Merchants of Morality

Which global injustices gain your sympathy, attention, and money? Rarely the most deserving. For every Tibetan monk or Central American indigenous activist you see on the evening news, countless other worthy causes languish in obscurity. The groups that reach the global limelight often do so at dear cost—by distorting their principles and alienating their constituencies for the sake of appealing to self-interested donors in rich nations. By Clifford Bob

For decades, Tibet’s quest for self-determination has roused people around the world. Inspired by appeals to human rights, cultural preservation, and spiritual awakening, tens of thousands of individuals and organizations lend moral, material, and financial support to the Tibetan cause. As a result, greater autonomy for Tibet’s 5.2 million inhabitants remains a popular international campaign despite the Chinese government’s 50-year effort to suppress it.

However, while Tibet’s light shines brightly abroad, few outsiders know that China’s borders hold other restive minorities: Mongols, Zhuang, Yi, and Hui, to name only a few. Notable are the Uighurs, a group of more than 7 million located northwest of Tibet. Like the Tibetans, the Uighurs have fought Chinese domination for centuries. Like the Tibetans, the Uighurs face threats from Han Chinese in-migration, communist development policies, and newly strengthened antiterror measures. And like the Tibetans, the Uighurs resist Chinese domination with domestic and international protest that, in Beijing’s eyes, makes them dangerous separatists. Yet the Uighurs have failed to inspire the broad-based foreign networks that generously support and bankroll the Tibetans. International celebrities—including actors Richard Gere and Goldie Hawn, as well as British rock star Annie Lennox—speak out on Tibet’s behalf. But no one is planning an Uighur Freedom Concert in Washington, D.C. Why?

Optimistic observers posit a global meritocracy of suffering in which all deserving causes attract international support. Howard H. Frederick, founder of the online activist network Peacenet, has argued that new communications technologies help create global movements in which individuals “rise above personal, even national self-interest and aspire to common good solutions to problems that plague the entire planet.” And Allen L. Hammond of the World Resources Institute recently wrote that the combination of global media, new technologies, and altruistic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) may soon empower the have-nots of the world, bringing them “simple justice” by creating a “radical transparency” in which “no contentious action would go unnoticed and unpublicized.”

But even while a handful of groups such as the Tibetans have capitalized on the globalization of NGOs and media to promote their causes, thou-
sands of equally deserving challengers, such as the Uighurs, have not found their place in the sun. While the world now knows about East Timor, similar insurrections in Indonesian Aceh and Irian Jaya remain largely off the international radar screen. Among environmental conflicts, a small number of cases such as the Brazilian rubber tappers’ struggle to “save” the Amazon, the conflict over China’s Three Gorges Dam, and the recent fight over the Chad-Cameroon pipeline have gained global acclaim. But many similar environmental battles, like the construction of India’s Tehri Dam, the destruction of the Guyanese rain forests, and the construction of the Trans Thai-Malaysia gas pipeline are waged in anonymity. Whole categories of other conflicts—such as landlessness in Latin America and caste discrimination in South Asia—go likewise little noticed. To groups challenging powerful opponents in these conflicts, global civil society is not an open forum marked by altruism, but a harsh, Darwinian marketplace where legions of desperate groups vie for scarce attention, sympathy, and money.

In a context where marketing trumps justice, local challengers—whether environmental groups, labor rights activists, or independence-minded separatists—face long odds. Not only do they jostle for attention among dozens of equally worthy competitors, but they also confront the pervasive indifference of international audiences. In addition, they contend against well-heeled opponents (including repressive governments, multinational corporations, and international financial institutions) backed by the world’s top public relations machines. Under pressure to sell their causes to the rest of the world, local leaders may end up undermining their original goals or alienating the domestic constituencies they ostensibly represent. Moreover, the most democratic and participatory local movements may garner the least assistance, since Western NGOs are less likely to support groups showing internal strife and more inclined to help a group led by a strong, charismatic leader. Perhaps most troubling of all, the perpetuation of the myth of an equitable and beneficent global civil society breeds apathy and self-satisfaction among the industrialized nations, resulting in the neglect of worthy causes around the globe.

