

NGOs: Here to Stay

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UNITED NATIONS, July 23, 2010 (IPS) -- Sam Worthington is the President and CEO of InterAction, the largest alliance of U.S.-based NGOs, with over 190 members. Worthington spoke recently with IPS about the role of NGOs in Haiti, the U.S. and throughout the world.

Q: As the focus in Haiti moves from recovery to development, what role will InterAction, specifically, and NGOs, more broadly, play in the reconstruction effort?

A: The InterAction community has pledged 510 million dollars to the reconstruction of Haiti. InterAction has been actively involved with its members and other NGOs in Haiti to set up a steering group of the major NGOs involved in reconstruction.

This steering group is now in place, and it is responsible for selecting the NGO representative that will serve on the [Interim Haiti Recovery Commission]. The Secretary-General will also serve as a liaison between the commission and the NGO community involved in reconstruction.

InterAction itself has been directly involved in mapping NGOs' work in Haiti, including their planned reconstruction work. That map is now available [at <http://haitiaidmap.org>] and its data is linked to the Office of the Special Envoy as well as the United Nations.

Q: In a recent IPS article, Peter Richards reported that during the July 4-8 Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Summit, outgoing CARICOM Chair Roosevelt Skerritt characterized the influx of NGOs in Haiti as undermining its democratic institutions. What are your views on these kinds of sentiments?

A: I think it's important to distinguish between different types of NGOs. Of course, there's first Haitian civil society made up of NGOs. At one point, someone has mentioned that there are perhaps 10,000 of these. We have no direct evidence to that effect one way or the other.

That said, if there are 10,000 local NGOs in Haiti, which would make 1 NGO for every 970 Haitians, that is actually not a bad number. The U.S. actually has four times as many nonprofits, and in fact, the basis of democracy in many countries is a large number of local civil society organizations.

With regard to international institutions, I think we need to distinguish between a broad interest of public outreach from North America and Europe – whether it's small church groups or individuals who want to try to help through a rotary club, or some other way to help the Haitian people – this engagement by hundreds of small groups, this phenomena is normal in a 21st century disaster.

While there may be many, many small groups like this, they account for less than 10 percent of the entire recovery effort, and the bulk of the recovery effort is ultimately being

managed by only 40 international NGOs. And these 40 international NGOs are working closely with the Haitian government and the United Nations and are active participants in the recovery effort.

Bottom line, the NGO community is actually part of the democratic process, and in many ways is actually encouraging the Haitian government to be actively engaged with its own civil society.

Q: The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Report launched July 15 on the Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Haiti underlined the need for NGOs “to understand better – and to work more proactively with – various actors from outside the humanitarian context, not least military entities, but also the private sector.” Given InterAction’s agenda of protecting NGO space, what benefits does IA see in this kind of external coordination, and what efforts is it making towards this end?

A: InterAction is a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee at the United Nations and was actually involved in preparing the report at the six-month point. As the representative of the U.S. NGO community, we have a longstanding dialogue with the military in terms of establishing roles – and I have personally witnessed effective NGO military coordination around a number of camps in Haiti.

We also have a longstanding relationship with the business community. In fact, our mapping effort, which was funded by FedEx is part of a partnership between Interaction and the Business Civic Leadership Council, which is part of the United States Chamber of Commerce.

Ultimately, the NGO Coordination Support Office that was established by InterAction right after the earthquake has worked very closely with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and in many ways, we are part of the official coordination structure.

It is important to distinguish between professional NGOs that are members of InterAction that are closely affiliated with both the U.N. and the Haitian government coordination efforts, and the broad number of smaller groups that are part of society’s outreach to Haiti that may have many institutions, but whose size are simply too small to make any significant difference in the overall reconstruction effort.

Q: InterAction is part of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network’s Reform Within Reach campaign, advocating for a reform of the United States’ foreign assistance policy. Why is this kind of reform necessary, and what shape should it take?

