CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Nongovernmental Organizations as a Vehicle for Collective Action

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Over a year ago, Kony 2012 (http://invisiblechildren.com/media/videos/program-media/kony-2012), a campaign that sought to bring the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, to light, was beginning to attract massive audiences worldwide partly due to the strategic and creative initiative run by the NGO (nongovernmental organization) Invisible Children. Simultaneously, local efforts by NGOs were taking place, including those of the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, which invited the world to consider alternatives to violence in order to end the conflict in Northern Uganda. In addition to the global and local expressions of harmony were the efforts by Sant’Egidio, a faith-based NGO in Italy, that provided space for and effectively facilitated dialogue between Joseph Kony and the Ugandan government. These cases illustrate three very different responses, all with considerable merit, to one dramatic and tragic conflict: (1) an international campaign to end a violent conflict with a clear victory, (2) a local effort to realize peaceful solutions and local justice, and (3) an Italian NGO’s vision to negotiate a peace between Kony and the Ugandan government. Bearing these three examples in mind, what is the central purpose of NGOs? Though there is no single answer here, we will argue that NGOs create individual responses to violence and conflict, which ultimately synthesize as a collective and multifaceted vehicle for change.

Violent conflicts have reached all corners of the globe and have left deep scars in the social fabric of many societies. As a response, the dedication, advocacy, and innovative techniques of NGOs have opened new avenues for societies to move from active hostility to inquiry and from conflict management to resolution (i.e., addressing root causes of a conflict). To offer a more precise (formal) definition of NGOs, we argue they are groups with legal status and relational connections to state structures and international
organizations that share a common constructive purpose by formal recognition and by work and action (Bartoli, 2013).

The existence of NGOs can be traced back to the emergence of the international system after World War II. In the aftermath of the war, at the moment at which states were reengaging with each other through the framework of the United Nations, there emerged a desire to identify actors that were relevant to the states and their interactions but were not as formal or established as UN member states. This led to a curious definition of NGOs through a negative qualification: nongovernmental. This being said, these “non” governmental organizations were contributing to conflict resolution even before UN member states deemed them as such.

An example of this is captured through the work of Henri Dunant that would eventually inspire the Red Cross movement. In the middle of the nineteenth century in Italy, after the Battle of Solferino, Dunant encountered human suffering that demanded a response by nonbelligerent actors. So he coined what we now call the space “in between” war—the suspension of hostilities where it is possible to care for the wounded, bury the dead, and encourage healing for the afflicted. In this way, Dunant was not mediating between belligerents; he was not facilitating dialogue; he was not negotiating. Rather, he was practicing what we might now call humanitarian creativity.

Clearly creativity implies a need for a safe space where one can indeed engage in the creative act. Dunant achieved this by holding parties in conflict apart in order to establish and maintain the space necessary for conflict resolution activities to take place. In this space, respect, common humanity, and the deep appreciation for human dignity is possible. It is the very space that NGOs create to resolve and transform conflict dynamics; it is the space that NGOs use as a foundation to become a vehicle for common purpose; and it is the very space that researchers and practitioners must explore further. This chapter explores those very things by discussing how NGOs (1) reveal the nature of state, (2) encourage creativity, (3) augment knowledge of conflict prevention, (4) better our knowledge of a conflict’s contentious past, (5) incite action, and (6) contribute to learning.

But first we explore what exactly an NGO is and what it does. The definition of NGOs above captures the grounding principle of the NGO movement: the way in which NGOs can achieve commonality and collective action. We propose conceptualizing NGOs as conduits that connect different players. NGOs make it possible for many constituency groups to connect with one another as well as with the state and its political and administrative structures in orderly and productive ways. They
are a form (a vehicle) that follows a function. In this case, the function is to organize structures that support activities and encourage a vision centered on shared (or common) purposes. In this way, NGOs become an expression of a community that confronts challenges (or set of challenges) collectively.

Frequently they are expressions of relational webs that precede legal recognition. In this way, families, villages, clans, and CBOs (community-based organizations) often exist relationally before any legal recognition exists. The state determines the legal status of NGOs and creates and maintains the space in which they exist. NGOs, in return, become an expression of the state’s political culture. They also contribute to the state by experimenting, advocating, and sharing knowledge.

