

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: A Close Look at a Human Rights NGO

Kate Phelan
Senior Honors Thesis
International Relations
April 11, 1997

CORETTE LIBRARY CARROLL COLLEGE



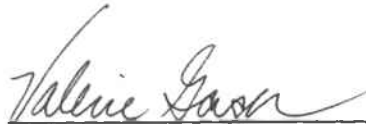
3 5962 00108 397

SIGNATURE PAGE

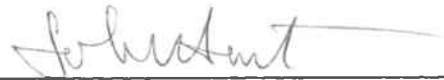
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for
the Department of International Relations.



Dr. Erik Pratt
Associate Professor of
International Relations



Dr. Valerie Gager
Director of Honors Scholars
Program



Dr. John Hart
Associate Professor of
Theology

4/11/97
Date

Table of Contents

Preface	1
Introduction	3
Chapter One: Non-governmental Organizations	13
Chapter Two: Appeal for Amnesty	18
Chapter Three: Amnesty International as a Contender	44
Chapter Four: Conclusion	55
Endnotes	60
Bibliography	66

Preface

Many of us allow our busy lives to consume our compassion. We find it easy to forget and ignore the lives others are forced to live, be they in another nation, our own nation, a different state, the next county, or even next door. With the hope of reminding myself and others about the necessity of human rights education, I have written this paper.

Human rights can be a complicated, variable, and abstract notion. When I use the term "human rights," I most often think of those rights outlined in the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. It covers social, political, civil, and economic rights. Although I believe (as does Amnesty International) that all these rights are important, I chose to research an organization which deals strictly with political and civil rights. It would have been simply too large of a project to tackle social, economic, political, and civil rights together.

Throughout the paper I often refer to "the human rights question" or "cause." By this, I am generally asking in what way can we best solve the puzzle of how to ensure and promote the dignity of all people. I contend that creative notions, such as Peter Benenson's, serve the human rights cause by raising consciousness, providing hope, and investing in lives. The study of different approaches to this question is valuable in that we continue to learn

about and perfect our promotion of tolerance and respect for all people regardless of race, creed, sex, or religion.

The essential aim of this paper is to record the growing meaning of the concept of human rights in the world today. It briefly describes academic perspectives on the universalization of human rights. It attempts to describe the role of non-governmental organizations, particularly Amnesty International's efforts to promote human rights work and influence the behavior of both governments and communities by the activities of its members. Finally, the paper attempts to capture the more qualitative aspects of human rights work and demonstrate their importance.

Introduction

I have never been locked up, beaten, abused, oppressed, or stifled on either a personal level or a political level to any alarming degree. Yet I do not take this lack of experience for granted. Perhaps I was born with an inherent regard for human life and dignity. Perhaps my socialization shaped and solidified such values within me. Regardless of how it came to be, throughout my life I have found myself fascinated with human relationships; more specifically, who holds control over whom and why? I am awed when any individual risks his/her life, his/her family's lives, or some portion of him/herself in order to keep alive some semblance of hope that the situations people find themselves in do not have to remain stagnant, unjust, and inhumane. I wonder where people find the strength to continue to stand up in the face of government authority and force. I admire the human being's will to better his/her situation and that of others.

Because of my general concern for the human race, I am attracted to human rights; a concept which seems to me to embrace and foster respect and tolerance for others. For these reasons I am driven to learn more about ways to approach the human rights question. The notion of one individual, Peter Benenson, caught my attention while I was searching for a topic on which to write. Peter Benenson

organized a campaign in which people would apply pressure on governments by writing letters with the purpose of persuading authorities to release their prisoners of conscience. These are people detained anywhere for their beliefs, color, ethnic origin, language, or religion, who have not advocated or used violence. This particular campaign attracted worldwide support and soon grew into one of the most influential human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the globe, Amnesty International. Martin Ennals, a former Amnesty International Secretary-General, sums up my reaction to Benenson's idea best when he stated it was "An amazing contention that prisoners of conscience could be released by writing letters to governments."¹

I decided to investigate Benenson's notion and the organization which grew up around it. Several questions surface when one digs into the concept of universal human rights. Do the philosophies, methods, and actions of human rights NGOs, such as Amnesty International, aid in the advancement of human dignity? What role does Amnesty International play in creating favorable space in which the universalization of human rights is able to grow? In what way does Amnesty International help to shape world views of human rights? In order to sort out some answers, I will briefly review the internationalization of human rights and the role of the human rights NGO. I will then examine the philosophies and methods of the human rights

NGO Amnesty International in order to determine the particular role which Amnesty International plays. With the assistance of critics and the perspectives of two local group members, I will conclude with my assessment of Amnesty International's effectiveness as a promoter of human rights.

The Internationalization of Human Rights

The concept of human rights has had a long history and many famous individuals associated with it. King John of England was required by his subjects to sign the Magna Carta, which limited the King's power and undermined the concept of absolute rule. The "Natural Law" philosophers e.g., Locke influenced the thinking of Thomas Jefferson who authored the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which relied upon the notion of natural rights to free the colonies from Britain and the King's control. A short time later, in 1789, the French established their first republic with the "Rights of Man." Thomas Paine, John Stuart Mill, and Henry David Thoreau's works further expanded the cause in Britain and the United States of America. The notion of Human rights seeped into the philosophies and life's work of such individuals as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.² The list of those who have dedicated a great portion of their lives to the notion of human rights is certainly extensive. The list above suggests that the concept of human rights (further

examined in following paragraphs) carries great appeal across state, ideological, social, and political lines. Out of such a concept, far reaching movements have been founded by those who take special stock in the value of spreading the "good news" of human rights.

After the horrors of Nazi atrocities and World War II, many governments saw the value in joining together to promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion."³ This shared value of human rights was partly responsible for founding the United Nations. In 1948 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which defines the rights and fundamental freedoms which governments agreed to protect.⁴ At this point, individuals became subjects of international law.⁵

Based upon my research, human rights issues appear to be multi-dimensional. Several elements shape the many perspectives which surround human rights dialogue. Generally speaking, individuals may be placed along a continuum regarding their position on the internationalization of human rights. Those who are optimistic about the human rights issue are at one end (we will call it the left). They believe in aggressive behavior reform, in the possibility of a harmonious human community, and also tend to believe that democratic and humane political systems are most stable. These people

believe in the development of universal human rights and therefore do not have a problem with encouraging all governments to uphold human rights standards.

Located at the other end (respectively, the right) are pessimists (some writers use the term "conservatives") who believe that conflict is inevitable. They believe that the best policy is to look after one's own interests and not entertain such illusions that the world could somehow become a more humane place. People who subscribe to this view tend to believe that human rights and democratic procedures are ill-suited for poorer and non-Western nations and that a universal application of human rights standards is a mistake.⁶

There are several objections to the concept of universal rights and their application in the world today. In order to be most effective, NGOs like Amnesty International need to be aware of these objections. The internationalization of human rights is problematic because it requires a diminution of state power. Pessimists believe that the power of the state undermines the effort to internationalize human rights and should continue to do so. They worry that the frame-work of human rights standards is generally Euro-centric and therefore is inappropriate and even interventionary in nature when applied to non-Western societies.⁷ Recognizing the importance of cultural difference, some object that human rights promotion is aimed at the "elevation of individual

freedom above the collective good, of rights above duties, of self interest above social responsibility, of civil and political liberties above economic and social protection."⁸ These people believe that these objectives should not be promoted as universal priorities. Their argument is that states remain the only legitimate power structures capable of embracing human rights standards. One cannot necessarily prevail upon a government to change or to improve the human rights situation according to norms the government does not subscribe to.⁹ Hence, such international standards as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights remain subject to the particularisms of the nation-state. Governments interpret the content of such normative human rights documents according to their own cultural, ideological, and practical interests.¹⁰

Conservatives from Burke onwards have argued that meaningful rights can only be protected in the context of the distinctive national traditions and legal orders within which they have evolved and from which they derive their appropriateness.

Advocates of the universal concept respond in a variety of ways to the pessimistic perspective. Geoffrey Best appears slightly more flexible than the average pessimist when he acknowledges that, although NGOs may play a welcome role and provide support, "it remains true that the spadework on national soil must be done by insiders."¹² Although not wholly convinced by the pessimist argument, Best softly validates the latter objection when he writes:

The bad behavior of states is not the only obstacle to the implementation of human rights laws and norms. Questions of priorities and adjustments deserve to be taken seriously; the Anglo-American package of rights and freedoms has some questionable items.¹³

We might consider Best representative of those located centrally on the human rights continuum, though leaning towards the right due to pragmatic observances of how the world has always worked.

