

The Role and Impact of NGOs on the Development Landscape

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Development is a fundamental part of the mandates of many NGOs. NGOs are important stakeholders in the development landscape where they have accrued extensive knowledge within the sector. They are high profile actors in the field of development both as providers of services to vulnerable individuals and communities and as policy advocates. Much of their work aims to strengthen community capacities through training, technical advice, exchange of experiences, research and policy advice. Yet there is considerable dissatisfaction within some quarters regarding their role, impact and intentions. This article provides a critical discussion on this topic looking at why NGOs matter, the ideological factors that help explain the rise of NGOs as well their advantages and disadvantages within the development landscape. This article also engages fully with the criticisms levelled against NGOs and also shows that NGO relations with governments may take different forms and go through many different phases and fluctuations. This article is a non-exhaustive assessment based on literature and research that includes academic studies, research commissioned by international organizations, donor agencies' reports, as well as government assessments and reports. Research on NGOs is vast, and NGOs have been subject to rich academic debates related to global governance, democratization and development.

NGOs have become an integral part of the international aid architecture and contribute to the implementation of the multilateral aid agenda. Joint partnerships between governments, NGOs and the private sector are crucial to the development trajectory of any country. NGOs are central to development theory and practice and are likely to remain important actors for years to come. From the late 1980s onwards, NGOs rapidly assumed a far greater role and profile on the development landscape than they had previously. NGOs were celebrated by donors as being able to bring fresh solutions to complex and long standing development problems. The new attention given to NGOs at this time brought many far reaching changes to development thinking and practice as a consequence of new interest in the then alternative concepts such as participation, empowerment, gender and a range of people oriented approaches. Alongside such claims, too much became expected of NGOs. All too often NGOs were seen as the magic bullet that could unlock the disappointment, disillusionment and deadlock that characterised the world of development. Such views inevitably led to a backlash when evidence began to suggest otherwise.

NGOs are an extremely diverse group of organisations which makes meaningful generalization difficult. NGOs play different roles and take very different shapes and forms within and across different country contexts. NGOs as an analytical category are complex and difficult to grasp as they are quite difficult to pin down analytically. This has generated a lot of debate on what is and what is not an NGO and the most suitable approaches for analyzing NGO roles in development. Many are externally funded while others rely heavily on locally mobilized resources. Some are well resourced and affluent while others live

¹ The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of any particular agency

from hand to mouth, struggling to survive from one year to another. Some have highly professional staff while others rely heavily on volunteers and supporters. They are driven by a range of motivations as some are secular while others are faith based. Some are paternalistic while others seek to pursue radical or empowerment based approaches.

Morris-Suzuki (2000) notes that NGOs may pursue change, but can equally work to maintain existing social and political systems. In some parts of the world, NGOs have gained legitimacy because they were part of struggles against dictatorship or because they provided support to independence movements from colonialism. For thinkers who desire private alternatives to the state, NGOs are regarded as part of market based solutions to policy problems. NGOs can therefore be defined as self-governing, private, not for profit organisations that are geared at improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people. NGO activities are supposed to complement traditional service provision, though this does not mean that all NGOs have good relations with government. In any case, NGO activities are increasingly diverse and can be seen as weakening central government or alternatively strengthening it in the long term.

NGOs also have the capacity to innovate and adapt more quickly than national governments; therefore, their actions can be seen as undermining government initiatives. NGOs have a significant impact on the development process but are also plagued with severe obstacles. NGOs at times suffer from a lack of resources and from their general estrangement with the state. Diversity has become an NGO trademark and it is a nearly impossible task to enumerate the various NGO characteristics when it comes to their aims, strategies, resources, target groups, tools, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. NGOs can be conceived as a separate sphere, distinct from the political and economic spheres. NGOs are characterized by their non-profit motivation. Most NGOs emerge from relatively small scale origins and grow over time into larger and more complex organisations. An individual takes action or a group of people with similar ideas come together in order to do something about a problem. Sen (1992)'s analysis of the rise of NGOs in India highlights several distinctive factors such as the influence of Christian missionaries, the growth of reformist middle classes and the influential ideas of Mahatma Gandhi who placed a concept of voluntary action at the centre of his vision for Indian development.

