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## Civil society, NGOs and social development: Changing the rules of the game

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Geneva 2000 Occasional Paper No. 1

January 2000

# **Civil Society, NGDOs and Social Development: Changing the Rules of the Game**

*by Alan Fowler*



United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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## Acronyms

<b>ABONG</b>	Association of Brazilian NGOs
<b>ACSPPA</b>	Ateneo Centre for Social Policy and Public Affairs
<b>ACVFA</b>	American Council on Voluntary Foreign Agencies
<b>ADAB</b>	Association of Development Agencies Bangladesh
<b>ADAB</b>	Australian International Development Assistance Bureau
<b>ADB</b>	African Development Bank
<b>AIDS</b>	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
<b>ALOP</b>	Association of Latin American NGOs
<b>ANGOC</b>	Asian NGO Coalition
<b>BRAC</b>	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
<b>CAS</b>	country assistance strategy
<b>CBO</b>	community-based organization
<b>CDF</b>	Comprehensive Development Framework
<b>CDRA</b>	Community Development Resource Association
<b>CIDA</b>	Canadian International Development Agency
<b>CIVICUS</b>	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
<b>CODE</b>	Caucus of Development NGO Networks
<b>CSO</b>	civil society organization
<b>Danida</b>	Danish International Development Agency
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>DNGDO</b>	domestic non-governmental development organization
<b>EADI</b>	European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes
<b>ESCOR</b>	Economic and Social Research Management Unit (DFID)
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FAVDO</b>	Forum for African Voluntary Development Organizations
<b>Finnida</b>	Finnish International Development Agency
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>GOM</b>	Gemeenschappelijke Overleg Medefinanciering
<b>GRO</b>	Grassroots organization
<b>GTZ</b>	German Agency for Technical Co-operation
<b>HDI</b>	human development index
<b>HIV</b>	human immunodeficiency virus
<b>IDA</b>	International Development Association
<b>IDR</b>	Institute of Development Research
<b>IFCB</b>	International Forum on Capacity Building (formerly IWGCB)
<b>IFI</b>	international financial institution
<b>IFRCRCS</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>IIED</b>	International Institute for Environment and Development
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>INGDO</b>	international non-governmental development organization
<b>INTRAC</b>	International NGO Training and Research Centre
<b>IWGCB</b>	International Working Group on Capacity Building
<b>MDB</b>	multilateral development bank
<b>MIT</b>	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
<b>MST</b>	Landless Rural Workers Movement
<b>NCOS</b>	Nationale Commitee voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking
<b>NGDO</b>	non-governmental development organization
<b>NGLS</b>	Non-Governmental Liaison Service
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>NGDOSO</b>	NGDO support organization

<b>NNGDO</b>	Northern non-governmental development organization
<b>NOVIB</b>	Nederlandse Organisatie voor Internationale Ontwikkelingssamenwerking
<b>ODA</b>	Overseas Development Administration (now DFID)
<b>ODA</b>	official development assistance
<b>ODC</b>	Overseas Development Council
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OED</b>	Operations Evaluation Division (World Bank)
<b>PGA</b>	people's global action
<b>PLAN</b>	Plan International (formerlay Foster Parents' Plan)
<b>PO</b>	people's organization
<b>PRIA</b>	Society for Participatory Research in Asia
<b>PVO</b>	private voluntary organization
<b>SAPRI</b>	Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Institute
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
<b>TANGO</b>	Tanzania NGO Council
<b>UNCSD</b>	United Nations Commission for Social Development
<b>UNCTAD</b>	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<b>UNDAF</b>	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNRISD</b>	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>VANI</b>	Voluntary Agencies Network India
<b>WSSD</b>	World Summit for Social Development
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization

## Summary/Résumé/Resumen

### Summary

This paper broadly evaluates the role and performance of non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) in promoting social development before and since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development. Two kinds of analysis and recommendations are offered. The first concerns the practices of NGDOs and their relationships with other “partners in development”. The second focuses on the deep-rooted pathologies of the aid system that condition the form and effectiveness of many development interventions not only by NGDOs but also by the larger universe of entities comprising civil society organizations (CSOs). This review concludes that, in the absence of thoroughgoing reform, the aid system will continue to hinder mobilization by the larger civil society with NGDOs to bring about genuine development in the Third World.

The concept of civil society has altered development thinking and practice in the major donor countries. However, the Western image of civil society that donors employ does not necessarily apply to civil societies elsewhere. This has serious consequences for efforts to mobilize civil society organizations in developing countries. In practice, donors need to have a much deeper understanding of the configuration and capacity of civil society in the specific locations where they intend to intervene. Donors must also recognize that NGDO efforts, while useful, are limited, and that they cannot substitute for those of the wider civil society.

The tasks NGDOs set for themselves, and the expectations of those that finance them, are complex and (probably too) demanding. They cover most facets of social development: reducing poverty and exclusion; improving access to basic services; conflict prevention; fostering democracy; influencing public policies, etc. NGDOs also function at multiple levels, from the individual, through households and intermediary institutions into the arena of international relations, conventions and commitments. In doing so, they may touch some 20 per cent of the world’s poor. However, evidence suggests that the NGDO contribution to social change is less substantial and durable than imagined.

NGDOs would like to do better and are doing something about it themselves. However, they are limited in this by the unfair, power-imbalanced and donor-serving framework of aid that they operate in. At the same time, NGDOs remain substantially aid-dependent and vulnerable, which can result in questionable motivations and behaviour. For NGDOs to improve their contributions in mobilizing for development, they must better learn to:

- understand and overcome the factors undermining their efforts;
- work differently with communities to ensure that change is sustained;
- develop an ability to cope with relative powerlessness within the “partnerships” that are possible in an unreformed aid system;



- improve relations between themselves;
- alter Northern NGDOs' roles vis-à-vis Southern partners and their own national constituencies, and work together with all kinds of NGDOs in coalitions and networks;
- broaden and bring enduring structure into interactions with wider civil society;
- interface more broadly with national and local government;
- operate in the international arena with downward accountability, while adopting advocacy strategies that do not undermine domestic governance or provoke a government "backlash".

But structural features of the international aid system limit NGDOs' capacity for self-improvement. Under existing rules, most recipients of aid are relatively powerless and are kept that way. The distorted language of "partnership" is a current example of how rhetoric masks major disparities in power and the maintenance of dependency. And this power imbalance generates perverse incentives for aid recipients. It blocks their necessary ownership of and commitment to change. Six reforms are proposed to attenuate or remove the institutional dysfunctions of aid, and hence make feasible the possibilities for NGDOs to work with diverse CSOs on a larger scale.

First, bring greater equity, co-responsibility and ownership into the aid process. Trust funds, or similar mechanisms, have often been proposed and should be implemented. These should create an appropriate distance between the giver and receiver of aid, set within a transparent governance framework.

Second, recognize relationships other than "partnership". The aid community requires an array of relationships, named for what they are, each designed to serve different purposes. Different relationships require the open negotiation of different rights and obligations of the parties involved.

Third, establish "honest brokers" along the lines of an Ombudsperson, as is now being considered by agencies working in humanitarian and emergency operations.

Fourth, prevent "development mono-culture" by encouraging NGDOs to do what they should do best: work with local agents of change to understand and promote integrative, cross-cutting, thematic, participatory and innovative approaches to development, tailored to specific situations. This goes against the current trend of forcing NGDOs to conform to official standards and methods, often prescribed along technical, sectoral lines favoured by the donor.

Fifth, improve social development practice by incorporating into interventions a deeper understanding of the interrelationships among social and economic change, the evolution of civic participation, the role and kinds of capacity building needed by CSOs, etc. The meaning of this is made clear by an example of a promising approach to capacity building.

Finally, expand relations with civil society on the basis of dialogue and building effective relations between diverse actors at multiple levels. Institutional

mapping is one way of identifying entry points for, and obtaining, this type of engagement.

The aid system has not demonstrated an ability to reform its fundamental principles and structures. Should it continue this way, NGOs' credibility when engaging with CSOs will be further compromised. It is not a question of not knowing what needs to be done. Necessary reforms are readily apparent. The problem is that failure to move as needed stems from a donor predisposition to prioritize domestic interests over those of recipients who remain in second place and second class. This may satisfy tax payers' need to see how they themselves benefit from their aid. Nevertheless, this stance is deficient when the same taxpayers ask what is actually being achieved on the ground. They want both home benefits and overseas results. Consequently, poor performance will eventually result in lost credibility at both ends of the aid chain. This must not be allowed to happen. People who are poor and marginalized, and in whose name the system operates, have a fundamental right that this not occur.

Alan Fowler is an independent consultant, based in Addis Ababa, who does research on NGOs, the reform of the aid system and the development of civil society.

## **Résumé**

L'auteur procède ici à une étude générale du rôle joué par les organisations non gouvernementales de développement (ONGD) dans la promotion du développement social avant et depuis le Sommet mondial pour le développement social (1995) et de leurs prestations dans ce domaine. Il propose deux types d'analyse et de recommandations. Le premier concerne les pratiques des ONGD et leurs relations avec d'autres "partenaires du développement"; le second a trait aux pathologies profondes du système d'aide qui conditionnent la forme et l'efficacité de nombreuses initiatives de développement émanant non seulement d'ONGD mais aussi du vaste ensemble d'entités regroupées sous l'expression d'organisations de la société civile (OSC). L'auteur conclut que, s'il n'est pas réformé en profondeur, le système de l'aide continuera à freiner la mobilisation de la société civile aux côtés des ONGD, alors qu'ensemble elles pourraient susciter un vrai développement dans le tiers monde.

La notion de société civile a modifié la réflexion et la pratique du développement dans les principaux pays donateurs. Cependant, l'image occidentale de la société civile qu'emploient les donateurs ne s'applique pas nécessairement aux sociétés civiles d'ailleurs, ce qui a de sérieuses conséquences sur les efforts visant à mobiliser les organisations de la société civile dans les pays en développement. Dans la pratique, les donateurs ont besoin d'avoir une connaissance beaucoup plus approfondie de la configuration et des capacités de la société civile à l'endroit précis où ils ont l'intention d'intervenir. Ils doivent aussi savoir que les efforts des ONGD sont utiles, certes, mais limités et qu'elles ne peuvent pas se substituer à la société civile dans son ensemble.

Les tâches que se fixent les ONGD et les attentes de leurs bailleurs de fonds sont complexes et (probablement) excessives. Elles recouvrent la plupart des aspects du développement social : réduction de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion, meilleur accès aux services de base, prévention des conflits, accélération du processus de démocratisation, influence sur les politiques publiques, etc. Les ONGD fonctionnent aussi à des niveaux multiples, depuis celui des individus jusqu'à celui des relations, conventions et obligations internationales en passant par les ménages et les établissements intermédiaires. Ce faisant, elles peuvent toucher environ 20 pour cent des pauvres de la planète. Cependant, les études montrent que leur contribution au changement social n'est pas aussi substantielle ni durable qu'on pourrait l'imaginer.

Les ONGD aimeraient faire. Cependant, leur capacité de le faire est limitée par le fait que le cadre institutionnel de l'aide dans lequel elles travaillent est injuste, les donateurs n'étant motivés que par leurs propres intérêts, et avec pour caractéristique un déséquilibre du pouvoir. En même temps, les ONGD restent essentiellement tributaires de l'aide et vulnérables, ce qui peut être à l'origine de motivations et d'un comportement contestables de leur part. Afin que le rôle des ONGD de mobiliser en faveur du développement soit plus efficace, elles doivent intensifier leurs travaux afin :

- de comprendre et de surmonter ce qui entrave leurs efforts;
- de travailler différemment avec les communautés pour veiller à ce que le changement soit durable;
- de renforcer leur capacité de gérer l'impuissance relative qu'elles éprouvent à l'intérieur des "partenariats" qui est caractérisée par un système d'aide inchangé;
- de coopérer avec d'autres ONGD et travailler en collaboration avec toutes sortes d'ONGD au sein de coalitions ou de réseaux;
- d'élargir et de structurer leurs interactions avec la société civile dans son ensemble;
- d'étendre leurs relations avec les pouvoirs publics nationaux et locaux;
- d'adopter sur la scène internationale un mode de fonctionnement qui permette de rendre des comptes aux partenaires nationaux et locaux ainsi qu'aux bénéficiaires.

Les ONGD du Nord en particulier devraient concentrer leur énergie non pas vers des activités opérationnelles dans le Sud mais réorienter leurs efforts vers l'éducation et faire en sorte de sensibiliser leurs propres composantes nationales aux questions de développement.

Cependant, les structures propres au système de l'aide internationale limitent ce que les ONGD peuvent faire pour s'améliorer. Selon les règles en usage, les bénéficiaires de l'aide sont, pour la plupart, relativement impuissants et maintenus dans cet état d'impuissance. Le terme de "partenariat", employé à tort et à travers, est un exemple d'actualité qui montre en quoi le discours sert à masquer l'inégalité des rapports de force et la survivance de la dépendance. Ce déséquilibre des forces a aussi des effets pervers sur les bénéficiaires de l'aide, en les empêchant de s'investir dans les changements nécessaires. Six réformes

sont proposées pour atténuer ou éliminer les dysfonctionnements institutionnels de l'aide et améliorer les possibilités réelles de coopération des ONGD avec des OSC de natures diverses.

Premièrement, mettre plus d'équité et de partage des responsabilités dans le processus de l'aide qui doit faire l'objet d'une appropriation. On a souvent proposé la création de fonds d'affectation spéciale ou de mécanismes similaires; il serait temps de passer au stade de la réalisation. Ces structures devraient mettre une bonne distance entre le donateur et le bénéficiaire de l'aide, en leur permettant une coopération dans le cadre d'une gouvernance transparente.

Deuxièmement, accepter des relations autres que celles du "partenariat". Les milieux de l'aide ont besoin de toute une panoplie de relations qu'ils puissent appeler par leur nom et qui soient chacune conçues pour servir un but particulier. Dans chaque type de relation, les droits et obligations des parties en cause doivent être ouvertement négociés.

Troisièmement, mettre en place des "intermédiaires honnêtes" calqués sur le modèle du médiateur, comme envisagent de le faire aujourd'hui des institutions travaillant dans le domaine des opérations humanitaires et des interventions d'urgence.

Quatrièmement, empêcher que naisse une "monoculture du développement" et, dans ce but, encourager les ONGD à faire ce qu'elles font le mieux : travailler au changement avec des agents locaux pour comprendre et faire adopter des approches du développement tenant compte de la notion d'intégration mais aussi intersectorielles, participatives et novatrices, taillées pour s'adapter à des situations précises. Cela va à l'encontre de la tendance actuelle à forcer les ONGD à se conformer aux normes et méthodes officielles, qui vont souvent dans le sens technique et sectoriel privilégié par le donateur.

Cinquièmement, améliorer la pratique du développement social en concevant des interventions qui témoignent d'une compréhension plus profonde des rapports entre l'évolution de la participation civique, le rôle et les compétences que les OSC auraient besoin de renforcer ainsi que les processus de changement économique et social.

Enfin, développer les relations avec la société civile sur la base du dialogue et des liens noués entre acteurs divers à de multiples niveaux. En établissant la cartographie des institutions, il est possible de repérer où elles sont accessibles à ce genre d'engagement.

Le système de l'aide n'a pas démontré son aptitude à revoir ses principes fondamentaux et ses structures. Si cela devait continuer, la crédibilité des ONGD auprès des OSC serait encore plus compromise. Les réformes nécessaires sautent aux yeux. Le problème vient d'une prédisposition des donateurs à faire passer leurs propres intérêts nationaux avant ceux des "bénéficiaires", qui restent au second plan. Cela peut satisfaire le contribuable qui a besoin de savoir dans quelle mesure il bénéficie lui-même de l'aide. Néanmoins, ces mêmes contribuables sont aussi intéressés par ce qui est réellement accompli sur le terrain. Il veut à la fois des avantages pour son pays et des résultats à l'étranger. De piètres prestations risquent donc de se solder en

définitive par une perte de crédibilité aux deux extrémités de la chaîne de l'aide. Il ne faut pas en arriver là. Les pauvres et les laissés-pour-compte au nom desquels le système fonctionne ont fondamentalement droit à un système d'aide plus efficace.

Alan Fowler est un consultant indépendant basé à Addis Abeba et dont les travaux de recherche sont centrés sur les ONGD, le réforme du système de l'aide et le développement de la société civile.

## **Resumen**

En este documento se evalúa ampliamente el papel y la actuación de las organizaciones no gubernamentales de desarrollo (ONGDs) en la promoción del desarrollo social antes y después de la Cumbre Mundial sobre Desarrollo Social de 1995. En él se ofrecen dos tipos de análisis y recomendaciones. El primero se refiere a las prácticas de las ONGDs y a sus relaciones con otros "socios en el desarrollo". El segundo se concentra en las deficiencias persistentes del sistema de ayuda, que condicionan la forma y efectividad de muchas de las intervenciones en pro del desarrollo, provenientes de las ONGDs así como de las organizaciones de la sociedad civil (OSCs). Esta revisión permite concluir que sin una reforma a fondo del sistema de ayuda, seguirá obstaculizándose la movilización de la mayor parte de la sociedad civil junto con las ONGDs para lograr un auténtico desarrollo en el Tercer Mundo.

El concepto de sociedad civil ha alterado las ideas y la práctica del desarrollo en la mayoría de los países proveedores de ayuda. Sin embargo, la imagen occidentalizada de la sociedad civil que tienen y utilizan los donadores, no necesariamente se aplica a las sociedades civiles de otras partes. Ese sesgo repercute seriamente en los esfuerzos para movilizar a las organizaciones de la sociedad civil de los países en desarrollo. En la práctica, los donadores necesitan entender más a fondo la configuración y capacidad de la sociedad civil de los lugares específicos en donde tratan de intervenir. Deben reconocer también que los esfuerzos de las ONGDs, sin dejar de ser útiles, son limitados, y que no pueden substituir a los de la sociedad civil en su conjunto.

Las tareas que las ONGDs se han asignado a sí mismas, así como las expectativas de quienes las financian, son complejas y tal vez demasiado exigentes. Cubren la mayoría de las facetas del desarrollo social: reducir pobreza y exclusión; mejorar el acceso a servicios básicos; prevenir conflictos; promover la democracia; influir en las políticas públicas, etc. Las ONGDs funcionan también en niveles múltiples, desde lo individual, pasando por el del hogar y el de instituciones intermediarias hasta el de las relaciones, convenciones y compromisos internacionales. De esa manera pueden acercarse a un 20 por ciento de los pobres del mundo. Sin embargo, la evidencia permite sugerir que la aportación de la ONGD al cambio social es menos sustantiva y duradera de lo que se ha imaginado.