However, David Forsythe indicates the Western label placed upon the current definition of human rights may be fading. The world has changed and is changing. Thus, it may be most pragmatic to encourage the advancement of human dignity as a universal goal by building on some present trends. He writes:

Even authors like R.J. Vincent, who are initially inclined to see human rights in foreign policy as a type of imperialism and thus a way for one state to try to project its values abroad, increasingly come to the conclusion that a more cosmopolitan definition of human rights exists and plays a larger role in international relations than in the past.¹⁴

Those who view the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a standard and ideal for all societies argue that, with the increasing interdependence of states, international pressure regarding human rights issues is hard to ignore. One source even goes so far as to claim that "this very interdependence could over time provide as effective a backing to regulation as outright force."¹⁵

Further, with the growth of international treaties and regulatory regimes, the treatment of citizens or even the type of constitutional arrangements states subscribe to are no longer simply a state's internal matter.¹⁶

Some conclude that the development of human rights laws and standards are not just a Western construct, as pessimists often claim. David Beetham suggests that those who subscribe to the imperialist argument seem to ignore the differences in perspectives and varieties of values present within even the most homogeneous societies. He writes of the imperialist argument that "such arguments readily serve to legitimate the suppression of internal dissent."¹⁷

Still others, while acknowledging guarantees of human rights as ideal, wonder how we can turn such "theory" into practice. These middle-of-the-roaders are located left of center on the human rights continuum because they value the concept of human rights but express concern with the viability of internationalizing the human rights cause because there is no single accounting scheme available which is adequate for monitoring the status of human rights globally. The authors of Global Human Rights could not identify one accounting scheme which was both conceptually valid and quantitatively reliable.¹⁸ It has also been acknowledged that expert judgments and opinion may vary when analyzing the human rights question. Additionally, (although some may also assert this as an NGO strength),

a researcher's intuition often accompanies his or her assessment of the situation and human beings can be fallible.¹⁹

Finally, some argue that problems identified with the human rights issue are increasing. For example, the gap between the rich and poor is growing wider, technology for repression has become more sophisticated, and regional cooperation among dictatorial regimes has been demonstrated.²⁰ The mass media also have control over what issues are covered. Their choices may not necessarily be deserving of attention in the real sense of a crisis as they are sensational.²¹ Still others fear that "there is nothing inherent in the human rights situation to distinguish it from . . . equally pressing domestic problems."²²

Despite the controversy, the internationalization of human rights has pushed forward in a number of ways. Increased attention given to human rights by inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations has given universal standards legitimacy. Change in international law and the number of treaties with special monitoring mechanisms demonstrate the growth in awareness of global human rights standards.²³

There has also been more construction, evolution, and impact of international regimes which deal with human rights. An increase in the professionalism, political scope, action, and impact of NGOs which assess human rights

violations points to the internationalization of standards.

"Such a global focus is itself a reflection of the emergence, however weakly, of a planetary perspective based on the notion that persons, not just juristic entities like states, warrant our normative attention."²⁴

Chapter One: Non-Governmental Organizations

The term "non-governmental organization" commonly refers to organizations which are neither governmental nor profit seeking. Many are small and operate at community levels, while some have grown large and influential. They can be either secular or religious; concerned with local issues, regional issues, or international issues; and are formed for any number of reasons. Some are designed to serve their own members and others serve those who need help. Some may have a specific work area or particular emphasis. Most NGOs believe that local participation and control is important to success.²⁵

NGOs offer many advantages. NGOs can provide their members with greater financial and negotiating leverage than they would have as individuals, voice a member's views publicly, try innovative methods in order to solve problems, network, build up connections and share information with other groups, mobilize people and resources to support projects, increase awareness and educate, lobby and make use of legal services, oppose government policies, organize demonstrations, and research and influence national policy making.²⁶ On a more intangible note, NGOs enable individuals to cope with change and to improve their quality of life.²⁷

NGOs also encounter challenges. Their chances for

failure often outweigh their chances for success. More often than not, they suffer from relatively weak managerial skills, organizational skills, and technical expertise; confront obstacles beyond their control; are forced to rely upon beneficiaries; have problems replicating successful projects; and constantly battle such common small group problems as lack of energy, motivation, or even isolation.²⁸

Presumably, the strongest argument against NGOs is their lack of real power. Ann Marie Clark notes the ultimate power of the state when she discusses the difficulties NGOs may encounter. However, she emphasizes that NGOs aid domestic groups (or "insiders," as Best refers to them) through interchange which can foster a domestic group's physical as well as political survival in a hostile state environment.²⁹ In a sense, international human rights NGOs can be helpful in propping up local groups working for human rights standards within their nation's and people's cultural context. NGOs cannot achieve much without a government's cooperation and domestic groups may be the key to bringing a human rights standard into a particular government's practice. Governments may be more receptive with the persuasive efforts of those who understand local cultural dynamics.

In responding to the overwhelming problems which the human rights cause brings, believers in the strength of NGOs such as Amnesty International place emphasis on the

fact that NGOs face fewer constraints than other groups, either governmental or inter-governmental. NGOs are more independent of political forces and possess a greater ability to identify and criticize violations whenever and wherever they may occur.³⁰ NGOs do not need to wait for the go-ahead of the international community in order to promote (NGOs lack enforcement power) international conventions actively or to develop their own implementation procedures in the monitoring of human rights.³¹

NGOs are not the only organizations which assess rights or monitor the status of human rights. The information which human rights NGOs gather can often be supplemented with reports from governmental organizations, educational and research NGOs, and scholarly studies. Hence, the efforts by NGOs to assess human rights are a component of a broader monitoring system.³²

NGOs are also important due to the nature of politics.

It may be unrealistic to suppose that the rights of an individual vis-a-vis the state can be effectively protected by the state itself or by international governmental organizations. For example, friendly governments may be reluctant to accuse each other of violations or with adversaries it may be used₃₃ as a thinly disguised political motive.

Therefore, NGOs can cover this territory without necessarily impacting other areas of governmental concern directly. Additionally, David Beetham and Geoffrey Best conclude that government reservations concerning NGO operations

may be seen as a measure of their success. As Best notes, "It has long been obvious as it is (perhaps lamentably) understandable, that sovereignty-flaunting states have mixed feelings about the activities of international NGOs within their borders."³⁴

Earlier it was brought up that problems associated with human rights issues may be on the rise. The rich are getting richer and the poor, poorer. With advancing technology, possibilities for repression can become more sophisticated. The media does not always publicize the more "pressing" and on-going abuses. It should be brought to light that as political regimes become more sophisticated, so do NGOs. NGOs are free to experiment with different and new tactics, not to mention that the longer they are established the stronger are their networking skills. Further, regardless of what the media should be reporting, any human rights story told raises consciousness. In short, the human rights cause is wrought with difficult angles, but does this mean that we should entirely abandon the cause? All in all, several observers believe that NGO activity is essential for continued efforts aimed at protecting human rights.³⁵

Clearly, human rights is a complex issue. Pessimists believe that the advocacy of international human rights standards is not practical for our world. Others question whether human rights standards can ever be truly respectful of all social systems and cultures. Still, some suspect

underlying motives for the promotion of human rights standards, particularly by the Western nations. There are also problems in the monitoring of human rights violations. Questions arise over whether certain methods and/or agencies contain bias. Finally, there are added complications over the impact NGOs have on the human rights issue.

Although the debate continues, a shift in perception regarding the concept of human rights has occurred. The concept of the internationalization of human rights is accepted now more than ever before. Several organizations, both inter-governmental and non-governmental, serve as evidence of this change in attitude. This chapter provides a basis for belief that NGOs have a growing impact on the world. The following material will acquaint the reader with Amnesty International in order to provide a closer look at the structure, motion, efforts, and aims of a particular human rights NGO.

