



A Model of its Own? State-NGO Relations in France

Samy Cohen

► To cite this version:

Samy Cohen. A Model of its Own? State-NGO Relations in France. U.S.-France Analysis Series, 2004, pp.1-5. hal-01019672

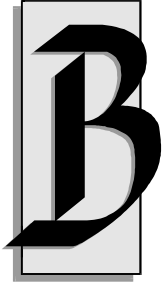
HAL Id: hal-01019672

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01019672>

Submitted on 7 Jul 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20036-2188
Tel: 202-797-6000 Fax: 202-797-6004
www.brookings.edu

U.S.-FRANCE ANALYSIS SERIES

January 2004

A Model of its Own? State-NGO Relations in France

SAMY COHEN

Director of Research, Centre d'études et de recherches internationales, Sciences-Po, Paris

The emergence of new transnational actors on the international scene has considerably transformed the global political landscape. The increasing number of multinational corporations, transnational criminal and terrorist groups, and humanitarian and charitable organizations whose activities cross borders means that states, acting alone, are much less capable of governing global affairs. According to many observers, this trend means that states have lost their monopoly in global diplomacy, becoming just one actor among many on the world stage.¹ Particularly for a country like France, whose identity has long been structured around the primacy of the state, such a vast decline of state capacity is sometimes lamented as the “end of France.”

In particular, the role and influence of one type of transnational actor—non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—on French foreign policy has been the source of much controversy in French political debate. This controversy began with an article by former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (December 2000) and, even more so, through his book *Les cartes de la France à l'heure de la mondialisation*. In these writings, Védrine expressed the view that “international civil society” is “somewhat of a madhouse or a mirage,” and that NGOs are “active minorities, self-designated powers.” He accused these organizations and the regulations they foster of “lacking transparency,” a position that sparked loud protests from NGOs and from much of the media.² The implication was that NGOs posed a serious threat to the independence of the French state and to the democratic spirit of French society.

¹ See for example, James N. Rosenau, *Turbulences in World Politics: a Theory of Change and Continuity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1990; Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*, Cambridge University Press, 1996; Bernard Badie and Marie-Claude Smouts, *Le retournement du monde: sociologie de la scène internationale*, Paris, Presses de Sciences-Po, 1999.

² Hubert Védrine, *Les cartes de la France à l'heure de la mondialisation*, dialogue with Dominique Moïsi, Paris, Fayard, 2000, pp. 20-22. For a revised, English translation, see *France in an Age of Globalization*, Washington, DC, The Brookings Institution, 2001.

Védrine's remarks, however, do not reflect the real state of relations between the French government and NGOs. There is no denying that NGOs, although hardly new, have become more numerous and visible in recent years. But far from sapping the vitality of the state, the increasing demands of non-governmental actors for state support and for state action in new areas have led to an extension of state activity and state capacity. The French state has often used its strong links with non-governmental actors, and the dependence of many types of non-governmental actors to further its efficacy and span of control. In the process, the French state and French NGOs have together created a new model of diplomacy that defies simplistic notions of pure state sovereignty or of stateless, borderless NGOs.

A Relationship Born of Distrust

The mutual wariness that initially characterized relations between NGOs and the French states has largely dissipated. This wariness was rooted in the highly centralizing tradition of French foreign policymaking, which had little patience for any intrusion of civil society in foreign affairs, and in the political culture of the non-profit sector, marked by a libertarian nature and a resistance to any compromise with the diplomatic corps and the army. Fears of mutual exploitation ran high.³