A las ONGDs les gustaría mejorar su labor, sin embargo, su capacidad para lograrlo está condicionada por el hecho de que el marco de referencia para ayuda, en el cual laboran, es injusto, está al servicio de los donadores y se

caracteriza por la desigualdad de poder. Al mismo tiempo, las ONGDs siguen siendo en gran medida vulnerables y dependientes de la ayuda, lo cual puede dar como resultado el que se pongan en tela de juicio sus motivos y su comportamiento. Para que las ONGDs mejoren sus aportaciones a la movilización social en pro del desarrollo tienen que intensificar sus afanes para:

- entender y superar los factores que están socavando sus esfuerzos;
- trabajar de manera diferente con las comunidades para asegurarse de que el cambio sea sostenido;
- desarrollar una cierta habilidad para arreglárselas sin tener suficiente poder en las “asociaciones” que caracterizan a un sistema de ayuda no reformado;
- colaborar con otras ONGDs y trabajar con todo tipo de ONGDs para formar coaliciones y redes de intercambio;
- ampliar y consolidar las relaciones con la sociedad civil en general;
- interactuar más extensamente con el gobierno a niveles nacional y local; y
- actuar en el escenario internacional rindiendo cuentas a sus asociados y a los beneficiarios a niveles nacional y local.

Las ONGDs del Norte deberían, en especial, reorientar sus energías alejándose de actividades operativas en países del sur y en vez de ello, educar y cabildear a su propia base social de apoyo en los países del Norte, sobre los problemas del desarrollo.

Empero, las características estructurales del sistema de ayuda internacional acotan la capacidad de las ONGDs para que mejoren por sí mismas. Bajo las normas existentes, la mayoría de los receptores de ayuda carecen de poder relativamente y así se les mantiene. La distorsionada terminología de “asociación” es un ejemplo actual de la manera como la retórica enmascara las grandes disparidades de poder y el mantenimiento de la dependencia. Este desequilibrio de poder genera incentivos que se traducen en perjuicios para los receptores de ayuda, ya que obstaculiza su compromiso de realizar el cambio y controlarlo. Se proponen entonces seis reformas para atenuar o quitar las trabas institucionales del sistema de ayuda, mejorando así las posibilidades de que las ONGDs trabajen con diversos organismos de la sociedad civil a una escala más amplia.

Primero, lograr mayor equidad, una mayor responsabilidad compartida y control en el procedimiento de ayuda. A menudo se ha propuesto que se instauren y se apliquen mecanismos como los fondos fiduciarios u otros semejantes. Con ellos se establecería una separación adecuada entre quien da ayuda y quien la recibe, permitiéndoles colaborar entre sí en el marco de una gestión transparente.

Segundo, reconocer la existencia de otras relaciones fuera de las de “asociación”. La comunidad de ayuda requiere que se definan con claridad sus relaciones según se las designe con propósitos diferentes. A determinadas relaciones corresponden derechos y obligaciones diferentes por parte de las entidades involucradas.

Tercero, nombrar “intermediarios imparciales” según los lineamientos del llamado defensor del pueblo (ombudspersona), tal como ahora está siendo considerado por las agencias que llevan a cabo operaciones humanitarias y de emergencia.

Cuarto, evitar la “cultura del desarrollo monolítico”, alentando a las ONGDs a que hagan lo que saben hacer mejor: trabajar con los agentes de cambio locales a fin de entender y proponer guías u orientaciones para el desarrollo, que permitan promover la integración, la participación de múltiples disciplinas, la participación social, la innovación y la adecuación a situaciones específicas. Esto va contra la tendencia actual de forzar a las ONGDs para que se amolden a las normas y métodos oficiales que a menudo se les prescribe siguiendo lineamientos técnicos y sectoriales preferidos por el donante.

Quinto, mejorar la aplicación del desarrollo social a partir de un conocimiento más profundo de las relaciones entre la participación cívica, el tipo de capacitación que requieren las organizaciones de la sociedad civil, y los procesos de cambio social y económico.

Finalmente, ampliar las relaciones con la sociedad civil apoyándose en el diálogo y en los vínculos entre diversos actores en múltiples niveles. Al trazar la red de instituciones se logra identificar los puntos de acceso a ese tipo de compromiso.

El sistema de ayuda no ha demostrado su capacidad para reformar sus principios y estructuras fundamentales. De seguir así, la credibilidad de las ONGDs al comprometerse con las OSCs será puesta en tela de juicio aún más. La necesidad de hacer reformas es evidente. La razón de que no se avance como se debe es que los donadores prefieren anteponer sus propios intereses a los de los receptores de ayuda, relegando a estos últimos a un segundo plano. Es posible que así se satisfaga la necesidad de quienes pagan impuestos, de buscar la forma de beneficiarse con la ayuda que ellos proporcionan. Sin embargo, esos mismos contribuyentes también están interesados en saber qué es lo que realmente se está logrando. Quieren las dos cosas, beneficios en casa y resultados favorables en el exterior. Por lo tanto, en un cierto momento, una actuación deficiente dará como resultado que se pierda la credibilidad en ambos extremos de la cadena de ayuda, lo cual no debe permitirse. La población pobre y marginal, en cuyo nombre opera el sistema, tiene un derecho fundamental a que el sistema de ayuda sea más efectivo.

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## Introduction

This study provides a critical review of the role and contribution of one constituency within civil society—non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs)—to social development across the world. The past decade has seen significant expansion in NGDO numbers and growth in their achievements. However, a broad conclusion is that three major impediments stand in the way of NGDOs making a greater impact that accelerates progress in realizing the ten commitments agreed upon at the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) held in Copenhagen.<sup>1</sup> The obstacles are associated with the environments in which they work; the quality of the funds they receive, predominantly from the international aid system;<sup>2</sup> and their own finite capacities and ability to achieve effective divisions of labour and equitable relationships. These limitations could be reduced if the “rules of the game” under which NGDOs operate and are financed were changed. But, more importantly, the credibility of the aid system needs to be re-established if it wishes to engage with civil society more widely around the WSSD agenda.

The paper begins, in section I, by unpacking civil society. A brief summary of the aid system is used to locate questions about how the concept of civil society is understood and approached. The focus then narrows to a particular category within civil society—NGDOs. Notwithstanding their wide diversity, they differentiate themselves from the main body of civil society in salient ways. Subsequent sections concentrate on this type of civic actor in social development.<sup>3</sup> The perspective adopted is one of organizational ecology. Put another way, like development itself, it is argued that NGDOs (and civil society for that matter) can best be understood in context-specific terms (Adelman and Morris, 1997; Salamon and Anheier, 1998b). In other words, NGDOs should be analysed in relation to the historical trajectory, dominant ideology, social forces, the nature of governance and the policy environment of different countries. These factors are themselves influenced by external (globalizing) forces—particularly, the political economy of aid and donor behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> The ten commitments are to: (a) an enabling environment for social development; (b) poverty eradication; (c) full employment; (d) promoting social integration; (e) equality and equity between men and women; (f) universal and equitable access to quality education and health services; (g) acceleration of development in Africa and the least developed countries; (h) inclusion of social development goals in structural adjustment programmes; (i) resources for social development; (j) international co-operation for social development (**NGLS Roundup**, No. 41, July 1999). As part of civil society, NGDOs are recognized as relevant actors in realizing WSSD commitments, notably in improving people’s access to social services, reducing poverty, building local capacity, assisting in the formulation of national strategies, mobilizing public awareness, etc. (UNCSD, 1995, paragraphs 4j, 6k, 28e, 34g, 85 and 85a). The World Summit for Social Development also confirmed the need to enhance the capabilities of CSOs and NGDOs to fulfil these tasks.

<sup>2</sup> The aid system is taken to be all institutions involved in allocating or receiving official—tax-derived—international development assistance as well as (private) organizations that raise funds from the general public for this expressed purpose. In other words, it includes bilateral and multilateral development agencies, recipient governments and civil society organizations of the North, South and East—predominantly, but not exclusively, NGDOs.

<sup>3</sup> Although NGDOs involved in emergency relief, humanitarian action and conflict reconciliation tend to operate from the perspective of a relief-to-development spectrum, their work is not included in this study.



Section II offers a stocktaking of (the probably unrealistically high) expectations about NGDOs versus their achievements in social development. Problems of methodology and uneven and unavailable data make this, at best, a tentative exercise. Nevertheless, an overall picture is one of limited direct NGDO outreach with reasonable success at producing outputs from social development “projects”, but very modest impact in terms of sustained social change. NGDOs appear to be making most recent gains in terms of influencing selected areas of social policy, nationally and internationally. Available evidence indicates common constraints to NGDO performance that could be reduced or removed. These are examined in more detail.

The subsequent section analyses relationships that condition NGDO work. It explores their role in social development and important interactions with grassroots or community-based organizations (GROs/CBOs), between NGDOs themselves, with governments and with the official aid system.<sup>4</sup> The dilemmas NGDOs face in gaining authentic community participation and avoiding “mutual dependency” are highlighted, as are the ways in which institutional self-interests and the nature of aid can work against applying appropriate practices. In addition, the often-ambivalent nature of NGDO-NGDO and NGDO-government relations is explored, as are the underlying pathologies and patronage basis of international aid. Particular attention is paid to how NGDOs experience the prevailing passion for (multisector) “partnership”.

Section IV uses previous findings and discussions to identify the types of institutional, policy and operational reforms needed in order for NGDOs to enhance their contribution to social development. They imply, in various ways and degrees, changing the rules of the game under which NGDOs operate. The conclusion is conjectural. It speculates on implementation of the institutional reforms required of aid if it is to operate new rules of the game that bring civil society and NGDOs on a par with states and markets in directing and shaping social development. A general observation is that, while the jury is still out, the omens are not encouraging. Why? Because, as a part of an imbalanced system of international political power and rule-based economic relations, a major pre-condition for success—the credibility of the aid system—is being seriously eroded.

## I. Unpacking Civil Society and NGDOs

The end of the Cold War brought an old concept and vocabulary of civil society into the forefront of international development. Civil society gained renewed prominence from within processes associated with the disintegration

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<sup>4</sup> A typical distinction between NGDOs and CBOs is that the former provide services to CBOs as third parties, while CBOs are made up of members who should themselves gain from their organization’s activities. CBOs can evolve to the extent that they employ staff and function as NGDOs in terms of professionalism and service delivery to third parties as well as to members—churches and religion-based CBOs are one example. Such “complex” CBOs—such as Six-S in Senegal—can be direct recipients of external aid.

of the Soviet Union (Siegel and Yancey, 1992).<sup>5</sup> It has since become an organizing framework and pivotal element in a new development agenda for this decade (Robinson, 1994). This ancient “city” concept has been reconstructed and deconstructed in a virtual industry of academic studies and donor-oriented publications, including civic “atlases” (CIVICUS, 1997). This paper does not analyse what the concept means to different observers, relevant references can be found in the footnotes.<sup>6</sup> Of importance is that the aid system has closely associated civil society with its political and social development objectives. It is therefore necessary to see how the concept has been interpreted. In addition, we need to understand what NGOs are in relation to a social development agenda as part of civil society. These tasks form the core of this section.

### ***Civil society and the aid system***

Today, international development is characterized by the aid system’s urgent embrace of the concept of civil society. The following subsections investigate what has happened to date and what this means for an appraisal of NGOs within international development thinking and practice. To do so, requires a brief explanation of the aid system itself.

#### **The aid system**

At its core, the international aid system is premised on both accelerating and directing a country’s development through the transfer of, mainly concessional, resources. Figure 1 provides a very simplified schematic overview of the system. Important resources are money, knowledge, technology and expertise. The ultimate users or beneficiaries of aid flows are intended to be the 3 billion poor or excluded citizens that form the deprived underlay of civil society in the

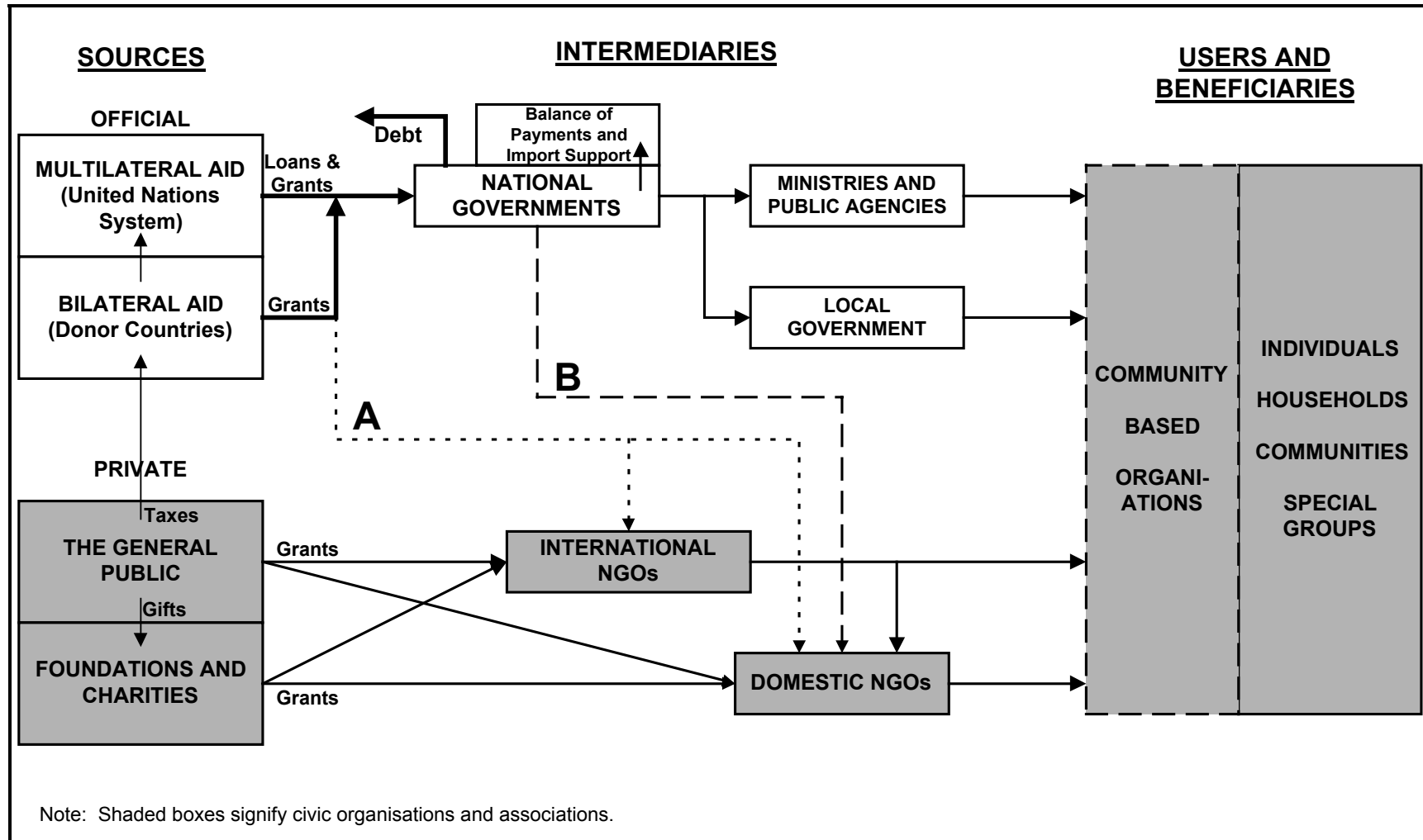
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<sup>5</sup> It could be argued that an appreciation of the emergence of citizen’s organizations and their significance as development actors preceded the Soviet implosion. Some observers had already pointed to a barefoot revolution (Schneider, 1988), others talk of an “emerging sector” (Salamon and Anheier, 1998a).

<sup>6</sup> An array of explanations and interpretations of civil society (and NGOs) is to be found. Key texts are: Blaney and Pasha, 1993; Gellner, 1994; Kumar, 1993; Lipshutz, 1992; Wood, 1990. Useful texts on the relationship between civil society, development and the aid system are: Bernard et al., 1998; Biekart, 1999; van Rooy, 1997; Whaites, 1998. There is an ongoing debate about whether or not market actors are “civic”. Although not resolved, the implicit notion in donor approaches is of “modular” or free citizens in a modernized economy. This perspective is of little relevance for the world’s poor. They know little distinction between their economic and non-economic selves as landless labourers, petty traders, hawkers and beggars. They do not “detach” themselves from citizenship when they work for subsistence and re-enter civil society when they stop. Erring on the side of caution and inclusion would suggest including all non-state actors within civil society. This has not been the definition used in this study, but the issue requires more debate and clarity if poverty reduction is a central goal of social development. For our purposes, civil society can be understood as the realm of citizen’s informal and formal private association to pursue non-economic interests and goals.



Figure 1: The Aid System — Highly Simplified Financial Links and Flows





South and East.<sup>7</sup> They are to be found as individuals, as members of households, village and community-based organizations and specific groups, such as the disabled, the illiterate, people with HIV/AIDS, and so on. They provide the overt justification for the aid system.<sup>8</sup>

The primary sources of international assistance are from the Northern tax-base—i.e. official aid—and from private donations and investment income—i.e. private aid. In 1998, \$47.9 billion<sup>9</sup> of tax funds were allocated as official overseas development assistance (ODA) (World Bank, 1999:68). Since 1990, the amount of concessional finance within ODA has been decreasing. In 1998, it stood at \$32.7 billion, down \$12 billion since 1990. Within concessional finance, the grant element has declined more sharply than the loan element. By a ratio of 3:1, multilateral flows supersede bilateral allocation in distributing the \$9.7 billion of concessional loans in 1998.

The major institutions providing official aid can be divided between bilateral donors—that is the specialized development agencies of Northern countries, and the multilateral agencies of the United Nations system. In 1997, 70 per cent of public tax-based funds were allocated bilaterally, the remainder through multilateral channels (Randel and German, 1998). By and large, the international financial institutions (IFIs) within this system—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank Group and its sister regional development banks—provide loans for financial stabilization and reform as well as for development investment. United Nations agencies typically employ grant funding. The private aid system (of foundations, charities and NGOs) also works on a grant basis.

The issue is how to get (the advantages of) these resources to beneficiaries in ways that are both effective and sustainable. The common answer is to use intermediaries who should own and be committed to the assistance they ask for and obtain. The natural intermediaries for official aid agencies are the member governments of these institutions and their civil service structures. The natural intermediaries for private donors and the general public are international and domestic NGOs (INGOs and DNGOs). Both channels typically end up interfacing with people who are poor or marginalized through local organizations set up by them. Together with intended beneficiaries, private aid agencies as funders and intermediaries comprise the civic element in international development.

In the past 10 years, as a matter of policy, most official donors have included and expanded the “civic channel” as intermediaries for, and direct targets of, their assistance. As shown in Figure 1, his support can flow directly (line A), as designated NGO allocations or as contracts; or indirectly (line B) via the recipient government as a subvention or a contract. Current estimates suggest that, of the \$13-15 billion that NGOs are thought to disburse annually, just

<sup>7</sup> The terms North, South and East will be used as a shorthand, respectively, for donor countries, countries typically receiving aid since the 1960s; and former countries of the Soviet Union that have been recipients of aid since the late 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> Aid also serves other purposes as an instrument of foreign policy and trade relations.

<sup>9</sup> All references to dollars are to US dollars.

over half comes from taxes and official aid (see footnote 28).<sup>10</sup> This is up from less than 30 per cent 10 years ago. This suggests that some 13 per cent of ODA is channelled to and through NGDOs. In short, a simplified interpretation of the aid system indicates that it is basically made up of a twin chain of institutions through which resources flow, with increasing interaction between and dependency of the private chain on public sources.<sup>11</sup>

But whom, within civil society, is the aid system approaching? Put another way, how is civil society understood and approached by aid agencies, and with what aims in mind? The following subsections address these questions.

