

## **Role and influence of NGOs**

Associations and civil society play a role as "whistleblowers". They identify new demands on the ground before public authorities and warn about situations of concern. They are helped by their employees when they have enough financial support; more than 90% of associations rely entirely on volunteerism (1). Volunteers are "sentinels" - they intervene as close as possible to the public in the field with a particular status, a neutral third party between the donors and the beneficiaries they support.

The term NGO first appeared in 1945 – it was used by the Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc) of the United Nations (UN) to designate organizations that were neither State (public structures) nor Market (companies). We also talk about the Third sector (neither public nor private). There is an artistic vagueness in the term that does not have a universal definition. However, it is necessary to clearly define their action to know whether a structure can, or cannot, receive public funds.

A special report (2) published by the European Court of Auditors (ECA) expressed surprise in April 2025 that the same criteria were not uniformly used within the European Union (all agencies and between member countries). It is essential to understand "whom" the European funds are granted and facilitate the communication of "coherent and reliable information on the funding granted by the Union to NGOs". Among the 27 member countries of the European Union, only 6 have adopted a legal definition of an NGO, 21 do not (including France). In January 2022, the Commission gave the following definition: "in addition to being a non-profit organization, an NGO must be independent of public authorities." Yet an NGO in the European sense is not always considered as such in the state to which it belongs. This contradiction is surprising and throws confusion.

The NGOs are not a homogeneous group either. Some are small organizations that carry out actions at the local level. Others are large international NGOs present in many countries. Human and financial resources thus range from a few thousand Euros made by a small team of a few people to more than one billion Euros for actions in 50 countries. They all intervene in countries of the South on equivalent missions.

Coordination Sud, created in 1994, conducted the most detailed study of 117 French NGOs. Associative platform, it brings together French associations "non-profit structures, resulting from a militant and citizen mobilization of a private nature, acting for social causes and in the general interest, with a transnational dimension" (3). The term chosen is International Solidarity Association (ASI). The role played by NGOs/ASI is crucial as "actors in the co-construction process" enshrined by the programming law on solidarity development and the fight against global inequalities (4). Since 2003, the international solidarity volunteers (VSI) have benefited from a legal framework (5); they have been governed for decades by a simple decree. In the hierarchy of standards, moving from a decree to a law was a considerable step forward. VSIs have all the profiles but their recruitment is more demanding than for civil volunteering. Very technical skills must be demonstrated to be efficient on the ground in sensitive areas (natural disasters, wars.. ) where populations need knowledge, know-how and specific skills.

NGOs and International Cooperation have benefited from a period of unprecedented growth and development between 2000 and 2023. Public Aid for Development (PAD) budgets increased from 80 to 233.3 billion dollars (OECD). The French situation (Coordination Sud, 2023) is eloquent. International aid represented 75% of public budgets with the following distribution: 47% of funds came from bilateral foreign cooperation (United States through USAID, Germany, United Kingdom), 32% from the European Union (direct or indirect management), 16% from UN agencies, and 4% from other sources. The national support comes from the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE) and the French Development Agency (AFD) with 21% of total public aid (2020). Territorial support (5%) also called "decentralized cooperation" is provided by regions, departments or municipalities (twinning arrangements, various agreements depending on their field of competence). Between 2016-2023, a reversal of the trend was observed: private aid, which until then had been the majority, was overtaken by public aid. It went from 778 to 953 million Euros (2016-2020). Donations and legacies remained constant (70% of total private aid), followed by corporate sponsorship (11% including 2/3 from foreign companies), 11% from foundations and 8% from own funds (sale of products and services).

Public Aid for Development stopped in France in 2024 due to public debt. The target set at 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) will not be reached. More seriously, since January 2025, public international aid has been going through its greatest crisis since the 1960s (time of independence). The American presidency of Donald Trump has canceled sine die 83% of ongoing contracts, without any evaluation, depriving millions of beneficiaries of essential and sometimes vital aid. The year 2025 is catastrophic; we measure, by its absence, the importance of PAD and NGOs whose interventions are varied - Education and training, Governance, Human rights, Food security, Environment Climate, Rural development, Water sanitation, Health emergency medical assistance, Gender equality, Hygiene nutrition... The PAD deserved a thorough audit to evaluate its effectiveness, but not such a drastic decline. The European Commission and the international organizations, with the efficient and expert assistance of Anglo-Saxon firms are specialists in audits.

A Swiss NGO, Advisor (5), specializing in the evaluation of NGOs suggested a convincing approach to measure the real influence of NGOs in the world. It retained three criteria – transparency, innovation and financial autonomy vis-à-vis governments (original criterion of the definition of an NGO). In its ranking, the first place goes to BRAC, an NGO created in Bangladesh in 1972, which has helped millions of people out of poverty thanks to micro-credit. Second place goes to “Médecins sans frontières” (MSF), an NGO created in 1971 by the "French doctors", 90% of which is financed by private donations and operates in 68 countries. The third place is for the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), which is based in Denmark and works in all unstable areas for mine clearance operations. The war in Europe, in Ukraine, showed the importance of such a mission ; it was a tragic loss for Ukrainians.

The weight of NGOs is not only measured by their budget but also by their governance, their impact on populations and their real influence on the ground. The European Union and France should be inspired by this example of good practice coming from Switzerland...

Dr Bénédicte Halba, president of IRIV ([www.iriv.net](http://www.iriv.net)), August 2025

- (1) Viviane Tchernonog « Paysage associatif français », édition 2023 (chiffres 2020-2021), ADDEs, Paris : JURis associations, 2023
- (2) CCE « Transparence des financements accordés par l'Union européenne à des ONG », rapport spécial 11/2025, Luxembourg, avril 2025
- (3) Coordination Sud « Étude Argent ASI » Paris, édition avril 2022.-  
<https://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/Etude-MSE-Coordination-SUD-1.pdf>
- (4) Loi n°2021-1031 du 4 août 2021
- (5) NGO Advisor- classement des 10 ONGs les plus influentes-  
<https://www.courrierinternational.com/grand-format/quelles-sont-les-dix-ong-les-plus-influentes-du-monde>