NGOs do not perform their activities in a vacuum. Rather, all activities of NGOs, especially those in the area of conflict resolution and peace building, have some influence on and connection to the work of the state and international organizations (Schemeil, 2008). This is why the very presence of NGOs in a political system signifies that the new option exists and functions within that system. The presence of NGOs creates and increases the number of options for state and nonstate actors; it also increases the availability of such options through interactive processes of engagement (Aall, 1996; Anderson, 1996; Chesterman, 2001). States typically have a vested interest in vibrant NGO contributions, especially when they are not constrained by self-imposed fears. In such cases, a small NGO can be a significant agent of change (Diehl and Druckman 2010). The presence of NGOs therefore can be seen as a precondition to a fully developed, open, and inclusive polity, where alternatives are explored, assessed, and actualized.

But to fully understand the role of NGOs in conflict resolution processes, we must also reflect on their efficiency and accountability, and, ultimately, hypothesize a general mode of operation for them. Studies of NGOs engaged in peace processes indicate their tendency to seek resonance and leverage turning points (Bartoli, 2013; Druckman, 2001, 2004). They do so by providing connectivity and communication among adversaries and other stakeholders bound in hostile systems. This is how they begin to help communities transform problems into collective opportunities. It is not unusual for parties in a conflict to use NGOs to explore venues, ideas, and strategies that they are perhaps willing to consider but are not ready to embrace. While the NGOs might not have the power to set the tone for conversations or independently transform a problem, the parties to the conflict do indeed have that power. And through this avenue, NGOs can provide the connectivity, experimentation, and innovation necessary for those ventures to succeed.
NGOs engage in four basic types of interventions, each with its own set of resources (Bartoli, 2013):

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Intervention</th>
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<td>NGOs observed working on prevention</td>
<td>Emphasis on knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGOs observed working on peacemaking</td>
<td>Emphasis on relations</td>
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<td>NGOs observed working on peacekeeping</td>
<td>Emphasis on advocacy</td>
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<td>NGOs observed working on peacebuilding</td>
<td>Emphasis on experimentation</td>
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This proposed taxonomy is not exclusive or exhaustive. As with any other interpretive framework, all four areas can be applicable to the subject. In this case, an NGO can at times be assigned to any or all of the proposed areas. In addition, the focus on one area does not imply that the same organization is absent in another nor does it imply an exclusive focus on one specific section. Instead, we should see the action of NGOs through the lens of the specific system around them and what it is trying to achieve. This is also relevant to donors, who use these very lenses in their evaluation of results and often control resources essential to the survival of NGOs. In recent years, the interaction among NGOs, donors, and local partners has led to a reconsideration of the uniqueness dilemma, which suggests that human experiences are unique and yet comparable. If the uniqueness argument is stressed too far, there is no meaningful comparability. If the comparability is emphasized too much, there is no respectful differentiation of the uniquely individual instances. But what is unique, and what is universal? What is comparable? What is relevant? These questions are clearly important not only for NGOs and their relationship with donors, but also for fundamental epistemological issues, which NGOs can address constructively.

We should also touch on the accountability and evaluation of NGOs. How might we fairly evaluate NGOs’ contributions to peacemaking processes? NGOs working on peacemaking are certainly accountable (and thus should be evaluated) to the parties who have requested their involvement, the actors who are exploring new paths through them, and the people (and institutions) who are involved in the peace process. The accountability might not be formalized, but it is real. If an NGO fails to deliver on a
promise, makes false statements, or sets the stage for a less-than-positive track record, its capacity to succeed diminishes significantly because NGOs are highly dependent on reputation.

If NGOs are to prove efficiency and accountability, they must confront and overcome some serious challenges as well. First, they might have to overcome the notion that they are part of a Western hegemonic strategy. In this regard, the language of NGOs involved in conflict resolution processes might be seen by some as an imposition (Druckman, 2001). They might also promote the frames that are incomprehensible to locals and encouraged by outside perspective. This error demonstrates the NGO’s ignorance of the complexities and nuances of the conflict at hand (Support, 2001). This is to say that they are unaware of or detached from the realities on the ground.