Chapter Two: Appeal for Amnesty

Amnesty International was founded in 1961 by Peter Benenson, a Catholic lawyer living in London, England. He conceived the basic idea of Amnesty International after he read about two students in Lisbon, Portugal, who were arrested and sentenced to seven years imprisonment for raising their glasses in a toast for freedom. This action enraged Benenson and he began to wonder how authorities could be persuaded to release these students. He came up with the idea of applying pressure on the government through the bombardments of written protests.³⁶

In order to draw public attention to prisoners of conscience, Benenson decided to create a one-year campaign focusing on prisoners throughout the world. He enlisted the help of Eric Baker, a prominent Quaker, and Louis Blom-Cooper, an internationally known lawyer, to help launch his idea. The three of them named the campaign "Appeal for Amnesty, 1961."³⁷

Benenson and his group deliberately chose Trinity Sunday in 1961 (May 28th) to launch the campaign.³⁸ This date seemed ideal because it was the centenary of the freeing of the slaves in the United States of America and of the serfs in Russia.³⁹ David Astor, a friend of Benenson and long-time editor of the influential and liberal newspaper The Observer, aided Benenson's cause by providing space for the new group's message.⁴⁰ "Appeal for Amnesty's"

article appeared in The Observer spread over a full page. The newspaper French Le Monde similarly carried their piece. The next day, several other news sources around the world picked up the story. Among them were such prominent publications as The New York Herald Tribune, Germany's Die Wiet, Switzerland's The Journal de Geneve, Denmark's Berlingske Tidende, Sweden's Politikevi, and other newspapers in Holland, Italy, South Africa, Belgium, Ireland, India, and Spain.⁴¹

"Appeal for Amnesty, 1961" featured eight prisoners of conscience whom Benenson called "Forgotten Prisoners." Their names and stories demonstrate to the reader the low key, personal, and impartial approach which would later characterize Amnesty International. These prisoners spanned the ideological and political lines, coming from such diverse nations as Angola, Romania, Spain, the United States of America, South Africa, Greece, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.⁴²

The response to "Appeal for Amnesty's" first campaign was strong worldwide. Floods of letters and donations came into Benenson and his friends. A great amount of information was sent in regarding thousands of other prisoners of conscience. Apparently, the cause behind "Appeal for Amnesty" inspired so many individuals that this one-time campaign transformed into a continuing international movement. Eight weeks after Trinity Sunday, interested parties from Britain, France, Belgium, Ireland,

Switzerland, and the United States met in Luxembourg. The group decided to create a prominent international human rights movement and, therefore, selected the name Amnesty International; sympathizers were put in touch with members living near them.⁴³

Soon small local chapters were springing up involving churches and schools, whose aim was to adopt individual prisoners of conscience and bombard the government responsible for the individual's imprisonment with letters. These groups also directed their attention to making contact with the prisoner's of conscience's family, sending the family presents and raising money for them. Finally, members of Amnesty International thought it important to write to the prisoner of conscience, even if no reply were possible, in the hope that the prisoner of conscience would know that people were aware of his or her situation and perhaps to provide some comfort.⁴⁴

The organization's founders thought it important to build up the strength of Amnesty International. To accomplish this goal, local groups were brought together to exchange and coordinate their views. Benenson decided that this unity should be shown through an emblem which would represent their particular cause globally. He asked a British artist, Diana Redhouse, to design the emblem based on the image of a candle encircled by barbed wire. Benenson claims this image came to him when he recalled the ancient proverb, "'better to light a candle than to

curse the darkness.'"⁴⁵ The first Amnesty International candle was lit on Human Rights Day in December of 1961 on the steps of the Christopher Wren Church, St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Odette Churchill Halkern, the most famous British agent in occupied France who escaped from a Nazi concentration camp, was asked to light the candle.⁴⁶

Amnesty International has grown. Presently, Amnesty International has a membership of more than 1,100,100 in over 160 countries.⁴⁷ The budget for its international section consists of 12.75 million pounds sterling and a staff of about 300 in the London headquarters.⁴⁸ Since it was founded in 1961, Amnesty International estimates that more than 38,000 prisoners were freed largely as a result of Amnesty International's efforts.⁴⁹

Methods of Action and Organization

In the summer 1996 issue of Amnesty Action, William Schultz (executive director of AIUSA) acknowledges that "a complex international organization such as ours appears somewhat oblique."⁵⁰ Amnesty International does many things that do not make it into public view. What are some of the methods Amnesty International employs in order to accomplish its goals of aiding people and protecting human rights?

Amnesty International is concerned with violations of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

with particular emphasis on violations of political and civil rights.⁵¹ Amnesty International is "concerned with identifiable individuals who have been wrongfully imprisoned because their thoughts and their attempts to communicate those thoughts have been judged dangerously deviant by national political elites."⁵² In short, Amnesty International has concluded that prisoners of conscience "have special symbolic significance because attacks upon them are like attacks upon the ideals of political and religious freedom."⁵³

Primarily, Amnesty International seeks the release of prisoners of conscience. Amnesty International works for fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners, including those who engage in violence, and on behalf of individuals detained without charge or trial. Amnesty International opposes without reservation the death penalty, torture, and other inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment of all prisoners.⁵⁴ The following statement made by Amnesty International on its twenty-fifth anniversary expresses Amnesty International's underlying theme and motivation:

When you do something to help a prisoner of conscience or to try to save someone from torture, you are doing something of incalculable value -- even if it may seem very modest to you. You are taking a stand for human dignity. You are saying that you refuse to accept the torture, the humiliation, and the silencing of another human being. In the face of cruelty and the arrogant abuse of limitless power, you are

proving -- by personal example -- to both the victims and their tormentors that compassion, justice, and human love are still alive.⁵⁵

Every prisoner of conscience adopted by Amnesty International becomes part of a world campaign. Generally, adoption groups urging reconsideration of the case send continuous letters to relevant government and prison officials, leading newspapers, and international organizations. Public meetings and vigils are sometimes arranged. Influential people are asked to provide support and, in emergencies, lawyers are sent to controversial trials.⁵⁶ Amnesty International maintains a policy of never making comparisons between countries and records and does not get itself drawn into the beliefs or agenda of the adopted prisoner.⁵⁷ At times Amnesty International gives financially to prisoners and/or their families, sending supplies, funds for food and clothing, and will even pick up some legal bills.⁵⁸ Amnesty International generates large volumes of literature which is filled with facts, names, and tragic stories. Amnesty International makes special efforts not to concentrate on theory or philosophy and aims to, in its own words, orchestrate a "mobilization of shame."⁵⁹

The actual process proceeds as follows. First of all, the Amnesty International Secretariat in London is contacted and a violation is reported. Amnesty International generally begins its process when two sources of information concerning the same violation are available.

Amnesty International then requests more information from the country, such as the circumstances of the arrest, where the prisoner is being held, whether the prisoner is a member of any revolutionary group committed to violence and so forth. The researcher assigned to the country in which the violation took place is then contacted and the researcher contacts the informers or the researcher's special contacts within the country for more details.⁶⁰

Amnesty International relies greatly on its research department in order to determine how Amnesty International activists can best support the prisoner of conscience. Amnesty International has dozens of researchers analyzing and evaluating what is happening in more than 140 countries around the world. These researchers have built networks of sources of information from countries for which they are responsible. They speak with all who might be helpful in providing information: human rights leaders, labor leaders, students, church members or officials, exile groups, emigrants, families of the victims, and sometimes the victims themselves. The researchers also keep tabs on what information the country is printing and document what is happening in the police stations and "back alleys" of their assigned country.⁶¹ Amnesty International estimates that one third of a researcher's time is spent investigating individual casework and the rest is spent studying legislative or political changes; preparing reports, missions, and campaigns; or giving input for policy

proposals.⁶²

The research department compiles a dossier, which contains statements and information gathered from the press reports, government statements, interviews with lawyers, and refugees, and news provided by any recently released prisoners. The dossier is needed because selection of a prisoner to be adopted is carefully controlled. A researcher's judgment is checked by a researcher working on a different country before making a final decision. If doubt persists, the decision can be referred to the Borderline Committee, which is made up of three people from different nations normally appointed by the International Executive Committee.⁶³

The Amnesty International Secretariat leaves much of the advocacy work to local groups. With the approval of the International Executive Committee, the dossier, including a case sheet giving personal details of the prisoner, such as information about the arrest, trial, and health of the prisoner; news about the prisoner's family; and instructions for the coordinated action, is then passed along to local groups.⁶⁴ Local groups in turn alert activist members. Among other forms of pressure, these members write letters, fax letters, email letters, and use the Internet to send letters and share information, hoping to gain the release of the prisoner or at least an improvement in the prisoner's conditions.⁶⁵

Amnesty International also drafts a news release,

approved by the Secretary-General, and sends this document to various news agencies including the AP, UPI, AFP, and Reuters. A cable is also sent to the president or whomever holds the chief position in the country. This cable outlines the violation of rights believed to have occurred and asks that a reason for the imprisonment be made clear. Amnesty International also asks that prisoners be granted access to their families and lawyers. If the researcher, Amnesty International's representative to the United Nations, and the Amnesty International Secretary-General deem it necessary, a telegram is also sent to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Additionally, Amnesty International sends representatives on an average of over 80 missions a year on average to trouble spots around the world so that Amnesty International may gain first hand knowledge of what is occurring in a particular nation.⁶⁶ Because Amnesty International's goal is to convince the government to do what is right in regard to upholding a human rights standard, Amnesty International is willing to work with the government to accomplish this goal, for example meeting privately with authorities before issuing a report. When possible, reports are sent to the government involved inviting comments before publishing. Amnesty International insists it will always correct errors publicly.⁶⁷

