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The role of NGOs and civil society in development and poverty reduction

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Abstract

Since the late 1970s, NGOs have played an increasingly prominent role in the development sector, widely praised for their strengths as innovative and grassroots-driven organisations with the desire and capacity to pursue participatory and people-centred forms of development and to fill gaps left by the failure of states across the developing world in meeting the needs of their poorest citizens. While levels of funding for NGO programmes in service delivery and advocacy work have increased alongside the rising prevalence and prominence of NGOs, concerns regarding their legitimacy have also increased. There are ongoing questions of these comparative advantages, given their growing distance away from low-income people and communities and towards their donors. In addition, given the non-political arena in which they operate, NGOs have had little participation or impact in tackling the more structurally-entrenched causes and manifestations of poverty, such as social and political exclusion, instead effectively depoliticising poverty by treating it as a technical problem that can be 'solved'. How, therefore, can NGOs 'return to their roots' and follow true participatory and experimental paths to empowerment? As this paper explores, increasingly, NGOs are recognised as only one, albeit important, actor in civil society. Success in this sphere will require a shift away from their role as service providers to that of facilitators and supporters of broader civil society organisations through which low-income communities themselves can engage in dialogue and negotiations to enhance their collective assets and capabilities.

Keywords: NGOs, civil society, poverty reduction

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1. Introduction

Across the developing world, states with limited finances and riddled by poor governance and corruption have failed to lead to development for all of their citizens. Within this context, alternative forms of development have been pursued, and since the 1980s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been increasingly advocated as a means through which the gulf between citizens' needs and existing services can be bridged. Where states cannot provide sufficient goods, services or enabling environments that help citizens in securing livelihoods, or where disadvantaged groups are excluded from existing state institutions, alternative channels of service provision and/or holding governments to account must be found. It is into this gap that NGOs have neatly fitted. Early criticisms of NGOs persist, however, and their activities have been more concentrated in service provision than in advocacy and empowerment. Their difficulties in promoting long-term structural change have led to the recognition of broader civil society organisations within the good governance agenda, given their stronger position for transforming state-societal relationships.

2. The emergence and expansion of NGOs in development

It was perceived failures of state-led development approaches throughout the 1970s and 1980s that fuelled interest in NGOs as a development alternative, offering innovative and people-centred approaches to service delivery, advocacy and empowerment. While NGOs and their position within the development sector have risen dramatically, the taxonomy of NGOs remains problematic (Vakil 1997). Emerging from long-term traditions of philanthropy and self-help (Lewis and Kanji 2009), NGOs vary widely in origin and levels of formality. While terms such as 'NGOs' and 'third sector' are classificatory devices that help understand a diverse set of organisations, they can also obscure: in presuming the institutionalised status of NGOs, for example, one potentially ignores a large number of unregistered organisations seeking to further the public good (Srinivas 2009).

Some definitions of 'NGO' have been suggested by legal status, economic and/or financial considerations, functional areas, and their organisational features – that NGOs are both non-state and self-governing (Vakil 1997). Frequently, too, NGOs have been classified by what they are not (neither government, nor profit-driven organisations), rather than what they are, highlighting their differences to and distance from the state and private sectors, who have yet to meet the interests of poor and disadvantaged groups (White 1999). One classification we can narrow down to for our purposes is 'Development NGOs', but even this masks an extremely diverse set of organisations, ranging from small, informal, community-based organisations to large, high-profile, international NGOs working through local partners across the developing world. Given the difficulties defining 'NGO', disaggregating within the NGO sector is often based on

their *type*. NGOs based in one country and seeking development objectives abroad are often referred to as international or northern NGOs (INGOs or NNGOs).¹ These organisations may have adequate finance and resources, but have limited country-level and grassroots knowledge, choosing instead to work at the local level through domestic or 'southern' NGO 'partners' (SNGOs), who are in closer proximity to communities geographically, culturally, and linguistically. While often referred to as North-South partnerships, these tend to be highly unequal, balanced heavily in favour of those with the funding and resources.

