Chapter 10.
Scale and Scope of NGO Activity

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There are thousands of operating NGOs but only a handful are capable of responding to emergencies internationally, and few of these have the know-how, organizational capacity, and funds to respond to international emergencies consistently.

Size and Capacity of NGO Community

The NGO community involved with international humanitarian assistance is large and diverse. This is clear from the membership profiles of InterAction—the largest coalition of U.S.-based international NGOs. Of its 175 members, the number whose program areas are classified in either refugee or development or disaster and emergency relief is presented in table 10.1. The 90-member European Union VOICE—the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid, relief, and rehabilitation and disaster preparedness has a similar breakdown.

Table 10.1 International Emergency NGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>InterAction members</th>
<th>175</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members classifying some or all of their work as disaster and emergency relief</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Members classifying some or all of their work as refugee and displacement</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total organizations in the two program areas</td>
<td>86</td>
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Measurements of community-wide capacity are hard to quantify. NGOs can do many different things and muster many resources, whether acting together or individually. NGOs have different capacities and the same NGO may have a different capacity in one emergency than it does in another. NGO capacity fluctuates because regional or sectoral specialties may be required in one region over another and because donor intent or relations with NGOs are different in various emergencies. In any case, the number of employees, offices, operations, programs, and number of HQ personnel may be

Executive Summary

- NGOs vary in scale, scope, and ability to respond to emergencies.
- The capacity of NGOs collectively or individually is hard to measure. In fact, no credible method of evaluating the NGO community’s total capacity exists. Examining annual budgets, staff levels, and number of country operations can help.
- Headquarters (HQ) operations can range in size and complexity and provide an NGO with make-or-break support.
- Through various procurement methods, NGOs can move in and out of private markets to obtain time-sensitive and critical equipment without bureaucratic restrictions. NGOs are also often assisted by UN, government, and military agencies with larger procurement and equipment capabilities.

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clues to how active or strong an NGO can be during an emergency. NGO funding levels are also good indicators for capacity.

Size and Capacity of Individual NGOs

Individual NGOs of course vary in size and capacity. The larger ones, such as CARE, CRS, and MSF, all have substantial individual capacities to respond to emergencies and to manage emergency activities for extended periods.

To get an idea of the variety of sizes within the NGO sector, the Cuny Center’s Greater Efficiency work gives a good glimpse into the budget types and percentages that NGOs expend during an emergency: the 25 operational InterAction members reported total revenue of $2 billion in 1998 or 1999 (the latest report for some agencies was 1998 and for the others was 1999). Very few agencies are able to identify the fraction of that amount devoted to HA. It likely falls between 1/3 and 1/2. For example, in 2000 Catholic Relief Services (CRS) spent $151,152,000 on emergency programming out of a total annual expenditure of $371,000,000, or 41%, while CARE’s 2000 annual report shows $58,842,000 spent on emergency programs out of a total expenditure of $409,289,000 or 14%. Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA), an agency with a mandated emphasis on disaster relief, estimates that their average annual expenditure on emergency programs is between $40,000,000 [and] 50,000,000, which is between 60% and 75% of their budget. A ballpark estimate of average annual expenditures for the principal 25 US-based NGOs is between $5 million and $100 million.133

NGO capacities are not necessarily measured by annual operating budgets. In some cases NGOs with small budgets have large impacts during emergencies, even as NGOs with seemingly incredible budgets have minimal impact. Many NGO capacities come in-kind from gifts to the organization. During the Kosovo crisis, for example, Wal-Mart provided a few NGOs with container loads of hiking boots and clothing for distribution among the then-refugee Kosovar Albanians. The container was sent from the East Coast of the United States and did not reach a Greek port until after the refugees had returned home. The container was then sent to Kosovo and after a few weeks, many Kosovars that lived in the southern part of Kosovo were wearing shiny new hiking boots.134 Aside from private donation for materials or equipment NGO can also obtain commodities donated by government agencies donated medical supplies (see chapter 11), capital assets (UN contracts and loaned materials), local NGO partnerships and partnerships with companies or government relief agencies, off-the-shelf technology, and other types of tools or resources an NGO can use to leverage its strength during an emergency. As mentioned in chapter 8, NGOs often keep reserves of cash for responses to new emergencies.