The International Council is Amnesty International's main democratically elected governing body. This council

decides on the long-term policy for Amnesty International. It discusses priorities for the upcoming year and reviews the activities of national sections, the International Executive Committee, and the International Secretariat.⁶⁸

The International Secretariat is made up of about 200 delegates from the national sections and other interested bodies like the United Nations and the Red Cross. The International Secretariat elects the nine members who make up the International Executive Committee.⁶⁹

The International Executive Committee implements policy. It meets as often as necessary, generally four or five times a year. Members discuss and approve missions, publications, and other important initiatives. The International Executive Committee gives guidance to the International Secretariat and appoints senior staff. The chair of this body is named the Secretary-General. Former Secretary-Generals include, Irishman Sean McBride, German Dirk Borner, Swede Thomas Hammarberg, and Chilean Jose Zalaguetta.⁷⁰

Fund raising has been a touchy issue for Amnesty International. Hence, the organization has set up guidelines. In general, no money is accepted for use for a specific cause unless it be for a broad program like the medical or refugee support program. Also, any donor who would want to give more than five percent of Amnesty International's income at any level of the movement is screened by the International Executive Committee. This

ensures that no undesirable influence suddenly comes to control the actions and agenda of Amnesty International. Amnesty International is independently funded. The only government funds it receives are those from the European Economic Community for work on the relief of prisoners.⁷¹ Hence, through its fund-raising rules, Amnesty International once again attempts to maintain its impartiality and influence in the world. It is accountable only to its members. Amnesty International notes that to be even more effective and successful, the organization must receive more donations of time and money, more information on prisoners, especially from those areas of the world where access to information is often limited, and requests that each prisoner be given to a caseworker in a local group.⁷²

The adoption group, also known as the local group, contributes most significantly to Amnesty International's struggle to monitor human rights abuses. There are 4,329 local Amnesty International groups registered with the International Secretariat and several thousand school, university, professional, and other groups in 89 countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.⁷³ Amnesty International describes the local groups as:

community-based groups of 10 to 25 people who meet regularly to write letters, publicize, and organize actions on behalf of individual prisoners of conscience, and work on special campaigns, such as the Campaign for the Abolition of Torture, in addition to working to abolish the death penalty

and halt extra-judicial executions.⁷⁴

The groups can be based almost anywhere -- in factories, churches, or neighborhood homes. The adoption group often consists of a small group of people who share a commitment to free speech, free thought, and free association. These people take it upon themselves to write carefully and consistently to prisoners, their jailers, authorities, and any others who could help to get the adopted prisoner released. Individual members and groups have a handbook which instructs them on what action to take and outlines the rules of Amnesty International. A monthly newspaper also keeps these groups and members in touch with recent developments and the prisoners of the month who are selected by the Research Department of the International Secretariat.⁷⁵

These local groups should always appear to be non-ideological and impartial. Adoption groups are not allowed to adopt prisoners in their own country and the groups are required to have geographical and political balance, regarding the political nature of the prisoners.⁷⁶ Benenson originally conceived these rules. His method of distribution was called "A Threes Network" which meant (in his Cold War era) a prisoner from the Communist block, the West, and the third world.⁷⁷ At the very least and depending on the adoption group capabilities, each group must work simultaneously for two prisoners of different ideological, political or religious backgrounds.⁷⁸

Amnesty International members are not expected to provide information on their own country. Further, the human rights NGO states that the associated adoption groups have no responsibility for actions taken by other Amnesty International groups or by International Headquarters about their own country.⁷⁹ These policies are an effort to protect the groups themselves from potential problems at home and to ensure Amnesty International's principle of impartiality is observed.

Amnesty International notes that most letters remain unanswered. Some adoption groups work for years on behalf of a prisoner and never know if their work has achieved anything. The organization also acknowledges that, even if the prisoner is released, it would be hard to know if the group could be responsible for it. However, Amnesty International asserts that publicity is one of its most powerful weapons.⁸⁰

Amnesty International has had some indication that their letters have helped prisoners of conscience. For example, Shahid Nadeem is a Pakistani TV producer and trade unionist imprisoned four times for union work and student political activities. The following is an excerpt from a report of his experience and the gratitude extended to Amnesty International for their work:

"Suddenly I felt as if the sweat drops all over my body were drops from a cool, comforting shower . . . The cell was no longer dark and suffocating."

Soon the whole prison knew about his

letter from an AI adoption group member in San Antonio, Texas.

"My colleagues were overjoyed and their morale was suddenly high."

Nadeem got summoned by the deputy-superintendent.

"He was so friendly and respectful I was shocked . . . He explained his dilemma as a God fearing jailer who had to obey orders and follow the rules . . . "

The head warden began to "behave himself." Taking their cue, the junior staff changed as well.

After a week from receiving a copy of the original letter, Nadeem got the original letter. Nadeem was later released.

He often muses on how "a woman in San Antonio had written some kind and comforting words which proved to be a bombshell for the prison authorities and significantly changed the prisoner's conditions for the better."⁸¹

While letter-writing campaigns are the basic strategy of Amnesty International, other methods are used by Amnesty International to attract attention and expand its influence. Amnesty International also investigates human rights abuse, observes political trials, and lobbies national governments for reform.⁸² The organization makes use of publicity stunts such as creative fund-raisers. For example, Amnesty International may throw a birthday party where a person may eat cake in return for writing a letter or Amnesty International may put on a soup kitchen to remind people of the life that a prisoner is forced to live. Amnesty

International has also focused in recent years on new letter writing methods, such as writing to those of the same occupation as the prisoner and asking them to write in support of the prisoner. Amnesty International hopes that the target government might respond to its own citizens.⁸³

On occasion, Amnesty International groups will stumble upon methods which prove more effective than writing letters. For example, a group found that Russians tended to respond best to personal phone calls.⁸⁴

To capture a detailed picture of a local Amnesty International group, I recently spoke with Michael Falk, the coordinator of Local Group 255, and Patricia Clancy, a long standing member of the group. Local Group 255 is located in Santa Barbara, California, and is at least ten years established.⁸⁵ Currently this local group's main focus regards a student named Khin Maung Shwe arrested during a peaceful pro-democracy protest in Burma and sentenced originally to fifteen years, later reduced to ten, in prison.⁸⁶

Both Falk and Clancy claim that Local Group 255 has a core group of dedicated members which has varied in number in the past ten years from three to about ten. There are always about twice as many who participate to a lesser degree.⁸⁷ Falk and Clancy relayed the opinion that membership is generally dependent on the individual's free time and not necessarily on the group's recruiting skills and/or chance that Amnesty International's activities

encourage more individuals to become active. Clancy had this to say about membership:

Lately our membership is up, and I don't see any particular relationship to issues/cases, since we are still working primarily on Burma. People often reduce their activity level when their life changes (birth of a baby, new job, etc.). But new members also appear on a regular basis. There are hundreds of local residents who are members of the national organization, and often they become active when they realize there is a local group in Santa Barbara.⁸⁸

What is it, then, that draws people to an organization like Amnesty International? The answers vary, but common threads surface. Amnesty International is attractive because of its broad mandate which tends to make people more comfortable about supporting a group. In general, Amnesty International appeals to people from many countries and cultures. It is safe to say that most people would be uncomfortable supporting such things as torture and imprisonment. However, Amnesty International does limit its membership by choosing to take stands on such controversial issues as opposing the death penalty or including sexual orientation as a basic human right. Depending upon how strong one's perspective, these stances of Amnesty International may or may not affect activity to a great extent. For example, Falk shared that, in the beginning, he was not sure that he agreed with Amnesty International's position on the death penalty. However, after working with Amnesty International and reading and

distributing its literature, he has come to change his original opinion on the death penalty to one in accordance with Amnesty International's anti-execution position.⁸⁹

Clancy adds,

I like AI because it is totally apolitical, and I have NO differences of opinion on the issues they support. I especially like their recent inclusion of sexual orientation as a basic human right, although I know it is hard for some members (like the death penalty).⁹⁰

Amnesty International is also a flexible and open organization. This makes it easy for members to drift in and out according to how much time they are able to give. Amnesty International's grass roots, community-based approach is encouraging to potential members who are uncertain as to what type of commitment they can make to the human rights cause. For example, Clancy indicated that, at certain points, her life made it difficult for her to participate in a local group:

I first found out about AI at a Joan Baez concert when I was a grad student at Berkeley in the early 70s. I became active when I got a job at UCSB in 1989. I'd always been interested, but in L.A. I hated to travel to go to meetings and had no time (pre-tenure stage of my life). Santa Barbara is a much smaller city and its been much easier⁹¹ to go to meetings and be active.