Given these classificatory difficulties, definitions and justifications for the emergence of NGOs have centred on their ability to offer a 'development alternative', making a set of claims about the more effective approaches necessary for addressing poverty and challenging unequal relationships (Bebbington et al 2008; Lewis and Kanji 2009) and justifying a role for NGOs in filling the gaps caused by inefficient state provision of services. The grassroots linkages they offer are the major strength of NGOs, enabling them to design services and programmes using innovative and experimental approaches centred around community participation (Bebbington et al 2008), and through their programmes, to empower disadvantaged groups and help them gain voice in the governance spaces from which they have so far been excluded. The adoption of 'empowerment' as a bottom line is their greatest asset: not only do NGOs strive to meet the needs of the poor, they aim to assist them in articulating those needs themselves through participatory, people-centred, and rights-based approaches (Drabek 1987).

NGOs continue to rise in prevalence and prominence. Global figures are hard to come by, given the lack of a coordinating body,² but Epstein and Gang (2006) reveal that for all Development Assistance Countries, official development assistance (ODA) to NGOs increased by 34 percent between 1991-92 and 2002, from US\$928 million to US\$1246 million,³ and the number of international NGOs grew by 19.3 percent over this decade. Along with rapid increase in NGO numbers, there has been a simultaneous trend towards expansion in the *size* of NGOs, particularly in South Asia, where Bangladesh is

¹ It is predominantly NGOs from Western countries that follow this model, hence the term 'northern NGOs'. BRAC, a Bangladeshi NGO, is the first example of South-South cooperation, having now expanded its operations to 10 national programmes. A key element of contemporary governance in the developing world is the relation between indigenous and southern NGOs and external, usually northern-based ones: in this sense, civil society is not nationally-centred, but increasingly internationally networked (Mohan 2002).

² This has led to great differences in estimations of NGOs at a national and international level. Looking at Bangladesh, for example: the Federation of NGOs records 900 members, the Government's NGO Affairs Bureau registers 6,500 NGOs, and the Department of Social Services, which includes semi-formal and informal civil society organisations in their definition, lists 23,000 registered organisations (Gauri and Galef 2005).

³ This represents an increase from 1.59 to 2.14 percent of ODA (Epstein and Gang 2006), highlighting that the majority of foreign aid remains firmly rooted in bilateral and multilateral government relationships. Lewis (2005) estimates that even at the height of NGO funding by donors, only between 10 and 20 percent of total assistance went to NGOs.

home to the Grameen Bank and BRAC, whose early successes were another justification for the rising interest in NGOs as a development alternative (Edwards and Hulme 1996; Barr et al 2005). NGOs are no longer minor actors on the development stage, in some cases receiving as much or more funding than their government counterparts (Brass 2011). Understanding their expansion must be contextualised within the history and systems in which NGOs are embedded (Lewis and Kanji 2009).

Until the late 1970s, NGOs were little-recognised in the implementation of development projects or in policy influence. Those few existing were perceived as bit players in service provision, short-term relief, and emergency work. A remarkable change in their scale and significance was triggered in the late 1970s, when NGOs became the new sweethearts of the development sector. The ideological ascendancy of neoliberalism at this time was accompanied by the rise of structural adjustment in aid policies, reductions in public expenditure, and the withdrawal of state-provided services. Within this radical reform, the market replaced the state at the centre of development strategies, and poverty lost its position as an explicit concern, given beliefs in the trickle-down effects of economic growth (Murray and Overton 2011). Continued donor distrust and frustrations with states generated and fuelled interest in NGOs as desirable alternatives, viewing them favourably for their representation of beneficiaries and their role as innovators of new technologies and ways of working with the poor (Gill 1997; Barr et al 2005; Lewis 2005; Murray and Overton 2011).