NGOs like all organisations are dynamic and changing. While many NGOs owe their origins to relief and welfare work, they often attempt to shift over time into more developmental roles. Most NGOs constantly find themselves dealing with change in unpredictable contexts as sometimes they find themselves favoured by governments and donors and at other times they can fall out of favour with policy makers. In the late 1980s some donors became frustrated with the often bureaucratic and ineffective government to government aid mechanism, found NGOs to be an alternative and more flexible funding channel which offered a higher chance of local level implementation and participation. Cernea (1988) argued that NGOs embodied a philosophy that recognizes the centrality of people in development policies and that this along with some other factors gave them certain comparative advantages over the public sector. NGOs were seen as closer to marginalized people and it was also claimed that NGOs were operating at a much lower cost due to their use of voluntary community input.

Some NGOs were also seen as bringing a set of new and progressive development agendas of participation, gender, environment and empowerment that were beginning to capture the imagination

of many development activists at the time. For other donors and some governments concerned with the need to liberalize and roll back the state as part of structural adjustment policies, NGOs were also seen as a cost effective and efficient alternative to public sector service delivery. Structural adjustment was a condition of many loans provided by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund from the late 1970s onwards which obliged governments to reduce the role of the state in running the economy and social sectors, to open up the economy to foreign investment and reduce barriers to trade. By the early 1990s the international community was advocating for a new policy agenda of good governance which saw development outcomes as emerging from a balanced relationship between governments, markets and a third sector alongside continuing economic liberalization. Within this paradigm NGOs came to be seen as part of an emerging civil society.

Development NGOs are committed to working towards economic, social or political development in developing countries. The Norwegian bilateral aid agency Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) (2004: 6) defines development-oriented NGOs as organisations that “attempt to improve social, economic and productive conditions and are found both as small community-based organisations at village and district levels and as large professional development agencies at state or national level”. One can distinguish between Northern and Southern NGOs within the diverse group of non-state actors and additional distinctions are often made between advocacy and rights-based NGOs; relief, welfare and charity NGOs; network NGOs and professional support NGOs. However, it is important to bear in mind that in practice the boundaries between these categories rapidly become blurred. Potentially, NGOs can participate in all phases of the policy cycle and on all levels of the public sector; as contributors to policy discussion and formulation, advocates and lobbyists, service deliverers (operators), monitors (watchdogs) of rights and of particular interests, and as innovators introducing new concepts and initiatives. Some NGOs combine two or more of these activities, whereas others choose to focus on one.

NGO action is often described as small scale, flexible, dynamic, adaptive, local, efficient and innovative. These are abilities that make them complementary to state action. The government cannot compete with their ability and desire to innovate, since the government’s capacity and structure does not allow the flexibility required to experiment with new approaches (Sequeira, Modesto and Maddox, 2007). NGOs are also perceived as being more flexible and dynamic while adapting easily to the specific political, economic and social context in a given country. As a result, it may be easier for NGOs to promote a needs-based, demand-led approach.

While there have been many advocates for NGOs, they have also been subjected to a lot of criticism some of which seems to be justified. The common obstacles associated with NGO interventions are linked to the difficulties in scaling-up and ensuring sustainability. This is often because NGO action is local, implemented on a small scale and project based. Many such projects have proved to be short-lived. There are some who feel that NGOs undermine the centrality of the state. Tvedt (1998) analyses the trend that saw the shift away from a focus on state institutions and towards a more privatized form of development which relies on NGOs as part of a transformation in NGO-state relations. Some critics view this shift as a de facto privatization through contracting out of public services.

One of the disappointments of NGOs, according to Bebbington et al (2008), has been their tendency to identify more readily with alternative forms of interventions rather than more systemic changes. There are also strong critiques that centre on the accountability problems of NGOs. Some of these criticisms have been buttressed by the fact that there is very little to show for the huge amounts of money invested in local pro-democracy groups in Zimbabwe for example over the years, according to a western envoy, who added that the NGO sector has become as corrupt as the regime whose ouster it sought. There has been no, or very little, change in the democracy situation in the country despite civil society having been well resourced financially, a diplomat who heads one of the western donor organisations in the country told NewZimbabwe.com.

After the West imposed sanctions to punish the Zimbabwean government for electoral fraud and gross human rights abuses 15 years ago, western donors also increased funding for pro-democracy groups to help upscale pressure on the government. Some NGOs also benefitted from a decision by the donors to stop directing humanitarian assistance to the country through the government, opting instead to work with the non-state sector. Among other things, NGOs secured funding for programmes that included civic education. But 15 years later with millions having been spent nothing seems to have changed with regards to the democratic situation in the country. If you take a closer look and analyze what happened in the 2013 elections and juxtapose it with the level of engagement and the number of NGOs who were educating citizens on democracy and the right to vote, you will agree that civic education contributed nothing to the situation said the diplomat who asked not to be named for professional reasons, according to NewZimbabwe.com.