PITCHING THE PRODUCT

The ubiquity of conflict worldwide creates fierce competition for international support. In a 2001 survey, researchers at Leiden University in the Netherlands...
lands and the Institute for International Mediation and Conflict Resolution in Washington, D.C., identified 126 high-intensity conflicts worldwide (defined as large-scale armed conflicts causing more than 1,000 deaths from mid-1999 to mid-2000), 78 low-intensity conflicts (100 to 1,000 deaths from mid-1999 to mid-2000), and 178 violent political conflicts (less than 100 deaths from mid-1999 to mid-2000). In these and many other simmering disputes, weak challengers hope to improve their prospects by attracting international assistance. Local movements usually follow two broad marketing strategies: First, they pitch their causes internationally to raise awareness about their conflicts, their opponents, and sometimes their very existence. Second, challengers universalize their narrow demands and particularistic identities to enhance their appeal to global audiences.

Critical to the success of local challengers is access to major Western NGOs. Many groups from low-profile countries are ignored in the developed world's key media centers and therefore have difficulty gaining visibility among even the most transnational of NGOs. Moreover, despite the Internet and the much-ballyhooed “CNN effect,” repressive regimes can still obstruct international media coverage of local conflicts. In the 1990s, for example, the government of Papua New Guinea did just that on Bougainville island, site of a bloody separatist struggle that cost 15,000 lives, or roughly 10 percent of the island’s population. During an eight-year blockade (1989–97), foreign journalists could enter the island only under government guard, while the rebels could dispatch emissaries abroad only at great risk. India has used similar tactics in Kashmir, prohibiting independent human rights monitors from entering the territory and seizing passports of activists seeking to plead the Kashmiri case before the U.N. General Assembly and other bodies. Less effectively, Sudan has tried to keep foreigners from entering the country’s vast southern region to report on the country’s 19-year civil war.

Even for causes from “important” countries, media access—and therefore global attention—remains highly uneven. Money makes a major difference, allowing wealthier movements to pay for media events, foreign lobbying trips, and overseas offices, while others can barely afford places to meet. For example, long-term support from Portugal helped the East Timorese eventually catch the world’s attention; other Indonesian separatist movements have not had such steady friends. And international prizes such as the Goldman Environmental Prize, the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, and the Nobel Peace Prize have become important vehicles of internationalization. In addition to augmenting a leader’s resources, these awards raise a cause’s visibility, facilitate invaluable contacts with key transnational NGOs and media, and result in wider support. For instance, Mexican “farmer ecologist” Rodolfo Montiel Flores’s receipt of the $125,000 Goldman Prize in 2000 boosted the campaign to release him from prison on false charges stemming from his opposition to local logging practices. Not surprisingly, such prizes have become the object of intense salesmanship by local groups and their international champions.

Local challengers who have knowledge of global NGOs also have clear advantages. Today’s transnational NGO community displays clear hierarchies of influence and reputation. Large and powerful organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth have the resources and expertise to investigate claims of local groups from distant places and grant them legitimacy. Knowledge of these key “gatekeeper” NGOs— their identities, goals, evidentiary standards, and openness to particular pitches—is crucial for a local movement struggling to gain support [see sidebar on opposite page]. If homegrown knowledge is scarce, local movements may try to link themselves to a sympathetic and savvy outsider, such as a visiting journalist, missionary, or academic. Some Latin American indigenous groups, including Ecuador’s Huaoroni and Cofán, Brazil’s Kayapó, and others, have benefited from the kindness of such strangers, who open doors and guide their way among international networks.

Small local groups with few connections or resources have more limited options for raising international awareness and thus may turn to protest. Yet domestic demonstrations often go unseen abroad.
If the Cause Fits

The world's largest international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often develop documents detailing their criteria for selecting the local causes, clients, and movements to which they will lend support. Herewith are two examples: The first is from Human Rights Watch (HRW), a New York–based organization founded in 1978 and dedicated to "protecting the human rights of people around the world," and the second is from the Sierra Club, a San Francisco–based environmental group with some 700,000 members worldwide and founded in 1892.

Excerpt From Human Rights Watch's World Report 2001

The failure to include a particular country or issue often reflects no more than staffing limitations and should not be taken as commentary on the significance of the problem. There are many serious human rights violations that Human Rights Watch simply lacks the capacity to address. Other factors affecting the focus of our work include the severity of abuses, access to the country and the availability of information about it, the susceptibility of abusive forces to outside influence, the importance of addressing certain thematic concerns, and the need to maintain a balance in the work of Human Rights Watch across various political divides.

"General Sierra Club Criteria for Involvement in Human Rights Cases"
(A high-level Sierra Club staffer described this document as an "informal ... starting point [including] some of the factors we weigh.")