Similarly, NGO accountability is often questioned because of outsiders’ suspicion that they are mere executors of powerful, controlling states. From issues of civil-military cooperation to questions of executing foreign policy objectives, critics see the role of many NGOs in conflict resolution as simply prolonging the presence of a specific powerful state actor on the international scene. Conceivably, then, these challenges must be addressed and overcome if an NGO is to produce effective results.

**NGOs REVEAL THE QUALITY OF THE STATE**

NGOs play a significant role at many levels of a conflict. From local community-based organizations to large international organizations that are able to mobilize millions of followers, NGOs have contributed significantly to conflict resolution in different ways. But when we consider how NGOs can reveal the quality and nature of the state, let’s reconsider the legacy of Henri Dunant.

Today, an NGO inspired by Henri Dunant’s work (it even briefly carried his name), Humanitarian Dialogue, is pursuing direct facilitation, mediation, dialogue, and representation of local concerns. In this way, it gives the polity a voice. As an independent agent of UN member states, Humanitarian Dialogue seeks to serve people in the in-between space. While Dunant was concerned with the bodies of the wounded and the dead and with the pain of the families and of the nation, Humanitarian Dialogue similarly serves the polity that emerged out of a world of differences. Whereas Dunant created space around and gave attention to the suffering of the wounded and the dead, Humanitarian Dialogue gives voice to those who lack political representation and are thus unable to fulfill their aspirations. Considering this, NGOs such as Humanitarian Dialogue symbolize an expression of a societal pattern that precedes state structure of the UN member states.

NGOs, however, are not the only organized expression of the polity. The revised triangular definitional space suggested by Yutaka Tsujinaka (2008),
a social scientist who has studied the role of civil society in modern cultures, is helpful in showing the different modalities of civil society and how it functions in this very way. As Tsujinaka’s model effectively demonstrates there is a distinction between branches of civil society and the realities external to them (government, business, or family structures).

Often when we speak of NGOs in relation to the state and the legal system, we are speaking of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in relation to business and CBOs in relation to families and neighborhoods. The difference between an NGO and a local community-based organization is usually the level of institutionalization. According to our working definition, NGOs are legal entities and thus have a direct link with the state and legal system. Within that state and legal system, NGOs are recognized as nonstate entities and given legal recognition. This is important especially when we observe that NGOs are frequently a way of managing programs and funds (Fox and Brown, 1998). Moreover, the legal status of NGOs requires and imposes a certain degree of management structure, accountability, and dependability (Brown, 2008; Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2006). As mentioned, an NGO emerges when—in order to obtain a common purpose—a legally recognized structure is needed. If this need is not pressing, NGOs might not emerge. Instead the people might continue to articulate their interests and needs through established networks of relationships with existing local communities.

**Challenges**

The presence of NGOs in relation to the state can also be problematic. Here we must mention the challenges an NGO faces in relation to their closeness to the state. In other words, their proximity can be an area of concern. If NGOs are too close to the state, they risk being manipulated by the state directly (appointing leadership, controlling membership, limiting the areas of action) or indirectly (controlling funding, reputation, and access). In this way, the relationship with the state should be considered, as Quango suggests, through the term *quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization.*

**NGOs CONTRIBUTE TO CREATIVITY**

By once again returning to Dunant and the Humanitarian Dialogue, we can see another important contribution of NGOs: their capacity to contribute to creativity. As a result of this, NGOs can effectively respond to conditions that seem to breed a repetition of the existing problem. In many cases, this repetition brings with it violence, and with violence often comes a need for creative solutions. The case of the Community of Sant’Egidio, which has since
intervened in Guatemala, Algeria, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Algeria, demonstrates this very point through its work in Mozambique.

Mozambique in many ways was the paradigm of a broken state: it lacked unity and had experienced war and conflict since its inception, it had suffered oppression for over four hundred years under the rule of the Portuguese, and it had experienced the violent and exploitative constraints of colonization. Yet despite its history, Mozambique found a way to achieve sustainable governance through a peace agreement negotiated between the two parties in Rome under the aegis of the Community of Sant’Egidio.

