



NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Amnesty International

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Introduction

Welcome to Amnesty International (AI), the NGO dedicated to protecting human rights around the world. As a member of AI, you are guided by a steady commitment to protecting human rights in every corner of the globe, regardless of national, cultural, religious or ideological boundaries. Founded in 1961, Amnesty International directs its resources towards researching and uncovering human rights violations in regions of the world where those in power would prefer that outsiders remain uninformed; by bringing these **atrocities** to light, it educates and empowers the international community and drives them to action.

As Amnesty International is guided by the overarching goal of protecting human rights, it is important to understand that it defines “human rights” as they are **delineated** in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was written in 1948. In light of the horrible abuses of human rights that occurred during World War II, the **United Nations General Assembly** adopted this document, which is the first ever to clearly define the **inalienable** rights of every global citizen. It contains numerous freedoms and rights, such as the right to protection under the law, the right to education, freedom of opinion and of expression, and freedom from slavery and torture.

Additionally, Amnesty International has undertaken its own special issues, such as freeing prisoners of conscience, a term the organization created to identify any individual imprisoned because of his/her race, religion, color, language, sexual orientation, belief, or lifestyle, so long as he/she has not used or advocated violence. Other issues that it has undertaken in its short but dynamic history include stopping violence against women, defending the rights and dignity of those trapped in poverty, abolishing the death penalty, opposing torture, protecting the rights of refugees and migrants, and regulating the global arms trade.

History

Almost fifty years ago, British lawyer Peter Benenson took up the cause of two Portuguese students who had been sentenced to seven years in prison for raising their wine glasses in a toast to freedom. At the time, he did not know that he was laying the foundation for what would become a significant and internationally respected NGO: Amnesty International. He was simply doing what he thought was his responsibility to combat this injustice by publishing a newspaper article

Atrocities—*extremely cruel, brutal, or horrifying acts.*

Delineated—*described with detail; set out.*

United Nations General Assembly—*one of the main bodies of the United Nations and the only one in which all member nations have equal representation.*

Inalienable—*incapable of being surrendered or transferred.*

titled “The Forgotten Prisoners.” With passion and candor, he wrote:

*Open your newspaper any day of the week and you will find a story from somewhere of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions are unacceptable to his government... The newspaper reader feels a sickening sense of **impotence**. Yet if these feelings of disgust could be united into common action, something effective could be done.*

Impotence—the state of lacking power or strength; helplessness.

The words in this article sparked the campaign known as “Appeal for Amnesty, 1961,” which evolved into Amnesty International the following year.

Its early focus was on providing relief for prisoners of conscience and other **refugees**, but in the decades that followed, its scope widened to cover other causes, including protecting prisoners’ rights to a fair trial, the abolishment of torture, and investigations into forced disappearances. As Amnesty International expanded in influence and effectiveness, it garnered recognition both in the form of awards like the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 and the UN Human Rights Prize in 1978 and in the form of denunciations from nations like the USSR, Argentina, and Morocco.

Refugees—people who flee to a foreign country to escape danger or persecution.

The new millennium ushered in different issues for AI, as globalization and the War on Terror dominated international news. AI broadened its scope to include the protection of economic, social, and cultural rights with the rise of globalization and drew attention to what it perceived as the erosion of human rights in the name of security in the US’s War on Terror. Today it has turned its attention toward regulating the world arms trade and ending violence against women.

Means of Action

You may be asking yourself how it is possible that an independently-funded NGO like AI has the ability to effect actual change against the wishes of larger and more powerful entities. It is able to do so because its strategies are diverse and effective, mostly consisting of uncovering the truth through careful research; mobilizing the public to rally around a crucial cause; and pressuring larger bodies such as governments, armed political groups, companies, and intergovernmental bodies to take action to end the abuse. The research portion of its activities is crucial, as it has built and works to maintain its credibility by conducting thorough investigations into claims of human rights violations. Its sources include the victims whose rights have been violated, their families, lawyers, journalists, diplomats, religious bodies, and other human rights organizations. Its experts observe trials, interview victims and

local officials, and cooperate with other human rights activists to uncover human rights abuses. Once AI has uncovered abuse, it works on the second part of the campaign, which is publicizing the newly discovered human rights violations. Work here covers a wide range of approaches, including publishing detailed reports, alerting the media to its cause, staging public demonstrations, hosting vigils, organizing letter-writing campaigns, direct lobbying, targeting appeals, emailing petitions, and performing other online activity.

With such a broad mission at heart, it is crucial that the organization maintains a degree of independence from governments and international players. Not only is it not associated with any government, political ideology, economic interest, or religion, but it is also financially self-sufficient, relying solely on donations. It is democratic and autonomous, and it does not support or oppose any government or political system. Furthermore, AI does not necessarily support or oppose the views of the victims and survivors whose rights it seeks to protect. Though its goals are undoubtedly lofty, AI seeks to make a difference in the world by effecting change wherever it can. Its ultimate objective is to ensure that governments everywhere respect the rule of law set forth in the UDHR, but no issue is too small for it to gain AI's attention.