### **Being careful with the concept: One Western size does not fit all**

The aid system has tended to adopt a formal, uniform and ahistorical view of civil society in relation to international development. This has led to an array of criticisms of the perspectives and assumptions underlying the aid system's embrace of civil society and particularly its expectations of NGDOs—i.e. what they are, the roles they can play and what they can achieve.

First, the developmental framework adopted for civil society is exclusive rather than inclusive. It tends to equate “civic-ness” with formal organizations. This ignores social configurations and how citizens interface with each other and with the state. This overly formal perspective also misrepresents how the poor associate in order to cope and survive (Edwards, 1999c) informally through intricate trust-based webs of familial and other networks (Hann and Dunn, 1996). In such systems—which can be very formal for those within them—primacy is given to mutual support and reciprocity that builds and maintains social capital.<sup>12</sup>

One reason for *neglect of the informal* is that the Western understanding of civil society is essentially urban, not rural (Mamdani, 1996). Yet, despite rapid urbanization, the majority of the world's poor still live in rural areas where other relational premises and designs apply. From this perspective, it can be argued that the Western experience driving aid thinking and practice is too limited in its time frame and geography. This invites caution when “exporting” or “strengthening” civil society across the world.

Second, the developmental approach to civil society underplays the fact that not all civic groups are “civil” in their behaviour (Holloway, 1997). The Ku Klux Klan, fundamentalists of various persuasions, and pro-and anti-abortion groups do not necessarily operate according to norms that reject violence and other “uncivilized” behaviour. Only a thin red line separates “uncivilized” behaviour from legitimate civil resistance, demonstrations and “constructive” confrontation. Forceful expression is a legitimate part of the repertoire of public action open to citizens. Recent examples have been demonstrations at

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<sup>10</sup> This figure includes funds for humanitarian aid and emergency assistance. The proportion of NGDO disbursements coming from the business community or from NGDOs' own economic activity is minimal (in the order of 1 per cent) but is growing rapidly.

<sup>11</sup> For simplicity, other linkages in the chain, such as advocacy, are not included.

<sup>12</sup> The notion of social capital tries to understand and capture the importance of this informal relational realm, and its underlying values, for the development of economies and societies (Woolcock, 1997).

the World Trade Organization and protest by Iranian students in favour of greater democracy. Tiananmen Square is “celebrating” its tenth anniversary. In other words, civil society is a source of and an arena for violence and constructive social contention as well as co-operation.

Third, it is incorrect to assume that forces that create poverty, exclusion and injustice exist only in governments, public policies and market institutions. They lie within civil society as well. In other words, civil society encompasses contending power relations and group interests that can both advance and impede poverty reduction, equity, inclusion, justice and other social development objectives. Civil society is essentially political in its meaning. The civic arena contains roots of power differences that are used to perpetuate poverty and exclusion. This reality must be factored into development initiatives.

In sum, as a new development concept and potential “instrument” or “partner”, civil society requires deep understanding of civil societies *in their own terms*. One (Western) size does not fit all. Moreover, engaging with this sector demands new approaches from development institutions whose practices are premised on resource transfer within the framework of governments. *In other words, working with civil society requires new rules of the aid game and methods to match*. In addition, the onus is on the aid system to prove its honest commitment and worth, adapting to civil society, not the other way round.

### **What will civil society do for international development?**

What does the international development community expect from a closer relationship with civil society? What can this institutional “sector” do to advance the social development objectives and commitments negotiated at Copenhagen and in other international conventions and covenants? A recent comparative study identified a variety of “developmental” expectations about civil society (van Rooy, 1998). These contributions are:

- To improve development by, *inter alia*:
  - directly delivering services to the poorest;
  - building social capital;
  - promoting equity, through activism for a fairer share of national wealth and the benefits of growth; and
  - replacing state aid.
- To foster democracy through:
  - establishing civic functions, such as checks and balances on state behaviour; blocking capture by interest groups; generating a stake in the social order; fostering political participation; acting as a source of political leadership; resisting authoritarianism;
  - containing a source of countervailing power, acting as an antidote to state expansion;
  - originating and nurturing democratic institutions;
  - fostering a culture of democracy and “civility”.



- Other functions include:
  - supporting “friends” in the post-Cold War era; and
  - promoting the free market or the “civil private sector”.

Obviously, in pursuit of social development goals, some of these functions are more relevant than others and some may be mutually contradictory. Nevertheless, the issue is whom can the aid system engage with? Which civic actors are best able to deliver these types of development contribution?

### ***Differentiating NGDOs (within civil society and between NGDOs)***

It is commonly assumed that NGDOs are a category solidly located within civil society. This conventional wisdom requires examination, beginning with a brief review of factors responsible for NGDO heterogeneity within and between countries and continents.

#### **The complex nature of NGDOs**

Since the early 1980s, one of the most visible actors in poverty reduction, outside of governments, has been NGDOs. Their origins are as varied as their organizational goals and behaviours. This paper will not detail their variety, as a range of publications already do so.<sup>13</sup> These show that NGDOs can best be understood with reference to the timing and socio-political context of their evolution. By way of illustration, and in very broad strokes, the situation on different continents may be described as follows.

NGDOs in Latin America have early origins in alliance with unions, peasant associations, popular movements and their responses to military dictatorship. They were often “protected” by links to the Catholic Church and informed by radical theology. At the same time, military régimes created their own NGDOs to show that they had a “human face”. This intentionally complicated the NGDO landscape. In this era, much NGDO finance came from private sources in the North.<sup>14</sup> Later NGDO evolution has capitalized on the space created by the inauguration of civilian régimes and democratic governance. Their growth was, until recently, further spurred by aid flows designed to “consolidate democracy” and by including NGDOs in development initiatives, such as “social funds” intended to mitigate the social costs of structural adjustment programmes.

The African context differed markedly. Here, de-colonization was a significant factor in NGDO establishment and subsequent profile. A number of what are now referred to as CBOs engaged in the anti-colonial struggle, later forming complex relations with newly independent governments and political structures. They emerged as one visible product of the “winds of change” that made the ethics and politics of colonialism unacceptable. Subsequently, where

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<sup>13</sup> Readings providing an overview of NGDOs are: Clark, 1991; Fisher, 1998; Fowler, 1997; Korten, 1990; Ndegwa, 1996; Smillie, 1995; Theunis, 1992. Country- or continent-specific studies are: Burnell, 1991; Carroll, 1992; Maskay, 1998; Meyer, 1999; Smith, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> It was not uncommon for bilateral aid to use NGDOs as a conduit for their funds. In this way, their finance would not be seen as support to military or left-wing régimes.

the political ideology of new rulers permitted—for example, it did in Kenya but not in Tanzania—other African NGDOs quickly emerged as part of a shared socio-economic agenda known as “nation building”. De-colonization also provided foreign role models for local NGDOs as their Northern counterparts (many from the colonizing country) entered to assist in the process of building newly independent states. In countries that chose a centrally planned approach to development—bolstered by one-party political systems—it was not until the 1980s that indigenous NGDOs began to outnumber those from abroad. In other words, a post-colonial history and the political framework strongly conditioned the profile of the NGDO community and the role(s) it played. Large aid flows and “adjustment” policies, such as retrenchment of civil servants, have accelerated growth within the African NGDO community. However, they have also cast doubt on NGDO values and the real reason for their existence—creation of self-employment or an ethic of social change? In other words, expansion may not have been accompanied by public trust.

Asia offers a more diverse perspective. In India, tradition, indigenous philanthropy and Gandhian teachings created a strong home-grown understanding of voluntary action and NGDOs. In parallel, some countries—for example, the Philippines and Thailand—experienced popular action against civilian dictatorship and military rule that spawned politically oriented NGDO leaders. Countries without party politics or following communist ideologies—People’s Republic of China, Laos, Viet Nam—remain inhospitable ground for the growth of autonomous civic organizations.<sup>15</sup> When such régimes change or open up, as in Nepal, local NGDO growth can be rapid and opportunistic. In contrast, the struggle for Bangladesh’s independence created a context enabling a widespread and substantial growth of indigenous NGDOs with the help of foreign aid. From the outset, some NGDO leaders had an agenda to operate on a scale commensurate with the scale of the problems faced by a new nation. Bangladesh is now home to the largest indigenous NGDOs in the South.

New states emerging from the former Soviet Union exhibit their own history of NGDO evolution. In some, NGDOs have recalled previous expressions of civic organizing. In Hungary, they are welcomed and supported by new governments and society (Kuti, 1998). In others, civic action is circumscribed and politically suspect, as in Turkmenistan, Khazakstan and Kyrgistan. In yet others, NGDOs are still an unknown quantity inviting suspicion of duplicitous agendas, or false fronts for the Mafia.

If one generalization can be made, it is probably that the existence and size of an NGDO community in countries of the South or East *cannot* be equated with public confidence from citizens or governments. Unlike in the West, NGDO growth has not been “organic” in the sense of emerging from indigenous forces and support; foreign relations and interests must be factored in. Externally induced processes can “contaminate” citizens’ perspectives of what NGDOs are and what interests they serve.

The point of the foregoing is to highlight factors that affect NGDOs as agents of social development. First, historical specificity conditions the degree of

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<sup>15</sup> Communist régimes typically produce NGDOs that are nominally autonomous but are in fact closely allied with the state. For example, for China see Young, 1999.

social and political trust enjoyed by NGDOs. Second, as this varies widely, so, too, does the degree of local financial support for NGDOs. Third, NGDOs' commitment and contribution to reaching universal social development goals are far from homogenous. Fourth, NGDOs' activities and approaches to development are manifold.<sup>16</sup>

Because of these factors, it is difficult for governments and the aid system to understand NGDOs and to identify which ones to engage with, much less to have the institutional capacity to work with different NGDOs in different ways. In other words, another rule of the aid game should be to *recognize, respect and positively respond to NGDO diversity*. This is necessary to ensure that interaction with the aid system does not homogenize and standardize NGDOs' outlook, identity and work. Otherwise, there is a grave danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Unfortunately, this is no abstract danger.

### **NGDOs within and above civil society**

Civil society existed before and extends far beyond NGDOs. However, in expanding the social development agenda to include civil society, NGDOs are readily seen as the "tip of a civic iceberg" and the point of entry. This assumption is only partially correct.<sup>17</sup> Some observers argue that many NGDOs have joined the market place as aid contractors and/or government-subsidized public service providers (Smillie et al., 1996; Uphoff, 1995), thus compromising their autonomy and civic roots. A *prima facie* case for such conclusions is the nearly total (about 95 per cent) financial dependence of Southern and Eastern NGDOs on international aid, directly, or on development loans to their governments, indirectly. This reality implies NGDOs being suspended above their economies and societies.<sup>18</sup> Another signal of weak-rootedness in civil society is poor accountability (Edwards and Hulme, 1995). As will be seen in section III, NGDO accountability—especially for the positions they take in international forums and in dialogues with aid agencies—is becoming a source of friction with governments as well as between NGDOs in the North, South and East.

External financial dependency and questionable local accountability are two points differentiating (and detaching) NGDOs from the main body of civil society—entities typically composed of (mass) membership bodies, be they formal or informal. A further separation can be found in the life styles and

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<sup>16</sup> As varied as their origins are the roles that NGDOs play and the way in which they go about what they do. Again, broadly speaking, some act as watchdogs on the effects of government and businesses on social processes. Some seek to rebuild "traditional" social structures oppressed by previous régimes or promote values other than "modern" individual wealth and consumerism. Many promote the self-development of CBOs and their empowerment towards local governments and other social actors. Others, probably the majority by monetary measure, provide social services. Others take on an international focus agitating against an international order they disagree with. Yet others focus on altering public policies in support of particular groups in the population or fix their attention on particular issues, such as child labour, human rights or the environment. These tasks and roles are not mutually exclusive. Multiple objectives can be found within many NGDOs. One commonality may be profession of a concern for the poor and marginalized. However, this broad umbrella hides many differences.

<sup>17</sup> For example, for Colombia see: Richie-Vance, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> It is also the case that a number of Southern governments—many in Africa—can only function anywhere close to a viable nation state because of international aid. Dependency is not just a problem for NGDOs (SIDA, 1996).

reward systems of many NGDOs of the South and East, which do not reflect local economic conditions or financial capabilities (Kuratov and Solyanik, 1995). This obviously creates an issue of credibility and future viability.

A conclusion from the above analysis is that NGDOs cannot simply be taken as reasonable proxy for civil society organizations (CSOs) or civic organizing in countries of the South and East (van Rooy, 1998). This suggests that including civil society in achieving social development goals requires dedicated outreach beyond and not necessarily through NGDOs. This fact has many implications for how the aid system operates.

The foregoing is not to imply that the role and work of NGDOs in social development is not potentially very important or useful—far from it. Many NGDOs have built up substantial and merited reputations. They have accumulated a wealth of experience and insight that can accelerate the realization of social development goals. The point is that working with NGDOs is not equal to a stated objective of working with civil society. With this perspective in mind, we turn to what NGDOs actually achieve.

## **II. Stocktaking: What Do NGDOs Achieve in Social Development?**

For more than 50 years, NGDOs have been involved in a vast array of initiatives that would fall under today's understanding(s) of social development (Alkire, 1997; World Bank, 1996a).<sup>19</sup> The first questions posed and tentatively answered in this section are what is there to show for all these activities? What have NGDOs achieved?<sup>20</sup> The overall answers fall short of some expectations. Another question asked and answered is why NGDOs are constrained as effective agents of social development. In this study answers to these questions emerge from comparisons of what NGDOs are expected to do by those supporting them against evidence of NGDO performance and impact. Evidence of the latter, is, however, drawn from an uneven and unconnected range of studies.

### ***Expectations of NGDOs in social development***

Intentions expressed at Copenhagen (see footnote 1) and publications from the official aid system indicate the range of development tasks NGDOs are expected to take on.<sup>21</sup> Their mix of tasks can also be deduced from publications about NGDOs' actual development roles and behaviour.<sup>22</sup> Together, they permit a summary of what NGDOs are expected to contribute to (social) development, listed in Box 1. As can be seen, the expectations are broad and

<sup>19</sup> Paul Francis of the World Bank argues that there is no single social development paradigm (Francis, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> This section draws extensively on Fowler, 1997 and 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Selected references: ADAB, 1995; African Development Bank, 1989; Asian Development Bank, 1996; SIDA, 1998; UNDP, 1995; USAID, 1997; World Bank, 1998b.

<sup>22</sup> Selected references are listed in footnote 13 and Craig and Mayo, 1995; Gibbs et al., 1999; ODI, 1988; OECD, 1988.

complex. The roles NGDOs are expected to play run the spectrum from state substitute to activist for structural social change. As service providers, they are expected to reach those the market and state cannot. Political tasks include pushing for policy reforms, exacting civic compliance on government and business behaviour and fostering “good governance”.

### **Box 1: Expectations of NGDOs**

*NGDOs will cost effectively help expand access to, and effectively deliver, tangible services (such as education, health care and credit) that reduce unemployment and levels of poverty among the most vulnerable of the world’s population—particularly women, children and indigenous peoples.*

*NGDOs will have a positive influence within (civil) society. For example, they will foster social integration and contribute directly and indirectly to the pre-conditions needed for democratic governance, such as civic awareness, inclusiveness in political processes, stronger demands for accountability and active defence of people’s dignity and rights.*

*NGDOs will engender people-centred social development processes, build local capacity and the “ownership” of benefits that will be sustained without external finance. They will themselves reach a stage where foreign aid is no longer required for their functioning.*

*NGDOs will gain leverage on national and international policies that condition progress towards social development goals.*

*NGDOs will act as watchdogs of the public good and safeguard the interests of disadvantaged sections of society.*

*NGDO interaction with funders will have a positive influence on the quality of aid practices employed by governments and bilateral and multilateral agencies.*

*NGDOs will exhibit integrity and provide unambiguous, verifiable accounts of the resources they employ.*

*NGDOs will maintain voters’ motivation to support tax allocations for aid.*

NGDOs are expected to intervene at any level, from local to global. In addition, it is assumed that they will increase or multiply their impact in a variety of ways—by expanding their outreach; demonstrating viable alternatives that can be taken up by governments and aid agencies; diffusion, where their work is spontaneously adopted; and influencing policy frameworks, which then have widespread effects (Edwards and Hulme, 1992).

By and large, when added together in all their locations and variety, NGDOs do indeed span the whole range of development action expected of them. However, their *direct outreach* remains modest (see below). Their indirect impact on poverty, through policy reform, government adoption of their methods, and spontaneous diffusion, is impossible to judge in quantitative terms. Reasonably certain is that they do not and cannot be expected to impact development/poverty alleviation on a scale with governments and official aid

programmes. Such an expectation would be unfair, unreasonable and immodest (Drabek, 1992). The question is how well do they do what they do?

### **Setting expectations against achievements**

Assessing NGDO achievements and impact is difficult. Systematic assessments do not exist—consequently, conclusions on a global scale can only be tentative and are inevitably open to dispute—contrary examples are always available. Nevertheless, drawing on scattered existing evidence, this subsection attempts such a review.

First, the nature and quality of available information is examined. This is followed by a comparison of NGDO performance in social development set against expectations summarized in Box 1. The concluding subsection summarizes the principal factors limiting the effectiveness of NGDOs.

### **Availability of studies on NGDO achievements**

The early 1990s saw unco-ordinated efforts to assess the degree to which, and under what conditions, Northern NGDOs—and by association their Southern and Eastern counterparts—fulfil the expectations listed above.<sup>23</sup> Eleven such “impact studies”, evaluations and assessments were made of NGDOs receiving bilateral aid from the major official donors.<sup>24</sup> USAID applies a sectoral approach, and hence does not create a broad or composite picture of the effectiveness of its aid to and through NGDOs—targeted to be 40 per cent of its total aid disbursement. There are no similar overall assessments from United Nations agencies. The most recent official studies of NGDOs come from Finnida (Hossain and Myllylä, 1998)<sup>25</sup> and the World Bank, that of the latter concerning the Bank’s loan portfolio (Gibbs et al., 1999).<sup>26</sup> In as far as they exist, overall (self-)assessments of major Northern NGDOs—e.g. the child-sponsoring NGDOs, such as World Vision, PLAN International, the Christian Children’s Fund, ACTIONAID and the Save the Children Federation, are not publicly available.<sup>27</sup> Yet, together, these few agencies raise a significant

<sup>23</sup> Though not exhaustive, the following constitute major studies about methods and results of studies on NGDO performance or summary comparisons of them. In terms of direct (project) impact: ADAB, 1995; Danida, 1994; Duran, 1999; Fowler, 1995; Fowler and Biekart, 1996; Gibbs et al., 1999; GOM, 1991; Hossain and Myllylä, 1998; Howes, 1992; Maren, 1997; ODI, 1996; OECD, 1992; Riddell, Bebbington and Peck, 1994; Riddell and Robinson, 1995; Tvedt, 1995; UNDP, 1993; van Dijk, 1994. In terms of indirect (policy) impact: Chapman and Fisher, 1999; Fisher, 1993; 1998; Fox and Brown, 1998; Madrinan, 1995; Sibanda, 1994; Sogge, 1996; Tercer Mundo, 1997; Thomas, 1994; van Rooy, 1997; World Vision (UK), 1997a; 1997b.

