

The International NGO: Lumbering giant or adaptable entity?¹

Marc DuBois. Executive Director, Médecins sans Frontières – UK

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Hear Ye! Hear Ye! The Golden Era of the Western-based global INGO is grinding to a halt. By 2020 we will either have rebirthed ourselves or joined the cassette tape, Vanilla Ice and the stegosaurus. While it is undoubtedly a mistake to treat the Western, global INGO as a homogenous and static set of entities, extrapolating from the trends of today yields a few broad-brushed predictions of life in 2020.

Forecast 1. The private sector will have captured a great deal of the work we now claim.

Aid is big business, involving big money. This is particularly true in the international domain of relief, reconstruction, development and the new kid on the block, climate change (add into that assorted tangents, such as democracy-building, conflict resolution, and human rights). The combined billions raked in by the not-for-profit sector is reason enough to expect the profit sector to intensify its calculated, well-resourced appropriation of “our” turf. At the end of the next decade, the moral lustre of the INGO will have faded, victim in part to the exposure bought by private sector funded research and NGO watchdog entities. Our documented shortcomings and inefficiencies will provide an excuse for government officials who are impervious to the heartstring-pulling images of fundraising, and aid corporations will have used well-honed tactics of political vote-buying to win the major contracts.

The private sector will have sold itself on the hope of a new (and improved!) model for addressing poverty and crisis, not through charity but social entrepreneurship, hence nicely dovetailing with (rather than criticizing) the aims of the capitalist agenda. And perhaps most importantly, something already true in conflict countries such as Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, by 2020 the private sector will have solidified its market dominance by honouring a firm commitment to turning a blind eye to Western abuses. Self-righteous moralizing from INGOs who declare an independence from the strategic politico-military objectives of the West will have dwindled to a sideshow in these major theatres of Western entanglement.

Forecast 2. Non-Western agencies will have captured a great deal of the work not taken by the private sector.

While private sector aid deliverers will better serve the interest of the Western nations, emerging INGOs from places like India and China will be favoured by recipient nations of aid. Though many Western INGOs have already identified the need to “de-Westernize” themselves, hiring more staff from outside the West or setting up offices in the non-OECD globe will prove superficial. In fact, the effort placed into this salvation delusion – becoming what one is not – will distract INGOs from the more difficult task of extracting themselves from the coattails of the Western hegemonic powers. By 2020, the presumptive moral authority of the West as the basis for the presumptive moral authority of the Western INGO will

¹ No longer available on the web. Originally posted as part of a series of thought pieces on the future of humanitarianism at =mc the management centre: <http://www.managementcentre.co.uk/>.

have become an obvious and fatal flaw. Locked into defending the universalism of our objectives, we will have missed the opportunity to detach ourselves from dominant ideologies that are already increasingly rejected by governments outside of the West. People and governments alike will have welcomed aid without (Liberal agenda) strings attached, delivered by INGOs from like-minded places, and from INGOs that do not humiliate the local government with fingerpointing advocacy or the local population with the saviours' parade of sanctimony.

Forecast 3. Headquarters will be larger in size and in gravitational pull, sucking the life out of operations.

With technology fuelling an increasing flow of information from the field to HQ, INGO headquarters across the West will have burgeoned to enormous levels. All phases of management of missions in the "South" will have moved to the North. Beyond technology, the logic of accountability, professionalism, and global coherence will justify the need for HQ capacity. HQ bloat and inefficiency will be decried in equal degree to its presence, but with no effect because with the growth will come an ever-more capable deployment of fundraising technologies.

Moreover, in defiance of pressure from governments, media, academics and plain old common sense, the INGO community (including that new breed of MONGO that adds to the circus of an international response such as in Haiti) will remain a highly duplicative and fragmented horde, there being no parallel arbiter to profit that allows for a thinning of the herd. Instead, the dependence on fundraising activities which require the strengthening of individual NGO identity will ensure that we remain locked into our termite hive of an industry.

There you have it. By way of warning, a bleak prediction. Note, however, that the most interesting feature of these emerging pitfalls is the degree to which they are either avoidable or self-inflicted. Unlike those giant reptiles of the past, INGOs could look quite different in 2020. We could survive our Jurassic.