

What Is an NGO?

Nongovernmental organizations come in many forms, sizes and types. Many are religiously oriented, regionally based, technically specialized, or community-based organizations. Most are small, though the more well-known are worldwide entities with international umbrellas and national chapters.

When an NGO is created it establishes a mission or vision statement, and a series of objectives and goals that guide it as an organization. If an NGO is founded with the mission of responding to disaster victims that are children, for example, it will seek to raise funds, capacity, and know-how to deliver programming to assist child victims of a disaster. The focus may also be regional, country specific, or to provide a specific service.

Executive Summary

NGOs are extremely diverse and can be characterized by their missions or response.

- Two important NGO activities addressed here are emergency response-relief and development.
- Other equally important NGOs focus on human rights and advocacy, conflict mitigation and resolution, and education.
- NGOs are operational in almost every emergency around the world.
- NGOs generally need external financial support as well as technical, logistical, and programmatic support.

The global community of NGOs encompasses a wide range of organizations, which can usually be categorized into four basic types:

- humanitarian aid, both emergency response and developmental
- advocacy groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, and Physicians for Human Rights
- faith-based groups are humanitarian aid groups originally founded on faith principles but do not use religion as a part of the aid given (Mercy Corps)
- missionary aid groups seek to “spread the word” using humanitarian aid to access to those who need conversion, more or less conditional aid (Samaritan’s Purse, Hope Ships)

The following organizations are smaller in capacity, staff size, or funding levels but operate in numerous locations across the world. Some are unique and focus solely on a specific sector or specialty.

- Air Serv International
- American Refugee Committee
- Americares
- Doctors of the World
- Direct Relief International
- Project Hope
- CARE
- Relief International
- OXFAM
- Mercy Corps International (MCI)
- Volunteers In Technical Assistance
- International Medical Corps

As noted, some NGOs are advocacy organizations. That is, they do not supply aid per se but instead focus on advocacy issues specific to the disaster to draw public attention with the aim of changing international, domestic, or host country policy. Recent examples of such type of advocacy include women's rights in Afghanistan, and the genocide in Darfur.

- Refugees International
- Physicians for Human Rights
- Human Rights Watch
- Amnesty International
- International Rescue Committee
- Medicines Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders)
- Landmine Survivors Network
- MADRE

Faith-based organizations are the largest growing group of NGOs and accounted for 10.5 percent of USAID dollars to nongovernmental aid organizations in fiscal 2001, and 19.9 percent in 2005. Some of the older, more experienced NGOs were founded on religious principles (Mercy Corps or International Rescue Committee) but do not proselytize as part of their programming, though others do. An easy way to identify these groups is from their mission statements, which are typically available on the group's website. Samaritan's Purse states that they have a "single-minded commitment to evangelism through aid relief" (www.samaritanspurse.org). The following list is not comprehensive but outlines evangelical NGOs, which the military frequently encounters:

- Samaritan's Purse
- Shelter Now
- Cure International
- Food for the Hungry
- Hope Ships
- World Vision
- Catholic Relief Services
- UMCOR
- Church World Service

In today's world, it is important to understand these differences. Using a missionary group in a Muslim country can cause havoc and distrust, as well as put aid programs at risk if the host country does not understand that not all NGOs are oriented to promote religion.

NGOs can be found in every country, and though the NGOs studied in this manual are primarily oriented internationally and mostly headquartered in western countries, most of the thousands of NGOs globally are local or indigenous civil society organizations that operate much as nonprofits do in the United States. More than 30,000 NGOs operate internationally, of which approximately half represent various western-based organizations working in developing countries.⁵³

53 Union of International Associations, www.uia.be/node/50 (accessed December 11, 2008).

Characteristics of Aid

NGOs work in five areas:⁵⁴

- international relief and development
- democracy promotion and electoral support, human rights and good governance
- conflict mitigation, management, and resolution
- civil society support and community-based service
- education, medical, and state service replacement (traditionally formed locally to substitute or enhance lacking or nonexistent government services)

This manual focuses on **international relief organizations** found in numerous places internationally and constantly responding to humanitarian emergencies. Of course, depending on the location and type of emergency the reader is considering, the number and type of organizations involved will vary. Local (host nation) NGOs and the various other organizations are often found in humanitarian emergencies and are used as partners, facilitators, or guides to international NGOs and IOs that deliver emergency services.