A: InterAction was a founding member of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, and has been actively involved in the reform agenda here in the U.S. In this capacity, we have advocated for a number of significant reforms largely because the U.S. foreign

assistance structure is broken, with close to 30 U.S. agencies involved in foreign assistance and no clear overall strategy.

In this regard, we've advocated with MFAN for significant reforms. These include an adoption of a national development strategy by the U.S. government, which is an effort that seems to have been successful; a rewrite of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act, and we've been closely engaged with Congress on the details of what a new Foreign Assistance Act would look like; and a shift to ensure greater country ownership of U.S. Foreign Assistance.

It is important to understand that when we say 'country ownership,' we are not just talking about nation-states, but about broader societal ownership of the development process, which mean funding of government programs but also significant funding for civil society efforts, public-private partnerships with businesses and active engagement by the international NGO community in partnership with local civil society in building local capacity.

All of these efforts have a significant momentum in the U.S., and we are witnessing one of the most significant potential reforms in U.S. foreign assistance in over a generation.

Q: What are your expectations for the upcoming Millennium Development Goals Summit?

A: The high-level summit in September on the Millennium Development Goals will enable world leaders to take stock as to the overall unfolding of the millennium development effort. In many ways, we believe the summit will fall short in that a significant effort needs to be made.

We are in close contact with the U.S. government and know that the U.S. and other major donors like the E.U. will be focused on major new initiatives to advance specific MDGs. An example of this would be Feed the Future, focused on food security. There are other initiatives, for example, focused on malaria.

These initiatives will make a difference in advancing the overall MDGs, but we fear that the negative economic climate in the U.S. and in Europe and elsewhere will result more likely in a decrease of [Official Development Assistance] flowing to other countries. We will be making the point that NGOs actually raise billions of dollars of private development assistance and are a crucial actor in advancing the MDGs around the world.

Q: What do you consider to be InterAction's priority areas of concern over the next few years?

A: As InterAction looks to the future, we will continue to push the U.S. government to have a greater focus on global poverty issues and ensure that its foreign assistance is more aligned with achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and has a greater expenditure in poorer countries.

In many ways, the InterAction members represent millions of Americans who care about development assistance, and while we fully understand that much of U.S. foreign assistance is tied to national security interests, we also want to make the case that development in and of itself is a crucial part of U.S. foreign policy in that resources must be invested in those countries that have the greatest need, with a particular focus on people and societies as well as supporting nations that are invested in efforts to help their own people.

Q: Kofi Annan once referred to NGOs as “the conscience of humanity.” NGOs have historically worked closely with the United Nations and its various sub-bodies. However, there have been recent criticisms that the relationship between the U.N. under Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and NGOs has been one of lip-service. For example, NGOs are now barred from access to General Assembly meetings and, most recently, were expelled from Arms Trade Treaty talks. What are your thoughts on this issue?

A: As the world has dealt with globalization and a wide range of problems affecting humanity, one of the phenomena of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of this century has been the rapid growth of many non-state actors.

These non-state actors – known as civil society or non-government organisations – have played a crucial role in advancing solutions to global problems both in terms of advocacy and service delivery.

Publics around the world have poured billions of dollars into these NGOs because of their high confidence that they deliver on their promises and that their missions are focused on human well-being.

The U.N. partnership with the NGO community is mixed. In some places, for example, in the humanitarian area, it is a very close working relationship that engages well on multiple fronts, such as in Haiti. In other areas, it is more of a critique relationship based on a concern by nation-states that non-state actors or NGOs are getting too much influence.

This tension will continue for the long run. NGOs are here to stay. They are part of the global infrastructure. As the world considers the overall aid infrastructure, it must acknowledge the tens of billions of dollars that private non-state actors bring to development.

These NGOs – whether international groups or foundations, like the [Bill and Melinda] Gates Foundation – are a significant part of how the world addresses its problems. And it is important that nation-states recognize this unique and important role that we play.