Falk also relayed that certain stages of his life were not compatible with activity in Amnesty International. Falk had written letters on his own in high school before

he joined a local group as an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University. Falk stated that he enjoyed writing letters but, like Clancy, his involvement depended upon his time schedule.⁹²

Falk's membership in particular is a good example of how a member is able to be as active as he or she desires to be. During his first year of membership, he mainly organized student fund-raisers, wrote letters, and tabled (when members set up a table with literature, petitions, tee-shirts etc. and interact with the public in order to educate). The following year he became the Baltimore area's student coordinator and received an opportunity to participate in the National Student Coordination Group.⁹³ Falk traveled to Korea for a year and did not do much in the way of Amnesty International. Afterwards, he came to the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) to finish his education and contacted the Santa Barbara Local Group 255. At this point, the group was in a transition period and needed someone to help keep the group going. Falk volunteered to be the coordinator, but said that title in no way implied that others in the group were any less dedicated than he. Like Clancy, Falk sees himself as a life-long member of Amnesty International.⁹⁴

Falk relayed that the members in the group tend to range on the political spectrum from middle-of-the-road to the very far left.⁹⁵ Clancy went on to say that,

given the mandate of AI and its positions on the death penalty, the

rights of refugees, and the overall message of tolerance, there is definitely a tendency for members to be middle-of-the-road to liberal rather than conservative. I wouldn't say there's a typical type of person: our local group has had many retirees, young students, students and faculty from UCSB, people working in local companies, just a whole range of ages, male and female, all different personality types from very quiet and reserved to out-going leader types.⁹⁶

Another attractive aspect of Amnesty International is that the local group structure allows Amnesty International to meet community needs. It provides regular periods in which people can gather in order to educate others and learn for themselves. It offers members opportunities to participate in aiding their community in human rights awareness while at the same time satisfying personal needs. Amnesty International offers ample social opportunities and forums in which members can give back to the community. It also provides members with the chance to make their own impact on government policies and agendas.

The group holds monthly meetings to discuss business. Falk stated generally this business revolves around their other case work and/or the distribution of Urgent Action tasks, minutes of the last month, plans for the future, and the identification of the next general of Burma to whom they will write.⁹⁷

In addition, other activities of Local Group 255 include organizing a table approximately once a month focusing on some current case or timely issue to raise

awareness, gathering signatures for petitions or letters, giving out information about Amnesty International to educate the public, and selling such items as tee shirts.⁹⁸

Falk also indicated that the group tries to put on at least one or two events every year as part of its efforts to educate the public on human rights issues. He told me that in the past years Local Group 255 has held a forum on the human rights implication of proposition 187, brought in a former prisoner of conscience from South Africa to speak about women's rights and female genital mutilation; and had a speaker discuss corporate responsibility, conscientious investing, and human rights in support of the group's efforts to apply pressure on the companies which continue to do business with Burma despite Burma's poor human rights record. The group also organizes a film at a local bookstore and has shown such films in the past as The Killing Fields. However, Falk admits having to be flexible with film choices, since the idea was not to turn off people. It seems that some films which dealt with human rights issues are often too depressing to attract people to come back for a second movie. Because the film series provided a good opportunity to educate the public through the introduction of the movie, the group decided to start choosing films which dealt with the harsher realities of human rights issues in the background rather than as the main focus.⁹⁹

Local Group 255's tailoring of a film choice for the

public demonstrates the type of trial and error method that many grassroots organizations employ. Here, the group was trying to avoid creating a feeling of fatalism in their community about human rights issues and even attempted to stifle what the public might have concluded to be an "overhyping" of human rights issues. Often, the particular political climate which the group works in determines what goes on the group's agenda. For example, Clancy notes,

With the heavy anti-immigrant, anti-affirmative action stances of the Republicans in California recently, I think many aspects of the conservative agenda are coming close to being in conflict with some of Amnesty's important issues.¹⁰⁰

Therefore, the group will have to adapt to its environment in order to be most effective. Local groups search constantly for what is successful in order to get their message across to the community.

For the most part, local groups are on their own. Little contact with International, National, and even Regional chapters ensures Amnesty International its grass roots base. Amnesty International points out that local participation is key in accomplishing their goals around the world.

With regard to contact with the International Section or even with the USA section, Falk stated that local groups rarely hear from these branches. He stated that they get their casework from the International Section, one or two updates a year, and the general resources. When asked

to do so, the Western Regional director helps. However, nothing like regular phone calls are received. The area coordinator located in Ventura, California, generally tries to attend the local group functions when asked. Occasionally, local groups do try to support each other, however, "sometimes other groups are more helpful than at other times" (meaning that each group is subject to its own dynamics and whether they have sufficient energy to work with other groups is more often than not unpredictable).¹⁰¹ Presently, the Los Angeles area groups are aiding in the campaign to persuade companies to pull out of Burma. Falk showed more enthusiasm when he mentioned that the high school coordinators in Santa Barbara come to Local Group 255's meetings. He believes that this is "where the most impact is." Essentially, the sentiment is that if the young grow up placing value in human rights, the world and our communities will be better for it.¹⁰²

The social aspect seems to play a greater role than most might realize. According to Falk, Local Group 255 is not simply a vehicle for the promotion of human rights, but an outlet for people to get together, meet others with similar beliefs, exchange inspiration, and develop friendships. He stated that the social aspect, along with the educational goals of the group, helps to counteract the frustration and occasional motivation problems which tend to accompany letter-writing campaigns (especially one like theirs to Burma, where no reply is ever heard

of).¹⁰³ To avoid the problem of isolation and promote camaraderie, Local Group 255 often has potluck suppers in the spring. Falk stated that a feeling of accomplishment is important in keeping groups together and he feels that such common educational and social experiences help to cement the group's dedication to human rights, the community, and each other. Falk added that it is important to allow members to become involved to the extent to which they feel comfortable. He stated that "the group's aim is to allow volunteers to do what they can and feel good; not feel guilty about what they're not doing."¹⁰⁴

Both Falk and Clancy relayed why Amnesty International is important to them. One of Falk's most memorable opportunities arrived in 1990 when he traveled to Santiago, Chile, where he attended a human rights concert. The performance, just after Pinochet had stepped down, took place in the large stadium where many had been taken and tortured. Falk described this opportunity as emotionally draining and stated that it was rather illuminating to speak with many of the citizens there. He was surprised to find some individuals continuing to give excuses for the human rights abuses of the Pinochet regime. He heard the flat explanation, "'Well, we had to get rid of the Communists,' often."¹⁰⁵

Clancy also describes the unquantifiable importance which Amnesty International holds for her:

There are many experiences with AI
that have been very important to me.

We have had a prisoner released, but only after he's basically served his term. We've been working on Burma, and there is absolutely no response from the generals in charge there. I've been very moved to have the opportunity to meet several former prisoners of conscience and to organize local events at which they and others concerned with human rights can speak. It has been extremely inspiring to meet some of the AI members and organizers who have dedicated their lives to this, especially my friend Aba Gayle, an opponent of the death penalty whose daughter was murdered (she's a member of Families of Murder Victims for Reconciliation); she's now moved north, but used to live in Santa Barbara.¹⁰⁶

In short, Falk explained that the life of the local group is generally dependent on its leaders and the dedication of its volunteers. The members must be somewhat self-directing. He told me that individuals could write letters on their own time, but that a local group does more for the immediate community through its dedication to the promotion of human rights, such as with their efforts to educate the public.¹⁰⁷

With regard to the effectiveness of Amnesty International and its letter-writing campaigns, members have mixed opinions. Generally speaking, we can assume that on some level Amnesty International's members believe letter writing to be worthwhile. Considering that often there is no response from governments or prisoners, letter writing is understandably frustrating. However, lack of response is not necessarily an indication that Amnesty

International letter writing campaigns are ineffective. The possibility of providing the prisoner some comfort is there. Also, those writing the letters gain a feeling of involvement and connection with other human beings by doing their part in the struggle to acknowledge human rights violations even though they can do nothing directly.

Both Falk and Clancy remark that, with regard to their particular case involving Burma, letter writing is probably not too effective. However, both take the general stand that letter writing can be effective. Clancy stated:

I think it [AI and its letter-writing campaigns] is remarkably effective, having met a number of released prisoners. In cases like Burma, when a very entrenched regime has simply decided to ignore world opinion as long as it can get enough foreign investment to keep their drug trade running and profits flowing to their personal bank accounts, I feel that additional action outside AI's mandate is necessary. In this case, supporting economic sanctions against Burma, along the lines that worked with South Africa.