Keep in mind, however, that international NGOs have moved to using primarily local staff in a response for building host nation capacity, safety, and credibility among recipients of aid. Just because you don't see a flag does not mean an international NGO is not there.

International NGOs are and have been prominent features in international responses to humanitarian emergencies globally. The United States and other governments have come to rely heavily on NGOs and their vast network of local and international connections. Because NGOs have extensive ground-level experience and are many times present before humanitarian emergencies arise, there exists an immediate capacity and knowledge of what needs to be done to respond to humanitarian needs.

NGOs—both locally and internationally—focus their work in a ground-up fashion that uses local capacity, local and regional organizations, familiarity and intimate relations with the community to implement programs. This is one of the primary advantages that NGOs have when compared with government and military agencies responding to the same type of emergency. Instead of duplicating efforts or having to establish new programs from scratch, donors now use the NGO community as an extension of capacity, and often as partners in formulating regional-level responses or policy.

NGOs Overseas

NGOs are found in most overseas disaster and emergency settings. NGOs are present in all phases of the emergency, including well beforehand. Their work includes various levels of activity:

54 Although these are generalizations, this list encompasses the primary differences between international and local organizations, and those organizations that exist to operate in humanitarian emergencies and those that operate in more long-term development settings.

- The onset of the emergency (acute phase) normally lasts for approximately a month in new emergencies. NGOs deliver all forms of emergency services, including emergency medical assistance, shelter, water and sanitation services, displaced population management, food and water provisions and nonfood items such as cooking utensils and blankets and the like.
- The recovery stage includes the period just after the initial chaos and expanded relief efforts are implemented. More assessments, detailed analysis, and extended and more far-reaching services can be delivered once security is better and the host nation, NGOs, and the donor community have identified priorities.
- The rehabilitation and development stages normally take hold after about six months, when the crude mortality rate (CMR) is close to baseline, and populations have been repatriated or settled and longer-term programs are designed and initiated.⁵⁵

The primary objectives of most NGOs responding to emergencies are to reduce the crude mortality rate, lower the level of physical, emotional and psychological suffering, provide stable food and clean water sources, provide for services of displaced populations and to generally assist national governmental or international efforts to stem large-scale suffering and humanitarian tragedy. This suggests that NGOs are often the first international organizations into an area during or after a humanitarian emergency, and often remain the only form of international presence in areas that are especially rough. U.S. military forces often encounter NGOs that have been in-country for years and that have specialized or in-depth knowledge of the country's or region's culture, politics, demographics and terrain and other pertinent forms of familiarity that comes with time and experience.

InterAction (www.InterAction.org), the U.S. consortium of U.S.-based international NGOs, states that its 170+ member organizations are operating in “every developing country” in the world.⁵⁶ This means that in any operation in a developing country, government or military units is likely to find a U.S.-based NGO on the ground. It is also likely that international NGOs based in Europe and the United States will be on hand in humanitarian emergencies.

Many NGOs sustain multiple programs in more than one country at a time. Larger NGOs, such as CARE, Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services, and World Vision, specialize in responding to numerous emergencies simultaneously, often using leverage from one emergency to respond to another, or relying on an extensive network of national chapter organizations to establish a footing in an emergency. Smaller organizations will also often respond to more than one emergency at a time, but have to choose their responses more selectively.

55 See Michael J. Roy, “Humanitarian Assistance: Introduction to Key Topics,” lecture presented in the Military Medical Humanitarian Assistance Course for Internal Medicine, sponsored by the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, MD, March 26–28, 2001.