The envoy also lamented the rampant corruption in the civil society sector in Zimbabwe saying graft had contributed immensely to derailing the pro-democracy agenda. Corruption is everywhere in Zimbabwe, including the civil society sector, although not as rampant as it is in the public sector said the diplomat. Since 2002 when Zimbabwe was slapped with sanctions by the West for alleged human rights abuses and electoral fraud, the Zimbabwean government has regularly attacked NGOs claiming they were aiding efforts by the United States and Britain to remove them from power. The Zimbabwean government has previously threatened to cancel operating licenses for NGOs which operate in rural areas, accusing them of working with the opposition. Villagers have in the recent past been told to disassociate themselves from NGOs. According to NewZimbabwe.com, one of the cabinet ministers also revealed that the state is suspicious of international organisations and donors who are coming to partner with government. In 2008, the government banned NGOs which were distributing food aid in the rural areas, accusing them of helping the opposition to campaign. Some critics however argue that the government should be thankful to the donor community for providing humanitarian assistance to the country as NGOs have carried the nation in terms of humanitarian support in areas that include the health and reproductive sector, food security sector, human rights and others.

NGOs have also been accused of imposing their own agendas and being self-interested actors at the expense of the people they are in theory supporting. Critics such as Tandon (1996) point to the ways in which NGOs have helped to sustain and extend neo-colonial relations in Africa. In the 1990s the dominant view of NGOs was essentially one of heroic organisations seeking to do good in difficult circumstances. Collier (2007) emphasizes the value of NGOs in bringing a valuable discourse to

international affairs which draws attention to moral issues. The fact that NGOs have now become the focus of criticism from many different perspectives is also a reflection of the wide diversity of NGO types and roles. An important reason why these debates have continued between NGO supporters and critics is that there is surprisingly very little data available as would be expected relating to the performance and effectiveness of NGOs in development and emergency work.

Some of the criticisms levelled against NGOs are however ungrounded and lack firm evidence while others are primarily ideological in nature. Some criticisms are however perfectly reasonable. Edwards (1999) writes that few NGOs have developed structures that genuinely respond to grassroots demands. Although NGOs talk of partnership, control over funds and decision making remains highly unequal. This makes the legitimacy of NGOs, especially Northern NGOs a heated topic of debate. According to Hulme and Edwards (1997), the idea of NGOs as a straightforward magic bullet that would help re-orient development efforts and make them more successful has since passed. In spite of their weaknesses, NGOs however play increasingly important roles in the development landscape. They receive higher levels of public exposure and scrutiny than ever before, speaking to their continuing importance.

NGOs provide alternatives to the status quo, providing a platform for participation, alternative practices and outcomes. The relationship of NGOs to the development landscape therefore takes many forms and their diversity cannot be overemphasized. For some NGOs are useful actors because they can provide cost effective services in flexible ways, while for others they are campaigners fighting for change or generating new ideas and approaches to development problems. In light of the foregoing, government attitudes to NGOs vary considerably from place to place and tend to change with successive regimes. They range from active hostility in which governments may seek to intervene in the affairs of NGOs or even dissolve them, with or without good reason, to periods of acute courtship and partnership as governments and donors may alternatively seek to incorporate NGOs into development policy and intervention processes.

Governments legitimately claim that they need to ensure that NGO governance and finances are monitored in order to ensure probity and that there is proper coordination of activities between government and NGOs as well as among NGOs themselves. As a result NGO-state relations are often tense and unstable. Furthermore, governments tend to feel threatened if they perceive that international resources, previously provided as bilateral aid are now being given to NGOs instead. The state may feel threatened if its legitimacy is brought into question through the work of NGOs which reveals government agencies' inability to deliver. The result may be that government tries to take credit for successful NGO work. Many NGOs find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place in terms of donor and state pressures. NGOs are faced with constant challenges of understanding donor preoccupations and requirements and then interpreting these to their constituents and trying to offset the efforts of state control or obstruction of their work especially in contexts where NGOs and the state are competing for the same donor resources.

Accountability is a complex challenge for NGOs because they have multiple constituents and need to be accountable in different ways to a variety of different groups and interests. The frequent lack of attention paid by many NGOs to questions of accountability has resulted in over accountability to

government or donors at the expense of downward or sideway accountability to beneficiaries. However the prevalence of NGOs is often considered a sign of a well-functioning civil society as they are expected to contribute to democracy and the building of democratic aid structures. Without doubt the role of civil society as a watchdog increases transparency and the participation of society in the development process. NGOs' generally positive reputation and the values associated with the participation of civil society in national and international relations have encouraged them to opt for more influence, not only on the implementation side of development, but also in decision-shaping and decision-making. NGO discourse on development reflects their desire to be considered as a relevant stakeholder by all actors involved, to engage with decision-makers, and to become active participants in and of development. This normative discourse helps integrate NGO action into the social and political aid system.