Strikingly, Sant’Egidio is not (and was not) a conflict resolution organization—that is, it was not professionally dedicated to the processes of conflict resolution. Rather, the community is an expression of an old spiritual tradition in Rome (Christianity). In 1968, the Catholic Church encouraged young high school students to gather in prayer, service, and community in an effort to support a fuller engagement with the gospel. Andrea Ricardi, the founder and leader of the Community of Sant’Egidio, became a key player not only during the peace negotiation process in Mozambique (he was one of the four mediators) but also through his numerous attempts to bring about peace in situations that were not, according to many observers, open to resolution.

Mozambique is the first time we see an NGO negotiating a track 1 agreement. It was allowed this opportunity because, in the eyes of the Mozambique government, the NGO represented an unofficial entity that did not threaten the government’s sovereignty. Thus, Sant’Egidio was able to create space in which both parties felt protected and able to communicate. In this way Sant’Egidio creatively approached the problem and chose not to impose a solution. Rather, it emphasized the importance of local (organic) ownership and authenticity of the process.

It seems that this creativity was deeply rooted in the realization that UN member states, while holding a prominent role at the national and international levels, were human constructs and thus fallible. Perhaps evolution then becomes an important theme. The two-thousand-year-old tradition of the Catholic Church was in many ways at play in this evolutionary process, which manifested through the creative response of Sant’Egidio in confronting political problems captured by state formation trends. This example demonstrates how NGOs can become a servant of participatory creativity.

When parties are in conflict, their capacity for curiosity is highly constrained. As Melchin and Picard have aptly noted, parties to the conflict have a reduced capacity to be curious, and this in turn makes it increasingly difficult for the system to generate creative responses. NGOs, in numerous conflict resolution processes, created this space in which creativity, as a
result of curiosity, invited parties to approach a common problem collaboratively and thus transform the problem into a challenge that could lead to an opportunity. For Mozambique, this opportunity led to a sustainable government for its people. Again, this captures the capacity of an NGO to act creatively in order to move parties from conflict to cooperation.

**Challenges**

In the case of Mozambique, it was clear that Sant’Egidio did not have the power to impose a solution on the parties and thus harnessed the capacity of creativity. But in other cases, the external, almost objective creativity, if it does not demonstrate respect for the painful conditions of the conflict, can become more of an insult to the parties involved.

It must also be said that NGOs, when striving to contribute to creativity, can also create dissonance through the many approaches to action. This means that because of various interests and strategies, actions may be at odds with one another and with the more formal processes of resolution at hand. In this way, creativity might go uncoordinated and unverified due to the structural lack of accountability inherent in some NGOs. These issues around coordination have been raised many times, and studies have suggested that a more systemic approach may contribute to increasing the effectiveness of NGOs by strengthening their capacity for self-coordination (Nan, 2008).

**NGOs CONTRIBUTE TO KNOWLEDGE ON CONFLICT PREVENTION**

The third way in which NGOs have been important to conflict resolution processes is through their contribution to knowledge on conflict prevention. In situations of conflict, the availability, accuracy, and veracity of knowledge are often questioned. Moreover, parties can be unaware of what others are doing and thinking.

Even when knowledge is in fact available, it is often bent by biases and misperceptions, and these can lead to violence. So the paradox here shows how knowledge can also lead to destructive behavior. Details of a specific episode or of interpretive frameworks that actors use may reduce their capacity to resolve conflict. Thus, generating accurate knowledge becomes of utmost importance.

For these reasons, NGOs have become active in generating, verifying, and sharing accurate knowledge for some time. In recent years, the establishment of outlets such as International Crisis Group, Conciliation
Resources, and, more recently, Peace Direct have made information about conflict areas, experiences, and successes more readily available and accessible. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has developed a methodology for gathering context-specific knowledge that helps inform responses to the needs of large political communities and therefore advances the potential for prevention. In addition, the ICG offers independent, nonpartisan information as a result of in-depth on-the-ground efforts. Its research and recommendations to government and intergovernmental bodies, such as to the UN, the European Union, and the World Bank, are prime examples of the centrality of knowledge in conflict resolution processes that an NGO can offer. From recognition of the actors in a conflict, to the ability to accurately report by disposition and strategies, NGOs such as the ICG increase the capacity of the international system, in its specific institutional hubs, to be cognizant of ever-evolving situations.