But over the last decade, most French NGOs have developed close relations with the state. The state's recognition of the "usefulness" of NGOs no longer poses any major problem and the government no longer considers NGOs as unwanted intruders.⁴ The French Foreign Affairs Ministry finances several NGOs through two major departments: the *Mission pour la Coopération Non-Gouvernementale* (MCNG) and the *Délégation à l'Action Humanitaire*. Through these programs, the Foreign Affairs Ministry recognizes three major types of "NGOs": (1) the large emergency medical and food aid relief organizations (e.g. Médecins sans Frontières [MSF], *Médecins du Monde* [MdM], Handicap International); (2) religious organizations, such as, the *Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement* (CCFD) and *Secours Catholique*; (3) small organizations specializing in a particular field (education, development aid) and others that function as volunteer research centers or cooperatives.⁵ Strict rules apply to granting NGOs subsidies: they must be a non-profit organization according to the terms of the law of 1901; they must devote all or part of their activities to international cooperation; and they

³ Guillaume Devin, "Les ONG et les pouvoirs publics: le cas de la coopération et du développement," *Pouvoirs*, 88, 1999.

⁴ Michel Doucin, "Diplomatie et société civile," in Samy Cohen: *Les diplomates: négocier dans un monde difficile*, Paris, Autrement, 2002.

⁵ Foreign Affairs Ministry/DGCID, "Organisations de solidarité internationale et pouvoirs publics en Europe," brief drafted by Nelly Potevin, June 2001.

must have been in existence for at least three years and show proof that they operate as a volunteer association.⁶

Relations between the state and NGOs have also become institutionalized in the area of international cooperation through agencies such as the *Commission Coopération Développement* (CCD), the *Haut Conseil de la Coopération Internationale* (HCCI) or the *Agence Française du Développement* (AFD). There are moreover many less formal contacts between the authorities and human rights NGOs as well as those working in sustainable development. The Foreign Affairs Ministry also subsidizes NGOs specializing in conflict resolution, such as the International Crisis Group (ICG). Fairly regular contacts exist between the main French NGOs and ministerial officials, and even the ministers themselves, the prime minister and the president.

This rapprochement between NGOs and the state, however, did not occur without posing problems for NGOs, some of whom define themselves in part by their independence. Relations with the state inevitably raise the question of NGO “neutrality.” French NGOs differ widely in their attitudes toward the value of neutrality and the importance of influencing French foreign policy. In terms of approach, three major types of organizations can be identified.⁷ The first type includes a few large international NGOs that have the means and the will to exert influence on states, such as MSF, MdM, the CCFD and Handicap International. Only a very few of the many French humanitarian organizations fall into this category, but together they account for 80% of the funds donated by the public. They are in a position to rely on a fairly stable network of private donors and do not rely on state financial support. Their resources, although considerable, are far below those of the major American, Canadian or British NGOs such as CARE, Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Oxfam.⁸ Even among these larger French NGOs, only MSF takes a hard-line “independent” stance and does not accept any state aid.

Far behind the first group are active NGOs that are often very effective in the field, but less able to attract private donations. These organizations are obliged to dip into the “coffers of institutional funding,” that is state budgets and funds from international organizations such as the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) or the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). They are highly vulnerable and easily exploited by states and international organizations, which have the leverage to convince them to intervene in fields chosen in accordance with geopolitical aims. In the third category, “mini-NGOs” are funded publicly or through appeals from a specific public figure. They rely on states and international organizations for funding, promotion and support for their projects. They have no margin to maneuver without risking a break with their financial backers and consequent bankruptcy.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Direction générale de la Coopération internationale et du développement, “Le cofinancement des projets et programmes des associations de solidarité internationale, vol. 1. Les projets. Vademecum.”

⁷ François Grünewald and Véronique de Geoffroy, “Humanitaire d’Etat et humanitaire privé: quelles relations?” Report made to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 August 2000.

⁸ For more details, see the aforementioned report by the Commissariat général du Plan.

In short, there is a huge gap between little local NGOs that send out a few highly-motivated and competent volunteers to help dig a well in Africa and what are known as the “majors.” Only the large NGOs can claim to exert any influence on the state. These large NGOs have become very professionalized, but they are increasingly perceived as “bureaucratic” and self-interested.⁹ Indeed, they no longer simply do aid and rescue work in the field. They are also to alert public opinion to new issues and are able to mobilize support through large press campaigns. They have developed a legal expertise that the state often lacks. The major humanitarian NGOs, which are very active in fields of conflict into which diplomats rarely venture, are a source of information for the state, and have prompted it to show more concern for the defense of human rights and humanitarian issues.

