CHAPTER 13

HUMAN RIGHTS DIPLOMACY: THE NGO ROLE

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Most of my colleagues would chafe at being called diplomats. There is a strong current among human rights activists that revels in being seen as outsiders, battling against corrupt and abusive governments. And, of course, we are also known for being decidedly un-diplomatic when the occasion warrants it. If human rights diplomacy is defined, however, as advocacy directed at governments and inter-governmental organisations to affect policy changes relating to human rights, it is a core function of non-governmental advocacy organisations like mine (Human Rights Watch). Human rights organisations have long since learned that it is not enough to document human rights abuses: we need to understand who is responsible for such abuses, why they occur, and what it will take to stop them.

Within the theatre of human rights diplomacy, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) take on many different roles. At times, the activities undertaken by NGOs are similar to those undertaken by governmental actors, but we also perform a number of functions that distinguish our work from governments. The discussion below highlights six different types of engagement by NGOs in human rights diplomacy, including our roles as: (1) catalysts; (2) advocates; (3) shapers of the debate; (4) partners in policy-making; (5) monitors; and (6) legitimisers and beneficiaries.

Catalysts

NGOs play a crucial role in instigating human rights diplomacy. By exposing abuses and pushing for accountability of those responsible for human rights violations, we act as catalysts for action by governments and other actors. When we put an issue into the public domain, governments are pushed to respond, and they recognise that failure to do so may provoke scrutiny and criticism by NGOs. Sometimes,
the key role an NGO plays is simply to set a process of human rights change in motion.

Advocates

The mainstay of engagement by NGOs in human rights diplomacy is our traditional role as advocates for change. As advocates, NGOs monitor governmental efforts at ‘human rights diplomacy’ and push for stronger, more effective human rights engagement by governments. NGOs frequently engage, for example, with foreign ministries and diplomats to push for human rights concerns to play a more central role in bilateral relations with states with poor human rights records. We engage on issues ranging from individual cases of human rights abuse to broad policy discussions on human rights violations related to counter-terrorism efforts.

When governments engage in human rights diplomacy, progress can often hinge on agreeing to reciprocal treatment, promising benefits or threatening sanctions. Of course, NGOs are unable to employ those tools in our efforts to weigh in on how governments conduct their human rights diplomacy. Instead, there are four key ingredients to getting our voices heard: (1) information; (2) expertise; (3) media; and (4) public support. Different NGOs rely on each of these elements to different degrees.

For an organisation like Human Rights Watch, the information that we have about human rights abuses on the ground is often our biggest capital. Despite the relative wealth of resources that governments possess, we frequently find that our researchers have direct or more detailed information about situations under consideration, and that knowledge gives us entrée into policy discussions. Similarly, NGOs can bring helpful expertise into such discussions. Our input on how human rights problems should be pursued is informed by our engagement on a broad range of similar issues in a variety of situations, a perspective that can often be useful to governments considering a range of policy options.

In addition, NGOs are able to use the media to amplify our own voices. By making public statements, writing opinion pieces, and speaking with journalists, we turn a spotlight on how governments are engaging on human rights issues and make them more responsive to human rights concerns. Finally, by building public understanding and