The Sierra Club's Human Rights and the Environment Campaign is particularly interested in protecting the fundamental civil liberties of individuals worldwide who wish to advocate nonviolently for environmental protection. Such liberties are more closely related to our mandate as a grassroots environmental organization. The kinds of rights that are most involved with providing these critical assurances are those: guaranteeing rights of political participation; guaranteeing personal security; and guaranteeing personal autonomy (e.g., freedom to speak, organize, etc.)

The Sierra Club prefers to confine its involvement in the human rights area to pursuing civil and political rights of this sort for all people in all places who are advocates for environmental protection. We would pursue these as rights to be recognized and guaranteed under international law.

As a corollary, we would not involve ourselves in promoting—as rights under international law—"social, economic or cultural rights." While these deal with important human concerns, they lack the same character as pre-conditions for our work.

General Human Rights and the Environment Campaign Support Questions
1. Is there a local grassroots organization that we can work with? [...] 
2. Does this individual or community group wish our assistance? 
3. Would the Sierra Club's involvement help or harm this individual/community? Will our involvement make a positive difference? 
4. Is the environmental cause in keeping with Sierra Club policy on that issue? 

If the above are answered affirmatively, then …
5. Do we expect this to be a long or short term campaign? How winnable is it? 
6. Will Sierra Club members be sympathetic to this issue/country/community? 
7. Is there a U.S. government or corporate hook?

-C.B.
Only spectacular episodes—usually violent ones—draw international media coverage. And since violence is anathema to powerful international NGOs, local groups who use force as an attention-grabbing tactic must carefully limit, justify, and frame it. For example, the poverty and oppression that underlay the 1994 uprising by Mexico’s Zapatista National Liberation Army went largely unnoticed at home and abroad for decades. In the face of such indifference, the previously unknown Zapatistas resorted to arms and briefly seized the city of San Cristóbal on January 1, 1994. Immediately tarred by the Mexican government as “terrorists,” the Zapatistas in fact carefully calibrated their use of force, avoiding civilian casualties and courting the press. Other tactics also contributed to the Zapatistas’ international support, but without these initial dramatic attacks, few people beyond Mexico’s borders would now know or care about the struggles of Mexico’s indigenous populations.

THE NGO IS ALWAYS RIGHT

To improve their chances of gaining support, local movements also conform themselves to the needs and expectations of potential backers in Western nations. They simplify and universalize their claims, making them relevant to the broader missions and interests of key global players. In particular, local groups try to match themselves to the substantive concerns and organizational imperatives of large transnational NGOs.

Consider Nigeria’s Ogoni ethnic group, numbering perhaps 300,000 to 500,000 people. Like other minorities in the country’s southeastern Niger delta, the Ogoni have long been at odds with colonial authorities and national governments over political representation. In the late 1950s, as Royal Dutch/Shell and other multinationals began producing petroleum in the region, the Ogoni claimed that the Nigerian federal government was siphoning off vast oil revenues yet returning little to the minorities who bore the brunt of the drilling’s impact. In the early 1990s, an Ogoni movement previously unknown outside Nigeria sought support from Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and other major international NGOs. Initially, these appeals were rejected as unsubstantiated, overly complex, and too political. Ogoni leaders responded by downplaying their contentious claims about minority rights in a poor, multiethnic developing state and instead highlighting their environmental grievances, particularly Shell’s “ecological warfare” against the indigenous Ogoni. Critical to this new emphasis was Ogoni leader Ken Saro-Wiwa’s recognition of “what could be done
by an environment group [in the developed world] to press demands on government and companies.”

The Ogoni’s strategic shift quickly led to support from Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Sierra Club. These and other organizations provided funds and equipment, confirmed and legitimated Ogoni claims, denounced the Nigerian dictatorship, boycotted Shell, and eased Ogoni access to governments and media in Europe and North America. In the summer of 1993, as the Ogoni’s domestic mobilizations brought harsh government repression, human rights NGOs also took notice. The 1994 arrest and 1995 execution of Saro-Wiwa ultimately made the Ogoni an international symbol of multinational depredation in the developing world, but it was their initial repositioning as an environmental movement that first put them on the global radar screen. (For its part, Shell countered with its own spin, attacking Saro-Wiwa’s credibility as a spokesman for his people and denying his allegations against the company.)