NGOs such as Conciliation Resources focus more on previous peace processes and their proper documentation. In this way, they develop dossiers dedicated to cases that offer a rich array of lessons learned, which students of conflict resolution and practitioners can access freely. Due to the widespread use of the Internet, knowledge has become part of the larger local and global conversation, making experiences in very diverse areas of the world relevant to political actors eager to be informed. In this way, Conciliation Resources offers services to parties in conflict so that accumulated knowledge can be used in fresh situations.

If we consider the notion that knowledge is an expression of lively and interactive human learning, it is particularly important to discuss how NGOs such as Peace Direct recognize the work, relevance, and experience of local peacemakers as well. Clearly local communities possess knowledge (i.e., local leaders often make wise decisions in difficult circumstances). In this vein, local strategies are developed to experiment with peacemaking as it makes sense in challenging circumstances. This is the knowledge that, while implicit for those who are doing peacemaking, becomes widely available through the efforts of NGOs such as Peace Direct.

NGOs have also been active in increasing knowledge around early-warning systems. Decades ago, Conflict Resolution literature identified the need for these systems, and subsequently local communities began participating in different ways to set this experiment into motion. Interestingly, after the violence in Kenya around the 2008 elections, technical solutions such as crowd sourcing, which gave regular citizens full access to human rights violation reports, became widely recognized as a new form of early warning systems. In light of this, Ushahidi, the Swahili word for testimony, enables local citizens to report human rights violations while protecting their anonymity. While some question the accuracy of crowd-sourcing reports,
the technological innovation and the relational commitment of local, national, regional, and international communities through this process created an environment in which NGOs can generate and verify knowledge that is at the core of preventing violent conflicts.

Another example of how NGOs generate knowledge central to prevention is captured through the work of the African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams who encouraged Kenyan citizens in remote rural areas to report human rights violations. This allowed Kenyan citizens to organize themselves and be supported by international NGOs by sustaining the possibility for local, national, regional, and international collaborations in ways that were previously unimaginable.

**Challenges**

This connectivity also creates a new challenge around the notion of relational responsibility as many, especially in the well-connected North of the globe, have the ever-increasing capacity to be informed at the level of specificity associated with villages and individual cases. For this reason, there is a need to shape a platform that could bring together state and nonstate actors, institutional and noninstitutional organizations, and governmental and nongovernmental entities into a cooperative framework.

Another challenge for the NGO community centers on the issue of negative verification. In other words, how is it possible to demonstrate that something (that did not happen) was prevented by someone’s action? After all, if an event does not occur, it is quite difficult to prove that this nonoccurrence was associated with a specific (preventative) cause. But relating to this issue, consider the following analogy around car accidents and prevention. Through this lens, we might say that it is nearly impossible to prove that the use of seatbelts prevents specific cases of injury in car accidents. But by analyzing all car accidents that occurred over a specific time and in a specific area, we can see the difference between the effect of the seatbelts on lethality and the severity of the injuries. In this way, it is important to move from the presumption of certainty to the analysis of probability.

The third challenge has to do with the NGOs’ limited capacity to affect actual responses. If we know that something is happening in a certain area, can we assume that a specific action will follow? Clearly the answer here is no. But this observation, while correct (there is indeed a gap between the capacity of NGOs to observe and their capacity to act), is not reason enough to discount the NGOs’ contribution. Instead we should begin to reflect on those who have knowledge of particular situations yet choose not to act.
NGOs CONTRIBUTE TO KNOWLEDGE ON DEALING WITH CONTENTIOUS PAST

Today, more than ever before, it is possible to know the suffering around the world; it is possible to know how violent conflict shatters the lives of those trapped within it; and it is possible to know the trauma those experience at the hands of painful violations of their bodies and freedoms. Many NGOs have helped acknowledge, communicate, and share in this suffering. The stories of victims are now available online, a click away within the archives of truth and reconciliation commissions around the world. Cases of activists who have disappeared are kept alive by the dedication of mothers, such as the Argentinean group Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, which gathers every Thursday to protest the disappearances (desaparecidos) of their children thirty years ago. In this way, NGOs have served as the hub for those committed to uncovering the tragedy of the past, for those seeking recognition for victims’ pain, and for those who long for justice. The NGO can advocate for knowledge to surface and reveal the suffering of a contentious past. This knowledge, however, is difficult to acquire, maintain, and preserve. As many human rights activists know well, power often seeks to conceal violations, especially in cases of security forces against dissenters. But since the establishment of Amnesty International, NGOs have contributed to bringing light to the darkness of human violence in order to recognize victims who were previously forgotten. Unfortunately, no matter how great the effort, many of the victims’ voices still remain in the silence and in the darkness, unheard and neglected.