56 InterAction, the American Council of Voluntary International Action, is based in Washington, DC, and is the leading U.S. consortium of internationally operating U.S. NGOs. It serves as a coordinating mechanism that primarily advocates to U.S. and other governmental institutions and international donors on behalf of its membership (see www.interaction.org).

NGO Assistance Activities

In most responses to humanitarian emergencies four major objectives are commonly held by the international community, by NGOs and by military units participating in humanitarian assistance operations (HAOs):

- reduce excess mortality
- reduce or minimize excess disease, disability and unstable health conditions generally
- provide infrastructure rehabilitation (including health-care facilities, water and sanitation systems, roads, telecommunication systems, and so on)
- ensure and protect return passage for displaced populations (refugees and IDPs)

NGOs vary in their program capacity and may carry out any or all of several functions: emergency assistance, long-term development, peace building, and sustainability programming. Key policy and operations are designed with several goals in mind: preserve life and minimize suffering by providing warning of natural events that often result in property damage and loss of life, sometimes extreme (such as hurricanes); preserve life and minimize suffering by responding to human-generated disasters; foster self-sufficiency among disaster-prone nations by helping them achieve some measure of preparedness; alleviate suffering by providing rapid, adequate response to aid requests; and enhance recovery through rehabilitation programs. Although most NGOs subscribe to the elimination of extreme poverty, many work as development agencies in specific theaters, including postconflict environments.

In addition, assistance activities can be divided into three categories based on the degree of contact with the affected population. Direct assistance is face-to-face distribution of goods and services. Examples include support of medical clinic services, supplies, and personnel. These services can be and usually are long term. Indirect assistance is at least one step removed from the population and involves such activities as transporting goods or relief personnel, support for ministries of health, and technical assistance such as assessments of hospitals, clinics or even population needs and gaps. The third category, infrastructure support, involves providing general services, such as road repair, hospital repair, airspace management, and power generation, which facilitate relief but are not necessarily visible to or solely for the benefit of the affected population.

Categories of NGO Response

The thematic division between those NGOs that focus on disaster-emergency response and those that focus on longer-term or community-based development is significant. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon to find organizations that participate in both longer-term and shorter-term programming in disaster-affected areas or developing regions or countries.

Disaster and Emergency Response NGOs

Many NGOs focus only on disaster response. This means that some arrive at the earliest possible time during or after an emergency, implement emergency response programs, and leave shortly after the

first stages of an emergency are complete. NGOs focus on being light, nimble, and efficient with very little red tape to prevent immediate action. NGOs that provide medical assistance pride themselves in being specific in their mission and efficient in their capacity to deal with emergency health matters while working to rebuild local capacity in the host country to deal with ongoing crises with the end state goal of improving health infrastructure and public health capacity.

Organizations that maintain disaster response capacities can respond immediately to humanitarian emergencies and are often part of a team of organizations that will arrive in an emergency setting before any other agencies or organizations. Albania and Kosovo, East Timor, earthquakes in Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Peru, and China, floods in Mozambique of 2000 and 2001, Afghanistan, and the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 showed that civilian capacity to muster resources and deliver emergency, search and rescue, and engineering specialists to the affected regions was indeed impressive. In many cases, NGOs were either already operational on the ground at the onset of the emergency or were the first responders, delivering relief personnel often only hours after the onset of an emergency.

Larger organizations have disaster response teams ready to respond to man-made and natural disasters on a moment's notice, and though normally reliant on private sector transportation, they can be deployed with considerable speed and resource to manage portions of the initial stages of the emergency. For those organizations that can afford to have a series of doctors, engineers, coordinators, and other general relief specialists on call, there is often a roster of people the organization can call on to ship out to an emergency-affected region to better assess the needs.

Long-Term Development NGOs

Other organizations shy away from relief and disaster response specialties (either solely or entirely) and focus on providing longer-term developmental assistance to populations affected by complex humanitarian emergencies that have existed for long periods, or in generally desperate conditions in very poor countries. Some NGOs do both relief and development, but those that focus solely on development are often sensitive about the delineation between how their activities are distinct from emergency responses or temporary fixes. Vested in working closely with the host community, region, or country, a development-focused NGO establishes stable projects that focus on economic development, health-care system enhancement, infrastructure rehabilitation, and other longer-term and thematic programs through local capacity building.

