

NGOs: Progressive Force or Neo-Liberal Tool?[1]

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The increasing prominence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been seen by many as a potentially transformative force in promoting more equal, participative, and sustainable development. At the same time, NGOs have also been seen as co-opted by neo-liberalism, functioning in ways that maintain systemic inequality. Edwards and Hulme's (1996) thoughtful article reviews many of these debates, and this short essay, like others in this issue, reacts to this article as well as draws upon my own experience and analysis of the threats and promise of the NGO phenomenon.

NGOs, of course, are very diverse. The NGO literature makes a variety of distinctions among NGOs and aims to capture some significant differences in their functioning: e.g., national vs. international, Northern vs. Southern, community-based, religious-based, grassroots organizations, popular organizations, NGOs associated with social movements, and even progressive vs. neo-liberal NGOs (Edward and Hulme, 1996; Macdonald, 1995). While these and other distinctions are very important in understanding the contributions and functioning of NGOs, there are some lessons that can be learned from looking at the NGO phenomenon as a whole.

Mostly, I wish to comment on some of the ways in which the NGO sector has been an integral part of a system that reinforces unequal development. [2] Nonetheless, I want to begin by underscoring the progressive promise of NGOs. My own experience, over many years, and, most recently, working in very diverse contexts--with programs for street and working children in Brazil, girl's and women's education in Guatemala, and social and economic development in Mozambique--is that NGOs consistently run the most interesting, innovative social programs with a commitment to grassroots participation and social justice. [3] Along with this, as one might expect, some of the most committed social activists I have worked with have been in NGOs. This is not to say all or most NGOs are progressive nor is it to slight the work of others within the government or elsewhere who have excellent programs and similar commitments. I simply wish to acknowledge that, in my view, some of the promise of NGOs is clearly being fulfilled. At their best, NGOs act as a progressive element in the dialectic of global and local, empowering individuals and communities to face, resist, and transform the unequal relations of neo-liberalism. [4] Unfortunately, the ability of NGOs to carry out this role effectively is seriously compromised for a number of reasons. NGOs may have initially grown within the cracks and fissures left by the unmet needs of a capitalist, patriarchal, and racist world system. However, as Edwards and Hulme discuss, the incredibly rapid expansion of NGOs has primarily been a consequence of two decades of a neo-liberal focus on privatization. With the advent of Reagan/Thatcher politics on a global scale, bilateral and multilateral agencies developed a rationale for avoiding aid to governments: imperfect markets are better than imperfect states. [5] As a compromise between funding social programs through governments and complete laissez-faire, NGOs became an important vehicle for development funds with consequences that seriously undermined their progressive potential. [6]

In many countries, cutthroat competition developed among NGOs for funding. Those that succeeded were too often those which took a more compromising, apolitical stance, if not openly right-wing, and those which met the development agenda of their funders, or, at least, did not directly challenge it. As Edwards and Hulme (1996, pp. 966-7) point out, the result of this Achilles heel of external funding has led too often to a shift in the status of NGOs from partners to contractors: instead of forging partnerships with funders and communities, NGOs become contractors implementing the funder's agenda in the community. In some ways, they then become indistinguishable from the more private sector-oriented firms like, for example, the "beltway bandits" in Washington, DC that grew up as contractors for government agencies in earlier eras when limits were placed on hiring staff internally. NGOs thus become the new temporary workers of development, useful to national and international agencies for specific tasks, but easily discarded as circumstances change, and consequently limited in their ability to challenge development practice (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 963; Smith and Lipsky, 1993).

Edwards and Hulme (1996) discuss many of these criticisms, but frame them as limits to NGOs' ability to further the post-Cold War "New Policy Agenda" of efficient economic growth, democratic governance, and sustainable poverty alleviation (p. 961). But, from a critical perspective, these goals are camouflage for policies that benefit the few: growth for whom? what kind of democracy? [7] Lately, it seems even the camouflage may not be necessary. During the 1990s, poverty alleviation as a goal has been disappearing, even at the rhetorical level. The World Bank, which had poverty elimination as a founding mission, after decades of little "success," now argues that it does not have enough money to make a difference but can offer good advice to poorer nations, and perhaps, over the long run, that will make a difference (e.g., World Bank, 1995).

