administrations, NGOs prosper because of a reputation which, without absolving them from applying a concrete action, absolves them from producing an explicit utility. While institutions on the market prosper on an economic rent and the public institutions benefit from a statutory rent, NGOs - especially the most important – exploit a “symbolic” rent which strongly structures their administrative situation.

Still, there is nothing providential about this rent. It has to do with the fact that the big NGOs get to the point where they “sell” their legitimate ambiguity to a large public made of important institutional actors.

Their strategic talent is linked to this ability of mobilizing the arguments that allow the justification of their positions or decisions, conciliating the greatest professionalism and the most ingenuous voluntarism, the expert owning of the programs and the clumsy innovation. This ambiguity incites NGOs to never offer explanations, in an exhaustive manner, in order to be able to have a complete dissimulation: financiers cannot grant public funds only on the basis of a “heroic” reputation.

We used concepts such as ambiguity, strategic game or control over the doubtful areas trying to make a description of an administrative situation of NGOs. Most of these notions are reserved to the analyze of some relations in the organization. This analogy allows us, beyond any doubt, to suggest that the organization is an actor searching for institutionalization and that the “organization” in which the action is situated is nothing more than the global society.

This acknowledgment strategy is based on a mythical construction. If the reality of the practices supplies the discourse about humanitarian help, still, rhetoric has the function of maintaining its mystery. Thus, NGOs must divide their communication to people who have only punctually the occasion of meeting with each other, but who are united by an appreciative perception of the humanitarian action.

The perennality of private organizations which show general interest, sustained by an important public made of institutional actors, seems to certify “an explicit request for ambiguity”, as if involving in something merely finalized should generate an individual satisfaction. This is not about disguising the preferences for collective action behind a diluted coercive system of centralized budgetary allocations. Donation remains a voluntary act, and also a humanitarian engagement. This satisfaction plausibly sustains the mechanic of transcendence. In the case of big NGOs, the administration of a “multi-ethnic” myth which implies utilitarian aspects – goes through an excellent self management.

Nongovernmental organizations are, after all, the guardians of a temple not strong enough for generating a subjugator curiosity, nor confidential enough to provoke indifference. It is only up to them not to follow their vocation.

While administrative sciences are interested, in general, by the systems of producing private utilities under constraints, the example of nongovernmental organizations seems to indicate the fact that the management of social values, the source of conventions according to which actors partially establish their private agreements can also be expressed in the terms usually reserved to commercial companies. Of course, the inexistence of a profitableness constraint invalidates the collation of a big number of administrative theories, as it is the case. But, certainly, this originality can only enrich the ability of knowing the product, regarding the organization and the management of enterprises. A close examination of the procedures for functional administration of the nongovernmental organizations (human resources, for example), of their processes for making operational decisions or of their marketing, among others, would allow, without any doubt, a better appreciation of the universality of certain theories and interesting instructions to be drawn from this eventual originality.

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