Role and Impact of International NGOs in Global Ocean Governance

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INTRODUCTION

For over two decades, the general public has become increasingly accustomed to the term “non-governmental organization,” and the acronym “NGO” has entered in the lexicon of laypersons all over the world. “NGO” is now widely used as a synonym for advocacy, voluntary or philanthropic organizations acting to protect various public interests in the fields of human rights, public health, global equity and solidarity, humanitarian affairs, environmental protection and conservation, fair trade, disarmament and arms control, etc. Among the wide array of spheres, issues and activities in which NGOs are involved, this article shows that the contribution of NGOs to ocean governance and ocean conservation has been and continues to be extremely important and wide-ranging. As Lucien Chabason, former Coordinator of UNEP’s Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP), and now Special Adviser to France’s International Institute on Sustainable Development on International Relations (IDDRI-Sciences Po) says, “Because of the governance gaps and overlaps, and the limited number of voters’ vested interests, the marine environment is for environmental NGOs’ their best niche.”

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RISE OF THE NGOs

For many years the term “non-governmental organization” had little or no resonance for the wider public. It was only a bureaucratic term used within the United Nations to distinguish NGOs from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and from governments and government agencies. The term NGO originated in the United Nations Charter of 1945. In Article 71, the United Nations’ founding fathers had already recognized that non-governmental organizations could and should have a supporting role. Many NGOs were founded and active in the decades following the creation of the United Nations. Their collective strength, broadly stated, as key non-state actors capable of shaping policy, became more formally recognized in the 1990s, a decade that began with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) of 1992, also remembered as the Rio Earth Summit and ended in 1999 with the Seattle Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO). In Rio 1992, NGOs were encouraged to help set the agenda; their role as partners was explicitly recognized in Section III of Agenda 21, the “blueprint” for sustainable development endorsed by Earth Summit participants. In Seattle 1999, grassroots civil society organizations (development and environmental organizations, trade union organizations, farmers federations, etc.) were largely credited with helping to create a mood that prevented the launch of a so-called Millennium Round of trade liberalization, triggering a wide array of commentaries and observations (positive and negative alike) on the implications for governance of the rise of NGOs as a new power capable of changing the course set by one of the Bretton-Woods institutions.

NGOs AT SEA

The nature of NGO contributions in marine governance, management, science and conservation is almost as diverse as the nature of NGOs themselves. Although they occasionally join forces, NGOs are not a monolithic block and their mandate, focus and approaches differ as a result of the characteristics of

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2. Article 71 of the UN Charter envisaged that: “The Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence. Such arrangements may be made with international organizations and, where appropriate, with national organizations after consultation with the Member of the United Nations concerned.” United Nations Charter, Chapter 10: The Economic and Social Council, 1945, available online: <http://www.un-documents.net/ch-10.htm>.

3. The number of NGOs involved in international programs is estimated to be of the order of 40,000.