The neoliberal approach and its accompanying structural adjustment programmes started to be drawn back from the mid-1990s and the development discourse shifted again. Under the emerging good governance agenda the state took centre stage again, alongside recognition of the explicit need to target poverty alleviation through a more interventionist, welfare-oriented, state-centred and scaled-up approach (Murray and Overton 2011). Impacts pulled in opposite directions. On the one hand, the 're-governmentalisation' of aid increased state funding in an attempt to influence recipient governments, drawing attention away from NGOs (Lewis and Kanji 2009). At the same time, however, the good governance agenda embraced the language of democracy, human rights, and public participation (Murray and Overton 2011), thus consolidating the centrality of NGOs in the development landscape. Into the 2000s a new aid regime had evolved, promising to move beyond growth-focused neoliberalism towards greater consultation between donors and recipients and a greater focus on poverty and responsibility for the nation-state (Murray and Overton 2011). Amidst the new focus on strengthening civil society, concerns with NGOs led to greater recognition that NGOs constitute only one part of civil society. Box 1 provides an overview of these changing discourses and paradigms.

Box 1: The rising prominence of NGOs

Until late 1970s:	A limited number of small NGOs receiving little external support constitute the NGO sector. Most are northern-based with a southern presence, often based on religious assistance and/or in short-term relief.
Late 1970s to 1980s:	'The NGO decade' takes place amidst the Western pursuit of neoliberal agendas, with NGOs emerging as a promising development alternative.
Late 1990s:	Alongside emergence of the good governance agenda, the first concerns surrounding NGOs take off alongside a focus back on the role of the state.
2000s:	A new international aid regime promises greater consultation and focus on non-growth factors. NGOs with their people-centred, rights-based, and grassroots-driven approaches are well-suited to continue riding the NGO wave.
2010s:	With persistent concerns of NGOs remaining unaddressed and recognition of their limited success in advocacy and empowerment, there is increasing recognition that NGOs are only one sector within broader civil society and they must reorient themselves with their grassroots-roots.

2.1 NGOs and the state

NGOs are often polarised with local and national governments, but such a dichotomy overlooks the nature of relationships between the two, which can range from overt and hidden tensions and active hostility to cooperation and collaboration, depending on multiple influences such as successive government regimes and their dispositions and changing NGO strategies and interventions (Rosenberg et al 2008; Rose 2011). While there is scope for positive relationships between government and NGOs for those working towards mutual goals in service and welfare provision, those working openly in advocacy and human rights tend to be viewed with suspicion or open hostility, especially when explicitly challenging the state. In Pakistan, for example, Nair (2011) highlights the potential for collaboration when NGOs remain in predefined roles of service provision, but the generation of conflict when NGOs step outside these to question government policies. While collaboration and strong linkages with national governments assists

programme sustainability (Barr et al 2005; Rosenberg et al 2008), where interests of the state and NGOs increasingly coincide, this runs the risk of pushing out the interests of those they are both responsible to, the poor (White 1999).

Prevailing institutional arrangements underpin the emergence and proliferation of NGOs in developing countries, ensuring that every country's NGO sector is different and distinctive (Lewis 1998). Diverse and complex, relations between governments and NGOs vary considerably from country to country and region to region.

In South Asia, Nair (2011) traces the evolutionary history of relationships between the state and NGOs in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, finding that a mixture of socio-political environments, NGO activities, donor presence and agendas, and global policies and pressures have influenced government–NGO relationships to varying degrees across the three countries. A withering of formal representative institutions fuelled the explosion of NGOs in India, with political parties since the 1970s being increasingly dismissive of excluded castes and groups (Sethi, in Clarke 1998). Likewise, in the Philippines, too, the inability of political parties to secure representation and participation for a large proportion of the population created an institutional vacuum into which NGOs stepped (Clark 1998). In contrast, NGOs in the East Asian countries of Indonesia and Vietnam proliferated in response to state hegemony rather than the weakness of formal institutions, attempting to expand the limited political space available to civil society (Clark 1998).