Overall, I think AI is very effective, especially when you consider what alternatives are available in so many cases AI investigates and works on (usually no alternatives at all). I think the arrival of the Internet and better world communications will increase AI's effectiveness, since the point is to inform the world about who is violating human rights.¹⁰⁸

Falk had other things to say about the effectiveness of Amnesty International. He told me that it was "hard to say." He does not believe that with a country such as Burma letter writing is the most effective approach.

However, with other countries, letter writing is a very effective approach. He does believe strongly that Amnesty International is effective in helping people "to make a connection between what happens in their lives and with what happens in others' lives in remote places." In short, what happens locally holds ramifications globally.¹⁰⁹

Falk finished his interview by stating that he thought it very important to devote one's life to ideal acts regardless of their overall effectiveness. This provides a type of role model and investment in humanity. He believes that Amnesty International is an ideal organization to volunteer for because of its emphasis on information sharing and education. It is important to "cut through the created silence." Furthermore, in response to the cultural relativist argument, Falk said that he believes that "people have a right to have their culture, but that nobody has a right not to be criticized over it. And through this process and dialogue, the world becomes a better place."¹¹⁰

Patricia Clancy and Michael Falk are bold examples of the hundreds of people present in the world who believe in the value of promoting universal human rights and of monitoring human rights in order to more fully attain a just society and world. The effects of their participation may not always be readily apparent. However, they serve as models to others by investing in humanity.

Chapter Three: Amnesty International as a Contender

The following chapter will outline Amnesty International's own perspective on universal rights and the value of the internationalization of human rights. The reader will note Amnesty International's optimistic place on the human rights continuum.

Morton E. Winston, Chair of USA section Board of Directors, delineates Amnesty International's logic when it comes to the issue of universal rights mentioned in the first chapter. Amnesty International insists that it does not follow a Western perspective when it comes to human rights. To support its stance, Amnesty International points to the development of international human rights law which has been the work of many nations since 1945. Amnesty International notes that the newly independent states of Africa, Asia, and Latin America have played an increasingly important role in developing the International Bill of Rights along with other major human rights covenants and conventions. In an equal sense, strong Western governments have often sought to delay or kill these treaties. In fact, some have not signed or ratified particular treaties or have done so with serious reservations. Although some Asians and Muslims say that human rights furthers the interests of the Western powers, Amnesty International responds that these governments "confuse the rhetorical invocation of human rights by some Western governments with the authentic demands for human

rights being made by NGOs such as AI."¹¹¹

Amnesty International adds that many make the mistake of confusing the origins of a belief with its legitimacy. "Legal norms embodying these values still apply to countries with different histories and cultures."¹¹² Winston illustrates this point with the example that, because the bicycle was invented in France or Scotland, it does not necessarily follow that the bike is an inappropriate means of transportation in China. Winston continues by stating that many make a mistake when they assume the governments which claim to represent the cultures of their countries really do so. Amnesty International responds to the conservative argument which points to cultural relativism (in order to discredit the notion of universal rights) by noting that the struggle for human rights is not only taking place between national cultures, but also within national cultures.¹¹³

Winston continues his argument by offering the example of American slavery and stating that historically cultural majorities can be mistaken. It is not necessarily correct that human rights principles are illegitimate if they do not conform to dominant thoughts or practices in present-day cultures. There would be no need for human rights documents if all nations already complied with the standards set forth. Winston states that human rights laws exist in large part to protect agents of social change and minorities against the majority. Finally, Winston states

that we cannot use the fact that people break laws as a basis to reject the law itself.¹¹⁴

Despite Amnesty International's efforts to carve out a place for itself in the international arena, people continue to point out the problems of human rights NGOs. Human rights assessment may itself be a violation of human rights because its practice reflects inequalities present in the world. For example, there are very few human rights organizations headquartered in Asia, Africa, or Latin America.¹¹⁵ Amnesty International's headquarter is in London, England.

Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard point out that Amnesty International is crisis oriented. It does not attempt to analyze underlying causes of repression. The authors argue that, without attention to causal factors, progress in human rights issues tends to be of a superficial and temporary nature.¹¹⁶ Amnesty International notes that if it were to try to examine the causes and context of the violations themselves, the organization would most likely lose the consensus and cohesion of its membership while also diverting valuable organizational resources, budget, staff energies, and membership discussions from the operational goals of the group.¹¹⁷

In terms of ideology, those on both the left and right complain about Amnesty International. Members of the left have objected to Amnesty International's narrow focus on political and civil rights and believe that this lack of

breadth leaves them with a static rather than a dynamic definition of human rights on which they are judged.¹¹⁸ The left insists Amnesty International's choice to leave social and economic rights on the back burner skews the leftist nations' human rights records for the worse. However, those on the right accuse Amnesty International of the "sin of disproportionality." The right complains about Amnesty International's policy of focusing simultaneously on prisoners from the first, second, and third worlds. Their position is best explained by the following quotation:

Amnesty International's attempted strategy of neutrality between ideological camps causes the organization to falsely equate unequal phenomena - i.e. - to assume that there is an equal number of prisoners of conscience cases in each ideological area of the world...and therefore biases the data and reports¹¹⁹ that Amnesty International publishes.

Regardless of support for either side, Amnesty International's point is that violations of human rights happen everywhere and simply because a country might not violate a citizen's rights often is not a reason to ignore the occurrence. Further, Amnesty International has a policy of avoiding comparisons between countries.

Other critiques include the concept that "familiarity may breed contempt."¹²⁰ Some have voiced the concern that Amnesty International may have been most effective in the beginning, when people and governments were less aware

of and less able to deal with the flood of letters they might receive on behalf of a prisoner. Some report that most violators of human rights have learned to give lip service to human rights in public relations but that their concern does not go beyond this. According to Vincent, "Some repressive regimes have even been said to welcome AI campaigns as identifying for them the particular individuals they should regard as most dangerous."¹²¹ In fact, some go so far as to assert that Amnesty International, among other groups, may even have contributed to the creation of "more sneaky" governments or ways to intimidate and control a population leading to violations which are more difficult to expose and prove and equally as damaging to the prisoner.¹²²

Others complain that Amnesty International does not go far enough. They discuss such examples as governmental use of extra-official assassinations or exile as opposed to the taking of prisoners to demonstrate their point. They state that "imprisonment is one of the most volatile aspects of repression and fairly easy to make short run or cosmetic changes."¹²³ Amnesty International has been criticized because it cannot address such injustices as people being kicked off their land at gun point, those removed do not tend to go to the police and therefore such incidents are not "official" and cannot go on the Amnesty International books.¹²⁴

Further, Amnesty International is criticized because

of the information and data it publishes and places in the public domain. These data are subject to misuse and abuse by scholars and others simply because the data are cost free and in a quantified form already. For example, some may attempt to make a comparison between nations and this is harmful because Amnesty International does not have the resources and/or access to monitor each nation in a proper manner which would validate this type of use of their reports.¹²⁵ Amnesty International responds to this charge by stating that it does not support this type of use of its data, (not to mention that it indirectly violates one of Amnesty International's principles).

Other problems arising from Amnesty International's growing credibility, efficiency, and influence is the tendency for the public to assume that a country without a report is "satisfactory" in upholding a human rights standard.¹²⁶ Several other reasons for a decline in numbers or the absence of a report may include that Amnesty International cannot cover these nations due to lack of resources, a lack of access to a nation, and the fact that the regime may simply be engaging in more passive forms of repression or violating rights Amnesty International does not cover in its mandate.¹²⁷

Finally, Amnesty International's mandate itself and its world leadership may weaken the cause of human rights. David Beetham writes, "AI, whether it likes it or not,...is the single most dominant force in the entire field, more

representative and more influential than most of the other groups put together."¹²⁸ Beetham goes on to indicate that there may be an overall lack of counter NGOs (or failure to create NGOs) which focus on the rights which Amnesty International does not (i.e., economic, social, and cultural rights and the monitoring of human rights in armed conflicts). However, Jonathan Power presents a contradicting perspective when he writes, "AI symbolized the concern, provided much of the raw data on which other organizations based their efforts, and was constant inspiration to groups of individuals around the world to set up their own human rights watchdogs."¹²⁹

Beetham asserts the possibility that Amnesty International's dominance has assisted in influencing and perhaps biasing the United Nations human rights system toward a focus on the role of political and civil rights. On top of all this, there is a tendency to forget that AI does not even cover all civil and political rights.¹³⁰ Yet, he goes on to credit Amnesty International for its self-imposed limited mandate. Beetham writes:

By focusing on prisoners of conscience, AI was able to build up a remarkable degree of consensus about the justice of its cause as well as providing assistance to many victims, and a sense of purpose, and not infrequently achievement to its members who work on individual cases.¹³¹

Others worry that if the organization itself becomes too big, "its bureaucratic growth" will lead to a "caution

which replaces spontaneity and Amnesty International itself becomes a prisoner. It would be hemmed in by the inertia of size and the immobility of responsibility."¹³²

Amnesty International's methods of locating, identifying, cross validating, and verifying its adoption cases are considered valid and reliable in the terminology of modern social science.¹³³ However, some have been concerned that the organization is not well funded enough to take on this task completely. This is why Amnesty International necessarily focuses on personal and "worst case" situations in societies to which Amnesty International has access. For example, those regimes which are closed off from outside contacts Amnesty International is forced to pass by.¹³⁴

In the face of all this criticism, Amnesty International asks one question:

Is it better to keep quiet and wait until absolutely incontrovertible evidence arrives, by which time hundreds more may be tortured or dead, or is it not the more responsible course to come out with the reasonable watertight but not¹³⁵ perfect case one has and take a risk?