<sup>24</sup> As part of its funding agreement with four Dutch co-financing NGDOs, the government requires periodic, independent evaluation of their programmes.

<sup>25</sup> This study spans a number of countries and themes, such as NGDOs and local government, or a sector, such as NGDOs and disability, or a specific activity, such as garbage collection in Cairo. The combination appears to be random.

<sup>26</sup> While adopting a different vantagepoint—contribution to loan performance—this investigation does not suggest significant revisions to major findings of studies undertaken earlier in the decade. One reason could be that the quality of World Bank funds is itself a constraint that may negate performance improvements NGDOs have made during the decade. In other words, the comparative quality of grant aid versus concessional loans must be taken into account.

<sup>27</sup> It could be argued that ongoing performance assessment is provided by the sponsorship mechanism. Dissatisfied sponsors may not have formal control over these NGDOs, but their chequebooks do.

proportion of private contributions.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), which is among the largest of the Southern NGDOs, publishes evaluations of its own rural development programmes (BRAC, 1996).<sup>29</sup>

### Problems of method

Studies of NGDO impact also suffer from methodological dilemmas, difficulties and biases (Coudere, 1994; Fowler, 1995; Kruse et al., 1997; Oakley et al., 1998; Riddell, 1990). For example, studies have concentrated on “projects” to the exclusion of the characteristics and competencies of the organizations concerned. The selection of projects for investigation has shown a slant towards the more positive examples. Given the difficulty of directly attributing social and other changes to NGDO activities, it is not surprising that few studies contained baselines against which change could be assessed. As a result, performance has been narrowly equated with producing the envisaged “outputs”—e.g. schools and wells built, children inoculated, contraceptive adoption rates.

Impact studies have seldom included the effects of pre-conditions stemming from official financing. In addition, studies also suffer from degrees of “politicization” in design or subsequent use because of the institutional interests involved in maintaining NGDO allocations within the aid system. This influence is not the case with studies undertaken by independent observers such as Fisher (1993, 1998), Smillie (1995) and Sogge (1996).

Overall, caution must be exercised in reaching firm conclusions about NGDO achievements because of:

- the preponderance of success stories in the sample;
- the limited universe of NGDOs involved;
- the restricted array of social development interventions being considered (there is relatively little study on social policy impact);
- the complex interests that have guided formulation of the terms of reference and interpretation of findings for public consumption.

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<sup>28</sup> It is notoriously hard to get firm figures on official aid to NGDOs and on their other incomes. For example, donors monetarize their food aid contributions, but not all NGDOs do—which is one source of discrepancy. An estimate from recent data suggests that about \$6 billion (including emergency funding) is channelled to and through NGDOs (OECD, forthcoming). However, these figures do not necessarily include aid as loans to governments that NGDOs then access and disburse in the country. For example, a figure of \$1.3 billion for NGDOs/CBOs over 13 fiscal years (1985-1997) is quoted for projects included in a World Bank study of NGDO/CBO involvement (Gibbs et al., 1999:9). Given current Bank policies on participation, it can be assumed that the proportion of projects with NGDO involvement is increasing, as is the level of finance to them. Funds raised by NGDOs from private sources are also increasing. The 1999 OECD Development Co-operation Report (OECD, 1999) estimates NGDO private income sources in 1996 as \$4.428 billion. Allowing for differences in years and the effects of in-country funding, an estimate of total NGDO revenues today stands at some \$12 billion or more.

<sup>29</sup> Assessments of NGDO performance are more often available for Southern NGDOs than for their Northern counterparts.

### Expectations set against performance

With the preceding caveats, what findings do existing studies offer? Compared to the expectations of NGOs in social development set out in Box 1, data on development impact, not project outputs, suggest a situation summarized in Box 2. The picture is of uneven but generally modest performance, particularly in relation to sustained benefits, participation, social inclusion and empowerment, and in the democratic behaviour of NGOs. A more positive picture emerges in terms of NGO influence on development policy.

NGOs score reasonably highly when it comes to delivering project “outputs”, although not necessarily with the poorest (Robinson, 1992:31). A more recent review reaches a similar conclusion:

... The studies concluded that the vast majority of [NGO] projects assessed do succeed in achieving their narrower and immediate objectives ... Not surprisingly, when judged against broader criteria, projects scored less well (ODI, 1996:1-2).<sup>30</sup>

What outreach do NGOs have? Despite the recent rapid growth of NGOs, the number of poor continues to grow. Nor is there credible evidence that NGOs directly reach a larger or smaller proportion of poor than was estimated in 1993, about 15-20 per cent.<sup>31</sup> Today, a reasonable “guesstimate” is that NGOs’ development work directly “touches” some 450-600 million people.<sup>32</sup> But touching people says nothing about overall NGO impact on their lives. Evidence suggests that when project outputs are set against broader criteria of *sustained change* in indicators of human well-being, capacity growth, empowerment, etc., NGO performance is very uneven but generally much poorer.

<sup>30</sup> Wider criteria include poverty reach, participation, gender, environment, replicability, flexibility and innovation, pre-project appraisal, evaluation and monitoring, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness.

<sup>31</sup> Reliable aggregate data on those “touched” by NGOs do not exist. Using country cases and extrapolating from previous estimates, a 1993 estimate (UNDP, 1993:93) was an outreach to 250 million people, at that time about 20 per cent of the world’s poor. The number of NGOs has increased rapidly since then and others have expanded (Salamon, 1994). However, since 1993, population growth, the Asian crisis and widening wealth gaps have co-contributed to the number of the world’s poor. Depending on the measures used (\$1 or \$2 per day), the “poor” are between 1.3 and 3 billion individuals. A direct NGO outreach to some 15-20 per cent of people who are poor (as opposed to poorest) is still probably a fair “guesstimate”—i.e. some 450-600 million people across the globe.

<sup>32</sup> If humanitarian response for refugees and internally displaced people is included, using country by country data on United Nations assistance, the numbers would increase by some 31 million people (IFRCRCS, 1997:127-134).



**Box 2: Expectations of NGDOs compared to achievements<sup>33</sup>**

Expectation	Status
<i>Tangible impact on reducing poverty</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Some, but by no means the majority of, NGDO projects have a positive, enduring influence on narrow aspects (sectors) of human well-being. Holistic change is the exception not the rule.</i></li> <li>• <i>The scale of direct NGDO outreach, mainly in service provision, is probably stable, reaching about 15-20 per cent of the world's poor. However, this does not necessarily mean the poorest and most vulnerable—targeting remains a problem.</i></li> <li>• <i>NGDO substitution for reduction in state services is on the increase, but most cannot be maintained without aid.</i></li> <li>• <i>Gender sensitivity of NGDOs is over-estimated.</i></li> <li>• <i>Overall, there is scant firm evidence to support high expectations about NGDO impact on sustained poverty reduction, as opposed to evidence about their efforts and project outputs.</i></li> </ul>
<i>Civic impact</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Impact studies have not taken an explicitly “civic” perspective, although much of what NGDOs have been doing could be recast in this framework. Available sources suggest that this is not yet an area of substantial achievement. Specifically, NGDO-supported groups tend to remain isolated from each other and from other civic formations. Mobilization or aggregations of local organizations into substantive civic actors has been poor.</i></li> <li>• <i>It is difficult to find examples of substantial NGDO influence on social integration, or on political inclusiveness at national level.</i></li> <li>• <i>There is growing success in fostering inclusion and civic influence on local government.</i></li> </ul>
<i>Sustainability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>NGDO development interventions too seldom lead to sustained change after completion.</i></li> <li>• <i>Ongoing provision of development services is aid-dependent, with little sign of economic “rooting”. However, NGDOs in a few countries in Latin America, and South and East Asia are showing positive signs of local economic embedding.</i></li> <li>• <i>A consistent estimate is that 90-95 per cent of Southern and Eastern NGDOs would disappear without international aid.</i></li> <li>• <i>Levels of Northern NGDOs’ dependency on official aid are uneven, but the average is edging above 50 per cent.</i></li> <li>• <i>Significant efforts to diversify and localize the resource base, especially in the South and East, are showing modest, incremental success.</i></li> <li>• <i>A substantial fee for service income is not (yet) a viable option.</i></li> <li>• <i>There is a trend for NGDOs to initiate credit programmes as a strategy for their own sustainability.</i></li> </ul>

<sup>33</sup> The findings have been obtained by a systematic examination of publicly available NGDO evaluations and impact studies (footnote 23). They are further informed by the “grey” literature of internal NGDO studies and assessments that this author has had access to in his professional work.

<p><i>Policy leverage</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Primarily because of more inclusive aid policies and growth in NGDO capacity—as opposed to widespread civic mobilization—they are increasingly recognized as policy actors in many areas of social development, nationally and internationally.</i></li> <li>• <i>Concern is being raised about NGDO legitimacy and accountability as policy actors—creating a “backlash” from governments in the South and East.</i></li> <li>• <i>There is also disquiet about NGDOs using multilateral bodies to gain leverage on their own governments. This can undermine local political processes, erode sovereignty and weaken (local) governments’ ownership of initiatives.</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Acting as watchdogs</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Success in policy influence is tempered by cautionary experience of NGDO ability to exact national compliance with international agreements and conventions.</i></li> <li>• <i>NGDOs with a human rights agenda are becoming numerous.</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Influence on the official aid system</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Though uneven across governments, donor agencies and topics, there are signs of positive learning from NGDO experience.</i></li> <li>• <i>NGDOs demonstrate significant and increasing influence in policy reform of aid agencies.</i></li> <li>• <i>Improving government and donor effectiveness in social development has shifted from learning about what is best practice to actually implementing the organizational changes needed to put such knowledge into practice. Here there is some (decentralized) progress.</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Integrity and values</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Endemic corruption attributed to governments is not a common feature of NGDOs, but instances of malfeasance do occur.</i></li> <li>• <i>NGDO growth is supply led and entrepreneurial, the more so where civil servants are being made redundant.</i></li> <li>• <i>Voluntary values are giving way to a contract culture, incentives and organizational behaviour.</i></li> <li>• <i>The purpose and morality of many newly established NGDOs in the South and, especially, the East is raising concern.</i></li> </ul>
<p><i>Public support for aid</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>There is no correlation between aid levels (as a percentage of GDP) and public support for development assistance in donor countries.<sup>34</sup></i></li> <li>• <i>National aid allocations fluctuate irrespective of levels of development education and public understanding and motivation.</i></li> </ul>

Delivery of technical, social and, increasingly, micro-financial services (Otero and Rhyne, 1994; Wood and Sharif, 1997) still forms the primary weight of NGDO activity. This is a logical outcome of the intentions of most of their funding, be it from official aid, governments in the South and East or the general public. There is scant evidence to suggest that *the bulk* of NGDOs have substantially shifted their operations towards redressing the structural or root causes of poverty and insecurity. This would focus their efforts on issues such

<sup>34</sup> Public awareness of aid issues through development education is not the same as public judgement that prioritizes aid over domestic needs (Yankelovich, 1996).

as land tenure, exploitative internal terms of trade for primary producers, conflict prevention, the legal status of women, corrupting relations between the political and business élite, lack of judicial capacity or independence, culturally embedded practices of oppression and exclusion, and unfair and detrimental international trade and patenting practices, etc.

However, from a weak base, progress is being made in the “public pressure” and civic dimensions of NGDO activity. Various observers are documenting where and how NGDOs are entering and influencing policy dialogue internationally. Less visible, but on the increase, is the impact of NGDOs at the interface of people and local governments, related to decentralization (discussed below). NGDO impact on national policies is, however, more contentious and tends to be more successful when “pushing at an open door”. For example, such influence is more likely in technical areas, such as better ways of promoting environmental protection or increasing agricultural productivity (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993).

Some observers ask whether NGDO attention to advocacy and influencing policy is actually being undermined by increasing dependence on official aid—a case of creeping self-censorship (Edwards, 1993). While there are no firm data, a division can be discerned: NGDOs receiving substantial levels of official aid are, indeed, less interested or assertive advocates than those whose sources are private. For example, recipients of funds from private foundations are more likely to be dedicated to or specialized in advocacy work than those relying on ODA. However, the picture is complicated by official aid for rights-oriented NGDOs that are financed to promote good governance (van Rooy, 1998; van Tuijl, 1999). But their numbers and the amount of money they receive remain small compared to the total NGDO community.

Sustainability (of impact) is both a complex concept and a difficult goal for NGDOs to achieve. Studies do not suggest that NGDOs are doing very well in this area. Moreover, there is little evidence that their impact is better or worse than that of bilateral aid programmes, which are estimated to be sustained in about 15 per cent of cases (Cox and Healey, 1998). The picture of NGDO self-sustainability is bleak outside of continued international assistance. Despite much rhetorical but incommensurate effort on the part of funders, proven strategies and cases of self-financing or mobilizing local financial support are in their infancy. They are nowhere on a scale of the foreign transfers that NGDOs rely on.

Progress has been made in systematically gathering the information needed to fulfil a watchdog role (Tercer Mundo, 1997). However, using this information to exact compliance with agreements and covenants signed by governments appears to be problematic. Régime ideology and state-society relations are more important factors conditioning achievement.

As part of complex coalitions, NGDOs are registering success in reforming aid policies, but less so aid practices. While the value of learning about good practices generated by NGDOs is increasingly recognized by the official aid agencies, implementing the institutional reforms required to “mainstream” such lessons remains difficult. In other words, NGDOs may just be widening the gap between rhetoric and reality. Rhetorical change then acts as a placebo and

tactic of co-optation by the powerful. This is one reason why it is vitally important that grassroots organizations be part of reform coalitions. Without grassroots accountability, the scope for official co-optation is enhanced. Without them, NGOs' accountability, credibility and legitimacy of agenda are often questioned and their effectiveness is diminished.

Observers are registering the fact that a rapid expansion of NGOs has been at the cost of some of their qualities: integrity, voluntarism, flexibility, risk taking, overall professionalism, etc. Public trust is not matching an increase in NGOs or their efforts. In addition, political régimes are concerned that NGOs are not socially legitimate. They suspect that some NGOs provide a shelter for political opponents. This often generates unwarranted suspicion about *all* NGOs.

Finally, in terms of private funding, public support for NGOs appears to be at a plateau. Diversification towards "partnership" with business is being actively explored, but with some caution, because this strategy contains dilemmas in terms of values and practices.

Overall, the NGO contribution to social change, in its many aspects, is certainly there to be seen. However, it is not as substantial as some might imagine. Nor is it as good qualitatively as NGOs themselves would like. Nor is their motivation or behaviour uncontested. They remain substantially aid-dependent and vulnerable. Improving on these and other shortcomings is already high on the NGO agenda. However, NGOs alone may not be able to do very much to increase their effectiveness. As the subsequent sections detail, substantial improvement will require complementary action by others.

### **Common constraints on NGO performance**

From the studies reviewed, NGO performance appears to be limited by:

- macro-environmental constraints, including government suspicion, economic mismanagement and poor governance;
- the growing dominance of donor funding that, by nature, works against employing best or appropriate practices;<sup>35</sup>
- too rapid NGO expansion due to accelerated availability of official aid; compounded by
- under- and poor investment in NGO capacity growth.

The following section analyses these constraints in greater detail. Before doing so, it is necessary to identify major parameters affecting NGOs as agents of social development.

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<sup>35</sup> For example, a study of European Union support to NGOs in South Africa concluded that new indigenous initiatives to generate finance for local NGOs were "highly significant, because the quality of donors' support and grant-making in general has been most inadequate" (Boule et al., 1993).

### III. Enhancing NGDOs as Agents of Social Development

A global perspective suggests that there are a number of “big” factors conditioning NGDO behaviour and effectiveness. These factors constitute a macro framework in which the four constraints noted above have to be placed. Together, the interplay between framework factors and typical constraints produces country-specific conditions that impact on NGDOs in different ways. This section starts by summarizing the factors involved. It continues with a review of the most fundamental attribute of the NGDO as an effective agent of social change—its ability to interact with, and change, other actors and institutions. The analysis suggests why NGDOs relations are often problematic. These explanations form the foundation for subsequent recommendations, in section IV, on the institutional reforms needed if NGDOs, and civil society organizations more generally, are to increase their contribution to social development goals.

#### **Conditioning factors and the contexts of NGDO action**

NGDO evolution and activity are currently, and commonly, conditioned by seven factors. These are:

- The nature of state-society relations, particularly the degree of legitimacy enjoyed by the régime in power, its political ideology and *tolerance* of autonomous civic action—the “T” factor. Does the government embrace and encourage or restrain, limit and control citizen action (high versus low T)?
- The historical trajectory, character, contemporary configuration, contention, density, strength and functions of *civic life*—the “C” factor. Is the civic arena, stable and collaborative or unstable and conflictive (robust versus fragile C)? For example, civic association may be highly informal, culturally ascribed, a key element in survival and not state-centric or “free”, strongly formalized, of little consequence to survival and understood in terms of the rights of citizenship of a nation-state (informal versus formal C).
- The *profile of poverty and exclusion* in a country or local area —the “P” factor. Who is affected, what are the root causes? Are poverty and vulnerability widespread and diffuse or tightly associated with particular groups and/or geographic locations (wide or narrow P)? Alternatively, are the poor directly vulnerable to or distanced from (external) economic shocks (dependent versus independent P)?
- *Governance* reform, typically democratization, through the introduction or “release” of multiparty systems from single-party control—the “G” factor. This also includes reform of local governance structures, giving them more authority and a stronger basis for inclusiveness, such as setting a minimum proportion of seats for women, indigenous people, etc. Is governance centrally controlled (tight G) or highly devolved and open (loose G)?
- *Reform* or “right-sizing” the state, frequently leading to reduction in and “privatization” of public services and shift of public roles and responsibilities to citizens and non-state institutions—the “R”

factor. Is government reform trying to shed or spread its social responsibilities (high R) or is it committed to universal access through public services (low R)?

- *Decentralization* of public administration including deconcentration of skills or delegation of authority to lower levels of state bureaucracy—the “D” factor.
- The political economy of *aid* accompanied by funding quality and shifts towards, *inter alia*, less money, policy-based programme finance, performance-related allocations and “partnership” between state, business and civil society—the “A” factor.

Each country generates its own combination of conditioning factors. They are neither static nor necessarily independent of each other. Together they create the unique ecological setting in which NGOs must establish, evolve and operate to redress poverty. For example, the post-Marcos Philippines is well known for its large, active and free civil society (strong C); and for its plural, tolerant, democratic and decentralizing system of governance (strong T, G and D factors). It is also known for high-income inequality, exacerbated by privatization and opening up to international markets (a strong R factor, coupled with a wide and dependent P factor). Finally, it is facing a donor community stressing trade and policy reform not aid (declining A factor).

An alternative example is Ethiopia. A deep history of imperial feudalism and orthodox Christian culture, a 17-year dictatorial communist régime and only seven years of “independence from itself”—after 30 years of civil war—ensured little tolerance, space or time for the emergence of a vibrant, overt and strong civic life (weak C factor). In addition, present ideology still mistrusts the “non-state” in general and NGOs in particular (low T factor). For example, the notion that NGOs have a legitimate voice in the policy arena has yet to be accepted. Despite serious government commitment, poverty is deep, widespread and structural, as indicated by enduring food deficits (a high P factor). The country is at the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI). The economy is still highly centralized and statist and there is caution about opening up to international competition (a weak R factor). Foreign direct investment is negligible and the currency is controlled. In contrast, on the political front the régime is serious about changing the nature of governance and administration. Unusual for Africa, the Constitution gives territorial recognition and right of succession to subnational ethnic groups and peoples (improving G and D factors). Finally, aid plays a significant role in public investment and development. If it were not for the border conflict with Eritrea, Ethiopia would probably start to enjoy substantial assistance and donor confidence (a high A factor).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an overview or classification of the diverse socio-political configurations these variables give rise to. What it does imply is the need to “map” the way such factors interact in a particular country. Only then, can potential points of entry and effective approaches to civil society be determined.