Similar transformations have helped other local causes make global headway. In drumming up worldwide support for Guatemala’s Marxist insurgency in the 1980s, activist Rigoberta Menchú projected an indigenous identity that resonated strongly with left-leaning audiences in Western Europe and North America. Her book I, Rigoberta Menchú made her an international symbol of indigenous oppression, helping her win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, year of the Columbus quincentenary, despite her association with a violent rebel movement. As anthropologist David Stoll later showed, however, Menchú and the guerrillas may have enjoyed more backing among international solidarity organizations than among their country’s poor and indigenous peoples. According to Stoll, external support may have actually delayed the guerrillas’ entry into domestic negotiations by several years, prolonging the war and costing lives.

Mexico’s Zapatistas have also benefited abroad from their indigenous identity. At the beginning of their 1994 rebellion, the Zapatistas issued a hodgepodge of demands. Their initial call for socialism was quickly jettisoned when it failed to catch on with domestic or international audiences, and their ongoing demands for Mexican democratization had mainly domestic rather than international appeal. But it was the Zapatistas’ “Indianness” and their attacks first on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and then on globalization that found pay dirt in the international arena. (Little coincidence that the day they chose to launch the movement—January 1, 1994—was also the day NAFTA went into effect.) Once the appeal of these issues had become clear, they took center stage in the Zapatistas’ contacts with external supporters. Indeed, the Zapatistas and their masked (non-Indian) leader Subcomandante Marcos became potent symbols for antiglobalization activists worldwide. In February and March 2001, when a Zapatista bus caravan traversed southern Mexico and culminated in a triumphant reception in the capital’s central square, dozens of Italian tute bianche (“White Overalls”), activists prominent in antiglobalization protests in Europe, accompanied the Zapatistas as bodyguards. Even the French farmer and anti-McDonald’s campaigner José Bové was present to greet Marcos.

Focusing on an internationally known and notorious enemy (such as globalization or NAFTA) is a particularly effective way of garnering support. In recent years, multinational corporations and international financial institutions have repeatedly served as stand-ins for obscure or recalcitrant local enemies. Even when a movement itself is little known, it can project an effective (if sometimes misleading) snapshot of its claims by identifying itself as the anti-McDonald’s movement, the anti-Nike movement, or the anti-Uno-cal movement. Blaming a villain accessible in the developed world also forges strong links between distant social movements and the “service station on the block,” thus inspiring international solidarity.

Such strategies are not aimed only at potential supporters on the political left. The recent growth of a well-funded Christian human rights movement in the United States and Europe has helped many local groups around the world. One major beneficiary is John Garang’s Sudan People’s Liberation Army, made up mostly of Christians from southern Sudan fighting against the country’s Muslim-dominated north. Rooted in ethnic, cultural, and religious differences, the conflict has been aggravated by disputes over control of natural resources. Since fighting broke out in 1983, the war has attracted little attention, despite the deaths of an estimated 2 million people. As late
as September 1999, then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright reportedly stated that “the human rights situation in Sudan is not marketable to the American people.” However, in the mid-1990s, “slave redemptions” (in which organizations like Christian Solidarity International buy back Christians from their Muslim captors) as well as international activism by Christian human rights organizations began to raise the conflict’s profile. The start of oil extraction by multinationals provided another hook to attract concern from mainstream human rights and environmental organizations. Joined by powerful African-American politicians in the United States angered over the slave trade, conservative NGOs have thrown their support behind Garang’s group, thereby feeding perceptions of the conflict as a simple Christian-versus-Muslim clash. These NGOs have also found a receptive audience in the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, thus boosting Garang’s chances of reaching a favorable settlement.

By contrast, failure to reframe obscure local issues (or reframing them around an issue whose time has passed) can produce international isolation for a struggling insurgent group. Two years after the Zapatista attacks, another movement sprang from the poverty and oppression of southern Mexico, this time in the state of Guerrero. The Popular Revolutionary Army attacked several Mexican cities and demanded an old-style communist revolution. But these rebels drew little support or attention, particularly in contrast to the Zapatistas and their fashionable antiglobalization rhetoric. Meanwhile, Brazil’s Landless Peasants Movement and smaller movements of the rural poor in Paraguay and Venezuela have suffered similar fates both because their goals seem out of step with the times and because their key tactic—land invasions—is too controversial for many mainstream international NGOs. In the Niger delta, radical movements that have resorted to threats, sabotage, and kidnappings have also scared off international support despite the similarity of their grievances to those of the Ogoni.