Characterised by its history of active associational life in which indigenous membership-based organisations have long played a role in community life and development (Hearn 2007), Africa experienced its NGO boom a decade later, starting in the 1990s. Kenya, for example, experienced a rapid increase in registered NGOs, from 400 in 1990 to over 6,000 in 2008 (Brass 2011).⁴ Likewise, in Tanzania, the 41 registered NGOs in 1990 had increased to more than 10,000 by 2000 (Hearn 2007). In some countries, such as Uganda, the NGO sector is viewed with mixed feelings, including rampant suspicion that the public good is not the primary motivation fuelling NGOs (Barr et al 2005). Political influences have been suggested as a strong influence on NGOs in Africa, with NGOs joining the patronage networks of political leaders (Brass 2012).

In Latin America, NGOs have historically functioned in opposition to the government, playing a crucial role in strengthening civil society (Drabek 1987). Consequently, the NGO sector here emerges from a stronger and more radicalised body of civil society organisations in opposition to the authoritarian regimes across the region (Bebbington 1997; Miraftab 1997; Bebbington 2005). In Mexico, for example, NGOs emerged from university-educated members of the middle class motivated by their desire for

⁴ The number of registered community-based organisations in Kenya is much higher, reaching 220,000.

'transformation from below' through a process of mobilisation and sensitisation with poor communities (Miraftab 1997). In this original form, community development was seen as a secondary goal, justified only on the basis of serving the higher goals of social change (Miraftab 1997). These popular movements, have, over time, experienced fragmentation, weakening, and identity crisis (Bebbington 1997; Gill 1997; Miraftab 1997). Transitions to democracy throughout the region meant NGOs could no longer base their identity purely on resistance, and a distortion in incentives fostered by foreign aid exacerbated pressures on NGOs to move towards greater collaboration with government in service provision (Bebbington 1997; Gill 1997; Clark 1998).

3. NGOs as the 'development alternative': service providers or advocates for the poor?

Two distinct roles for NGOs are highlighted, both as service providers and advocates for the poor.⁵ The service provider–advocate divide differentiates between the pursuit of 'Big-D' and 'little-d' development (Bebbington et al 2008; Hulme 2008). 'Big-D' development sees 'Development' as a project-based and intentional activity, in which tangible project outputs have little intention to make foundational changes that challenge society's institutional arrangements. In contrast, 'little-d' 'development' regards development as an ongoing process, emphasising radical, systemic alternatives that seek different ways of organising the economy, social relationships and politics (Bebbington et al 2008). The shape of NGOs has changed over time. While many NGOs, particularly in Latin America, were created around the explicit intention of addressing structural issues of power and inequality and expanding civil society against hegemonic or weak and unrepresentative states, they have seen a shift in their organisational character and in the nature of their work, instead adopting technical and managerial solutions to social issues such as poverty through service delivery and welfare provision. Ninety percent of registered NGOs in Kenya, for example, are involved primarily in service delivery (Brass 2011). In the process, NGOs and their activities have become professionalised and depoliticised (Kamat 2004).

In their role as service providers, NGOs offer a broad spectrum of services across multiple fields, ranging from livelihood interventions and health and education service to more specific areas, such as emergency response, democracy building, conflict resolution, human rights, finance, environmental management, and policy analysis (Lewis and Kanji 2009). Interests in the contribution of NGOs to service delivery did not rise only because of the enforced rollback of state services, but also because of their perceived comparative advantages in service provision, including their ability to innovate

⁵ Some argue that distinguishing between the conflicting objectives of service delivery and advocacy is not always helpful, given their strong interaction in NGO strategy and objectives (Batley 2011; Rose 2011). There is, however, a big difference in outputs of empowerment between being advocates *for* the poor and supporting the poor to be advocates for themselves.

and experiment, their flexibility to adopt new programmes quickly, and most importantly, their linkages with the grassroots that offer participation in programme design and implementation, thereby fostering self-reliance and sustainability (Korten 1987; Vivian 1994; Bebbington et al 2008; Lewis and Kanji 2009). These strengths, it was widely believed, would foster “more empowering, more human, and more sustainable” forms of development (Foster, in Bebbington 2004). These grassroots linkages are, after all, the reason NNGOs work through local partners, recognising that objectives and priorities of international organisations may not reflect those at the grassroots, and closer proximity at this level is necessary for more effective participatory designs. In the wake of failed top-down development discourse, NGOs were seen to offer the sole organisational forms that could implement the global commitment to ‘bottom-up’ development (Kamat 2004; Hearn 2007).⁶

