“The 1990s were heady days for international NGOs, which expanded their numbers, increased their budgets, and extended their mandates into hitherto untouched areas. NGOs seemed to be rising in status and influence, taking a ‘place at the table’ with states in international decision-making, and gaining leverage over states to make them embrace new norms.”

William DeMars has written a useful analysis of the transnational networking function of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in setting policy goals and in developing local projects of famine relief, conflict reduction and human rights. As De Mars points out “Currently, the NGO bloom has three dimensions. First, NGOs are proliferating quantitatively in established issue-areas, including human rights, grassroots development, humanitarian relief, environmental protection, feminism, population control, conflict resolution and prevention, and democratization. Second, the increase in NGO numbers is a global phenomenon affecting all regions, even Asia and the Middle East where governments have maintained relatively tight control over civil society for decades. Third, NGOs are also proliferating qualitatively, by taking the initiative to colonize or create new issues where hitherto they have exerted limited influence. The NGO bloom, in all its dimensions, constitutes a problem for government policymakers everywhere, because the very presence of NGOs alters the context for government policy.”

The NGO ‘bloom’ as DeMars calls it, is due to the existence of the United Nations and the provisions in the UN Charter for a ‘consultative status’ for NGOs. When the UN Charter was being drafted in 1945, a small number of NGOs, mostly from the USA, followed the drafting as closely as they could and worked for some structured role in the UN system. As one of the failings of the League of Nations had been the lack of public support and understanding of the functioning of the League, some of the UN drafters felt that a role should be given to NGOs. At the start, both governments and UN Secretariat saw NGOs as an information avenue — telling NGO members what the governments and the UN was doing and building support for their actions.

However, once NGOs had a foot in the door, the NGOs worked to have a two-way avenue — also telling governments and the Secretariat what NGO members thought and what policies should be carried out at the UN. Governments were none too happy with this two-way avenue idea and tried to limit the UN bodies with which NGOs could ‘consult’. The General Assembly and the Security Council were to be free from NGO input. The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which has potentially a wide role to play but in practice has never been the center of economic or social policy, was the body which was to consult with NGOs. ECOSOC also created a “Committee on NGOs” which admits or refuses to admit NGOs into consultative status and analyses the contributions that individual NGOs play in the UN system.

However, what in practice gives NGOs their influence is not what an individual NGO can do but what they can do collectively. ‘Networking’ and especially transnational networking is the key method of progress. As DeMars shows “NGOs make networks, which facilitate the transnational movement of norms, resources, political responsibility, and information.” NGO networks tend to be informal, non-binding, temporary, and highly personalized.

In addition to the yearly meetings of the main UN bodies such as the General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights, the UN has organized during the 1970s and again in the 1990s a series of world conferences on such issues as environment, population, food, the rights of women, human rights in general, land reform etc.
These large UN conferences and especially the preparatory process leading up to the conference were key opportunities for NGO action. NGOs from a large number of countries who were unable to attend the regular UN meetings which take place primarily in New York and Geneva and to a lesser extent in Vienna, made an effort to attend the world conferences. At these conferences, they met other NGO representatives with whom they stayed in contact—thus building links in the networks. One example is the three international conferences held during the UN Decade for women: 4,000 people participated in the NGO forum held in Mexico City at the same time as the governmental meeting in 1975, 7,000 in Copenhagen at the midpoint of the Decade (1980) and 14,000 in Nairobi at the end of the Decade in 1985. As DeMars points out “At these meetings many of the same women met repeatedly and entered into broad-based dialogue and experimentation to find a ‘frame of meaning’ that could capture a wide range of concerns of women, especially across the North-South divide. The issue frame of ‘violence against women’ emerged from this process, and became the basis for a global network and campaign that resonated with a broad public and also linked the diverse problems of domestic violence, sex-selective abortion, sexual slavery, and female genital mutilation.”

What is true of women’s issues is also true for the environment, the fight against racism, human rights and social development. On certain issues which have a less broad appeal, specialized NGOs have played a crucial role as at the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea and the UN Conference on Technology for Development.

Especially during the 1945-1990 Cold War years, NGOs were concerned with arms control and disarmament. NGOs have played important roles at the every-five-years review of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons since the first review in 1975. NGOs played a crucial role in the fight against land mines and in the flow of small arms.

NGOs have been active, especially from the late 1960s on, basically starting with the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, with conflict resolution in civil wars. DeMars has a good chapter on NGO efforts during the conflicts in former Yugoslavia which “addressed an array of issues including refugees, internally displaced persons, human rights, genocide and crimes of war, disaster relief, Red Cross action for victims of war and conflict resolution.” NGOs were no more successful than governments in conflict reduction efforts in former Yugoslavia, but they were and still are active building bridges where bridges between groups had been destroyed.

Governments have slowly come to recognize that NGOs are here to stay. In fact, many governments are creating ‘tame’ NGOs which push the government’s policy. As DeMars points out “When governments do not know what else to do concerning a region or issue, they are tempted to ‘throw NGOs at the problem’. NGOs are inexpensive, they maintain a flow of Information to donors, their failures are more easily disavowed than those committed by official government agencies, and their successes may map new government policy options.”

DeMars sets out well what is generally known about transnational NGO networks. He also sets out areas that require more observations and research. This is a useful book both for NGO members and for those who want to understand more fully how NGOs function within the world society.

Rene Wadlow