NGOs are no longer small-scale actors, simply interested in filling up the vacuum left by government. They have grown into powerful voices of civil society. NGOs play a key role in the drafting and implementation of poverty reduction strategies and such a role represents a fundamental change compared to earlier periods where NGO involvement was strictly limited to service provision, an activity that has led to resistance from some governments. Governments have largely recognized the important role of NGOs, especially concerning service provision to the socially excluded. They are slowly but surely realizing that development goals cannot be reached without the active participation of NGOs. In addition to pure service provision, NGO participation is seen as strengthening the legitimacy of public and social policy. As a result, NGO involvement can improve both upward and downward accountability. Upward accountability is improved by augmenting the chances of reaching internationally set goals, while downward accountability is improved by ensuring civil society representation.

NGO state relations are a fragile and context-specific partnership in constant evolution. Many NGOs have had to deal with local authorities, with government officers or local institutions when engaging in activities. According to research, democratic regimes are strongly correlated with openness towards NGOs. In Nepal, for example, NGOs have been present since the 1950s, when the feudal regime was officially abolished. When the development sector became more centrally controlled in 1971, the role and impact of civil society decreased. However, a new space for civil society opened up parallel to the democratization and liberalization of the country in the 1990s (UNESCO, 2001). The scope and nature of NGO work is determined largely by the political culture – whether there is a tradition of well-functioning civil society organizations or not. South Asia, for example, has a long history of indigenous NGOs working in the development sector. India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are countries that are recognized for their openness towards NGOs. According to Ahmad (2006: 631), “there are probably more and bigger NGOs in Bangladesh than in any other country of its size”. As a result, in recent years, government has been incorporating NGOs into various committees with other line ministries from unions to the national levels and sharing and learning from the experience of NGOs in different sectors.

Nevertheless, in some countries, NGOs are not perceived as legitimately representing national or local civil society. In some countries, faith-based organizations might be more representative of a given community and might thus be more successful in creating partnerships with the government. In other countries, the legislation has established a strong regulative framework for NGOs, restricting their activities and the possibilities for scaling up. Such regulation may actually be to the benefit of NGOs. In

countries that have had to deal with so called 'briefcase' NGOs – NGOs created exclusively for personal profit – legislation has proved helpful for serious NGOs, such as in Pakistan (Anzar, 2002). When state capacity is weak, a government rarely interferes in the work of NGOs, especially at the micro level because they do not have the capacity to do so.

In conclusion, this article has been explored with one main question in mind: has NGO action evolved from replacing the state on the ground? Their gap-filling role and independence from government has allowed them to implement innovative approaches that can serve as models for government. In this sense, NGOs should continue doing what they already do best. Mainstreaming such successful innovations in cooperation with government and the private sector thus becomes a development process par excellence. NGOs can play the role of organizing people at the grassroots and strengthening social capital thereby complimenting the delivery of services. An ability to innovate is often claimed as a special quality and an area of comparative advantage of NGOs over other kinds of organisations, especially government agencies. Innovation claims are one of the key justifications of NGOs as purveyors of development alternatives and there is evidence to support that NGOs contributed new approaches to poverty reduction. NGOs may be less constrained by orthodox ideas and structures than mainstream aid agencies and governments. NGOs have considerable flexibility to experiment, adapt and try out new approaches to problem solving. Another key role of NGOs is to act as whistle blowers if certain policies remain unimplemented or are carried out poorly, as well as scanning the policy horizon for interferences to development policy and implementation. Through community organisation and policy advocacy, NGOs and other civil society organisations can operate as a counterweight to balance public interests especially those of the disadvantaged against the excesses of the state and the market.

Neo-liberal policies have served to increase NGO roles as service providers, but with mixed results. While there are excellent examples of high quality work in which improved service delivery has been built on NGO's superior knowledge of local contexts and needs, there are also examples where the services provided were patchy in coverage or of a poor quality, along with concerns about service sustainability and cultural shifts away from earlier moral or political commitment to poverty reduction and towards a more professionalized, business type approach to their work. Unless NGOs become partners with government and the private sector and not competitors, development initiatives will continue to be stunted.

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