It was not until later in the 1990s that donors started promoting a second important role for NGOs, viewing them as organisational embodiments of civil society that could play a role in political reform (Harsh et al 2010). While their role in as ‘democratisers of development’ (Bebbington 2005) is highlighted as frequently as their role as service providers, rarely is it articulated how NGOs should participate in the political process to achieve this (Edwards and Hulme 1996). Challenging the state can lead to hostile government–NGO relationships and threaten prospects for sustainability, and donors, too, are often anxious to ignore the political realities of NGO interventions (Clark 1998).⁷ Their role as social development agencies, therefore, takes precedence over their role as political actors (Clark 1998).

The role and contributions of NGOs in advocacy and empowerment is difficult to define, but we can look at their efforts along a broad spectrum. At one end are those NGOs actively intervening in democracy-building and transforming state–societal relations, such as those emerging to mobilise and support radical social movements in the early ‘NGO decade’ in Latin America. NGOs are vastly constrained in this sphere, seeking instead to convince governments that they are non-political. Instead, at the other end of the spectrum, most NGOs seek ‘empowerment’ as an indirect outcome of their wider

⁶ A last advantage of the role of NGOs in service provision is that they provide more satisfactory accounts of programmes, and are seen as a safer alternative in the context of states with limited resources and poor records of corruption and accountability (Harsh et al 2010).

⁷ Many donors are reluctant to acknowledge that funding NGOs frequently, if indirectly, aims to strengthen opposition to government regimes (Clark 1998). There has, however, been greater success and impact of advocacy at the global level, such as success of well-mobilised campaigns around debt cancellation, landmines, fair trade, and more recently, the controversial Kony 2012 campaign (Ibrahim and Hulme 2011). Kamat (2004) highlights that ‘advocacy NGOs’ do not operate locally nor represent a geographically-defined community, tending instead to be issue-based and working across multiple communities, regions or countries. They organise national and international campaigns for different kinds of policy or legislative changes, functioning in this way as more of a lobby group.

service delivery activities.⁸ People-centred and participatory approaches to service delivery are suggested in this approach to lead to local-level capacity building in the long run, fostering a stronger democratic culture in which changes are hypothesised to feed into local and national institutions and processes. Others argue that NGOs pursue advocacy by stealth, by working in partnership with the government through which they can demonstrate strategies and methods for more effective service provision (Batley 2011; Rose 2011).⁹ The inability and/or unwillingness of NGOs to engage in political dimensions has forced us to re-evaluate early claims that NGOs can promote democracy with a caveat: NGOs promote democracy *only* when they contribute to the improvement of citizen participation (Hudock 1999; Ghosh 2009).

NGOs do, therefore, have a strong political dimension, even within service delivery and welfare provision (White 1999; Townsend et al 2004). Ghosh's (2009) description of NGOs as 'political institutions' highlights the difficulties NGOs face in remaining non-political (or convincing the government they are non-political) while advancing their and their clients' interests in a highly political arena. One account of NGOs in Uganda, too, highlights the delicate balance NGOs play in becoming "entangled in the politics of being non-political" (Dicklitch and Lwanga 2003). Viewing NGOs as strengtheners of democracy and civil society is, therefore, an overly generous view, given they must embark on advocacy work in incremental ways and can rarely operate in ways that reach genuine transformative agendas.