The Framework for Dealing with the Past (Figure 54.1) shows areas in which NGOs can enrich our understanding of postconflict realities. NGOs have the capacity to enable difficult processes of dealing with the contentious past in the aftermath of violent conflicts by contributing to knowledge in terms of the right to know, the right to reparation, right to justice, and guarantee of nonrecurring.

Challenges

Of course, there are still challenges, one of which deals with framing. NGOs when dealing with the past might feel pressure from partisan commitments to remember one side, narrative, or story of victimhood against the other. The need to acknowledge the past and its suffering can lead to a narrowing of the research horizon that does not accurately or promptly recognize the suffering of all those involved in conflict. As a result of this challenge, the topic of dealing with the past has become increasingly prominent in emerging conflict resolution literature, demonstrating the need for
processes and approaches that may help communities (through NGOs and other venues) face the challenges of the past constructively. When the past emerges from conflict situations, it is frequently constraining. In this way, NGOs may play a pivotal role in liberating individuals, communities, and humanity as a whole from the tightening grip of the past by encouraging recognition and not repetition.

**NGOs DO THINGS (OR NGOs INCITE ACTION)**

The previous sections have demonstrated NGOs’ contributions to conflict resolution in terms of their relationship to the state, the parties in conflict, and
NGOs have responded to these questions and similar crises through practical experimentation. This type of action is exemplified through the work of Search for Common Ground (SFCG), the largest organization dedicated to conflict resolution in the world. SFCG has a strong commitment to a long-term relational investment. Founded in the United States in 1982, it tried “to transform the ways the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches towards cooperative solutions.” This goal is fairly broad and applicable to all areas of the world. But it is important to note that SFCG’s long-term commitment to the field created the space necessary for it to develop its own methodologies over time. These methodologies center on an integrated approach that works at multiple levels of analysis simultaneously, thus solving problems of conflict not just at the interpersonal level but also at the societal and international levels as well. Yet, even with this multileveled approach, SFCG still demonstrates a commitment to transforming the individual, the basic unit of analysis in conflict according to one of the pioneers in conflict resolution studies, John Burton (1991).

Furthermore, NGOs such as Search for Common Ground incite action by reaching diverse audiences around the globe through media, radio, and television. As history seems to prove, journalism, in the traditional sense, is far less effective in reaching constituencies in polarized societies. Conceivably there is a real need for unbiased and independent media in conflict zones. An example of this is illustrated through SFCG’s work in Burundi. In Burundi, SFCG’s media strategy included creating a space where Hutu and Tutsi professionals could work side by side in studio Ijumbo. In this case, SFCG identified not only a particular need but also a particular strategy of intervention that allowed the whole society to enjoy the level of free information that was otherwise inaccessible by bringing together two groups of people who were otherwise divided. The campaign focused on media programming through radio and spot messages.

NGOs, specifically SFCG, incited action through media in Macedonia as well. In this case, television was the central vehicle used to encourage tolerance between Albanian and Macedonian ethnic groups. This programming
strategy focused on creating television series that promoted cultural understanding and awareness. Many of these shows still exist today, air in multiple countries, and are watched by millions of people. Furthermore, the television campaign in Macedonia was replicated in Kenya, and similar programming was created to bridge differences along ethnic divides. In one particularly poignant story, a woman in a refugee camp who had recently lost her child during an outburst of violence decided to seek out the nurse who had refused her child treatment because of ethnic differences. Her courage was inspired by a television show. Ultimately the woman found the nurse and convinced her to watch the show together. The transformation that followed was so profound that they now travel around the country together telling their story of pain and reconciliation.

Clearly, SFCG cannot always predict when these shifts in perspective might occur. But in any case, the examples show how practical experimentation might influence deeply divided societies to shape alternative storylines and narratives that encourage constructive and cooperative behavior.