Many development-oriented NGOs are primed to provide emergency services in their area of operation. The NGO may not have specific emergency response strategies, but those that have been in a country or region for a long time have an advantage in knowing a region's workings, terrain, and culture extensively. When a humanitarian emergency strikes, many development NGOs can easily harness resources to be the first responder, or to serve as an information source for donors and emergency response NGOs soon to arrive.

NGOs like Winrock International do not normally participate in emergency response activities even though they may be in the area.⁵⁷ Winrock is a development NGO that specifically provides support for economic development in developing communities. It has no capacity to respond to emergency needs outside of providing information to other NGOs about the area, people, resources, and other pertinent information. Because it does not normally use trucks, warehouses, local procurement channels for large commodities, or emergency networks, it would not be a prime candidate to shift its programming to an emergency response-oriented framework.

On the other hand, NGOs that focus on development such as CARE, World Vision, Food for the Hungry, or International Relief and Development are also capable of responding to a humanitarian emergency. Each has extensive worldwide networks of emergency response capacities and personnel, as well as comprehensive policies and experience in responding to humanitarian emergencies. Although they participate in development-oriented programming, these organizations can quickly adapt their capacities and become a viable humanitarian emergency response when a humanitarian emergency arises.

This differentiation between the two major types of international NGOs is essential. Both have value and should be understood as part of the NGO community, but are often different in objectives, missions, and capacities.

Multisectoral NGOs that participate in global relief and development activities are valuable in an emergency because of their unique blend of ground-level knowledge of an area gleaned from development projects and significant know-how on emergency response acquired during missions worldwide. Development-oriented NGOs are valuable in that they can easily provide an extensive body of knowledge and understanding that would not normally be readily available for the international NGOs and donor organizations arriving specifically to respond to a new emergency.

Table 3.1 (*see following page*) distinguishes comparative advantages, weaknesses, and other characteristics between emergency response NGOs, development NGOs, and those active in both sectors. Although not comprehensive, it can be useful in understanding the various dynamics of each type of NGO.

Why Are NGOs Overseas? Why Are They in My AOR?

Military and other entities that begin operations in humanitarian emergencies will find various types of NGOs in the area that focus on many different types of services. There is often overlap, and sometimes an organization will specialize in general sectors that may or may not be needed in a given emergency.

57 Winrock International is a U.S.-based NGO headquartered in Arkansas and Virginia. It says that “achieving a sustainable balance between the need for food and income and environmental quality is the most effective approach to improving living standards of rural people and ensuring resources for the future” (see www.winrock.org).

	<i>Emergency Response</i>	<i>Development</i>	<i>Multisectoral</i>
Comparative advantage or strength	Extensive expertise in logistics, communications and coordination; rapid deployment; specialized capacity to handle emergency health, infrastructure, and so on	Extensive ground-level knowledge of a region's people, culture, language, economy, society, political atmosphere; close relationships and networks with local NGOs, other civil society organizations, government	Extensive knowledge of the ground with the capacity to shift operational strength to emergency response; support of an international network of emergency response individuals, programs and policies; ready for anything; sensitive to needy population's needs, strengths, and capacities
Weaknesses	Often lack knowledge of needy population's culture or politico-economic atmosphere; often unaware or not knowledgeable about region's transportation, communications structures, ministry regulations, and the like. Often have to establish new systems and programs from scratch, requiring set-up and learning-curve time	Often lack capacity to handle multiple stages of humanitarian suffering (emergency); often limited by narrow mission or project scope	Sometimes not strong enough in any one sector or programming area; potentially weak in coordination efforts with other relief or development NGOs or even militaries
Value to an emergency	Provide emergency relief and humanitarian assistance; concentrated expertise and capacity to provide immediate services; normally host to emergency specialists, medical personnel and an efficient logistics system to complete assessments, coordinate and deliver HA	Provides body of knowledge and extensive networks between local NGOs, governments and donors that can be shared with emergency response entities, donors and militaries	Can immediately harness knowledge of local conditions and atmosphere for most appropriate forms of emergency response; can leverage the strength of local entities and relationships; has large sense of credibility in eyes of local populations as not an outsider
Examples	Medicine San Frontiers (MSF), International Rescue Committee (IRC), International Medical Corps (IMC), Doctors of the World (MDM), Air Serv International	Winrock International, Catholic Relief Services, UMCOR	World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, CARE, Oxfam, Relief International, Save the Children, International Relief and Development.

