

The Self-Appointed Altruists

By Sam Vaknin

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Their arrival portends rising local prices and a culture shock. Many of them live in plush apartments, or five star hotels, drive SUV's, sport \$3000 laptops and PDA's. They earn a two figure multiple of the local average wage. They are busybodies, preachers, critics, do-gooders, and professional altruists.

Always self-appointed, they answer to no constituency. Though unelected and ignorant of local realities, they confront the democratically chosen and those who voted them into office. A few of them are enmeshed in crime and corruption. They are the non-governmental organizations, or NGO's.

Some NGO's - like Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Amnesty - genuinely contribute to enhancing welfare, to the mitigation of hunger, the furtherance of human and civil rights, or the curbing of disease. Others - usually in the guise of think tanks and lobby groups - are sometimes ideologically biased, or religiously-committed and, often, at the service of special interests.

NGO's - such as the International Crisis Group - have openly interfered on behalf of the opposition in the recent elections in Macedonia. Other NGO's have done so in Belarus and Ukraine, Zimbabwe and Israel, Nigeria and Thailand, Slovakia and Hungary - and even in Western, rich, countries including the USA, Canada, Germany, and Belgium.

The encroachment on state sovereignty of international law - enshrined in numerous treaties and conventions - allows NGO's to get involved in hitherto strictly domestic affairs like corruption, civil rights, the composition of the media, the penal and civil codes, environmental policies, or the allocation of economic resources and of natural endowments, such as land and water. No field of government activity is now exempt from the glare of NGO's. They serve as self-appointed witnesses, judges, jury and executioner rolled into one.

Regardless of their persuasion or modus operandi, all NGO's are top heavy with entrenched, well-remunerated, extravagantly-perked bureaucracies. Opacity is typical of NGO's. Amnesty's rules prevent its officials from publicly discussing the inner workings of the organization - proposals, debates, opinions - until they have become officially voted into its Mandate. Thus, dissenting views rarely get an open hearing.

Contrary to their teachings, the financing of NGO's is invariably obscure and their

sponsors unknown. The bulk of the income of most non-governmental organizations, even the largest ones, comes from - usually foreign - powers. Many NGO's serve as official contractors for governments.

NGO's serve as long arms of their sponsoring states - gathering intelligence, burnishing their image, and promoting their interests. There is a revolving door between the staff of NGO's and government bureaucracies the world over. The British Foreign Office finances a host of NGO's - including the fiercely "independent" Global Witness - in troubled spots, such as Angola. Many host governments accuse NGO's of - unwittingly or knowingly - serving as hotbeds of espionage.

Very few NGO's derive some of their income from public contributions and donations. The more substantial NGO's spend one tenth of their budget on PR and solicitation of charity. In a desperate bid to attract international attention, so many of them lied about their projects in the Rwanda crisis in 1994, recounts "The Economist", that the Red Cross felt compelled to draw up a ten point mandatory NGO code of ethics. A code of conduct was adopted in 1995. But the phenomenon recurred in Kosovo.

All NGO's claim to be not for profit - yet, many of them possess sizable equity portfolios and abuse their position to increase the market share of firms they own. Conflicts of interest and unethical behavior abound.

Cafedirect is a British firm committed to "fair trade" coffee. Oxfam, an NGO, embarked on a campaign targeted at Cafedirect's competitors, accusing them of exploiting growers by paying them a tiny fraction of the retail price of the coffee they sell. Yet, Oxfam owns 25% of Cafedirect.

Large NGO's resemble multinational corporations in structure and operation. They are hierarchical, maintain large media, government lobbying, and PR departments, head-hunt, invest proceeds in professionally-managed portfolios, compete in government tenders, and own a variety of unrelated businesses. The Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development owns the license for second mobile phone operator in Afghanistan - among other businesses. In this respect, NGO's are more like cults than like civic organizations.

Many NGO's promote economic causes - anti-globalization, the banning of child labor, the relaxing of intellectual property rights, or fair payment for agricultural products. Many of these causes are both worthy and sound. Alas, most NGO's lack economic expertise and inflict damage on the alleged recipients of their beneficence. NGO's are at times manipulated by - or collude with - industrial groups and political parties.

It is telling that the denizens of many developing countries suspect the West and its NGO's of promoting an agenda of trade protectionism. Stringent - and expensive - labor and environmental provisions in international treaties may well be a ploy to fend off imports based on cheap labor and the competition they wreak on well-ensconced domestic industries and their political stooges.