**Challenges**

The main challenge for practitioners in the field of conflict resolution is the tendency to succumb to the self-referential mind-set of “good intentions.” This mind-set emerges when one discounts the need for verifying results and acknowledging their own unintentional control in processes of action. This disrespect and immaturity create conditions for exacerbating tensions in conflict. While the actors intervening may view themselves as well intentioned and may very well be just that, the communities involved in the conflict may not recognize the same positive attitude, especially if the NGO is not open to feedback and is not delivering results. Because of this, it is essential for those engaged in practice to recognize the importance of verifying results and receiving feedback from those involved as key to any successful intervention.

**NGOs CONTRIBUTE TO LEARNING**

This sixth contribution of the nongovernmental sector relates to education and processes of learning. Many academic institutions and educational enterprises have nongovernmental status and contribute to the field by gathering knowledge about conflict resolution and then making it available.

It can be said that while humans have long had the capacity to create and resolve conflict, the study of conflict resolution as an area of systematic inquiry became relevant in academia only in the twentieth century and
grew out of interdisciplinary contributions. Concerns about nuclear warfare, labor disputes, and general inquiries around social psychology all contributed to the emergence of the rich and varied field of study that was (and is) identified as conflict resolution.

Methods for systematizing, sharpening, and advancing conflict resolution as a discipline have been performed primarily in academic settings. The School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University has been around for more than thirty years and has been a model for conflict resolution education around the world. While still being the only school in the United States with undergraduate, certificate, master’s, and PhD programs, domestic and international, it is now accompanied by a large number of excellent programs that offer degrees in conflict analysis and resolution worldwide. This evolution has occurred due to the demand for more systematic knowledge about conflict resolution.

The contribution of the University of Colorado’s Conflict Information consortium (CCI), founded in 1988 as a “multidisciplinary center for research and teaching about conflict and its transformation,” serves as another example of how academic institutions (with nongovernmental status) contribute to the field. The CCI acts as a knowledge base of information on various topics that is made readily available for audiences around the globe for free. Recently it was enriched by an investment in Beyond Intractability, a website (and learning forum) that offers a comprehensive catalogue of conflict resolution literature that would not otherwise be available if it were confined to printed volumes. The CCI has a very loose organizational structure and operates under the leadership of its founders, Heidi and Guy Burgess, who continue to welcome the support of contributors around the globe. Their vision was to create a hub for people to think about, write, and begin systematizing the knowledge within the field of conflict resolution.

The promise of such hybrid organizational settings is highlighted by a recent initiative: the challenge-oriented, large-scale, and long-term learning (CL3) community, which identifies global and large-scale problems with constructive engagement. Many large-scale, collective problems facing humanity have been addressed by collaborative ventures, such as the CL3, that use scientific paradigms of knowledge sharing and verification. The conflict resolution field is at the beginning of this collaborative process, and platforms such as the CL3 will be able to serve the growing and dynamic community of scholars around the world dedicated to conflict resolution, research, and practice.

The Uppsala Peace and Conflict Database (UPCD) has created a similar space for knowledge sharing. This network offers information not only on armed violence, but also on the human interactivity toward solutions. In
addition, the dynamics of conflict can be understood better through this large-scale database that allows analysis to be more accurately responsive to actual data.

From fire to illness prevention, humans have learned to examine their interaction not only through its individual case but also through the patterns that those cases create over time. Because of this, knowledge must be free from political corruption. Fortunately, academia has provided just this avenue through networks and knowledge bases that invite all those curious to share information and processes of learning. Conceivably governments should support these large data sets the same way they support knowledge management systems dedicated to public health, education, the economy, and transportation. After all, quantitative knowledge is central to how we understand ourselves as humans. And in this way, NGOs have contributed enormously to the creation, management, and distribution of this new form of knowledge.