Although Amnesty International's impact cannot be measured with much precision due to the multi-causal nature of the human rights cause, many believe that, without Amnesty International's and other groups' activities, that the human rights situation would be worse.¹³⁶ They presume that Amnesty International's monitoring of human rights

violations aids in establishing an atmosphere of standards through which those governments that comply are supported and encouraged and those who do not are systematically scrutinized and censored.¹³⁷ In this manner, Amnesty International serves as an invaluable source of information. Its research department especially has set up a network of reliable communication links not available to governments.¹³⁸ Also, due to their long practice in this arena, Amnesty International's researchers tend to know whom they can trust. Many believe there is a great depth to their judgments.¹³⁹

There is evidence that letter writing is not a futile method. No government likes to admit that the release of a prisoner is due to pressure rather than clemency. However, Amnesty International does have reason to believe "off the record," that letter writing does influence government decisions. A former Secretary-General of Amnesty International, Sean McBride, claims that he was told "off record" by a high official of an Eastern European government,

that it was the cumulative effect, the infuriating load of Amnesty-inspired letters, which led his government to review the imprisonment of thousands of social democrats, priests, and members of the old order who had been locked away for 14 years.

In 1965, this country released twelve thousand political prisoners.¹⁴⁰ To the extent that the behavior of political elites is systematically scrutinized, that domestic

repression can no longer be hidden, and that elites are forced to give at least verbal deference to human rights standards, the impact of NGOs is noted.¹⁴¹ NGO action, such as Amnesty International's, encourages governments to act in accordance with international standards.

Amnesty International has elevated the human rights cause into the mainstream. Amnesty International acknowledges that its concerns are to remedy specific problems.

By concentrating on a specific program in the human rights field, Amnesty International does not imply that the rights it does not deal with are less important. Amnesty International is convinced of the indivisibility and mutual dependence of all human rights. The movement concentrates on its own defined area in order to be as effective as possible and to put its limited resources to the most efficient use. Amnesty International therefore takes up only those cases that fall within its object as set out in its Statute. This object is commonly referred to as Amnesty International's "mandate."¹⁴²

Because Amnesty International focuses on the individual, the object of human rights work is intensely personal. Amnesty International focuses on the individual attacked by oppressive government actions. Amnesty International believes that, without such a personal focus and identification of the human beings involved, human rights would fade into mere abstract thought. It is precisely because Amnesty International keeps the movement personal that Amnesty International is able to make a

difference in the world. The flood of information from all over the world regarding such personal human rights violations continues to present a great challenge and great opportunity to Amnesty International.¹⁴³

Chapter Four: Conclusion

So what role does Amnesty International play in creating favorable space in which the universalization of human rights is able to grow? The fact that Amnesty International plays a positive role in the world through its promotion of political and civil human rights is difficult to dispute. Not only does Amnesty International influence such inter-governmental organizations as the United Nations, governments of nation states, and other non-governmental organizations internationally, but it also plays an intimate role in the lives of its local or "domestic" members. Amnesty International has followed through and accomplished its goal of releasing thousands of prisoners of conscience. It is instrumental in getting human rights on the agenda of world affairs. Its ability to gather information on human rights issues and distribute information throughout the globe continues to grow. The power which Amnesty International wields is immeasurable.

Do the philosophies, methods, and actions of human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International aid in the advancement of human dignity? Amnesty International has both a bottom up and top down approach to the human rights question. The careful top-down organization within the International Section and other Amnesty International committees add to the advancement of the human rights cause on an international and inter-governmental level. The

fact that Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 demonstrates appreciation for its contribution to the human rights cause. The adoption groups (or domestic groups) are bottom-up in structure. By local member participation, Amnesty International promotes human rights awareness through its letter-writing campaigns, education campaigns, and other activities.

The immeasurable importance of local groups shines throughout the testaments of Patricia Clancy and Michael Falk. Amnesty International local groups provide an outlet for people to get together, meet others with similar beliefs, exchange inspiration, and develop friendships. Human rights awareness is strengthened and stabilized by such social interaction. Local groups also provide a forum where local members can educate themselves and others. The groups offer opportunities to participate in the changing and shaping of community perspectives and of government policies and agendas. Amnesty International groups are active vehicles which aid people in making connections between their lives and the lives of others.

Amnesty International is also attractive because of its limited mandate. Amnesty International is apolitical in that it does not involve itself in any prisoner's cause or politics. It does not suggest a "correct" form of government and is careful to avoid comparing human rights records of nations. Amnesty International is free to experiment with different and new tactics, not to mention

that the longer Amnesty International is established, the stronger is its networking and monitoring skills.

From what has been presented, it is clear that Amnesty International holds an optimistic viewpoint when it comes to the internationalization of human rights. The number of prisoners of conscience released and the value placed on Amnesty International by those prisoners of conscience (like Nadeem) lend evidence to the fact that aggressive human behavior can be reformed. To simply look after one's own interests does nothing to foster respect for the dignity of human life. Additionally, the support which Amnesty International receives from so many citizens of various states makes it simple to see the impact and role Amnesty International plays in the world.

The concepts and issues behind human rights are so broad that one organization could not possibly cover everything which should and needs to be addressed. Amnesty International is criticized in many areas due to the enormous work which human rights promotion and monitoring requires. However, Amnesty International does well with the mandate it has chosen and is generally considered successful. Those who worry that Amnesty International neglects social and economic rights would do well to start an organization of their own in order to cover this void. Although such an organization would be controversial and no doubt limited in its following, such a tactic would aid the human rights dialogue. If such a group would not

add balance to Amnesty International's work, at least it would offer a different perspective and perhaps even allow the opinion that the definition of human rights is merely a Western construct to fade.

As for the concern that the methods of Amnesty International contribute to more violence in the world, this assessment may in fact be true. There are always people who attempt to sabotage a cause in order to discredit it. One only has to look at the controversy surrounding the issue of women's rights in the United States to see this. What should be realized is that violence was present before Amnesty International's existence. Those governments which violated human rights in the first place may have gotten more "sneaky," but I believe that the Amnesty International education campaigns, research, information sharing, and overall consciousness raising on human rights issues counterbalance this criticism. The human mind can always come up with innovative ways to accomplish a goal. Benenson's notion serves as a reminder of those concerned with the promotion of human rights to be vigilant and creative in their watch.

It has been said that people's perspectives shape their realities. With this in mind, support for organizations which serve "the Forgotten" may prove to be an invaluable force for spreading the concept of universal human rights. I, for one, am not willing to disregard such human rights movements simply because it

is reasonable and even pragmatic to believe in the inevitability of conflict. My contention is that Amnesty International's "mobilization of shame" is justified if only one person was comforted thus far by Amnesty International's efforts. Human life is precious. As it is, Amnesty International has provided aid for more than one person. Evidence suggests many have been served.

In short, I agree with Michael Falk, the devotion of some part of one's life to human rights is important regardless of its overall effectiveness. For, this provides a role model and an investment in humanity. Perhaps it is necessary to close with a statement made by Amnesty International's founder, Peter Benenson, on Amnesty International's twentieth anniversary. The statement is instructive of the people Benenson had in mind when he started his campaign and of the general mission of the organization Amnesty International.

We have lit this candle today as an act of re-dedication to our work. I would like you to remember, together with me, not our success, because I think that has been relatively lean, but all of our failures. I think that the candle burns not for us but for all those whom we failed to rescue from prison, who have died in prison, who were shot on the way to prison, who were tortured, who were kidnapped, who "disappeared." That's what this candle is for . . . I have lit this candle today, in the words of Shakespeare, "against oblivion" -- so that the forgotten prisoners should always be remembered. ¹⁴⁴We work in Amnesty against oblivion.