Where found	At the onset of an emergency; immediately after large-scale fighting has stopped or natural disaster; after peace agreements and cease-fires; during conflict (variable depending on scale, accessibility); up to 6 months after an emergency	In poor or post-emergency countries and/or regions; in rural and urban areas with substantial offices and presence in specific areas of operation; 3 to 6 months after an emergency. Can be in-country for a decade or more.	In both development and emergency settings, often using an existing development project in an emergency-affected country to launch emergency HAOs; can be in-country for a decade or more (IMC in Afghanistan more than 23 years)
Duration	1 week to 6 months for natural disasters and postconflict response; indefinite for complex emergencies and continuing humanitarian emergencies	Indefinite, often lasting more than 20 years in a specific region; normally provides programming until donor priorities shift	Indefinite
Size	Variable	Variable	Variable
Constituency	Victims of a humanitarian emergency	Postconflict, poor and poverty-stricken populations	A combination of emergency victims and the postconflict poverty-stricken
Donors	Governments, UN agencies, private contributions, and NGO savings that have been set aside for emergency spending	Foundations, governments, development oriented UN agencies, churches, synagogues, and mosques, religious organizations, corporations	Variable

An NGO will be found in a humanitarian emergency for three primary reasons.

- It has a *comparative advantage* in responding to a specific emergency, it has current operations in the area that precede the emergency, it has specific capacity nearby that could be utilized in the emergency, or it has a specific expertise or strength in the affected region or emergency type.
- It has a *specific interest in the area*, suggesting that it was formed to serve a specific population or region, and any emergency within that population or region would naturally warrant a response from it.
- It targets a *specific type of victim*, and when an emergency or situation creates victims of this type, it is a natural responder.

NGOs have a number of advantages in a disaster.⁵⁸

- They are able to experiment freely with innovative approaches and, if necessary, to take risks.
- They are flexible in adapting to local situations and responding to local needs and therefore able to develop integrated projects, as well as sectoral projects.
- They enjoy good rapport with people and can render microassistance to very poor people as they can identify those who are most in need and tailor assistance to their needs.
- They can communicate at all levels, from the neighborhood to the upper echelons of government.
- They can recruit both experts and highly motivated staff with fewer restrictions than the government.

At the same time, they also have a number of disadvantages.

- The paternalistic attitudes of some NGOs may restrict the degree of participation in program or project design by the local community.
- Approaches to a problem or area may sometimes be either restricted or constrained.
- An approach or idea may not be replicable because the project or selected area is not representative, the project coverage is relatively small, or outside financial resources are too restrictive.
- What is called the *territorial possessiveness* of an area, sector, or project reduces cooperation and coordination across agencies, and is often seen as threatening or competitive.

The most common NGOs military personnel are likely to come in contact with are profiled in annex 1, which harnesses a representative cross-section of the types of organizations that can fall within the NGO category and are likely to interface with the military in disasters. The range extends from the world's largest NGOs to smaller organizations, but does hold steady the condition that each operates in humanitarian emergencies in countries other than its origin. It is, however, worthy of note that many U.S.-based NGOs changed their charters to respond to the Katrina disaster.

58 Abstracted from William Cousins, "Non-Governmental Initiatives," in *The Urban Poor and Basic Infrastructure Services in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila: Asian Development Bank and the Economic Development Institute, 1991).