**LEADERS FOR SALE**

If marketing is central to a local movement’s gaining international support, a gifted salesman, one who identifies himself completely with his “product,” is especially valuable. Many individual leaders have come to embody their movements: Myanmar’s (Burma) Aung San Suu Kyi, South Africa’s Nelson Mandela, as well as the Dalai Lama, Menchu, and Marcos. Even when known abroad only through media images, such leaders can make a host of abstract issues seem personal and concrete, thus multiplying a movement’s potential support. For this reason, international tours have long been a central strategy for domestic activists. In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, for example, Sun Yat-sen crisscrossed the world seeking support for a nationalist revolution in China. Attracting international notice when he was briefly kidnapped by the Manchus in London, Sun found himself in Denver, Colorado, on another lobbying trip when the revolution finally came in 1911. Today, for well-supported insurgents, such roadshows are highly choreographed, with hard-charging promoters; tight schedules in government, media, and NGO offices; and a string of appearances in churches, college lecture halls, and community centers. In November 2001, for example, Oronto Douglas, a leader of Nigeria’s Ijaw minority, embarked on a six-city, seven-day tour throughout Canada, where he promoted the Ijaw cause along with his new Sierra Club book *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta*.

What transforms insurgent leaders into international icons? Eloquence, energy, courage, and single-mindedness can undeniably create a charismatic mystique. But transnational charisma also hinges on a host of pedestrian factors that are nonetheless unusual among oppressed groups. Fluency in a key foreign language, especially English; an understanding of Western protest traditions; familiarity with the international political vogue; and expertise in media and NGO relations—all these factors are essential to giving leaders the chance to display their more ineffable qualities. Would the Dalai Lama appear as charismatic through a translator? For his part, Subcomandante Marcos has long insisted that he is but an ordinary man, whose way with words just happened to strike a responsive chord at an opportune moment.
Most of these prosaic characteristics are learned, not innate. Indeed, many NGOs now offer training programs to build advocacy capacity, establish contacts, and develop media smarts. The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization in the Hague regularly holds intensive, week-long media and diplomacy training sessions for its member “nations,” replete with role plays and mock interviews, helping them put their best foot forward in crucial venues. (Among others, Ken Saro-Wiwa praised the program for teaching him nonviolent direct action skills.) One of the most elaborate programs is the Washington, D.C.-based International Human Rights Law Group’s two-year Advocacy Bridge Program, which aims to “increase the skills of local activists to amplify their issues of concern globally” and to “facilitate their access to international agenda-setting venues.” Under the program, dozens of participants from around the world, chosen to ensure equal participation by women, travel to Washington for one week of initial training and then to Geneva for three weeks of on-site work at the U.N. Human Rights Commission. In their second year, “graduates” help train a new crop of participants.

Successful insurgent leaders therefore often look surprisingly like the audiences they seek to capture, and quite different from their downtrodden domestic constituencies. Major international NGOs often look for a figure who neatly embodies their own ideals, meets the pragmatic requirements of a “test case,” or fulfills romantic Western notions of rebellion—in short, a leader who seems to mirror their own central values. Other leaders, deaf to the international zeitgeist or simply unwilling to adapt, remain friendless and underfunded.

THE HIGH PRICE OF SUCCESS

Many observers have trumpeted global civil society as the great last hope of the world’s have-nots. Yet from the standpoint of local challengers seeking international support, the reality is bleak. The international media is often myopic: Conflicts attract meager reporting unless they have clear relevance, major importance, or huge death tolls. Technology’s promise also remains unfulfilled. Video cameras, Web access, and cellular phones are still beyond the reach of impoverished local challengers. Even if the vision of “radical transparency” were realized—and if contenders involved in messy political wrangles in fact desired complete openness—international audiences, flooded with images and appeals, would have to make painful...
choices. Which groups deserve support? Which causes are more “worthy” than others?

Powerful transnational NGOs, emblematic of global civil society, also display serious limitations. While altruism plays some role in their decision making, NGOs are strategic actors who seek first and foremost their own organizational survival. At times this priority jibes nicely with the interests of local clients in far-flung locations, but often it does not. When selecting clients from a multitude of deserving applicants, NGOs must be hard-nosed, avoiding commitments that will harm their reputations or absorb excessive resources. Their own goals, tactics, constituencies, and bottom lines constantly shape their approaches. Inevitably, many deserving causes go unsupported.

