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An NGO fit for the future

How will NGOs work best in a volatile world with scarce resources? Peace Brigades International is one to watch



Peace Brigades International activists in Colombia. Photograph: PBI

During a recent interview for a radio programme, I was asked what I thought the future international NGO would look like. NGOs are so diverse in objectives and strategy that the question is a bit broad to answer sensibly, but, on reflection, the kind of NGO I would like to be a part of in 10 years' time would look a lot like [Peace Brigades International](#) (PBI), whose conference on defending environment and [land rights](#) took place in London on Monday.

Most people might think of international NGOs as essentially conduits to pass money from rich people in the north to poor people in the south. After all, the marketing campaigns usually feature poor people looking cash-strapped, and the simple act of putting a coin in a collecting tin, or setting up a direct debit when inadvertently "chugged" (charity-mugged) on the street, implies that the important part of the equation is the money.

But when I ran an NGO country office, I lost count of the times when our partners in the country would say to me, "It's not that we don't appreciate the money; of course we do. But more important than that is your accompaniment, physical and political."

Sure, this was in a country which is relatively well off ([Colombia](#)) compared with most of the developing world, and where it is conflict not poverty that is the major political issue. But that, I think, is the point. Assuming (and hoping) that the world's poor countries continue to do relatively well economically, as they have done for the past decade, gradually the problems will become less associated with absolute lack of money. Because while we can expect [traditional development indicators](#) (such as access to basic healthcare and education) to continue to improve, the same cannot be said for conflict.

In [his latest book](#), [Steven Pinker](#) argues that there are strong reasons to believe that we live in a more peaceful age than ever before. But, he warns, that clouds on the horizon to do with resource scarcity could undermine this apparent progress. I agree. The future challenge for international NGOs will be to discern the new threats to the interests of the poorest and most marginalised that emanate from an increasingly unequal, volatile and resource-scarce world.

There will be a need for a strong and principled global civil society if this is indeed what the future holds, and while some engage in the perennial tension between closeness to power and co-option by it, many others will be needed simply to stand alongside the poorest. Which is exactly what PBI do. While other NGOs have spent the past 30 years professionalising and expanding their funding base, PBI has stayed true to its volunteer roots. Which is not to say it is unprofessional; on the contrary, its risk analyses and impact assessments were much sought after when I worked closely with PBI volunteers in Colombia.

At this week's conference, [Jorge Molano](#), from Colombia, and [Padre Uvi](#), from [Mexico](#), recounted how they and their colleagues and friends had been constantly threatened and attacked for speaking out in favour of poor communities. PBI's response is to live in the house next door, to walk with them to work, to publish stories about them around the world. The message is that the eyes of the world are watching, and this deters the gunmen.

Another reason I like PBI is the implicit challenge it makes to the "results" mentality most NGOs are caught up in. NGOs are under pressure to claim great results for huge numbers of people. But organisations that defend [human rights](#) defenders apply a different logic. Their beneficiary is often one person (for example, a human rights lawyer in Mexico) and their result is that nothing happened (ie: another day and s/he is still alive).

By aligning itself with human rights defenders for the long haul, PBI's emphasis is squarely on relationships rather than log frames, harking back to an era in the history of NGOs when solidarity was more important than annual reports. Ironically, this approach guarantees far better results because trust is developed for real, rather than enforced through a culture of audits.

However, there is contradiction and complexity in any intervention and in this case it is the nexus between defending people under threat and asking why they are under threat in the first place. PBI's conference sought to make the links between attacks on human rights defenders and certain development models that lead to displacement and environmental degradation.

In my experience, those countries that are most vociferous in their support of human rights defenders are the ones that go cold when questions are raised about their own corporate interests that lie at the heart of the problem. Canada and the UK are prime examples. They will go out on a limb to stand up for human rights, but suggest that it is their own mining companies that are causing the problem and you might as well be talking to a wall.

It is another version of the famous statement by Hélder Câmara, the Brazilian archbishop, who said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why are they poor, they call me a communist."

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