The major French NGOs have all diversified their activities, in step with transformations that the major Anglo-Saxon NGOs have made. Many of them have set up offices in several countries, becoming in effect multinational organizations. The legal expertise they have developed gives them a certain degree of clout in international negotiations. They are capable of forming international coalitions of NGOs and states, as occurred with the convention for the International Criminal Court. They can function on multiple levels, conducting operations, protesting, acting as a mouthpiece for their constituents and providing geopolitical analyses of international or internal conflicts.

The Limits of Influence

But the influence French NGOs supposedly have on state policy is overstated and the resistance of states to them underestimated. Their influence, when it is exerted, is usually only limited and partial. There is often a considerable gap between their demands and the results achieved, or between image and reality. In the area of humanitarian action, in particular, the specifically French grand ambition of humanitarian action “without borders” has led to a total dead end.¹⁰

NGOs are powerless to modify French foreign policy substantially; they are incapable of forcing a decision that would run counter to what France sees as its basic interests. Their influence, when it is exercised, is confined to issues the state views as secondary. On all issues touching on the heart of national sovereignty—security, the model for economic development, strategic interests—France, like many other countries, continues to act as it always has, weighing the pros and cons according to its own interests. Despite the know-how and devotion of their activists, NGOs have no more influence than what the state decides to grant them.¹¹ They have wrested

⁹ They are thus undergoing a phenomenon that has considerably affected the Anglo-Saxon NGOs. See Grant Jordan and William A. Maloney, *The Protest Business?: Mobilizing Campaign Groups*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ See Samy Cohen, *La résistance des Etats: les démocraties face aux défis de la mondialisation*, Paris, éditions du Seuil, “L’épreuve des faits” series, 2003.

¹¹ Ann Marie Clark, Elisabeth J Friedman and Kathryn Hochstetler reach similar conclusions. See “The Sovereign Limits of Global Civil Society. A Comparison of NGO Participation in UN World Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights, and Women,” *World Politics*, vol. 51, no.1, Oct. 1998.

from governments more verbal commitments than actual deeds. Governments, in very many cases, have yielded little more than a few declarations of good intentions. The hard-won advances are most often bittersweet victories with outcomes that fall well short of their ambitions. Most achievements—the antipersonnel mines treaty, the ICC—are very limited. The state remains the indispensable actor without which nothing can be done and the balance of forces remains overwhelmingly in its favor.

The state in France does finance several NGOs and state officials do frequently claim that France “needs strong and powerful NGOs in all sectors.” But they do not do so out of philanthropy. Rather, NGOs are now perceived as another avenue of French influence throughout the world. They are in a position to convey the French viewpoint effectively in international forums, and they can advocate France’s position in international volunteer circles, thus limiting the influence of American and British NGOs, many of which make no bones about defending their government’s positions. Even more concerned with sovereignty than other European countries, France realized, albeit somewhat late in the day, the advantage that lay in having strong NGOs that are able to compete with their foreign counterparts.

In the field of development aid, NGOs do work that states like France no longer want to do. Their presence allows the state to justify its withdrawal and to delegate tasks to the non-profit private sector while keeping a certain control over development aid projects via co-financing. And they cost less than the private sector, a factor of no small importance. The thinking within the government on NGOs is dominated by a sense of pragmatism and realism that has nothing in common with the position articulated by Hubert Védrine.

But there is still a major lack of consistency in the French approach: France is one of the European countries that channels the least development aid through NGOs and that relies the least on international humanitarian associations. State officials claim that the state needs to maintain a capacity for “state-to-state” international aid. In fact, France wants to continue to act directly without going systematically through NGOs. The question remains whether this position is compatible with the desire to have NGOs that are “as powerful as the American ones.”