Challenges

The greatest challenge for NGOs contributing to knowledge, especially in an academic setting, is encouraging the long-term support and political relationships necessary to maintain learning and the space for it. The establishment, maintenance, and improvement of these large data sets require the use of significant resources. NGOs will never be able to maintain such a commitment unless governmental and international organizations recognize the importance of investing in this sector. But this call for recognition and need for resources may bring with it the political and state control of data sets and frames of analysis that we have warned against. Thus, it is essential to balance the two imperatives with great care.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, EDUCATIONAL TRAINING, AND DIRECT INTERVENTION

We have offered an overview of how NGOs reveal the quality of the state, contribute to creativity, offer knowledge, incite action, and contribute to learning. We have discussed how NGOs become an expression of common purpose around specific problems. In this way, they can encourage practice and inform intervention. But when carrying out practice, NGOs cannot become mere receptors of outside theories or pawns of experimentation that impose outsiders’ ideas on human communities. Instead, this chapter assumes that NGOs have a genuine interest in contributing to the larger conversation around conflict resolution and improving their own performance based on what has been learned (learning by doing).
We argue that practice should follow a common arc: practice to theory to practice. Intuitively, then, it begins with the NGO’s own experience, transitions into reflection on those experiences through a theoretical lens, and returns once again to a more sharpened practice that considers past successes and failures. This process of learning by doing is key to any educational training or direct intervention within the NGO community.

In addition, NGOs’ practices can be improved through training, especially when these experiences are respectful and participatory. From financial services to communication skills, from archival strategies to marketing, NGOs can learn a great deal from the insight of others who have been involved in similar processes in the past. Academic institutions might offer a vehicle for this insight. NGOs may also help train academic institutions by examining the many areas of conflict resolution theory that need further research. This example shows how collaboration between NGOs and academic institutions will prove to be mutually beneficial. In this vein, consider Daniel Druckman’s (2001) notion of turning points in negotiation. Through this lens, NGOs may be more open to learning outside the formal structures of governmental and intergovernmental organizations. Conceivably, then, the participation of NGOs might achieve this turning point when the strategy of NGOs is verified against the theoretical constructs of academia. The effectiveness of this proposition, however, relies on funding. Clearly the time dedicated to data collection, verification, and analysis cannot be easily be covered by the meager budgets of most NGOs. Academic funding for research could, however, complement NGOs in this way and strengthen their capacity to share data and knowledge. Moreover, this collaborative knowledge and experience might contribute to new theories and hypotheses within the field of conflict resolution.

Collaboration, in my opinion, is central to NGOs’ success in the future. Many NGOs demonstrate this awareness by investing in their own practice-to-learning tactics by dedicating personnel and resources to communication strategies within the field at large to make sure that their learning strengthens the practice of others. A very interesting case shown through the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project of the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects illustrates this very point. This project aimed to understand the cumulative impact of peace work over time. In doing so, it was trying to assess the effectiveness of individual programs across different agencies and conflict situations. Its research demonstrated that while countless people and organizations work on various levels of analysis that participate in the overall peace process, their programs do not automatically add up. So the challenge of working effectively in a multiagent environment is significant across the field and is particularly relevant if NGOs want to become mobile, adaptive, and responsive to ever-changing situations.
Another area of training that could have significant impact on effective collaboration should explore NGOs and the relational dimension of their work. In other words, the more that NGOs see themselves as part of a larger relational system and the more they are able to understand the drivers involved in a conflict, the easier it will be for them to be effective in their work and explain their own efficiency.

Finally, collaboration between researchers and practitioners is of the utmost importance: it tempers the tendency of an actor or party to succumb to self-righteousness, which is often the result of good intentions. Unfortunately, it is a common trend for dedicated actors to overplay the significance of their own work. Perhaps a greater commitment to the evaluation of results would overcome this challenge. If destructive behavior (killings, trauma, illness) can be measured, then so can NGOs’ actions and results; this might include measuring an NGO’s effect on health, education, social structures, and cultural expressions.

CONCLUSION

Only through a collective assessment of conflict resolution strategies will we realize our potential as practitioners, theorists, and intervenors. In this way, we must recognize the problem in front of our eyes. These problems, though perhaps overwhelming for an individual or single organization, become opportunities when confronted by communities or organizational networks. As this chapter argues, NGOs are an expression of common purpose; they are the creative vehicle in which collective action becomes possible and sustainable; they are the container of knowledge that welcomes all those curious to come together to learn collectively; and they provide a space for transformation, common purpose, and shared vision to become actualized.

Notes

2. There are more than twenty-four thousand civil society organizations registered in the NGO Branch of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs database within the UN Secretariat for nongovernmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and for NGOs seeking status: http://esango.un.org/civilsociety/newLogin.do?sessionCheck=false

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