Rather than contributing to sustainable poverty alleviation, NGOs, despite their best efforts, have, at a systemic level contributed to sustaining poverty. Maintaining poverty and inequality is an integral part of the new and old policy agenda of capitalism. The NGO phenomenon has supported this agenda most strongly by contributing to the delegitimation of the State. The emphasis on NGOs helps ensure that no social programs "go to scale." [8] Despite some limited examples (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 964), few believe that NGOs offer any hope for systematically providing necessary social services on a large scale. In Brazil, for example, one estimate was that the hundreds of often excellent small-scale programs offered by NGOs for street and working children served less than one percent of those in need (Myers, 1991). The strength of NGOs has been their ability to work closely with local communities and to develop innovative programs that fit with local needs and context. Most NGO staff I know recognize that it is government that must bring such programs to large-scale. [9] Many NGOs have also recognized that governments, especially during the last two decades, have not been bringing such programs to scale. As a result, some NGOs have begun a new activity: lobbying the State for large-scale social change, sometimes even abandoning their program development work to become full-time policy advocates and to help in the development of social movements that press the State for policy change. [10]

NGOs dedicated to progressive social change are in an incredibly difficult situation. The need for their services is enormous, resources are very scarce, and, when available, come with strings attached. Most NGO staff I have worked with feel that they are putting their

fingers in just a few of the many holes in the dike. I vividly remember a Southeast Asia regional adult education conference in 1996. There was an excellent presentation about an NGO's work that had begun by helping AIDs victims in Thailand, but because social problems are so interlinked, over time they began to deal with related problems of sex education, prostitution, income generation, rural poverty, women's and children's rights, health, schooling, and others. The discussion at the end of this conference session became focused for a time on what it was that NGOs were really doing with such excellent small-scale programs. One participant put forth that such efforts grew out of their desire to "heal" social ills, that is, to transform the conditions that yield exclusion and disadvantage. This web-like pattern is common to many successful NGOs that begin with one social problem and extend themselves through all sorts of forward and backward linkages to related problems, from urban to rural, from adult to young child, from education to health, etc.

Those who work with NGOs recognize the problems above make progressive action very difficult, but they try to make the best of a bad situation. Despite the strings attached to funding, NGOs often try to remain true to their own agenda by a variety of strategies: not taking funds from those agencies they disagree with; not depending too much on one funding agency; and not playing agencies off against each other. While this may seem rational and even progressive from the point of view of individual NGOs, systemically the result is far from even coping with the deadly consequences of neo-liberalism. Unfortunately, today's market economics, especially with the minimal social welfare role assigned the State, makes full employment of human resources impossible, leads to cutbacks in already very inadequate social services, and has no room for the greater participation in governance that is essential to challenge the maintenance of inequalities. [11] Under the aegis of neo-liberalism, the situation worsens each day as more people than ever join the ranks of the excluded and exploited. "Healing" means transforming this world system. It does not mean eliminating markets but governing them and not treating them as sacred. It means guaranteeing the rights of people to a decent living and to meaningful and fair social participation.