Nevertheless, the foregoing implies that:

... there is no such thing as a universally appropriate strategy among NGOs across different contexts. Equally, some responses are more effective than others in the same or similar contexts ... NGOs can still increase the opportunities for effective work—and improve the context in the process—by using the right strategies in the right combinations (Edwards, 1999b:371).

To understand their effectiveness in different settings, the competencies of NGDOs themselves must be taken into account. In other words, an NGDO's effectiveness is a function of the match between its competencies and the conditioning factors it confronts in its local and wider environments. Further, while NGDO capabilities must be appropriate to the conditions in which they operate, these must not be passive or unquestioning: NGDOs are shaped by and must also shape their environments. Through advocacy, NGDOs seek to mould the environments in which they work as much as tailor what they do to their context. It is a dynamic interplay that unfolds over time. This behaviour is, itself, a competence.

What important abilities must NGDOs possess if they are to be effective agents of social development? Some are internal: having a clear sense of identity and direction without allowing too much distraction; being skilled in selecting and applying a development approach and methods appropriate to specific circumstances and goals; being able to balance contending demands and expectations from different stakeholders (Fowler, 1997). But, most importantly, all NGDOs must relate properly to the outside world. Developing effective relations with actors in the external environment is a fundamental competence. Four sets of NGDO relationships stand out: first, with people who are poor or excluded; second, between NGDOs, especially North-South and North-East, as well as with other civic actors; third, with governmental bodies of various types at different political-administrative levels; fourth, with funders, be they official or private, which for domestic NGDOs often means their international counterparts. The following sections look at experience with each of these.

### ***NGDO relations with communities***

NGDO relationships with communities are conventionally understood in terms of “people’s participation”. A substantial body of experience has been accumulated on participation as means and end, state and process, as a technology, when applied to monitoring and evaluation, etc.<sup>36</sup> In common with NGDOs, communities are not a homogenous category and they are located in a diverse social universe. Consequently, participation is not straightforward nor can its application be uniform or standardized. Getting it right requires a highly “client-centred” approach and competencies. At best, we can try to identify generic features that inform participation as a human-centred process that NGDOs need to master.

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<sup>36</sup> Key readings are: Aycrigg, 1998; Donnelly-Roark, 1995; Fowler, forthcoming; Oakley, 1991; Rietbergen-McCraken, 1996; UNDP, 1998; Vivian and Maseko, 1994; White, 1996; World Bank, 1996b. For participatory evaluation, see: Guijt and Gaventa, 1998; Marsden et al., 1994.

The key to successful participation in externally supported interventions is employing development approaches and methods that *establish commitment and ownership* of change within the community, group or individual concerned.<sup>37</sup> Without this, sustainability of the benefits and of structural change would be at risk. Lack of sustainability is a common finding of impact studies, implying that, despite substantial effort, NGDOs are too seldom able to embed the effects of their support. Why is this?

A number of reasons can be put forward. First, NGDOs have not mastered withdrawal once an intervention starts. The attention given to participation at entry, for example using joint planning techniques, participatory appraisals and the like, seldom includes negotiating conditions, strategies and methods for “incremental disengagement” (Howes, 1997). By and large, interventions stop when the (project) funds run out or the predetermined duration is reached, irrespective of the state of play and degree of embeddedness of change processes.

Compounding this problem is a natural desire of vulnerable people to have the NGDO stay around for as long as possible. There are always new problems and needs to address. For an NGDO, letting go means starting afresh somewhere else, putting together new funding proposals and accruing institutional investment costs that are seldom covered by typical project finance (an aid or A factor). Consequently, the notion of withdrawal creates anxiety for NGDOs and for poor people that postpones sustainability-oriented behaviour until it is too late. The result is a satisfying “mutual dependency”. When separation occurs, outputs are left, continued benefits to the human condition are not.

Second, government agents and politicians may not look kindly on NGDOs withdrawing themselves and their resources from their jurisdictions. This is likely to be the case where the trust, or T factor, is high, and the reform or R factor is increasing—e.g. India and the Philippines and countries of East Africa (Semboja and Therkildsen, 1995). This combination of factors creates additional pressure to remain as service providers. In addition, it potentially reinforces patronage politics (Eade, 1997), while abetting the state’s shedding of previous social responsibilities. Correspondingly, a subtle change can occur in popular perceptions of NGDO identity, where they become incrementally viewed as extensions of the bureaucracy or of political interests.

Third, NGDOs are frequently trapped in a “sustainability-accountability paradox”. On the one hand, sustainability requires progressive integration of the products and effects of interventions into the ongoing processes of economic, social, political and cultural life that surround them. Only by creating the necessary linkages—horizontally and vertically—will the effects of temporary external resources be locally supported and carried forward—in more assets, in new behaviours, in knowledge, in altered patterns of relationships. On the other hand, to demonstrate and be accountable for performance, the effects of NGDO interventions must be visible and

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<sup>37</sup> Readings on NGDO development approaches can be found in: Burkey, 1993; Carroll, 1992; Craig and Mayo, 1995; Drabek, 1987; Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Holloway, 1988; Maskay, 1998; Porter et al., 1991; Smillie, 1995; Sogge, 1996; Tandon, 1995.



attributable. In attempting to make this possible—to satisfy donors—NGDOs often deliberately or unconsciously “ring-fence” projects to show differences resulting from specific inputs. Where this phenomenon occurs—irrespective of the “integration” that project documents call for—it acts as a constraint to linking, embedding and sustainability. This problem is directly associated with the aid or A factor.

Fourth, as recently argued, participation has passed from being a peripheral event, through mainstream development practice and into a formulaic tyranny.<sup>38</sup> In making participation a statutory requirement within narrowly understood parameters and methods, such as participatory and rapid rural appraisal and its logically framed variants (Forster, 1996), the aid system is throwing the baby out with the bath water. Participation becomes a symbolic act required for bolstering (competitive) proposals, not a core feature of a process of engagement.

Fifth, NGDOs ability to enhance organizational capacities in the community is not as widespread as it could and should be. One reason is a low T factor, or lack of state acceptance of autonomous institutional forms. Examples are to be found in China, Ethiopia, the Sudan and Viet Nam. This stance works against NGDOs helping communities to express themselves organizationally as they want, as opposed to what the government expects or requires. Another explanation is that NGDOs do not make the right trade-offs between inducing a new local institution and understanding and utilizing existing ones (Howes, 1997). There are advantages and drawbacks to both (Fowler, 1997). Rather than exploring and understanding the social fabric (Cernea, 1995), time pressure leads to inadequate investment in identifying and negotiating with indigenous civic entities. For example finding out about conflict and co-operation, entrenched interests, mediating methods and conventions, etc.—i.e. coming to grips with facets of the civic or C factor. Working from existing civic entities is certainly not always the right answer, but this approach needs to be more actively considered.

Another common reason for social benefits not to accrue or be fairly distributed or sustained, is the absence of a core competence in the NGDO: an ability, in different stages of intervention, to bring together the right proportion of material/economic, local organizational development and empowerment components of social change (Fowler, 1997). Without these elements, suitably altered and blended over time, NGDO investments may produce short-term gains but not social returns in the long term. This blending requires a mastery of internal and external processes of change.

NGDOs have been improving their external balancing and blending skills, largely through (participatory) techniques. Their internal blending and “respons-abilities” have, however, lagged behind (CDRA, 1999:4). Many factors influence this imbalance, which may be eroding gains already made. Three are significant. First is the quality of financial resources. Official aid tends to “sectorialize” and encourage technocratic NGDO expertise—i.e. to provide tangible deliverables (water, health, education and credit) over abilities to integrate concerns of, say, equity, gender, empowerment and rights. Coupled

<sup>38</sup> Cleaver, 1998; Hailey, 1998; Mohan, 1998; Mosse, 1998.

to this tendency is a narrow appreciation of capacity-building of NGOs themselves, which results in an emphasis on acquisition of skills for delivering tangible inputs and verifiable outputs at the cost of acquiring the intangible, but vital, elements of a civic “being”. According to Kaplan (1999), these are the prerequisites of a capacitated organization. Second are common NGO learning disabilities that limit reflection and introspection (Smillie, 1995). Third is the fear of dropping a mechanical view of human development in favour of one that recognizes and works with it as a complex indeterminate process that can be shaped but not controlled (CDRA, 1999).

Dual mastery of internal and external processes is an art not a science. It requires the NGO to base its interventions on an ability to “read” the point of entry and context correctly and dynamically (CDRA, 1998). This organizational faculty evolves from sound practice, attention to reflection and active learning, married to continuous environmental scanning and organizational re-adjustment (Fowler, 1997). In short, it calls for *insightful agility*.

Finally, participation still sets its major sights on improving projects, be they for local development or better governance. There is relatively little attention to framing participation as an aspect of citizenship (Fowler, 1992). Put another way, participation in social change is a right of the population irrespective of where the initiative comes from. Such a perspective re-positions people from being “participants” or “project stakeholders” to being actors in shaping a country’s development trajectory from the micro to the macro. This implies a shift from instrumental participation “on offer” by NGOs—and aid more generally—to *participation as an inherent non-discretionary civic right*, which is an essential aspect of development with public accountability.

The explanations offered above describe an interplay between internal NGO capabilities and external processes that co-determine the quality of interaction between NGOs and communities. However, NGOs must maintain other constructive and enabling relationships. Examining these relationships calls for a review of a guiding framework in which they are supposed to occur.

### ***Partnership as pathology: Use, abuse and practical limits***<sup>39</sup>

If NGO relations with the poor and marginalized are captured by the concept of participation, relations between NGOs themselves and others are typically expressed by the concept of “partnership”. Given the pervasiveness of the term, and its relevance for subsequent subsections, it is necessary to examine this concept more closely.

Since the 1970s, “partnership” has been a benchmark for NGO relationships with other actors (Fowler, 1991; 1998). In its original form, partnership was understood to reflect humanitarian, moral, political, ideological or spiritual *solidarity* between NGOs in the North and South that joined together to pursue a common cause of social change.

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<sup>39</sup> This subsection draws on Fowler, forthcoming.

Since then the quest for “partnership” has been adopted by many kinds of development institutions, and, more recently, by private sector entities (Tennyson et al., 1994; Bendell, 1998). Today’s rule of thumb in international development is that everybody wants to be a partner with everyone, on everything, everywhere. Inevitably, the original idea and premise of partnership has been stretched in many directions and interpreted in many ways.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the phrase “partnership in development” has become virtually meaningless and discredited. The more so because too often it camouflages aid-related relationships that are unbalanced, dependency-creating and based on compromise in favour of the powerful.<sup>41</sup> Frequently, these dis-empower NGDOs (and others) on the receiving end of the aid system. This can occur in many circumstances, for example, when:

- aid conditions and procedures undermine an NGDO’s own governance and local accountability, or work against applying good practice and achieving comparative advantages;
- donors do not accept *mutual responsibility* for performance, loading everything onto the NGDO;<sup>42</sup>
- NGDO attention to financiers is at the cost of attention to and the influence of local constituencies;
- NGDO local knowledge and rootedness is discounted by external, comparative knowledge and imported models;
- external development policies become fashions to be followed and only questioned at the risk of being financially excluded—in other words, when NGDO self-censorship becomes an organizational way of life (Edwards, 1993);
- the “lottery” aspect of funding generates insecurity in an NGDO’s organizational behaviour, as well as “short-termism”;
- patron-client behaviour becomes the norm; and

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<sup>40</sup> The emphasis on partnership across the aid system rests on a questionable premise and neglects donor countries’ own history. The false premise in universal partnership stems from the paradigm informing today’s official development goals, priorities and methods. The idea is to establish in the South and East a “social contract” model of development prevailing in most Northern countries. In this model, state, market and third-sector actors perform in consort and are aligned to overcome the social and environmental dysfunctions created by the limits to competition in a capitalist market economy (Lisbon Group, 1995). This approach rests on the assumption that the long, differentiated evolutionary processes and struggles between social forces that the North has undergone to reach social contract arrangements can be circumvented by judicious application of foreign funds within a uniform framework. Historical analysis of development offers no confirmation that this assumption holds true. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. Namely, that development models, policies and approaches need to be tailored “to a country’s moment in history. Situational relativism must be accepted by academic development economists as well as by policy makers, both within developing countries and in the international development policy community” (Adelman and Morris, 1997:840). Partnership as pursued by donors may apply in some contexts but not in (many) others. In short, one size does not fit all.

<sup>41</sup> Selected references on NGDOs partnerships are: Fowler, 1991; 1998; Lap, 1997; Malena, 1995b; Malhotra, 1997; Manji, 1997; Martella and Schunk, 1997; Murphy, 1998; Perera, 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Evaluations are the usual method for assessing the performance of development institutions. Too seldom, however, is donor behaviour—their conditions, procedures, inconsistencies allied to frequent staff turnover, micro-management by their personnel, etc.—included in evaluations of NGDOs. Put another way, aid is seldom evaluated as a system but as discrete, unrelated projects, programmes and institutions.

- local NGDOs are “captured” by foreign agencies, eroding or compromising their autonomy, local credibility and identity by becoming extensions of those—“the foreign masters”—that they serve (Maina, 1998).

These aspects of dis-empowerment are common, especially among smaller Southern and Eastern NGDOs. Their dissatisfaction with relationships is voiced from time to time in public—but more often and forcibly in private. However, notwithstanding innovations and experiments, the old debates have yet to lead to constructive change.

The gap between the rhetoric and reality of mutual respect, equitable sharing and balanced power—which partnership with and between NGDOs implies—remains large and systemic. Such a perpetual gap signals a structural pathology or institutionalized illness in the aid or A factor.<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, as will be seen later, the difficult translation of partnership into practice causes discomfort, disappointment and mistrust. This is the case in the most sincere attempts to make partnership work equitably. For example, a recent evaluation of a Danish NGDO’s relationship with Southern partners of many years reached the following conclusions:

- The partnership concept is not understood by the partners.<sup>44</sup>
- Country offices try to change reality by changing words in policy papers and partnership agreements rather than by practical fulfilment of the ideas.
- The NGDO is seen to do a lot of talking about partnership, yet in many ways still behaves like a traditional donor eager to have ‘partners’ for placement of their development workers and as outlets for their funds (**Development Today**, 1999:10).

A similar picture can be found with American foundations financing international development—i.e. the donors considered to be most experienced and advanced in terms of the profession of funding NGDOs.

Yet, despite the pervasive rhetoric of partnership, foundations’ grantmaking practices have often been criticized for their insensitivity to the perspectives and needs of recipients. Unfortunately, the nature of philanthropic relationships tends towards donor dominance (Schearer, 1999:29).

These findings reflect common experience. Inevitably, Southern NGDOs are increasingly frustrated by the relational pathology of Northern NGDO counterparts and the growing number of official aid agencies that preach participation but practice dominance and patronage (Muchunguzi and Milne, 1995; Smillie, 1995; Malhotra, 1997; Eade, 1997). Overall, for moral, conceptual and operational reasons, the notion of “partnership in development” requires more honesty and a substantial rethink. What this could entail is discussed in section IV.

<sup>43</sup> While not fulfilling its promise, retaining the word is attractive because it mystifies what is really going on to the benefit of those with greater power.

<sup>44</sup> The evaluation was carried out in Mozambique, Nepal and Tanzania. If not tongue in cheek, this formulation places the blame firmly on the Southern “partners”. They do not understand. It is their fault. The phrasing is indicative of a Northern mindset still immune, or unconscious, to how patronage expresses itself.

### **NGDO relations with each other and with wider civil society**

Relations between NGDOs vary. Alongside the major mode of partnership, there are temporary alliances, coalitions and platforms. There are also more formal, enduring collaborative and representational structures, such as legally established NGDO co-ordinating and umbrella bodies. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine them all. (Such analysis can be found in Leach, 1995; Fowler, 1997.) With an agenda of increasing NGDO impact in social development, four types of relationships are examined. They are between Northern and Southern/Eastern NGDOs, in NGDO representational bodies, in policy and advocacy alliances, and with major civic associations.

### **Northern NGDOs in the South and East: Time for a role change**

In sketching the evolution of NGDOs in the South and East in section I, attention was drawn to the influence of Northern NGDOs. Up until the early 1980s, the North offered models of what it meant to be an NGDO in terms of role and practices. In addition, until the early 1990s, they were also a major source of finance for their local counterparts. Direct official funding of NGDOs within the South and East, and local resource diversification, makes this less and less the case (Bennett and Gibbs, 1996; INTRAC, 1998).

This decade is witnessing an uneasy shift in NGDO roles, in part because of the success of Northern NGDOs in fostering the growth, in capabilities and numbers, of domestic NGDOs. It also stems from a virtual “explosion” of domestic NGDOs in response to trends in the tolerance, governance, reform and aid factors that combine to create greater space, resources and opportunity for them. Consequently, there is pressure on Northern NGDOs to change their roles in the South and East. They are being challenged to re-orient themselves in a number of ways (USAID, 1998; van der Velden, 1996). One Southern observer proposes six reforms for Northern NGDOs (Malhotra, 1999). These are:

- *Northern NGDOs should no longer be operational in the South.* They should shift their focus to local capacity-building of domestic NGDOs and people’s organizations so that they can take over the roles currently played by Northern counterparts.
- *Embracing mutual transparency and accountability mechanisms.* The challenge for domestic NGDOs is to shift from accountability to Northern counterparts to mutual NGDO accountability within a broader vision of building a global movement for change.
- *Redefining the Northern NGDO policy role.* The tendency of NNGDOs to speak on behalf of the South must give way to the South speaking for itself. NNGDOs must also yield the initiative and prerogative of policy research to the South..
- *Working in the North.* Drawing on and interpreting their own and Southern experience, NNGDOs need, or may be forced, to re-orient their social justice and development work northward. Informed by growing interdependence, this will better equip NNGDOs to act in North-South alliances everywhere.

- *Educating domestic constituencies.* A greater emphasis on NNGDOs informing and “educating” home constituencies with particular attention to the poor and excluded and those that are discriminated against (political and economic migrants, refugees, the structural underclass of unemployed and urban poor, etc.).
- *Building domestic constituencies.* NNGDOs should enlarge home constituencies to voice a direct concern about shifts to a rule-based world system (overseen by the World Trade Organization and the Bretton Woods institutions).

A typical problem for Northern NGDOs in responding to these challenges is that their resource base and viability have been built on transferring funds and doing development work themselves overseas. Removing this function poses a threat to their existence. One Northern NGDO response to these pressures is to “localize” or “indigenize” by legally incorporating themselves as a domestic NGDO (Fowler, 1999a). This strategy can, however, provoke charges of “unfair competition” from existing domestic NGDOs—that cannot count on the backing, expertise or contacts of an international donor when searching for local funds. In addition, “indigenized” foreign NGDOs often have the financial backing needed to write and adapt proposals for donors under competitive bidding. Even if direct work in social development by NNGDOs in the South and East continues to decline, it may not lessen tensions about the role of Northern “clones” in the South if bilateral donors are seen to favour in-country funding of “localized” NGDOs.