Throughout the 1990s, NGOs may have been viewed largely as 'heroic organisations' seeking to do good in difficult circumstances (Lewis and Kanji 2009), but this rose-tinted view has been rolled back amidst increasing acknowledgement that NGOs are not living up to their expectations. A number of emerging criticisms highlight problems of representativeness, limitations to effectiveness and empowerment, and difficulties remaining loyal to their distinctive values, which are all undermining the legitimacy of NGOs (Atack 1999). That early worries have yet to be systematically addressed by NGOs has led to them becoming fully-fledged concerns and criticisms, and as NGOs have become increasingly professionalised and service-oriented, their proposed

⁸ Improved agency through increases in individual collective assets, however, is not enough to promote empowerment, which is a process that must be accompanied too by wider changes in the structural environment that improve the terms of recognition of poor and excluded groups

⁹ Establishing good working relationships with government officials and agencies, Batley (2011) highlights, is a deliberate strategy through which NGOs can have direct influence on the state, and through this they are seeking a position that gives them greater voice, influence and leverage on government policy and practice through demonstration and engagement. Tactics for working within structural constraints are similar for NGOs and broader civil society, seeking greater influence in the space for negotiation. Through seeking greater 'insider status', many successful NGOs make the choice to sacrifice some level of autonomy/independence from government to ensure increased leverage and influence within government policy and practice. White (1999), however, cautions that aligning interests with national governments draws NGOs further away from their intended beneficiaries.

strengths in terms of their loyalty to the grassroots and innovative ability have been undermined, as the next section explores.

4. Specious or specialist? Mounting concerns in the NGO sector

NGOs, therefore, rose to prominence as vehicles of popular participation and advocates for the poor, as well as service providers (Bebbington 2005). Seen to offer participatory and people-centred approaches to development that were both innovative and experimental, they offered the opportunity for generating bottom-up opportunities for development, reflecting the needs and wants of local communities and disadvantaged groups. The initial hype greeting NGOs as a development alternative, however, was surprisingly uncritical, based more on assumptions than evidence (Hearn 2007; Bebbington et al 2008; Lewis and Kanji 2009; Fowler 2011).

Criticisms of NGOs first emerged in the mid-1990s, with early performance indicators raising questions about their much lauded comparative advantages. Some have argued that such high expectations on NGOs meant that some level of disillusionment with their activities and impact was inevitable (Vivian 1994; Bebbington 2005; Hearn 2007; Srinivas 2009; Harsh et al 2010). Edwards and Hulme (1996) first expressed concern at the close proximity and high dependence of NGOs to donors, meaning that NGOs were compromising their grassroots orientation, innovativeness, accountability, autonomy, and ultimately, their legitimacy (Edwards and Hulme 1996). Their concerns continue today, and while research on NGOs and wider aid channels has shed more light on these issues,¹⁰ this has not led to any systematic action by the donor and NGO community.

¹⁰ Early concerns of NGOs were not only down to their organisational structure and impact, but also for the fact that NGOs were neither well understood, nor well researched. Early research was based on hard-to-generalise case-studies, or carried out on a quasi-consultancy basis for NGOs, thereby bringing into question the positionality of researchers and their ability to establish greater analytic distance (Clark 1998; Bebbington 2004; Lewis 2005; Barr et al 2005; Tvedt 2006; Hulme 2008; Harsh et al 2010). In addition, a strong ideological emphasis, both for or against the NGO sector, has maintained descriptive research and limited efforts to find a clear conceptual framework for the sector, and little effort has been made to bring together themes and concerns of NGOs across the North-South 'fault line' that exists in NGO theory and practice (Lewis 1998b; Lewis 2005). Furthermore, with research treating the organisation as the unit of analysis, much research has failed to analyse NGOs in terms of the institutions and social structures of which they are a part (Bebbington 2004; Tvedt 2006). Much remains to be known about NGOs, but there has also been significant process in this sector recently, including some cross-sector quantitative studies at the national and international level using new survey data (see for example, Salamon and Anheier 1997; Barr et al 2005; Koch 2007; Bano 2008; Koch et al 2009; Burger and Owens 2010; Brass 2012), and several recent qualitative cross-country or cross-sectoral studies (see, for example, Kilby 2006; Rosenberg et al 2008; Elbers and Arts 2011; Batley 2011; and Rose 2011). The role research must play in is to put together a solid theoretical body of knowledge that can be stripped down into a persuasive policy narrative in order to propose and outline a full-blooded development alternative (Hulme 2008).