Notes

- 1 Power, 1981, p. 17.
- 2 Hampton, 1996, p. 1 f.
- 3 Andrus and Rosen, 1988, p. 17.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 222.
- 6 Falk, 1981, p. 155.
- 7 Winston, 1996, p. 10.
- 8 Beetham, 1995, p. 2.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 3, 104.
- 10 Falk, 1981, p. 2.
- 11 Beetham, 1995, p. 1 f.
- 12 Best, 1995, p. 794.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 799.
- 14 Forsythe, 1991, p. 119.
- 15 Beetham, 1995, p. 5.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 5.
- 18 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 167.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 275.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 260.
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 259 f., 275.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 260.
- 23 Forsythe, 1991, p. 171.
- 24 Falk, 1981, p. 34.
- 25 Livernash, 1994, p. 209
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 214 ff.

27 *ibid.*, p. 209 and p. 214.
28 *ibid.*, p. 212 ff.
29 Clark, 1995, p. 524.
30 Forsythe, 1991, p. 73.
31 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 262.
32 *ibid.*
33 *ibid.*, p. 282.
34 Vincent, 1986, p. 248 f.
35 Best, 1995, p. 796.
36 Power, 1981, p. 17.
37 *ibid.*, p. 17 f.
38 Drinan, 1994, p. 6.
39 Power, 1981, p. 17 f.
40 *ibid.*, p. 8.
41 *ibid.*, p. 18 f.
42 *ibid.*, p. 19.
43 *ibid.*
44 *ibid.*, p. 20.
45 *ibid.*
46 *ibid.*
47 Blackstock, 1996, p. 1.
48 Beetham, 1995, p. 109.
49 Wavy Gravy, 1992, p. 149.
50 Schultz, 1996, p. 11.
51 Blackstock, 1996, p. 3.
52 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 149.
53 Prisoners of Conscience, 1984, p. 434.

54 Blackstock, 1996, p. 1.
55 Drinan, 1994, p. 8.
56 Power, 1981, p. 39.
57 *ibid.*, p. 53.
58 *ibid.*, p. 50.
59 Drinan, 1994, p. 7.
60 Power, 1981, p. 43 f.
61 Schultz, 1996, p. 11.
62 Power, 1981, p. 43.
63 *ibid.*, p. 53.
64 *ibid.*, p. 42 f. and Schultz, 1996, p. 11.
65 Schultz, 1996, p. 11.
66 *ibid.*
67 Power, 1981, p. 53.
68 *ibid.*, p. 42.
69 *ibid.*
70 *ibid.*
71 Power, 1981, p. 53
72 *ibid.*, p. 38
73 Amnesty International Mission Statement, 1996.
74 Amnesty International is its Volunteers, 1996.
75 *ibid.*, p. 39.
76 Vincent, 1986, p. 251.
77 Power, 1981, p. 18.
78 *ibid.*, p. 39 ff.
79 *ibid.*
80 *ibid.*, p.37.

81 *ibid.*, p. 46.

82 Satchell, 1991, p. 60.

83 Power, 1981, p. 37 ff.

84 *ibid.*, p. 49.

85 Clancy, February 15, 1997. and Amnesty International,
Local Group 255, 1997.

86 Amnesty International, Local Group 255, 1997.

87 Falk, January 9, 1997. and Clancy, February 15,
1997.

88 Clancy, February 15, 1997.

89 Falk, January 9, 1997.

90 Clancy, February 15, 1997.

91 *ibid.*

92 Falk, January 9, 1997.

93 *ibid.*

94 *ibid.*

95 *ibid.*

96 Clancy, February 15, 1997.

97 Members of the Urgent Action Network are periodically
called upon to send air mail letters and telegrams
to assist individuals in immediate danger of torture
or execution. Amnesty International is its
Volunteers, 1996, and Michael Falk noted that Group
255 refers to their letter-writing campaign as the
"General of the Month Club," since they have been
working on this case for some time and every official
they write to seems to be a general. Falk, January

- 9, 1997.
- 98 Clancy, February 15, 1997.
- 99 Falk, January 9, 1997.
- 100 Clancy, February 15, 1997.
- 101 Falk, January 9, 1997.
- 102 *ibid.*
- 103 *ibid.*
- 104 *ibid.*
- 105 *ibid.*
- 106 Clancy, February 15, 1997.
- 107 Falk, January 9, 1997.
- 108 Clancy, February 15, 1997.
- 109 Falk, January 9, 1997.
- 110 *ibid.*
- 111 Winston, 1996, p. 10.
- 112 *ibid.*
- 113 *ibid.*
- 114 *ibid.*
- 115 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, p. 283.
- 116 *ibid.*, p. 258 f.
- 117 *ibid.*, p. 150.
- 118 *ibid.*
- 119 *ibid.*, p. 149.
- 120 Vincent, 1986, p. 253.
- 121 *ibid.*, p. 258.
- 122 *ibid.*
- 123 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 128 f.

- 124 Power, 1981, p. 223.
- 125 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 151.
- 126 *ibid.*
- 127 *ibid.*
- 128 Beetham, 1995, p. 106.
- 129 Power, 1981, p. 33.
- 130 Beetham, 1995, p. 106
- 131 *ibid.*
- 132 Power, 1981, p. 34.
- 133 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 149.
- 134 *ibid.*
- 135 *ibid.*, p. 221.
- 136 *ibid.*, p. 257.
- 137 *ibid.*
- 138 *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 139 Power, 1981, p. 221.
- 140 *ibid.*, p. 49 f.
- 141 Nanda, Scarritt, and Shepard, 1981, p. 257.
- 142 Blackstock, 1996, p. 3.
- 143 Healey, 1992, p. 7.
- 144 Power, 1981, p. 226.

Bibliography

- Amnesty International, Local Group 255. [1 page]
<http://golem.physics.ucsb.edu/-ai255/> [Netscape].
- Amnesty International Mission Statement. New York: Amnesty International USA, 1997.
- Amnesty International is its Volunteers. New York: Amnesty International USA, 1997.
- Andrus, B. and Rosen, S.A. (Ed.). (1988). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948-1988: Human Rights, The United Nations, and Amnesty International. AIUSA: Legal Support Network.
- Beetham, D. (Ed.). (1995). Politics and Human Rights. Great Britain: The Political Studies Association.
- Best, G. (1995). Justice, International Relations and Human Rights. International Affairs, 71, 775-799.
- Blackstock, M. (1996). What is Amnesty International? [18 pages] <gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:70/00/orgs/ai/4> [Netscape].
- Clancy, Patricia. Personal Interview. 15 February 1997.
- Clark, A.M. (1995). Non-governmental Organizations and Their Influence on International Society. Journal of International Affairs, 48, 507-525.
- Drinan, R.F. (1994). A Mobilization of Shame. Commonweal, 121, 6-8.
- Falk, Michael. Personal Interview. 9 January 1997.
- Falk, R. (1981). Human Rights and State Sovereignty. New York: Holmes and Meirer Publishers, Inc.
- Forsythe, D.P. (1991). The Internationalization of Human Rights. Massachusetts: Lexington Books.
- Hampton, C. (1996). A Short History of the Human Rights Movement [4pages]
<http://www.traveller.com/-hrweb/history.html>
[Netscape].
- Healey, J. (1991). Let's Get Personal. Amnesty Action, Sept/Oct., 7.
- Livernash, R. (1994). The Growing Influence of NGOs in the Developing World. Third World, 94/95. Connecticut:

The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.

- Nanda, V.P., Scarritt, J.R., and Shepard, G.W. (Eds.). (1981). Global Human Rights: Public Policies, Comparative Measures and NGO Strategies. Colorado: Western Press Inc.
- Power, J. (1981). Against Oblivion. Great Britain: William Collins Sons and Co.
- Prisoners of Conscience. (1984). America, 151, 434.
- Satchell, M. (1991). Nemesis of Third World Thugs: Mr. Human Rights. U.S. News and World Report, 111, 60-64.
- Schultz, W. (1996). Keeping a Light on Human Rights. Amnesty Action, XIX, 11.
- Vincent, R.J., (Ed.). (1986). Foreign Policy and Human Rights: Issues and Responses. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.
- Wavy Gravy. (1992). The Amnesty International Handbook (book reviews). Whole Earth Review, 76, 100.
- Winston, M.E. (1996). The Case for Universality: Human Rights Standards Apply to All Cultures. Amnesty Action, XIX, 11.
- Writing Letters to Foreign Governments. New York: Amnesty International USA, 1997.