Take child labor - as distinct from the universally condemnable phenomena of child prostitution, child soldiering, or child slavery.

Child labor, in many destitute locales, is all that separates the family from all-pervasive, life threatening, poverty. As national income grows, child labor declines. Following the outcry provoked, in 1995, by NGO's against soccer balls stitched by children in Pakistan, both Nike and Reebok relocated their workshops and sacked countless women and 7000 children. The average family income - anyhow meager - fell by 20 percent.

This affair elicited the following wry commentary from economists Drusilla Brown, Alan Deardorff, and Robert Stern:

"While Baden Sports can quite credibly claim that their soccer balls are not sewn by children, the relocation of their production facility undoubtedly did nothing for their former child workers and their families."

This is far from being a unique case. Threatened with legal reprisals and "reputation risks" (being named-and-shamed by overzealous NGO's) - multinationals engage in preemptive sacking. More than 50,000 children in Bangladesh were let go in 1993 by German garment factories in anticipation of the American never-legislated Child Labor Deterrence Act.

Former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, observed:

"Stopping child labor without doing anything else could leave children worse off. If they are working out of necessity, as most are, stopping them could force them into prostitution or other employment with greater personal dangers. The most important thing is that they be in school and receive the education to help them leave poverty."

NGO-fostered hype notwithstanding, 70% of all children work within their family unit, in agriculture. Less than 1 percent are employed in mining and another 2 percent in construction. Again contrary to NGO-proffered panaceas, education is not a solution. Millions graduate every year in developing countries - 100,000 in Morocco alone. But unemployment reaches more than one third of the workforce in places such as Macedonia.

Children at work may be harshly treated by their supervisors but at least they are kept off the far more menacing streets. Some kids even end up with a skill and are rendered employable.

"The Economist" sums up the shortsightedness, inaptitude, ignorance, and self-centeredness of NGO's neatly:

"Suppose that in the remorseless search for profit, multinationals pay sweatshop wages to their workers in developing countries. Regulation forcing them to pay higher wages is demanded... The NGOs, the reformed multinationals and enlightened rich-country governments propose tough rules on third-world factory wages, backed up by trade barriers to keep out imports from countries that do not comply. Shoppers in the West pay more - but willingly, because they know it is in a good cause. The NGOs declare another victory. The companies, having shafted their third-world competition and protected their domestic markets, count their bigger profits (higher wage costs

notwithstanding). And the third-world workers displaced from locally owned factories explain to their children why the West's new deal for the victims of capitalism requires them to starve."

NGO's in places like Sudan, Somalia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Albania, and Zimbabwe have become the preferred venue for Western aid - both humanitarian and financial - development financing, and emergency relief. According to the Red Cross, more money goes through NGO's than through the World Bank. Their iron grip on food, medicine, and funds rendered them an alternative government - sometimes as venal and graft-stricken as the one they replace.

Local businessmen, politicians, academics, and even journalists form NGO's to plug into the avalanche of Western largesse. In the process, they award themselves and their relatives with salaries, perks, and preferred access to Western goods and credits. NGO's have evolved into vast networks of patronage in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

NGO's chase disasters with a relish. More than 200 of them opened shop in the aftermath of the Kosovo refugee crisis in 1999-2000. Another 50 supplanted them during the civil unrest in Macedonia a year later. Floods, elections, earthquakes, wars - constitute the cornucopia that feed the NGO's.

NGO's are proponents of Western values - women's lib, human rights, civil rights, the protection of minorities, freedom, equality. Not everyone finds this liberal menu palatable. The arrival of NGO's often provokes social polarization and cultural clashes. Traditionalists in Bangladesh, nationalists in Macedonia, religious zealots in Israel, security forces everywhere, and almost all politicians find NGO's irritating and bothersome.

The British government ploughs well over \$30 million a year into "Proshika", a Bangladeshi NGO. It started as a women's education outfit and ended up as a restive and aggressive women empowerment political lobby group with budgets to rival many ministries in this impoverished, Moslem and patriarchal country.

Other NGO's - fuelled by \$300 million of annual foreign infusion - evolved from humble origins to become mighty coalitions of full-time activists. NGO's like the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Association for Social Advancement mushroomed even as their agendas have been fully implemented and their goals exceeded. It now owns and operates 30,000 schools.

