FCO Leadership

Opening speech by David Green CMG, Director-General of the British Council

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Let me start with a story which no doubt is apocryphal. A British diplomat once suggested to a leading figure in the Chinese Communist Party that it was time for his government to allow non-governmental organisations [NGOs] to operate freely in the People's Republic. The politician furrowed his brow, thought a bit and then pronounced: "Excellent idea, but tell me one thing: how many do you think we should set up?"

NGOs are independent, organic organisations, with many different structures and objectives. Increasingly, like multinational companies, they are becoming international in scope and ambition, successfully engaging and/or antagonising governments across the world. And those who seek to coerce them for specific ends may find the experience as rewarding as harnessing zebras for use on a children's pony trail.

But the global reality is that diplomacy today must recognise NGOs as effective players who can mobilise public opinion rapidly, and spread opinions – all made that much easier through ICT [information and communication technology]. Some commentators argue, as Mark Leonard has done, that – and I quote – "embassies should be re-tooled to become lobbying and policy exchange organisations which link up political parties and think-tanks across borders to create public policy space; engaging with the domestic politics of other countries, linking up with NGOs to change public opinion."

The compact – no need to re-invent the wheel

Doing that, however, may be more difficult than it sounds.

Fortunately, we do have a useful starting point. Our own Government's compact on relations with the voluntary sector (and I am using NGOs, third sector and voluntary sector interchangeably here) – produced while Jack Straw was Home Secretary – lays down important principles of how the two sides should conduct their relations. The Government should accept the voluntary sector's independence and right to criticise, for example, and the voluntary sector should undertake to represent the views of those it speaks on behalf of accurately.

The compact is now three years old and has produced a welter of partnerships operating at local level across the UK.

It's worth saying that very few countries have such a compact and the UK is leading the way in this.

The FCO and NGOs – a solid track record

The FCO [Foreign and Commonwealth Office], too, has been active in engaging NGOs, particularly over the past five or so years. In 1997 Robin Cook called for "a spirit of partnership" with NGOs, setting up consultation panels, secondments in both
directions, NGO input into policy-making and representation in the UK delegation at some international conferences.

The panoply of overseas projects developed under the Human Rights Projects Fund and the Environment Fund, and the work done by my own organisation, the British Council, in capacity building, networking and information exchange, all stand testimony to a successful engagement with NGOs.

**Future objectives**

But should and can we do more? What are the pitfalls and potential benefits?

- Should and can we effectively create partnerships with NGOs in order to gain greater credibility with overseas publics? The term "diplomacy by stealth" carries an undertone of crouching behind the greater popularity of NGOs. Does this not carry dangers of dilution of message and lack of control of the final message?

- Can we engage NGOs as a means of reducing the appeal of anti-globalisation movements to the politically disaffected?

- We seek to engage NGOs because they enable us to demonstrate we are a pluralistic society that welcomes a diversity of views. Will this be understood in certain societies, or viewed with resentment, particularly if the NGOs’ views and tactics are considered co-terminous with those of HMG [Her Majesty’s Government]?

- What are the limits to engaging NGOs in building more coalitions internationally to achieve change on human rights, the environment, child labour conditions, landmine useage and so on?

We have to assess where it is appropriate and where it is impractical. Much of the co-operation so far has been at the centre. Where it has taken place in country, it has often been as a demonstration of "soft" power – of capacity-building of NGOs, to improve human rights in country, or to strengthen civil society in states coming out of the shadow of Communism.

What are the risks of extending this approach? How far is it compatible with traditional diplomacy, particularly in an international environment where a priority has been put on the "war against terrorism"?

And how can we categorise NGOs themselves? They are a diverse sector with differing goals, modi operandi and their own international networks. Most function totally within the law but some rely on direct action.

Their reputations may be high in the UK, but much lower in the countries where they function on the ground. They may be popular with the dispossessed, and unpopular with governments – conversely, they may be plugged into urban elites, but unknown to the poor – and indeed, unwittingly, they may sustain patron/client relations.

Some may tend towards emergency relief, others towards long-term planning and policy advocacy. Some may have access to global media such as the BBC and CNN and be able to influence perceptions and stories in a matter of hours – witness Greenpeace and Brent Spar. Some may accept common cause – others will reject it as threatening their independence.
Are there NGOs that work successfully in the Arab and Muslim worlds with whom the FCO could make common cause? Or would the mere fact of allying with them destroy the credibility they currently have?

To help you in your discussions, we have hazarded some models that scope out the kind of engagement that might be possible in differing contexts. We have also attempted to categorise NGOs according to their characteristics. And we have produced a continuum that demonstrates the kind of relationship possible between government and NGOs – and where it has been hampered by the kind of antagonism that reached its apogee at the Genoa summit.

There is no doubt whatever in my mind that we need to extend our engagement with NGOs. The UK has one of the strongest NGO sectors in the world and I would contend that the strength of a democratic, socially inclusive society is directly related to the strength of its voluntary sector. And for changing positively perceptions of the UK it is a powerful instrument.

The questions are: how do we work more effectively in order to promote the UK’s interests and fulfil foreign policy objectives, and how do we manage the inevitable tensions that exist?