134 One thrifty company provided a 20-foot container of Chap Stick for the Kosovar Albanian refugees, and a Kuwaiti company provided two truckloads of canned and caramelized dates. These were off-loaded to the black-market because no one wanted tons of either Chap Stick or dates.
Some NGO capacity can be found in the UN Central Registry. In line with a UN order to create a central register that inventories all disaster management capabilities, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has provided the web-based OCHA Central Register. It is a portal website that archives information and organizes resources that are reported by NGOs, UN agencies and governments that are ready for deployment at the behest of a government or UN agency. Within the OCHA Central Register is the Emergency Stockpiles of Disaster Relief Items section. This area includes specific inventories of NGO and IO warehouses in storage for future emergencies. It is valuable to see how few resources are currently available for emergencies, and how crude the NGO inventory management system is sector-wide.

Stockpiled materials listed in the database are to be used for international humanitarian emergencies through the UN or other partner agencies. The relief materials must comply with the following three stipulations:

- the stocked disaster relief items can be made available for international assistance through the UN,
- the disaster relief items are provided on a nonprofit basis, and
- the stockpile activity is not limited to local relief operations (that is, in the country of the stockpile’s location).

The OCHA Central Register is neither an extensive site nor extremely user-friendly. It does, however, provide valuable information about locations of specific stockpiles and who oversees them. For example, MSF France manages extensive warehouses, as do USAID and other national aid agencies. It is a start, and developments have been made recently to make the site more accessible. More on this topic will be discussed in chapter 14.

### Headquarters and Staff

NGOs often manage multiple emergency responses around the world at the same time; operations at HQ can be complex. Staff levels range from two to 100 at headquarters and often up to 2,000 in the field. The range for the top 25 or 30 NGOs based in the United States for field staff is between 1,000 and 2,000.

Headquarters staff members often focus on a range of issues including but not limited to fundraising, programmatic backstopping, administration and accounting management, program development, public relations, and government liaising. HQ staff members also help manage commodity and relief material equipment and are often the central coordinating and hiring body for personnel. Most HQ activities are focused on supporting field activities and the stronger the HQ staff, the better the programs run in the field. Many HQ functions are essential to the viability of relief programs abroad.

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136 Ibid.
Obtaining Equipment and Tools

NGOs typically do not have large capacities in maintaining fleets of trucks, cranes, well-digging machines, or other technical or capital assets. Instead, they secure use of the appropriate equipment needed during an emergency response. Local procurement, where appropriate and available, is the first choice. Another option is to work with large brokers that specialize in providing major shipments of trucks, cars and other hardware otherwise hard to come by in emergency settings. Sometimes also the UN or government agencies will bring in shipments of specific equipment and distribute the equipment to implementing partners like NGOs or IOs.

Well-digging machines, large generators, satellite stations, specialized trucks and personnel vehicles, land-mine removal equipment, water and sanitation equipment, and even some construction tools are often hard to obtain, and therefore procured by coordinating with NGO associations or other international agencies. NGOs normally can build the costs of required equipment and tools into a grant proposal or contract agreement with donor agencies. Such costs are usually considered a justified expense because the international community would not have any other way of obtaining the appropriate goods otherwise.

An NGO’s primary strength in procurement comes from the ability to participate in market systems around the world. Whereas government and military entities are often strapped by procurement guidelines, purchasing restrictions, or liquidity concerns, NGOs can move in and out of local and international markets to obtain the appropriate equipment and tools for their programming. NGO personnel are normally not required to procure equipment from any specific vendor and normally can deal effectively with local business people or international companies alike. Although an NGO may not have an unlimited amount of funding for any specific program, it can still procure equipment quickly and efficiently. Very little bureaucracy or regulations governing purchasing or procuring exist for an NGO, and this is a benefit during an emergency.

NGOs do not, for the most part, have access to large cargo planes, major water purification systems, and communications equipment. Liaising with military offices and UN agencies is one way around the problem.

Conclusion: Where NGOs Don’t Go

There are very few places and types of emergencies that NGOs are likely to respond to. NGOs have little capacity, for example, to respond to chemical, biological, or nuclear incidents. Still, the NGO footprint in humanitarian assistance is large and NGOs will continue to find ways to meet the needs of emergency-affected populations.