This mission creep is not unique to developing countries. As Parkinson discerned, organizations tend to self-perpetuate regardless of their proclaimed charter. Remember NATO? Human rights organizations, like Amnesty, are now attempting to incorporate in their ever-expanding remit "economic and social rights" - such as the rights to food, housing, fair wages, potable water, sanitation, and health provision. How insolvent countries are supposed to provide such munificence is conveniently overlooked.

"The Economist" reviewed a few of the more egregious cases of NGO imperialism.

Human Rights Watch lately offered this tortured argument in favor of expanding the role

of human rights NGO's: "The best way to prevent famine today is to secure the right to free expression - so that misguided government policies can be brought to public attention and corrected before food shortages become acute." It blatantly ignored the fact that respect for human and political rights does not fend off natural disasters and disease. The two countries with the highest incidence of AIDS are Africa's only two true democracies - Botswana and South Africa.

The Centre for Economic and Social Rights, an American outfit, "challenges economic injustice as a violation of international human rights law". Oxfam pledges to support the "rights to a sustainable livelihood, and the rights and capacities to participate in societies and make positive changes to people's lives". In a poor attempt at emulation, the WHO published an inanelly titled document - "A Human Rights Approach to Tuberculosis".

NGO's are becoming not only all-pervasive but more aggressive. In their capacity as "shareholder activists", they disrupt shareholders meetings and act to actively tarnish corporate and individual reputations. Friends of the Earth worked hard last year to instigate a consumer boycott against Exxon Mobil - for not investing in renewable energy resources and for ignoring global warming. No one - including other shareholders - understood their demands. But it went down well with the media, with a few celebrities, and with contributors.

As "think tanks", NGO's issue partisan and biased reports. The International Crisis Group published a rabid attack on the then incumbent government of Macedonia, days before an election, relegating the rampant corruption of its predecessors - whom it seemed to be tacitly supporting - to a few footnotes. On at least two occasions - in its reports regarding Bosnia and Zimbabwe - ICG has recommended confrontation, the imposition of sanctions, and, if all else fails, the use of force. Though the most vocal and visible, it is far from being the only NGO that advocates "just" wars.

The ICG is a repository of former heads of state and has-been politicians and is renowned (and notorious) for its prescriptive - some say meddlesome - philosophy and tactics. "The Economist" remarked sardonically: "To say (that ICG) is 'solving world crises' is to risk underestimating its ambitions, if overestimating its achievements."

NGO's have orchestrated the violent showdown during the trade talks in Seattle in 1999 and its repeat performances throughout the world. The World Bank was so intimidated by the riotous invasion of its premises in the NGO-choreographed "Fifty Years is Enough" campaign of 1994, that it now employs dozens of NGO activists and let NGO's determine many of its policies.

NGO activists have joined the armed - though mostly peaceful - rebels of the Chiapas region in Mexico. Norwegian NGO's sent members to forcibly board whaling ships. In the USA, anti-abortion activists have murdered doctors. In Britain, animal rights zealots have both assassinated experimental scientists and wrecked property.

Birth control NGO's carry out mass sterilizations in poor countries, financed by rich country governments in a bid to stem immigration. NGO's buy slaves in Sudan thus encouraging the practice of slave hunting throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Other NGO's actively collaborate with "rebel" armies - a euphemism for terrorists.

NGO's lack a synoptic view and their work often undermines efforts by international organizations such as the UNHCR and by governments. Poorly-paid local officials have to contend with crumbling budgets as the funds are diverted to rich expatriates doing the same job for a multiple of the cost and with inexhaustible hubris.

This is not conducive to happy co-existence between foreign do-gooders and indigenous governments. Sometimes NGO's seem to be an ingenious ploy to solve Western unemployment at the expense of down-trodden natives. This is a misperception driven by envy and avarice.

But it is still powerful enough to foster resentment and worse. NGO's are on the verge of provoking a ruinous backlash against them in their countries of destination. That would be a pity. Some of them are doing indispensable work. If only they were a wee more sensitive and somewhat less ostentatious. But then they wouldn't be NGO's, would they?

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From Glory to Glory

By Joyce C. Lock

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When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.

They shall fear thee as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations. He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth. In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth. He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.

Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day.

Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah.

He appointed the moon for seasons: the sun knoweth his going down. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breach of his people, and healeth the stroke of their wound.

Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord.

There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.

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Joyce C. Lock is a published author, poet, and columnist. In addition, she founded and maintains the e-mail ministries "Heavenly Inspirations"

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