Unfortunately, the least participatory local movements may experience the greatest ease in winning foreign backing. Charismatic leadership is not necessarily democratic, for instance, yet external support will often strengthen a local leader’s position, reshaping the movement’s internal dynamics as well as its relations with opponents. Among some Tibetan communities today, there are rumblings of discontent over the Dalai Lama’s religiously legitimated leadership, but his stature has been so bolstered by international support that dissident elements are effectively powerless. Indeed, any internal dissent—if visible to outsiders—will often reduce international interest. NGOs want their scarce resources to be used effectively. If they see discord instead of unity, they may take their money and clout elsewhere rather than risk wasting them on internal disputes.

The Internet sometimes exacerbates this problem: Internecine feuds played out on public listservs and chat rooms may alienate foreign supporters, as has happened with some members of the pro-Ogoni networks. And although much has been made about how deftly the Zapatistas used the Internet to get their message out, dozens of other insurgents, from Ethiopia’s Oromo Liberation Front to the Western Sahara’s Polisario Front have Web sites and use e-mail. Yet they have failed to spark widespread international enthusiasm. As the Web site for Indonesia’s Papua Freedom Organization laments, “We have struggled for more than 30 years, and the world has ignored our cause.” Crucial in the Zapatistas’ case was the appeal of their message (and masked messenger) to international solidarity activists, who used new technologies to promote the cause to broader audiences. In fact, for most of their conflict with the Mexican government, the Zapatistas have not had direct access to the Internet. Instead, they have sent communiqués by hand to sympathetic journalists and activists who then publish them and put them on the Web. Thus the Zapatistas’ seemingly sophisticated use of the Internet has been more a result of their appeal to a core group of supporters than a cause of their international backing.

Perhaps most worrisome, the pressure to conform to the needs of international NGOs can undermine the original goals of local movements. By the time the Ogoni had gained worldwide exposure, some of their backers in the indigenous rights community were shaking their heads at how the movement’s original demands for political autonomy had gone understated abroad compared to environmental and human rights issues. The need for local groups to click with trendy international issues fosters a homogeneity of humanitarianism: Unfashionable, complex, or intractable conflicts fester in isolation, while those that match or—thanks to savvy marketing—appear to match international issues of the moment attract disproportionate support. Moreover, the effort to please international patrons can estrange a movement’s jet-setting elite from its mass base or leave it unprepared for domestic responsibilities. As one East Timorese leader stated after international pressure moved the territory close to independence, “We have been so focused on raising public awareness about our cause that we didn’t seriously think about the structure of a government.”

The quest for international support may also be dangerous domestically. To gain attention may require risky confrontations with opponents. Yet few international NGOs can guarantee a local movement’s security, leaving it vulnerable to the attacks of enraged authorities. If a movement’s opponent is receptive to rhetorical pressure, the group may be saved, as the Zapatistas were. If not, it will likely face its enemies alone. The NATO intervention in Kosovo provides a rare exception. But few challengers have opponents as notorious and strategically inconvenient as Slobodan Milosevic. Even in that case, Albanian leader Ibrahim
Rugova’s nonviolent strategies met years of international inaction and neglect; only when the Kosovo Liberation Army brought the wrath of Yugoslavia down on Kosovo and after Milosevic thumbed his nose at NATO did the intervention begin.

Historically, desperate local groups have often sought support from allies abroad. Given geographical distance as well as political and cultural divides, they have been forced to market themselves. This was true not only in the Chinese Revolution but also in the Spanish Civil War, the Indian nationalist movement, and countless Cold War struggles. But the much-vaunted emergence of a global civil society was supposed to change all that, as the power of technologies meshed seamlessly with the good intentions of NGOs to offset the callous self-interest of states and the blithe indifference of faraway publics.

But for all the progress in this direction, an open and democratic global civil society remains a myth, and a potentially deadly one. Lost in a self-congratulatory haze, international audiences in the developed world all too readily believe in this myth and in the power and infallibility of their own good intentions. Meanwhile, the grim realities of the global morality market leave many local aspirants helpless and neglected, painfully aware of international opportunities but lacking the resources, connections, or know-how needed to tap them.

—Want to Know More?

The leaders of local movements around the world have authored numerous first-person chronicles of their battles and causes. For a fascinating account of the Ogoni struggle, see Ken Saro-Wiwa’s A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary (New York: Penguin, 1995). José Ramos-Horta describes the early years of East Timor’s struggle for international support in Funu: The Unfinished Saga of East Timor (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1987). Aung San Suu Kyi explains her experiences in Burma in Freedom From Fear (New York: Penguin, 1991). Many of Subcomandante Marcos’s communiqués are available in Spanish and English on the Web site of the nonprofit group ¡Ya Basta!


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