

# **Trade Unions and NGOs in Social Development - a Necessary Partnership**

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Summary

## ***Why Unions and NGOs?***

Trade unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are both actors in civil society. What they have in common, and what distinguishes them from other actors in civil society (for example mainstream churches and religious sects, educational institutions, professional associations) is that they have specific agendas for the improvement of society.

Unions have always held that a consistent defense of the interests of their members over the long term required them to work for the well-being of people and of society as a whole. Their vision of society always included elements such as political, social and industrial democracy, civil and democratic rights for all, the elimination of poverty, equality, the rule of law. In that respect, they would legitimately claim to be serving the interests of society generally, as would NGOs acting on a desire to advance and improve the human condition.

Consequently, co-operation between unions and NGOs is possible and necessary in a shared perspective of building a society where the satisfaction of basic human needs is the overriding priority.

This paper seeks to examine the conditions which both unions and NGOs must meet to strengthen their alliance. It reviews the historical background, the existing record, the difficulties and the potential for co-operation.

## ***Organized Labour Since the War***

Unions re-emerged after World War II in a favourable political context world-wide which helped conceal the crippling losses inflicted by several decades of repression by totalitarian States and by the war itself. NGOs had already been created by the mostly social-democratic labour movement before and after World War I to service special needs of its membership (for example in the fields of welfare, housing, health,

education, culture), and to advance its political agenda. These were not merely service organizations but collectively represented an attempt to create an alternative society and a counter-culture.

In the conditions of post-war reconstruction, these labour NGOs disappeared or survived with a narrowed-down agenda. Trade unions themselves largely withdrew into their “core business” (wages and conditions of employment). Several factors account for these developments: the loss of trained and experienced political leadership, the post-war social compromise based on the ideology of social partnership, reliance on the State to support the trade union agenda, distortion of labour movement priorities through the Cold War.

The effect of globalization has been to break the balance of power between organized labour and organized business on which the post-war social consensus was based. The rise of transnational corporate power has been accompanied by a massive attack on all fronts (social, political, ideological, cultural) on the labour movement and on its values. It has also aggravated inequalities within and among countries and changed the role of the State to serve its purposes. The trade union movement was largely unprepared for these developments and unable to offer an adequate political response.

Meanwhile, civil society had generated a large variety of voluntary organizations seeking to advance public interest issues, in part as a response to social problems generated or aggravated by globalization. Many of these NGOs filled the vacuum left by the labour movement when it retreated from the broader social and political concerns it sought to address in pre-war decades.

### *A Growing Union/NGO Alliance*

Since the 1970s, co-operation between unions and NGOs has developed over a wide range of issues. It has been most established and successful so far in the defense of human rights including workers’ rights. In the field of development and education, unions have been active largely through labour movement NGOs, in some instances also with non-labour NGOs and, in education, with academic institutions.

On women’s rights and equality issues co-operation has been more problematic since it implies a challenge to the traditional (male dominated) culture of the labour movement but it is potentially the most

important area of co-operation in a perspective of organizing the unorganized and growing sectors of the labour force world-wide (services, free trade zones, informal sector) and of regenerating the trade union movement itself.

More recently, union/NGO co-operation has developed on environment issues, particularly in agriculture (pesticides and herbicides, chemical fertilizers, genetic engineering, seed patenting), forestry (sustainable exploitation of timber) and on issues of chemical pollution in industry and mining.

Corporate accountability has been an area of expanding union/NGO co-operation, especially when workers' rights are at issue, but in some instances unions have had to resist what they saw as an overly accommodating approach by NGOs towards company codes of conduct. Whilst some NGOs have been prepared to accept such codes, including a monitoring role for themselves, unions stress that codes are no substitute for union organization and that monitoring is most effectively done by union organizations at the workplace. Unions therefore remain distrustful of unilaterally proclaimed codes of conduct and aim at international agreements.

### ***The Future of Union/NGO Cooperation***

Co-operation between unions and NGOs depends, in the first place, on shared objectives and, equally importantly, on the way the organizations involved operate (issues of legitimacy, transparency, accountability, management). The pressures generated by globalization and the threat of the neo-liberal agenda, endorsed by most leading governments, against the prospect of a just, egalitarian and democratic society, advocated by unions and most NGOs, have powerfully strengthened the case for co-operation.

In a globalizing economy and society, trade union face three main tasks: organizing in transnational corporations, organizing the informal sector and connecting with other actors in civil society to advance their broader social and political agenda. In all of these areas they have formed partnerships with NGOs and this trend will continue because it produces positive results. In the process, both unions and NGOs are changing. Important segments of the labour movement are returning to their roots in the form of "social movement unionism". On the NGO side, the resilience of the trade union movement under conditions of adversity and its capacity for self-renewal has not gone unperceived. NGOs wishing to

act in the public interest are finding in trade unions the social sheet anchor and reality check that neither their own constituency nor their relations with other social actors can provide.

Because the way society develops ultimately depends on the global power relations resulting from the struggle between labour and organized business, the responsibility of building a broadly based peoples' movement for social progress and determining the direction it will take rests largely with the trade union movement and its allies.