### **NGDO relations with each other—NGDO co-ordination and representation**

Inter-NGDO history has been typified by lack of co-operation and factionalism. Today, NGDO co-operation within countries is far better because of locally mandated framework, or government legislated, co-ordinating or representative bodies. Typically, these are NGDO councils or member associations. Examples are CODE-NGO in the Philippines, Voluntary Agencies Network India (VANI), the Association of Development Agencies Bangladesh (ADAB), the Tanzania NGO Council (TANGO) and the Association of Brazilian NGOs (ABONG). Experience shows that such “convening” organizations work best when a number of conditions are fulfilled (Bennett, 1995):

- They enjoy support from local and foreign NGDOs to ensure a balance of interests.
- Their constitution/by-laws prevent domestic NGDOs from excluding their international counterparts, on the basis of majority voting. Representative bodies are stronger if governance includes both domestic and international NGDOs.<sup>45</sup>
- They do not duplicate the functions of member NGDOs unless this is requested and uncontested.
- They are not a substantial donor-funding channel to the membership.

<sup>45</sup> The evolution in governance of ADAB illustrates this well (Fowler, 1997:119).

- They host and facilitate subgroups of NGDOs with common (sectoral) interest and agendas.
- They are recognized by government and society as legitimate interlocutors on issues affecting the NGDO community as a whole.

To build public trust and accountability, NGDOs' representative bodies are drafting codes of conduct (Ball and Dunn, 1995). In some countries—Bangladesh, the Gambia, Kenya and Thailand—such codes have been in operation for a number of years. However, limited experience to date suggests that drafting acceptable codes is difficult and gaining compliance even more so.<sup>46</sup>

### **Coalitions and networks**

Another feature of inter-NGDO co-operation is emerging in the area of conference inspired networks and policy reform coalitions. Various United Nations summits have seen such networks at work (Fisher, 1993). They bring together from across the world NGDOs that share a common agenda or common interests. Examples of these include the Environment Liaison Centre in Nairobi (the global node for hundreds of NGDOs and interface with the headquarters of the United Nations Environment Programme); the International Debt Coalition (advocacy for debt reduction); and the Save the Children Alliance (promotion of children's rights). Coalitions can also coalesce around specific policies, programmes, loans or interventions planned by donors and bring about reform in their intentions (Fox and Brown, 1998). Similarly, national coalitions of NGDOs also emerge in response to development initiatives from governments, commonly within the framework of foreign aid. For NGDOs working in international coalitions, credibility and downward accountability to groups in the population that have a legitimate claim on changing the rules of the game are crucial (see section IV).

NGDOs may collaborate, of their own volition or by invitation, in order to interact more effectively with governments and/or donors. For example, the various NGDO committees established to interact with the World Bank and sister regional development banks promote periodic interaction between NGDOs within and across continents. And growing accreditation of NGDOs to the United Nations has its own networking and coalescing effects. Opportunities for interaction between domestic non-governmental development organizations (DNGDOs) and their governments are also being spurred by aid agencies pushing for their inclusion in policy discussions and other exercises. The World Bank's decision to permit CSOs to participate in formulation of the country assistance strategies (CASs) is but one example (Alexander, 1998).

If recent self-assessments of NGDO capacity are reliable, the ability to work collaboratively is not evenly spread across the world (IWGCB, 1998). According to regional reports, African NGDOs were least able to mobilize continent-wide. Asian and Latin American NGDOs fared better. This is also reflected in the relative strength and acceptance of pan-continental NGDO

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<sup>46</sup> Personal observations.

bodies, such as the Forum for African Voluntary Development Organizations (FAVDO), the Association of Latin American NGOs (ALOP) and the Asian NGO Coalition (ANGOC). ALOP and ANGOC have broad support and provide effective “in-reach” to members and outreach to governments and donors. FAVDO is still hampered by relatively low NGDO capacity and density, coupled with subregional (language) and other differences.

Success seems more possible where the focus is on specific issues rather than on civic representation per se (see below). The women’s and environmental movements are examples where strong NGDO collaboration can be found more or less everywhere. Micro-credit is also enjoying substantive NGDO following and interaction in the South and East. Health, education, water and sanitation do not appear to reflect the same intensity of NGDO collaboration. In sum, the overall picture is of uneven collaborative performance by region and topic.

### **Working with civil society**

NGDO collaboration with CSOs is strongest with individual community, peasant and grassroots organizations. However, with civic federations of craft producers and petty traders, for example, it is patchy and generally weak. There are instances of effective and widespread civic co-operation in a popular struggle against military or repressive régimes (for example in Chile and Nigeria) and constructive collaborations with issues-based movements (for example on land tenure, environment and gender). These are not, however, commonplace and enduring. Typically, success in replacing military with civilian régimes is rarely accompanied by wide, sustained and structured civic interaction. Particularistic interests tend to re-merge.

Mass membership organizations of the poor and excluded are increasingly exerting themselves in the South and directly in the North, alongside or displacing domestic and international NGDOs. For example, the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil has successfully squatted on land that, after tenure, was ceded by the government and has been turned into economically successful agricultural co-operatives. In May 1999, a group of activists and peasant farmers from Colombia, India and Mexico formed an international caravan for a month-long tour of G8 countries. They employed non-violent direct action to lobby against the disastrous effects of falling prices and opening up markets to subsidized international imports of the basic commodities that form their productive livelihood.<sup>47</sup> A similar set of popular demonstrations by People’s Global Action against the WTO took place in Geneva in February 1998 (Jenkins, 1998). One observer attributed the absence of major international NGDOs from the demonstration as a sign of disagreement with the confrontational tactics adopted by the organizers (Madeley, 1998).

Instances of inter-civic collaboration involving domestic NGDOs do not mean they are common. For example, it is difficult to find well-established and trusted forums in which a wide array of civic actors come together. Examples of *institutionalized* interaction and consultation between, say, NGDOs and trade

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<sup>47</sup> *Guardian Weekly* (1999:19-20).



unions—or consumer associations, professional bodies, religious organizations, traditional welfare organizations, or social movements and civic federations of whatever complexion—are rare. Reflecting on the Latin American experience, Mariano Valderrama, a former President of ALOP observes:

It has been repeatedly said that progress means [official] institutions recognizing civil society in the framework of development. However, the networks that have tried to nucleate the whole of CSOs (the third sector in general) have not had much success, although those that nucleate organizations by sector of interest have had success ... (personal communication).

As a whole, with their intended beneficiaries, NGDOs tend to operate as a civic enclave. Strong interaction among civic “peers” is exceptional. This separation probably reflects the inherent constitution of civil societies everywhere, especially a lack of well-developed and harmonious horizontal civic interaction across social, professional, cultural, class and other group boundaries, whether in the North, South or East.<sup>48</sup> Contentiousness is a defining feature of the civic arena. Consequently, it is expecting too much of NGDOs to be an effective (donor) point of entry for engaging and mobilizing wider civil society towards social agendas. A different approach is needed.

### ***Interacting with government***

NGDOs interact with governments on many levels and for many reasons. This interaction is becoming broader and more frequent, if not necessarily easier (Bennett, 1997; Smillie and Helmich, 1999). Four factors seem to account for this:

- Reform in the role of the state, specifically privatization of public services.
- The continuing decentralization of public administration.
- Coupled with the previous factor, the devolution of responsibility for, though not necessarily authority over, public services to subnational, politically mandated institutions, such as regional, provincial, city, municipal, district and village councils.
- Democratization, with its implicit goal of opening space for and stimulating wider inclusion, civic mobilization and citizen engagement in public affairs and policy-making.

Change in any of these factors offers a potential for increased state-society interaction. This does not, of course, say anything about on whose terms such interaction will take place and how agendas will be set. The degree to which NGDOs interact on a par with government depends on the trust *T* and civic *C* factors. How tolerant is government of civic assertiveness and how strong, coherent and competent are NGDOs? The answers to these questions vary so widely it is not possible to draw firm conclusions. At best, the following impressions can be offered.

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<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that diverse civic groups will not come together around a common agenda for a fixed period of time. The point is that these relationships are fluid and not a permanent feature of the civic landscape.

### **Going local: NGDOs and subnational government bodies**

As an idea and a policy, decentralization of public administration has been around for a long time (Conyers, 1984). One conclusion from past practice is that decentralization was a “push-down” attempt to better initiate and guide governments’ development initiatives (Fisher, 1998), a case of bringing top-down development closer to the people. More recent interpretations, aligned with privatization and cost sharing, is that decentralization is intended to allow government to reduce, if not abdicate, its responsibilities.

Changes in internal bureaucratic structure were not necessarily enshrined in legislation. How they operated could not be legally challenged. Decentralization often established bureaucratic forums or committees that might include non-state actors, but they had no formal rights. However, these arrangements could provide a point of access for NGDOs—to get approval for what they wanted to do, to sanction collaboration with line ministries, and so on. In other words, they are operational and functional, not political.

Privatization and shrinking government resources make it attractive for local officials to include NGDOs in plans to the extent that they contribute additional resources. For NGDOs, decentralized authorities are a place, for example, to negotiate recurrent government support for their investments. Typically, this boils down to having items included in next year’s budget and hoping for central approval. Such interaction also allows for cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between NGDOs and government officials.

However, there are two sides to opening up state-society interaction at lower levels. For, where tolerance and trust of NGDOs is low, decentralization better enables officials to control what NGDOs do and how they do it, to stifle anything that reeks of empowerment, and to generally put obstacles in the way so that NGDOs do not look better than government in the eyes of those they are both supposed to serve. For example, mutual suspicion between NGDOs and officials of local government in Bangladesh, the Union Parishads, appears to be one reason for little interaction (Aminuzzaman, 1998:90).

The local scenario is however changing as elected bodies grow alongside and “nominally” control the decentralized bureaucracy. This strengthening of civic participation across the state-society interface is facilitating claim-making and assertion of rights to public goods and services. It helps advance the NGDO role from bringing in supplementary resources towards social and political reform. Increasingly, NGDO work on empowerment with communities is enhancing inclusion—e.g. through elections to local councils, as one aim and an indicator of success. These achievements create a structural paradox, however. On the one hand, democratization should enable greater popular mobilization, expression of interests and assertion of rights. Governance should facilitate this by opening up decision-making to greater public scrutiny—i.e., becoming more transparent. On the other hand, such efforts often occur alongside pressure to reduce government deficits, especially by cutting social services and sharing costs. If local bodies have no power to raise revenue, or if there is little local economic potential to do so, there is an inevitable reduction in public resources, which poor people can make claims against. Consequently, NGDOs find themselves caught between people’s

increasing demand for public services and a shrinking supply. Their own actions raise the pressure on NGDOs to generate more resources themselves, rather than less.

All in all, however, progress has been recorded in terms of state-society interaction at subnational levels. But, whether this change is empowering or simply shifting burdens to the citizenry and NGDOs remains unclear. In fact, one thrust in administrative decentralization is to incorporate NGDOs as the local extension of the government because they are more dense and active just where many government agencies are thinnest. An example, from Kenya, illustrates the case. Levels of government agricultural extension staff were reduced with the expectation that NGDOs—and companies wishing to sell agricultural inputs—would fill the void. Should this be guarded against? Or is it the most efficient use of scarce resources?

### **Going national: NGDOs and central government<sup>49</sup>**

Interaction between domestic and international NGDOs and national governments is mediated by two important variables: first, the tolerance, trust or T factor, which itself relates to political culture, and the state of democratic governance, the G factor; and second, the purpose of the interaction. Here, a crude but useful distinction can be made between interaction on technical operational issues and advocacy to alter public policies. By and large, the second is more difficult than the first.

Political culture determines the extent to which governments see dialogue with NGDOs—or civil society more widely—as discretionary or as a right people have. Originally reinforced by the aid system, the first 20 years of development were state-centred and lacked political pluralism—exemplified by the many one-party states in Africa and military régimes elsewhere. This approach established a legacy that makes governments treat public voice in decision-making as optional and discretionary, not as a civic right.

However, NGDOs have a long history of interacting strongly and constructively with governments when it comes to technical concerns within their “traditional” areas of work: provision of health, education, water and sanitation services, and smallholder agricultural development. NGDOs have also had success when it comes to exerting influence in new areas of government concern and where they already have experience and credibility. Environment, gender, debt, micro credit and landmines are examples. NGDOs are also increasingly involved with official aid and implementation of loans made to their governments. Some already receive—and more are making a case for—subsidies or subventions from the regular national budgets for the social services they provide.

More difficult is constructive interaction when issues shift from technical to policy or into domains where government treats unsolicited inputs as interference. Often among these domains are macro-economic policy, budget

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<sup>49</sup> Selected references on local, national and international policy influence: ACSPPA, 1997; Bratton, 1990; Edwards, 1993; Fowler, 1999d; Grindle and Thomas, 1991; Khan, 1997; Miller, 1994; Najam, 1995; Sibanda, 1994; Thomas, 1994; World Vision (UK), 1997a; 1997b; Wuyts et al., 1992.

allocations and compliance with international treaties. Consequently, NGOs require skills in selecting and advocating policy positions to government (Najam, 1999). And indeed, such skills are being rapidly acquired<sup>50</sup>—both within newly established, specialist NGOs and, to a lesser extent, in operational NGOs that are not succumbing to the “self-censorship” effects of aid noted previously. Understandably, such a trend is causing discomfort with some governments. However, improving advocacy skills does not mean recognition of a right. Moreover, as explained below, skills are not necessarily enough to influence government on a par with other interest groups.

Scaling up impact through national policy advocacy is firmly on the NGO agenda (Najam, 1995). Accomplishments are increasing, but far from uniformly in terms of country or topic area. Much will depend on the state of governance and quality of NGOs. However, for many countries, in the South and East, the state of governance is no longer a sovereign, national affair. And, neither is the purview and arena of action for NGOs. International relationships are therefore where we turn to next.

### ***NGOs in the international arena***

NGO involvement in international advocacy has various main focuses—for example, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and the international summits they sponsor; the regular economic and political conferences of Western countries, such as the G8; and international institutions, particularly the multilateral development banks (MDBs) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>51</sup> Another is policy advocacy towards bilateral aid agencies.

Much has been written about NGO involvement in international UN conferences and similar forums.<sup>52</sup> There is also increasing study of the role of NGOs in policy advocacy towards bilateral and multilateral agencies. The mode of interaction—which has been characterized as “critical engagement”<sup>53</sup>—does not reflect the confrontational stance of poor people and their mass organizations described earlier. However, critical engagement may be allied to, and is often strengthened by, civic protest in the South.

The purpose of this section is not to explain how these interactions work in practice, but to reflect on concerns arising from NGO roles in this arena. These interrelated concerns centre on aspects of NGO accountability, strategies and tactics that may both erode democratic processes even be creating a government “backlash”.

<sup>50</sup> The rapid growth of special courses in advocacy indicates an entrepreneurial response to this new emphasis on NGO activity. One example is the School of International Training in Vermont. It has developed both courses and a substantial electronic database of advocacy materials. Another is an advocacy centre in Poona, India. Yet another, is a Masters programme for Africa, based in Harare, Zimbabwe.

<sup>51</sup> Bain, 1999; Covey, 1997; Fox and Brown, 1998; Jordan and van Tuijl, 1997; Nelson, 1995; 1997; Pua-Villamor and Ocampo, 1997; World Vision (UK), 1996.

<sup>52</sup> See the many publications of the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS). The UNDP-NGLS publication of 1996, **New Commitments, New Opportunities**, sets out the various ways in which NGOs can involve themselves in United Nations summits. Also, Fisher, 1993; van Rooy, 1997.

<sup>53</sup> Statement by Jane Covey, a member of the NGO-World Bank Working Group, quoted in Bain, 1999.

### **NGDOs as international advocates: The challenge of downward accountability**

How are NGDOs formally held accountable for what they do and say (nationally and) internationally? Where NGDOs have a civic constituency that controls their governance and mandate, the answer is reasonably straightforward. A constituency is the instrument of direct accountability in addition to the wider public accountability through domestic law governing their establishment (World Bank, 1997).<sup>54</sup> However, most NGDOs do not have a civic constituency of governing members. The Greenbelt Movement in Kenya and the Landless Rural Workers Movement in Brazil—NGDOs with mass membership—are not typical. More usual is a self-perpetuating, self-selected set of directors or trustees,<sup>55</sup> which calls into question the validity of the “agreed” positions that such NGDOs take in international forums and towards multilateral organizations (Jordan and van Tuijl, 1997; Nelson, 1995, 1997).<sup>56</sup> And, more generally, a lack of clarity about the source of NGDO mandates undermines their credibility as policy actors, nationally and internationally.<sup>57</sup>

How are NGDOs responding to this vulnerability? The likelihood of their transforming themselves into member-based entities with constituency control is not high. Nor should it be necessary. The law on public registration and control should suffice, as it does for businesses. Nevertheless, the issue of civic accountability still has to be addressed. As alluded to earlier, a common way for NGDOs to deal with the issue of mandate is to form alliances and operate in coalitions with those on whose behalf they are advocating. This has occurred to some extent among those seeking to change World Bank policies (Fox and Brown, 1998). Examples include coalitions of CBOs, domestic and international NGDOs and bridging organizations advocating in relation to the Kedung Dam in Indonesia, the Mount Apo thermal plant in the Philippines and the Planaflo Natural Resource Management loan to Brazil. It has been suggested that to be legitimate, credible and effective, policy advocates must establish “downward accountability” (Fox and Brown, 1998).

In transnational advocacy, the three crucial components of downward accountability include:

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<sup>54</sup> This publication does not deal with accountability to beneficiaries—i.e. the poor and the excluded.

<sup>55</sup> Civic codes common in Latin America allow, if not encourage, staff to form the governing entity.

<sup>56</sup> Nelson (1997) examines the contention between African and Northern NGDOs on the position to take with respect to a World Bank IDA replenishment.

<sup>57</sup> The democratic credentials and mandate of many governments criticizing NGDO lack of accountability can be questioned. However, two wrongs do not make a right.

- *Representation*: The manner in which an organization, or group of organizations, speaks for its members or constituents and is held to account for this representation.<sup>58</sup>
- *Capacity-building*: The ability of a network to co-ordinate actors and bridge differences to achieve impact and leverage in a way that pools skills and builds the capacity of its members—primarily its Southern members—to represent their own views in national and global arenas.
- *Social capital*: The ability of a network to promote trust, solidarity, respect and unity among its diverse members and re-enforce democratic practices by conducting itself in a transparent and accountable manner (Bain, 1999:6).

These components lead to a synthetic definition of downward accountability as:

The ability of the network [read: international advocacy coalition] to serve as a channel for the excluded while promoting balanced partnerships between its members and practices, skills and values that re-enforce democratic traditions.

