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Amnesty International

**Global civil society and the role of NGOs**

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## Statement

Global civil society has developed alongside, but sometimes in opposition to, globalization as it is usually understood. Its development has been possible because of the transformation of communication systems, but even before this there were a few organizations concerned with human rights, such as Amnesty International, which recognized the importance of crossing borders and cooperating with like-minded people around the world. Amnesty International began as an international organization in principle, but took many years to become a truly global organization with activists in 140 countries and territories. In the same way, its relationships with other NGOs have developed over time from informal cooperation to coalitions formed to achieve specific objectives.

Eight years ago the UN World Conference on Human Rights recognized “the important role of non-governmental organizations in the promotion of all human rights and in humanitarian activities at national, regional and international levels” and appreciated “their contribution to increasing public awareness of human rights issues, to the conduct of education, training and research in this field, and to the promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

NGOs emerge from and remain part of civil society: they are one of the means by which civil society expresses its views. They exist to influence the actions of individual governments and intergovernmental organizations - IGOs. Some do this by working mainly at the national level, others by organizing themselves internationally or forming links with similar groups. This cooperation has developed into a global human rights movement. NGO coalitions have achieved notable successes in the creation of a High Commissioner for Human Rights, the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, in the establishment of a Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders, and in bringing the creation of an International Criminal Court within reach.

Another important aspect of the work of Amnesty International and other NGOs is to provide information to the treaty bodies, such as the Human Rights Committee and the Committee against Torture, which monitor states parties' compliance with international human rights treaties. Few Committee members would have access to detailed and up-to-date information about a government's human rights record if this was not given to them in written and oral briefings by national and international NGOs. NGOs also provide the UN thematic mechanisms, such as the Special Rapporteur on torture, the Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, with information relevant to their mandates.

Amnesty International was a founding member of the NGO Coalition for an International Criminal Court which came into being because of outrage that despite the extent and horrific nature of the crimes witnessed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only a handful of perpetrators had been brought to justice. If the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to avoid the brutality that was the hallmark of the 20<sup>th</sup> a legal system that ends impunity must be created and implemented worldwide to allow victims of the worst crimes known to humanity to obtain justice and redress and to deter people contemplating such crimes. Such steps are an essential foundation for lasting reconciliation between groups or states involved in a conflict. The Court, which will prosecute people accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, will be created when 60 states have ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Forty-five states have ratified to date.

The importance of civil society and NGOs has become even more apparent since 11 September. The horror and anger which were the immediate response to the events of that day provoked the backlash which manifested itself in some countries as racist attacks on people because of their appearance and/or religion. At the same time, some governments took advantage of the new climate to reduce human rights protection, to make opportunistic moves against Islamists, or to introduce draconian new measures that threaten the human rights of their own citizens, immigrants and refugees. The protests against these moves came mainly from NGOs and other voices from civil society. As Amnesty International knows only too well, no political system in itself is a sufficient protection against human rights violations. Civil society must be vigilant and must speak out whenever it sees a threat to human rights.

In recent years we have also seen the development of protests against globalization in Seattle, Prague, Quebec and Genoa. Although some NGOs may participate in these demonstrations, they are for the most part a much looser coming together of people from global civil society, who may have widely different concerns and objectives, but are moved to travel long distances to join a common protest against what they see as a largely malign force. They attract considerable worldwide media attention, not least because of the violent activities of some participants, but their demands are not always clear which makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of this kind of protest.

International NGOs are changing to meet the challenges of a changing world. Increasingly NGOs concerned with development and aid are acknowledging the relevance of civil and political rights to their work. Amnesty International has recently taken the decision to develop a program of work on economic, social and cultural rights, in addition to its traditional work on civil and political rights. The artificial separation of the two sets of rights which was produced by the geo-political global divide of the Cold War years is giving way to a renewed emphasis on the universality and indivisibility of human rights, as set out in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*Es gilt das gesprochene Wort.*