This is not at all a call for despair. The question is how to bring such changes about. If, as in the distinction used by Macdonald (1995) and others, you work with a "progressive" NGO, what should you do? There is no roadmap or guide to successfully challenging, undermining, and transforming what is a very hegemonic world system. [12] There are an array of strategies progressive NGOs are trying which aim at fundamental changes, such as: develop more extensive partnerships with government and civil society; lobby for national policy changes; align with and help develop progressive social movements; focus more on systemic causes of social problems like trade policy, structural adjustment, and human rights; and increase the capacity of people to represent their own interests. [13]

Has the NGO phenomenon been "overrated" by progressives? Yes. Is it a "progressive force" or is it a "neo-liberal" tool? As feminist writers have been reminding us, it is never "either/or;" it is "both/and." NGOs are contested terrain in the struggle for social transformation. There are many reasons to believe that the NGO phenomenon is more business-as-usual: the agenda of NGOs is determined within a hegemonic world system, even progressive NGOs are co-opted, and even good strategies have a difficult time of

success. Nonetheless, on the whole, NGOs still constitute one of the most widespread challenges to current development strategies, especially as they form linkages with other elements of civil society and foster the development of progressive social movements. The serious commitments many NGOs have to social justice and grassroots activism continue to make them an important force in the struggle for a fair and sustainable development.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Comparative and International Education Society annual meeting, Buffalo, N.Y., March 17-22, 1998. I would like to thank Susanne Clawson, Tony Dewees, Peter Easton, David Palmer, George Papagiannis, and Angela Siqueira for thoughtful comments on a draft of this essay. The responsibility for the views expressed is, of course, mine alone.

[2] I, like others, find the term "development" to be so problematic that its use should be discontinued. Yet having no facility at doing so succinctly in this short essay, it remains (for good discussions see Fox, 1997 and Escobar, 1995).

[3] See Dewees and Klees (1995), Stromquist, Klees, and Miske (1998); and Klees, Matangala, Spronk, and Visser (1997), respectively.

[4] See Arnove and Torres (in press) for a broad discussion of these issues from a comparative education perspective.

[5] The imperfect logic of this rationale is pithily summarized above by Christopher Colclough, as quoted in Edwards and Hulme (1996, p.961).

[6] For an interesting and more positive assessment of this "third sector" of the economy (i.e., not public, not private), see the set of essays in OECD (1996).

[7] More participatory forms of democracy are discouraged by current market-obsessive policies and even the liberal democratic state is threatened. Cuts in State funds and authority make democratic demands on the State dangerous and destabilizing. The consequent retreat from democracy can be seen throughout the world. Nor is overall economic growth a goal of the world system. The goal of "efficient" economic growth (Edwards and Hulme, 1996, p. 961) is just used as camouflage for privatization. The real goal is to develop policy that increases wealth accumulation by the politically and economically powerful, even if faster, more diffused, more equal, and more sustainable growth could be achieved through expanded public sector investment.

[8] Framing this as a discussion of "going-to-scale" makes the question seem technical when it is about a fundamental transformation. The reasons social programs do not "go-to-scale" reflects a political unwillingness to temper, let alone resolve, the inequalities that are inherent to world system operation.

[9] There is sometimes hope expressed that successful NGO activities can "replicate themselves" or be "bought into" by other communities, thus accomplishing a more

natural and bottom-up "grow-to-scale" instead of a more centrally-determined government-aided go-to-scale blueprint (Easton et al., 1998, Klees et al. 1997). Still, to have such bottom-up replication happen on a wide scale would need considerable support from a much more participatory form of government than we now have.

[10] This tension between developing model programs and policy advocacy is not limited to NGOs; for example, it has long been a struggle within UNICEF.

[11] While restructuring economies to better satisfy basic needs for those excluded and marginalized can create wealth, it will also require some redistribution through taxation. To those who argue there is no tax capacity to do so, I offer as one response the most obscene statistic I have come across. Barnet and Cavanagh (1994) report that in 1994 there were 358 known billionaires in the world whose total net worth summed to the equivalent of the total net worth of the poorest 45 percent of the world's population, about 2.5 billion people. In the vast and deep concentrations of wealth in the world, there is considerable room for increased taxation.

[12] Debates about what constitute successful "non-reformist" reform strategies have long been an important feature of all progressive policy discussions (Gorz, 1973).

[13] See Macdonald (1995) for a good discussion.

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