Bain examines these components in three transnational coalitions advocating policy at the World Bank—the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Institute (SAPRI); the Women’s Eyes on the World Bank Network; and the NGDO World Bank Committee:

While some progress has been made in addressing low upward accountability ..., it seems that downward accountability—at least within transnational NGO networks—continues to be the Achilles heel of the NGO movement. In an era when NGOs aim to become ‘vehicles of international co-operation in the mainstream of politics and economics’ and have successfully won a place at many global negotiating tables, they now seem to be having difficulties in adjusting to their new role. While it would be unreasonable to expect all NGOs to adopt strategies of partnership and collaboration, it is not unreasonable to expect NGOs to begin to practice the downward accountability that they preach (1999:20).

In sum, NGDOs have found a potential method to address legitimate criticism of their role as international advocates. However, much more needs to be done to make this option the norm.

### **Avoiding a backlash: sorting out strategy and tactics**

NGDO accountability feeds into and complicates concerns about the impact of NGDO advocacy on sovereignty and democratization in the South and East. Does NGDO influence on the policies, and hence conditions and practices, of multilateral and bilateral agencies undermine the right of governments to determine their own development path? Are NGDOs that are unaccountable locally interfering with civic involvement in public policy formulation, which is an essential feature of democratic societies?

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<sup>58</sup> She notes that “representation is not the only form of NGO legitimacy and it is understood that NGOs are not organised to play the representative role of political parties. However, if NGO legitimacy rests partially on their role as intermediary organizations for the poor—a role that political parties seem to find more and more difficult to play—they cannot be perceived to be serving as false interlocutors, divorced from grassroots’ realities and failing in their role as bridging organizations to the poor”.

The concern is exacerbated by the growing practice of foreign aid agencies to insist on the involvement of NGDOs and other civic actors in deliberations about aid policy and practice towards a particular country or finance for a particular intervention (Kapur, 1997). NGDOs thus circumvent the constraints of domestic politics and gain leverage nationally that they could not easily achieve working domestically by themselves. But, in doing so, NGDOs undermine the local commitment to change that is vital for aid to be effective. Moreover, by encouraging such practices, aid agencies may be undermining prospects for achieving their own governance objectives.

Mohammed (1997) reports growing irritation on the part of governments pushed to deal with “unaccountable” NGDOs. Or to find that, behind the scenes, NGDOs are increasing and/or re-specifying donor conditions. He notes a government “backlash” and growing tensions with NGDOs—negative impact on the trust or T factor. Peter van Tuijl observes a number of governments seeking to change laws under which NGDOs operate, creating stronger restrictions and instruments for control among them within the past two years—Albania, Brazil, Egypt, Japan, Mongolia, Pakistan and Uganda. He also notes creative NGDO responses to a decrease in government tolerance. For example:

... in Egypt, NGOs have been able to avoid the impact of restrictive laws by registering as non-profit companies under the general Egyptian law on corporations. In Indonesia, most NGOs register as foundations so they can avoid being subject to restrictive laws on mass organizations. The Malaysian chapter of Amnesty International ... has been active ever since it applied for registration by operating in an undefined, grey area, thus not violating state laws (van Tuijl, 1999:503-504).

In Turkmenistan, due to legal uncertainty and the restrictive stance of the régime, new NGDOs join and operate under the umbrella of the only two NGDOs registered so far, rather than seek registration.

When NGDOs elicit domestic change through advocacy to foreign aid agencies, it can be argued that NGDOs are confusing strategy and tactics. While it may be a tactical advantage to make external aid aware of civic positions and preferences, the strategy must surely be to foster democracy by gaining greater civic involvement in direct local debate with government about policy and practice benefiting the poor. In other words, focusing their efforts on changing the domestic rules of the game, not using international aid agencies as proxies.

Moreover, there may be a strong case for NGDOs to help build the capacity of governments to be more capable negotiators with international institutions based on positions that are shared. For it is not *a priori* the case that NGDOs and their governments always disagree. This argument has been made, for example, by NGDO activists in relation to improving the negotiating competencies of poor countries at the WTO.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> An argument made by Martin Khor of the Consumers Association of Penang at a UNDP meeting on civil society held in Warsaw in February 1997.

A short-term tactic may be to push for changes in policy and practice of multilateral institutions, but this must not be at the cost of a strategy aimed at structural reform of the rules and conventions that mediate the state-society interface. Domestic and transnational actions for policy reform are too often out of step. The latter undermines the former. Backlash and increased tension between government and “advocacy” NGOs are one manifestation. Government questioning of the legitimacy and accountability of NGOs *as a whole* is another, more serious, sign of stress.

### **NGOs and the quality of international aid**

The earlier discussion on the aid or A factor, indicated that the quality of ODA was one factor co-determining NGO effectiveness. The proportion of official aid in NGO budgets continues to grow. The A factor is therefore gaining in significance. Consequently, improving NGO performance means ensuring that aid to and through them is of the highest quality. This is the final topic of the section.

What is the “quality” of aid? Quality can probably best be treated as a comparative measure. It can be defined as the product of ideas, conditions and modalities of development finance when set against the requirements of good practice in development work. High quality aid conforms to these requirements, low quality aid does not. The quality of funds an NGO receives can enhance or constrain effective behaviour. For example, the short-term nature of project-based funding is often a limitation in terms of development processes requiring (participative) behavioural change—something that NGOs are supposed to be good at. Expecting NGOs to apply methods that are “recognized” or insisted upon by the funder—even if they are not the most appropriate—is a quality-reducing stance. Specifying which (national) technical assistance domestic NGOs should use takes away choice and hence local responsibility, reducing ownership and commitment. Internal procedures, especially of the European Union, often unreasonably delay disbursement, resulting in needless pressure on the NGOs and those they serve. The consequences of such behaviour remain largely unperceived by the donor and, hence, do not create an incentive to improve.

These typical generic examples do not mean that aid quality is simple and static. To the contrary, it is complex and dynamic. On the one hand, as a norm, the concept of quality is theoretically applicable to all types of aid financing. On the other hand, it cannot generate a uniform set of operational criteria because good practice varies between different development goals and the activities required to achieve them. For example, best practice in reducing environmental degradation—say, through tree planting to protect a watershed—differs markedly from making governance more inclusive through civic education. Each goal and activity brings different quality demands. Nevertheless, what the concept of quality does allow is a test of donor competence expressed as *an ability to tailor assistance to the specific requirements of different good practices in different situations*.

Detailed findings on how official financing to NGOs affects their performance are difficult to come by. One reason is that impact studies rarely, if at all, consider the funding pre-conditions associated with a particular



intervention or donor behaviour throughout. The primary reason for this information gap is that most aid to NGDOs is applied on a project basis: discrete pre-determined sets of resources, activities and outcomes that are meant to occur “outside” the NGDO. This externalization separates the impact of development aid from the *whole system* that provides it. Another reason is the absence of case studies where the complete story—including all links in the aid chains—is told fully and honestly.<sup>60</sup>

The need for improvement in the quality of official aid to NGDOs is the conclusion of many reviews and studies, dating back to the mid-1980s.<sup>61</sup> Some progress has been made over this period. For example, donors in Scandinavia and the Netherlands have introduced programme or “framework” funding agreements that allocate a block sum of funds to Northern NGDOs on a multiyear basis (e.g. SIDA, 1998). Some donors, such as the British, are making limited funds available to finance the pre-investments need for good project design. However, these changes do not reflect the mainstream of allocations or donor-recipient behaviour.

In fact, more recent studies suggest that modest gains are in danger of being reversed by changes in funding practices that impede quality or reinforce bad habits. Escalating demands from parliaments and state auditors, an inability by donors to unlearn dysfunctional behaviour and an ingrained culture of disbursement work against major improvements in quality:<sup>62</sup> Impediments to improving aid include:

- The privatizing and competitive ethos accompanying the way official aid is increasingly on offer: allocated by price difference rather than the value-base and commitment of the organization and more stringently accounted for. This trend is captured in the question: are NGDOs development partners or competing contractors (Smillie et al., 1996)?
- Struggle over defining an overhead cost (Fowler, 1997:155-159).
- Standardization of NGDO practices around a uniform “projectized” understanding and belief in the utility of a logically framed approach to almost every type of social development intervention in all contexts (Wallace et al., 1998).
- Procurement procedures that undermine practices likely to have positive outcomes, especially on the interaction between NGDOs and communities (Voorhies, 1993; Gibbs et al., 1999).

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<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, many years on, the observations on the dysfunction of projects for development still apply (Hirschman, 1967; LeCompte, 1986).

<sup>61</sup> Selected publications reviewing the interface between NGDOs, governments and donors—including strengthening civil society—are listed in footnote 21, and: ACVFA, 1997; Bassler and Smit, 1997; Bebbington and Riddell, 1995; Edwards and Hulme, 1996b; Hallows, 1995; Hellinger, 1987; Malena, 1995a; Mohanty, 1996; Nelson, 1995; NGLS, 1995; ODA, 1992; ODC/Synergos, 1996; Pratt and Stone, 1994; Riddell et al., 1995; SIDA, 1998; World Vision (UK), 1996.

<sup>62</sup> Smillie and Helmich (1993; 1999), continue to identify interface issues that impede quality. They stem from the behaviour and pre-dispositions of both NGDOs and donors.

- A cleavage between investments in capacity-building for project delivery and for strengthening NGOs as civic actors in good governance (van Rooy, 1998:67).
- NGOs not learning about or integrating lessons from practice; leading to repetition without improvement and meagre growth in professionalism (Smillie and Helmich, 1993:24).
- Lack of donor continuity, coherence and consistency across their total funding policies, strategies and selection of partners—NGOs experience donor funding as a lottery (Edwards, 1999a:138).
- The mendicant stance of many NGOs, which belies the supposed striving for greater financial independence (ACVFA, 1997:35).

Many suggestions have been made about how to improve aid quality in relation to NGOs and civil society (e.g. Boule et al., 1993; Hellinger, 1987; INTRAC, 1998; ODC/Synergos, 1996). They include greater flexibility, a longer term perspective, greater attention to process over outputs, more merit to qualitative changes and measures and a stress on creating linkages to other interventions and situational processes. However, a more important issue is the extent to which proposed improvement in donor behaviour is relevant for wider civil society, as opposed to aid-oriented and dependent NGOs.

There is no reason to assume that “projects” are important to all types of civil society organizations. Unlike many NGOs, the origins, presumptions and perspectives of many CSOs do not rest on the existence or otherwise of an aid system and its objectives. This modality cannot, therefore, be assumed to be a relevant basis of dialogue or outreach. Potential topics of interest to civil society are discussed below. But whatever they may be, the mere fact that civil society is not premised on aid or international development agendas implies a recasting or reinvention of the aid system. In other words, changing the rules of the game—the topic of the following section.

#### **IV. Civil Society and Social Development: Changing the Rules of the Game**

The preceding pages have taken a broad tour over many facets of social development in relation to NGOs and civil society more generally. Various observations have been made on ways in which they could make a stronger contribution to a social development agenda and the commitments made at Copenhagen in 1995. However, doing so is only partially in their hands. Others must play their part. This section therefore brings previous findings together in a series of recommendations directed at NGOs, governments and the international aid establishment, *as a necessarily coherent, fair and transparent system*. It considers reforms already underway and suggests others that are still needed.

The perspective adopted is “changing the rules of the game”—both formal and informal. In other words, altering the culture, laws, strategies, conditions,

conventions, interests and practices that determine organizational behaviour and the patterns and effects of the institutional relations they give rise to (Kruijt and Koonings, 1988). Rules need to be changed in relation to structural and functional issues. Structural issues pivot around, first, changing the fundamental construction of the aid system to make it more client-centred, “equitably located” and transparently governed. Second, there is a need to make the system more plural and user friendly by re-tooling to better account for the diverse contexts in which interventions take place. Third, reforms should be adopted that broaden the interface between the aid system and civil society—in other words, an outreach alongside and beyond NGDOs. Functional issues for NGDOs relate to strengthening their approaches to development work, particularly capacity-building and accountability.

### ***Repositioning aid—The case for development funds***

Despite sincere and superficial attempts at reform, the prevailing mode of aid is often dis-empowering. Legitimate interests of donors and recipients—be they governmental or non-governmental—are typically reconciled in favour of the former. Other factors further contaminate “healthy aid” in ways that generate deep-lying pathologies.

One such factor is the pressure to disburse aid in order for it not to be cut. Paradoxically, such pressure is enhanced when countries strictly fix their aid allocations as a percentage of GDP. Every year domestic growth creates additional money that has to be spent. Another distortion is that, abetted by the nature of the evaluation process—which biases against arguing for aid reductions because of poor performance—levels and replenishment of aid are only very loosely coupled with achievement (Carlsson et al., 1994). Together, these factors reinforce a donor culture and behaviour that value approval of disbursements over development impact.<sup>63</sup> Such factors also generate perverse incentives for recipients who, for example, can exert the very limited influence they have by holding things up or demanding fees or per diems to participate in, and hence legitimize, donor processes. Delay in recipient approval and demand by host country officials for allowances to take part in workshops, seminars and meetings organized by official aid agencies, is a common lament of donor staff.

A further contamination arises from reasons for allocating aid that have nothing to do with poverty alleviation—to retain influence in former colonies or penetrate potential markets for domestic businesses (World Bank, 1998a:16).<sup>64</sup> Practically, this means that aid generates less development benefits than it might otherwise be able to because deciding who gets what discounts the need for sound policies and strong institutions to use aid well. Psychologically, recipients see through double or triple agendas and donor strategic self-interests and mistrust the whole enterprise. Rather than a spirit of co-operation, an atmosphere of “them and us” prevails. This influence reduces

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<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to note that reductions in aid levels over the past 10 years have been attributed to budgetary constraints in donor countries, not to poor aid performance per se (Randel and German, 1998).

<sup>64</sup> This Bank study notes that Nordic countries do not manifest this type of contamination to the same degree as donor countries with a colonial past.

openness, transparency, trust and the possibility to negotiate truly common objectives.

Among other reasons, mistrust and cynicism or a sense of powerlessness in dealing with donors drives governments to treat aid fungibly. This common practice finds aid allocated for a specific purpose being used for another purpose, or replacing government allocations leading to a reduced net increase in investment. Ring-fencing aid as projects does not solve the problem (World Bank, 1998a:72). Fungibility is an almost inevitable outcome when there is no *real agreement* between government and donors about objectives. The conditions noted above reduce both the effectiveness and credibility of aid. Consequently, unless sufficient reform is made in aid delivery, there are diminishing grounds for justifying its continuation. Recognizing its own role in generating such unhealthy outcomes, the World Bank's recent proposal for a more policy-based development framework and aid allocations (see below) is put forward as one possible remedy.

A key to reform lies in one of the most important findings about aid over the years, recently reconfirmed by a comprehensive study of aid performance. The "painful lesson of experience is that *government and community ownership of projects is crucial*" (World Bank, 1998a:79; emphasis added). A vital reform, therefore, is to create a system that ensures and enforces authentic negotiation of *truly shared agendas and objectives* within mutually agreed parameters. An important precondition for doing so is to reduce if not eradicate the power difference of donor-recipient and the "binary" behaviour of flight (acquiescence and lack of commitment) or fight (delays in approvals, passive obstruction, nit-picking, etc.) that this produces. In other words, to create a "ternary" system where the ultimate objective, poverty reduction, stands above and is guarded by shared governance and not subsumed by institutional and national self-interests—one reason why proposals for trust funds have made little headway.

In various guises, a proposal for this kind of reform has been on the table for a long time. This is to create national development funds positioned at an "equal distance" from the institutions that provide, use and are affected by them. These funds would be "governed" by a compact, not "conditionality" which is so often ineffective (Stokke, 1995).

A combination of consolidated funding (to promote continuity), mutually binding international agreements (to strengthen coherence), and cross-society decision making (to maintain consistency with realities on the ground), could build the local ownership [and commitment] that development demands without sacrificing the accountability donors require to keep aid funds flowing (Edwards, 1999a:138).

Despite high-level support, an attempt to establish such a fund, spearheaded by the Global Coalition for Africa in 1995, has not progressed further. To this author's knowledge, no such fund has been piloted or introduced.<sup>65</sup> Lack of political will explains much of the absence of progress.<sup>66</sup> It could be argued that

<sup>65</sup> One limited spin-off from this initiative is an experimental creation of a social trust fund in Tanzania, with SIDA playing a leading role.

<sup>66</sup> Personal communication from Prof. Göran Hyden, who was directly involved in the high-level discussions on the African initiative.

recent proposals and experiments in aid reform are a modest move towards the principle of enhanced recipient ownership underpinning development or trust funds. The notion of a Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) advanced by the President of the World Bank is one such initiative (Wolfensohn, 1999). A similar, more modest, but none the less significant proposition is that of the United Nations to establish national development assistance frameworks (UNDAF).<sup>67</sup>

However, given past divergence between rhetoric and practice of the multilateral system, it remains to be seen if the substantial institutional reforms required will actually be introduced. If progress in participation in Bank policy-making and operations is anything to go by, the signs are not encouraging. For example, an ongoing study suggests that, after initial improvement between 1994 and 1996, the Bank has slipped back in terms of participation in practice (van Wicklin, 1999). The Bank's seminal study, **Assessing Aid**, paints a too optimistic—if not self-serving—picture of the likelihood of reform of the overall system.

Irrespective of how difficult these reforms may be to introduce, they do not get to the heart of the matter. The need is to create a space between donors' (national) interests and their funds so that negotiation can take place on a more level, less contaminated, playing field. The necessary outcomes are *objectives and commitments that are jointly and fairly shared, owned in and by the South and East and transparently governed*. As useful as they are, current proposals for reform appear to treat symptoms rather than causes of aid pathology.

Overall, progress on proposals for *structural* reform that gives recipients real ownership of change has been poor if not deplorable. Reforms currently on offer are, in essence, administrative improvements. The fact is that aid will only have tax payers' support if its benefits—politically and economically—can be sufficiently demonstrated to the giver. This consideration is paramount. Recipients' rights remain secondary. After almost 40 years, those who justify the system in the first place still remain in second place and second class. It is little wonder that cynicism, misappropriation and fungibility are the response to a system that is essentially duplicitous and morally impoverished. For this reason some argue that the answer to development lies in fair trade not tainted aid.

Finally, it is ironic that demonstrating aid's benefits to the giver is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the system to enjoy public support. Domestic constituencies in the North also want better results overseas. Trust funds, described below, are a potential way of satisfying both demands.

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<sup>67</sup> UNDAF is intended to provide a strategic agreement between United Nations agencies on the profile of assistance they will offer to a host government, including division of labour between them. The CDF is proposed as a guide for the harmonization of effort between governments, businesses, civil society and the aid system as a whole on agreed development areas and strategies.

## **Authentic partnership—A question of balancing rights and obligations**

To be effective, institutions within the international aid system require a variety of working relationships. Ideally, each relationship will be tailored to the goals and circumstances of the parties concerned in equitable and mutually beneficial ways. Too often, imbalances in political strength, organizational capabilities and financial power lead to relationships that are neither even-handed nor characterized by reciprocity. This imbalance generates friction, reduces effectiveness, increases transaction costs and discredits the basic principle of development as co-operation (Edwards, 1999a). Moreover, calling relationships that perpetuate or hide such imbalances “partnerships” further undermines the credibility of the system as a whole.