Campaigns

Control Arms

One of the pressing issues that Amnesty International is currently trying to resolve is the unregulated global arms trade, which is believed to directly and harmfully contribute to violence in the form of murder, rape, injury, and displacement at the hands of repressive governments, organized crime, and terrorists. AI has joined Oxfam International and the International Action Network on Small Arms in a Control Arms campaign. The campaign calls for the passing of the Arms Trade Treaty, a global, legally binding agreement to ease the suffering caused by irresponsible transfers of conventional weapons and munitions, citing statistics like the existence of at least 640 million firearms globally. In December 2006, a historic vote at the UN General Assembly saw 153 governments vote for a resolution to start the process for a global Arms Trade Treaty in 2007.

Counter Terror with Justice

AI has tailored its ever-present objection to the unlawful treatment of prisoners and **detainees** to fit the context of the current war on terror. These criticisms are mostly directed at the US's treatment of detainees since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They denounce America's actions as being in violation of international law and of citing national security as a false justification. Though remaining consistently and firmly

Detainees—people held in custody, often without charges.

opposed to terrorism, AI has argued that real security from such attacks can only be achieved when all people are included in the political process and their rights as humans are respected by all.

An aspect of this campaign is the attempt to close Guantanamo Bay, a controversial United States detention center that has gained notoriety in recent years for allegedly denying detainees the protections outlined in the **Geneva Conventions**, holding some of them illegally, and subjecting them to degrading conditions. The other fronts of this campaign are directed at ending the practice of returning detainees to countries where they will be at risk of torture through the process of rendition, a legal process through which the government transfers detainees to another nation. Some detainees have simply disappeared and are commonly known as “ghost detainees.”

Geneva Conventions—a set of four treaties that outline the standards for international law with respect to humanitarian matters, especially the treatment of non-combatants and prisoners of war.

Stop Violence Against Women

Recognizing the tragic fact that females are victims of violence and abuse at an alarmingly higher rate than their male counterparts, whether in times of war or prosperity, whether in peaceful regions or in conflict zones, Amnesty International is focusing its efforts on **stemming** this violence. It seeks to do so by advocating for the enforcement of existing laws that protect victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence, calling for the enactment of new laws that will protect women’s rights, looking to end laws that discriminate against women, urging the end of institutional violence against women perpetrated by states and their agents, and working to empower women.

Stemming—checking or going counter to; making headway or progress against.

Conclusion

As a member of Amnesty International, realize that your main obstacle will usually not come in the form of outright disagreement, for few delegates will vocalize an ideological objection to the protection of human rights. Rather, your main objective is to ensure that this issue ranks as one of the highest priorities on others’ agendas and that safeguards are put in place to prevent abuses not only at the highest levels of government, but at the lowest. You can accomplish this goal with clear, insightful arguments, supported by solid facts and statistics.

There is an abundance of information that you can use to open people’s eyes to the atrocities taking place all over the world, which can be found on AI’s website (www.amnesty.org) and on the other websites listed below. Come prepared with sound data and clearly articulated arguments, and you will help further the cause of ensuring human rights everywhere.

Guide to Further Research

Beyond reading this briefing on Amnesty International, there are two main ways to further prepare yourself for lobbying for your NGO while at the conference. First, the most valuable resource will be Amnesty International's website. Here you can find various information on its history, their mission and goals, as well as details on their latest campaigns and causes:

- <http://www.amnesty.org/>
This is the main AI website. This is a great starting point for learning more about this NGO.
- <http://www.amnesty.org/en/campaigns/control-arms>
In order to uphold its mission, AI targets the unregulated global **arms trade** inflicts misery worldwide as one of its primary campaigns. In garnering support for this issue, AI points out that every year thousands of people are killed, injured, raped and forced to flee their homes as a result.
- <http://www.amnesty.org/en/counter-terror-with-justice>
One of the major campaigns led by AI is regarding the War on Terror. They believe that it has led to an erosion of a whole host of human rights. States are resorting to practices which have long been prohibited by international law, and have sought to justify them in the name of national security.
- <http://www.amnesty.org/en/death-penalty>
AI argues that the death penalty is the ultimate denial of human rights. It is the premeditated and cold-blooded killing of a human being by the state. This cruel, inhumane and degrading punishment is done in the name of justice. AI argues that this is such a significant issue that it should extend to affect foreign policy with nations who practice capital punishment. As such, this will be an important point to raise to committees considering treaties with these countries.

Arms trade—a global industry of businesses that manufactures and sells weapons and military technology and equipment.

The second primary way that you can prepare further is by reviewing the issue briefings of the committees at HMCE, particularly the ones that will be considering issues that are relevant to AI. Look over the briefings and the questions that the committee will be considering. In doing so, you should be able to gain an understanding of how your organization can interact with the committee in order to further your initiatives and campaigns.

As a member of Amnesty International, it is your job to familiarize yourself with the several different campaigns of your organization, as well as the issues that are going to be considered at HMCE. There is plenty of opportunity to lobby the committees in order to advance the principles of AI.

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