In short, the rules of the game require urgent reform to create a more honest, equitable and transparent framework for negotiation and action, whether associated with development funds or not. The key to this approach to relational reform lies, first, in recognizing and “publicly” defining different kinds of relationships appropriate for different purposes, and, second, in specifying and negotiating relations in terms of rights and obligations of each party. The relationship should be characterized by both an agreed level of mutuality—where the rights of one party are mirrored by the obligations accepted by the other—and balance—where the “weight” of rights and obligations borne by each party is similar. Problems occur when mismatches are not seen or ignored, when parties do not deliver, or when the weights are unequal from the start. The following kinds of relationships could be envisaged:

- *Development ally.* Two (or more) organizations decide on a development agenda or objective they wish to pursue together, typically for an agreed period of time. They can do this, for example, by exchanging information, sharing expertise or employing their respective positions and contacts in co-ordinated ways. While modest financial transfers may occur, they are not the basis of the relationship. A development ally is typically found in NGDO (and wider) networks, alliances, coalitions (for international advocacy) and platforms.
- *Project funder.* Parties agree to a narrow and focused relationship, revolving around discrete projects. The relationship can include project design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and so on. It can result from an NGDO gaining funds for an initiative that it identifies or from its winning bids for initiatives that others want implemented. This is typically the case when NGDOs engage in government projects financed by loans from development banks.
- *Programme supporter.* This relationship typically concentrates on a particular sector, such as health, education, water supply, credit or small-scale enterprise; or on a theme, such as conflict prevention, food security, gender or human rights. Support could be financial, technical or access to specialist networks, and so on. A programme may correspond to (one of) an organization’s strategic goals or themes, such as environment or gender.

- *Institutional supporter.* This relationship is primarily concerned with an organization's overall effectiveness and viability. It can include assistance for development of policies, strategies, operations, management, organizational sustainability, sectoral relations, and so on. Transactions benefit both what the organization does and what it is. This modality is common among Southern and Northern NGDOs that have interacted over a long period. For example, they collaborate in ventures that improve the domestic standing and impact of both—such as Southern NGDO staff visiting donor constituencies. However, organizational aspects that are not directly concerned with development role, tasks and performance—such as governance and leadership selection—are seldom considered appropriate for support.
- *Partner.* Typically, a true partnership exhibits full, mutual support for the identity and all aspects of the work and the well-being of each organization. It is holistic and comprehensive, with no limits—in principle—to what the relationship would embrace. Though uncommon, such interaction can be found in “natural” partnerships, exemplified by religious denominations, professional associations, etc. (Fowler, 1991).

In moving from ally to partner, the depth (degree of influence) and breadth (number of organizational facets to be included) of the relationship increase. (A proposal for such a negotiating framework and details of a methodology are given in Fowler, forthcoming.)

Associated with this approach are important benefits. First, it encourages development institutions to be self-aware, clear and honest about the pre-conditions that exist when entering negotiation. Is “partnership” really possible? Is it a relationship we are honestly prepared for and able to embrace? Second, it reduces the anxiety of “speaking a lie” in knowing that the partnership label does not cover the possible content of a relationship. It allows for more appropriate standards and realistic expectations about interactions that foster trust rather than cynicism.

Enhancing trust can bring performance benefits to all types of development relationships. Trust reduces transaction costs. It underpins mutual respect, fostering commitment to shared agendas. And, it builds the intangible forces that bind collective effort allowing better responsiveness to changing circumstances while countering the stress they can produce. In short, open and fair negotiation is an asset.

Finally, giving different kinds of relationships their own and proper name will help reveal how Northern interests create first and second class players. It is a necessary antidote to the “partnership illness”.

### ***Involving an honest broker—The case for an Ombudsman***

Development organizations aspire to conflict-free relationships. Conflict increases transaction costs and reduces trust. Inevitably, conflicts occur. But they are not necessarily unhealthy if, by working through them, parties reach

better insight and mutual respect. One positive way of dealing with the inevitability of disagreement and/or conflict is, *as a matter of organizational policy and good practice*, to create and agree on an arbitration or mediation procedure. Relief agencies are about to test the feasibility of an Ombudsman to provide this function (British Red Cross, 1998).<sup>68</sup> The World Bank Inspection Panel is another example. Without the existence of such an institution, Northern NGOs, and donors more generally, inevitably end up in the unwanted position of judge, jury and executioner. In effect, the weaker party has no channel for, or acknowledged right of, redress.

The process of establishing an Ombudsman or mediator is probably more important than the rules under which he, she or they would operate. The steps taken must create a moral as well as a formal mandate for the person(s) to act. It must also establish the grounding from which the parties involved are morally, and not just administratively, committed to complying with the outcome. A strong case can be made for development NGOs, and others in the aid system, to initiate and invest in a mediation or arbitration resource that they can turn to.<sup>69</sup> Without it, the benefits of greater fairness and more balanced relationships would be difficult to realize.

More importantly, it is difficult if not hypocritical for donors—including NNGDOs—to call for transparency of governments when they operate in ways that offer no justice and redress. This behaviour puts another nail in the coffin of system credibility. In sum, calls for greater democracy and transparency must be taken on board by aid agencies themselves. Changing the rules of the game to include an Ombudsman, where such a post does not exist or cannot be combined with an already present similar function, is one way of doing so.

### **Preventing a development monoculture**

More than a decade ago there were fears that greater NGO interaction with and funding from official aid would negatively affect their civic values and origins and homogenize their practices (Hellinger, 1987). Evidence suggests that this is happening. In theory, this is contrary to what the aid system wants—i.e. that NGOs apply and improve their supposed comparative advantages as agents of social development (Tendler, 1982; Fowler, 1988), while remaining rooted in civil society and expanding their outreach.

However, the aid system's embrace of privatization and "sectorialized" assistance makes it difficult for NGOs to remain "civic" and enhance their contribution. Privatization has been discussed above. Sectorialization requires

<sup>68</sup> The feasibility study raised a number of concerns among donors as potential collaborators. At the time of writing, supported by DFID, the initiators are widening the debate through consultations and workshops (personal communication from Deborah Doane, Project Manager).

<sup>69</sup> An attempt, in 1997, to propose and detail such an Ombudsman function for development NGOs got nowhere (Fowler and Malhotra, 1997). There appears to be substantial anxiety about and resistance to the concept of an independent review of North-South NGO relationships that are in difficulty. International non-governmental development organizations (INGDOs) are not willing to level the playing field. We still believe that there is much merit in such an idea. It would be unfortunate if the "scandal" of NGO behaviour in response to the emergency in Rwanda, which prompted the Red Cross Ombudsman initiative, is required to create such an experiment for development relationships.



that major investments to and through NGDOs correspond to donors' own divisional structures—physical infrastructure, water, agriculture, education, health, small enterprise, credit, and so on. This differs significantly from the use of funds raised from the general public and accessed through the NGDO “windows” maintained by donors. These are more flexible in that they are not *a priori* assigned to categories of intervention or investment area. This enables NGDOs to adopt a holistic and integrated view of development and shape their work accordingly. Increasingly, for example, where conditions permit NGDOs are turning to “integrated area development” as a strategy for adopting a multidimensional approach to their interventions.<sup>70</sup> This trend corresponds to the needs of good practice detailed earlier.

However, parliamentary concerns about performance are inclining donors and government officials towards applying “technical” measures to what NGDOs do and achieve. As a proxy, they are assessing NGDOs for sectoral expertise, not their cross-sectoral, integrative and process abilities. In addition, NGDOs are accessing—from donors' country allocations—greater amounts of official aid than those specifically designated for them through NGDO “windows”. Such country funds are typically allocated for sectors where social components are not (yet) consistently treated on a par with technical investment criteria.<sup>71</sup> Again, this can impact negatively on the flexibility and integrative advantages NGDOs should bring to bear.

In sum, there are signs of a move towards a development monoculture by homogenizing what NGDOs do and how they do it, according to uniform, official criteria. This move can be viewed as a reversal of ideas that NGDOs have something different and complementary to offer and, thus, require different funding rules. These should be designed to ensure NGDOs bring to bear what they should be good at—targeting, situational sensitivity, mobilization, flexibility, facilitation and process guidance.

To counter the erosion of NGDO-specific traits and contributions, donors must recognize and analyse social development as a non-linear, integrated and recursive process that cannot be achieved through purely sectoral frameworks and approaches. One way to accomplish this is to better understand how NGDOs integrate their work and adjust their roles and contributions throughout all stages of an intervention, with particular attention to withdrawal or re-negotiation. Once donors can do this, they will be better equipped to assess NGDO capabilities and decide which organizations to work with.

NGDOs may assist this process by collectively examining and proposing norms, good practice and organizational capacity for engaging with complex processes of social change. National, regional and continental forums—perhaps related to UNDAF or CDF initiatives—would be one place to initiate such an exercise. Failure to do so will probably leave donors to decide what

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<sup>70</sup> Integrated area development takes a geo-administrative area and negotiates an array of activities. Guiding ideas are that the local administration can see and better adopt alternatives that work and that local people can politically engage to agitate for ongoing support from public funds when this is required. In other words, it has a withdrawal perspective built in.

<sup>71</sup> The social-technical tension plays itself out within donor agencies and governments too. Lack of reconciliation of such a tension is spilling over into interaction with NGDOs.

constitutes the signs they are looking for and then to impose them uniformly through institutional guidelines and standards. Structured and periodic dialogue between different constituents of the aid system may ensure that technical sectorialism is balanced by the necessary holistic considerations.

### ***Improving NGDO practice in social development***

Observations contained in previous pages suggest ways in which NGDO effectiveness can be enhanced at the micro level. Mentioned so far are embedding ownership and commitment; focusing attention more on root or structural causes, but not simply at the cost of addressing symptoms; taking on board the civic aspect of participation; ensuring that changes in economic status, organizational capability and civic empowerment go hand in hand; better recognizing the potential value of existing, indigenous forms of civic organization; fostering horizontal and vertical linkages so that interventions are not isolated; and taking a multisectoral, thematic and integrating view of change processes.

Enhancing organizational capacity is recognized as an essential feature of social development (Fowler, 1997). Correspondingly, this task has been of growing importance for NGDOs and for CBOs.<sup>72</sup> Established in 1998, the International Forum for Capacity Building (IFCB) is a significant global initiative intended to improve investment in and the quality of capacity-building efforts. Preparatory surveys and studies for the launch of the IFCB showed a widely diverse understanding of what capacity-building was and how it could best be approached (IWGCB, 1998). What is striking in these studies, is the lack of any underlying theory or appreciation of how organizations grow and how this process can be properly nurtured.

Such a perspective and “theory” is urgently needed. One field-tested candidate is provided by Allan Kaplan (1996). He formulates the necessary process as one of organizations (be they NGDOs or CBOs) moving from dependence, through independence, to a self-chosen and self-willed interdependence. His framework would suggest that too often NGDO relationships do not achieve the necessarily painful but empowering transition to independence of both parties. It is from this position of a proven foundation of self-worth, self-awareness and ability to stand on your own feet that interdependence can be *freely chosen*. Getting a better conceptual grounding on organizational evolution and the role of outsiders is a vital task if NGDOs are to be more effective in this core area of social change.

In addition, Kaplan (1999) challenges the prevailing, mechanical view of how organizations function and how they develop. He points out that what is most significant in terms of organizational capacity is intangible. It has to do with the soundness of concepts, a compelling vision, a coherent strategy and an enabling culture. Conversely, the aid system is most comfortable dealing with “lower level” tangible features, such as resources, manuals of procedures,

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<sup>72</sup> The 1990s have seen a rapid growth of NGDO support organizations (NGDOSOs) dedicated to building the capacity of NGDOs. A conference in January 1998, organized by the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) in Oxford, brought together some 50 NGDOSOs, from over 30 countries. They focused on what it meant to be an NGDOSO and defined what good practice meant for this type of organization and its role.

computerized systems and individuals and their skills. Only by shifting the organizational paradigm to appreciate the intangible, and to assume complexity rather than simplicity, will we be able to develop a more sound theory and necessary practice.

Alongside the challenges described above, NGDOs must do more to facilitate the linkage of isolated communities into their own networks and “wider and higher” civic associations. In other words, to adopt a perspective of fostering civic association that underpins and gives energy and force to social movements that agitate for the sort of changes envisaged in Copenhagen. The rhetoric is often there, but practice is lagging far behind.

At macro level(s), building downward accountability is probably the most urgent item on the NGDO agenda. In addition, there is also the need to make a conscious effort to link with like-minded civic associations not originating or premised on aid or external interventions. Experience suggests that assembling around a specific issue or shared concern is a “natural” way to build the mutual understanding and trust required to establish more institutionalized forms of interaction, such as national civic forums. However, it would be unhealthy if the motivation for coming together were principally to access (low quality) external resources. The purpose should be to alter domestic rules of the game to foster the inclusion of the broad spectrum of civil society actors. Doing so tests the democratic nature of civic organizations and of civil society itself. Some suggestions for how the international aid system could help in this respect are discussed in the following subsection.

### ***Expanding engagement with civil society beyond NGDOs***

On a number of occasions, it has been argued that constructive interaction with civil society is—for INGDOs, and for the aid system and its host governments—not the same as dealing with domestic NGDOs. Rather, it is argued that government outreach to CSOs should occur alongside as well as through NGDOs. To do so, the prevalent resource-transfer framework must be, notionally, set aside and new rules of engagement seriously considered.

For a start, the currency of dialogue cannot be funds, projects and external interventions. Instead, it needs to be one of dialogue on issues with citizens, debating “ideas” about civil society and civic action. The intention is not for civil society to fill the gap created by weak, failed or non-inclusive politics or government retrenchment. Instead, it is to help civic actors decide how political systems and democratic principles can be attuned to their specific political cultures and socio-political arrangements—one size does not fit all. In other words, to help locate diverse configurations of civil society in a country’s historical trajectory with a view to enhancing its role.

One approach to embarking on such a dialogue is “deep” mapping of civic expression and the social capital it embodies (van Rooy, 1996; Woolcock, 1997). This is not just documenting formal organizations alongside the state and market. It is understanding the social structures and patterns that give meaning to people’s lives and expression to their interests, beliefs, status, rights, obligations and aspirations. Mapping can help identify “points of entry”

that are more or less amenable to external initiatives. It can signal areas of opportunity and sensitivity. It also permits a critical assessment of the right and capability of external actors to intervene at all.<sup>73</sup>

It is argued that civic organizations need not be democratic in order to foster democracy (Blair, 1998:74). A counter-argument is that it cannot be assumed that CSOs necessarily want to pursue democratic ends. Interest groups may wish to “capture” elements of the state or its policies in ways that do not represent or advance the common good. CSOs can be an impediment as well as an asset to democratic processes (Salamon, 1993).

A common sense view would be that democratically run CSOs are likely to promote such internal values and principles in civic relations and state behaviour. Those governed autocratically would be less likely to do so. If this assumption holds true, then one possible role for external agencies would be to support the strengthening of democratic practices within CSOs at all levels of their organization, locally nationally and internationally. In particular, assistance is often required to create mandates based on constituencies *having adequate knowledge and timely, sound information*. This requires investment in processes that improve representation and create new, respected ways of negotiating differences. Often, in societies undergoing rapid change, existing mediating institutions are not up to the new tasks and shifting patterns of interests. The aid system would do well to create new ways and “spaces” for contending actors to come together—the intention behind forums associated with local government in South Africa. However, a word of caution is needed. There will be a natural tendency to slip into “project” mode when such initiatives or support are considered. Given the quality limitations of aid detailed so far, this would be a grave danger. The kind of reformed aid system described above might, however, reduce the likelihood of greater outreach to CSOs resulting in dependency and detaching civic organizations from their roots.

A further potential strategy for civic engagement is to act as an honest broker or convenor. An external role could be one of creating spaces and opportunities for the wide array of civic actors to meet and exchange experiences and ideas. An implicit intention would be to help CSOs, governments and others coalesce around common agendas, if they exist, and to explore how to act in consort. However, this must be done without prescribing what the agenda will be. Sometimes the outcomes will be central to social development goals and issues. Sometimes they will not. It depends on the

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<sup>73</sup> For example, guided by its mandate and policies, UNICEF (1999) is exploring how to map institutions that are interested in, concerned about and that impact on children’s rights. This is approached from a concept of different levels of social relations—from individuals, through households to national level, and beyond into international conditions and agreements. In relation to a specific problem of children, such as AIDS orphans, for each level an assessment is made of who is, could, or should be involved, what are they doing and how well they are doing it. This would include household coping mechanisms, provision of social services, welfare organizations, activist groups, domestic and international NGOs and the public policies that enable or constrain them. But the investigation goes further, to see how these actors relate—or could relate—to each other. In other words, the spaces between actors are apprehended as well. From such an exercise, a coherent point (or multiple points) of entry with relevant actors can be proposed and negotiated singly and jointly.

context. The challenge for external agencies is to accept and actually embrace an open-ended process.

This option could act as a building block for an idea advanced by Juan Somavía<sup>74</sup> at the inaugural session of the post-Copenhagen retrospective organized by UNRISD in 1997:

... a global social movement, some kind of framework that will connect all these different social actors, and which would establish a highly focused common agenda on which they could really act. The issues of the Social Summit—the eradication of poverty, full employment and social integration—are very clearly part of that common agenda (UNRISD, 1997:9).

### **Perspectives on institutional reform**

The guiding rubric for this paper is “changing the rules of the game”. This means altering the way actors in and beyond the aid system function, and in the process encouraging them to relate to one another in a more healthy fashion. For, unlike businesses, improved efficiency and performance will not be gained by externalizing costs. In social development, optimizing performance calls for distributing rights, obligations and costs across institutions based on an anti-poverty agenda within a systems perspective.

The biggest institutional shift required to improve social development and poverty reduction is for the aid system to function equitably and fairly. Presently it is still a discordant, poorly co-ordinated agglomeration of self-focused, self-interested entities with too little incentive to overcome dysfunction and pathologies. It is a system that, too often, fosters dependency while denying it is doing so, and prevents people taking charge of their own development choices and processes. It is also part of a system and structure of international relations that sends mixed signals.

Consequently, why should the poor and marginalized in society believe and trust aid’s actors to prioritize their interests over those of more powerful resource providers? For, we must be aware that citizens of the South and East see governments that are financing and promoting international social development in other settings too, for example at the World Trade Organization. There, their behaviour sends the opposite message, namely that they will only consider altering structural causes of poverty if it does not threaten or erode the enormous advantages already enjoyed by “contented” Northern voters (Galbraith, 1992). For this is the nature of short-term, narrow politics.

Put another way, in order for the aid system to spearhead and accelerate civic engagement in social development it must first become credible. And this means consistent deeds across the board, not words and double standards. Poor people and the societies in which they live must see and be convinced that *their interests count most* for those purporting to act because of the moral

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<sup>74</sup> Formerly, Chairman of the Preparatory and Main Committees at the World Summit for Social Development, and now Director-General of the International Labour Organization.

unacceptability of poverty and exclusion. There is no shortage of proposals about how this can be achieved. The preceding pages offer but one synopsis.

In the last analysis, necessary institutional reform boils down to honest commitment. This implies integrity, allied to a long-term political will stemming from an insight among the mass of the better-off that they live in an interdependent world. This insight must be reinforced by increased, better mobilized, and better articulated pressure, as a right, from below. This calls for broad-based international co-operation, not aid, as the best way to rid the world of poverty wherever it exists.

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