4.1 Grassroots orientation

It is commonly viewed that NGOs provide more effective targeted aid, given their closer proximity to the poor, and that their operations should not be subject to distortions by commercial or political interests (Koch et al 2009). When the challenge of NGOs as a development alternative was first proposed, the centrality of this strength to the legitimacy of NGOs was strikingly evident, with Drabek (1987) forewarning NGOs not to “forget their grassroots origins and links, the basis of their greatest strength”. With their participatory and bottom-up development approach, they are differentiated by the fact that their programmes should reflect local contexts, needs and realities. Institutional imperatives of organisational survival and growth dominate over these development principles, however, and over several decades this has led to a redefinition of NGO goals and objectives and a change in their relationships with the state, donors and the poor (Miraftab 1997; Power et al 2002; Townsend et al 2004; Edwards 2008). Their unequal position in the international aid chain means that NGOs have become too close to the powerful, and too far from the powerless (Hulme and Edwards 1997; Edwards 2008).

Two major problems result, leading NGOs to compromise their ability to lead grassroots-driven and bottom-up programmes and to prioritise greater accountability to donors. Contrary to popular perceptions, therefore, NGOs face significant difficulties tailoring programmes to local needs and realities, incentivised, instead, in a competitive and donor-driven funding environment, to formulate their strategies and policies in line with donor priorities and interests. As Bebbington (1997: 1759) highlights, this implies a shift in the nature of an NGO, “turning it – at least within the realms of these contracts – into a subcontracted development consultancy” (Bebbington 1997: 1759).

International donors have particular goals to achieve through their spending, creating incentives for NGOs to align their objectives and priorities with these in pursuit of funds and leading towards the external determination of local agendas (Gill 1997; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Fowler 2000; Mohan 2002; Epstein and Gang 2006; Tvedt 2006; Elbers and Arts 2011; Simon Morfit 2011).¹¹ Donor priorities and funding have seen a strong shift to a poverty-focused agenda (Clark 1995; Atack 1999; White 1999; Bebbington et al

¹¹ As Simon Morfit (2011) illustrates, for example, donor prioritisation of HIV/AIDS in Malawi has caused other key sectors to shrink or disappear, including pressing issues such as agriculture, which has diminished drastically at the same time as HIV/AIDS’ rise to prominence. That this is largely a result of donor preferences is evidenced in changing funding allocations over this period. AIDS funding to Malawi increased from around one percent of total development funding in 1989 to nearly 30 percent in 2006, and as its funding has increased, that available to other sectors has diminished. NGOs have some room for manoeuvre in managing this narrow funding opportunity, by framing other sectoral programmes through an HIV/AIDS lens to secure support. Whether or not these are as effective as funding those issues directly can be questioned, however, and some key concerns that are not easily linked with HIV/AIDS, such as agriculture and governance, are neglected (Simon Morfit 2011).

2008),¹² and in the process taken steps back from broader objectives of empowerment which recognise that while poverty reduction is an important goal in itself, it is also a condition within the broader goal of empowerment (Atack 1999). While donors may recognise the role of NGOs in making the voices of the poor heard in programme design and holding governments to account, the reality is that at the same time they are funding NGOs to supply target-oriented services directly, both professionalising and depoliticising operations by turning NGOs into implementers or contractors of donor policy, rather than representatives of grassroots constituencies (Edwards and Hulme 1996; Bebbington 1997; Fyvie and Ager 1999; Hudock 1999; Hailey 2000; Kamat 2004; Townsend et al 2004; Bebbington 2005; Hearn 2007; Bebbington et al 2008; Edwards 2011b; Elbers and Arts 2011).

The replacement of broader goals of empowerment by measurable outputs overlooks or ignores the systems, processes and institutions that perpetuate poverty. This depoliticises strategies open to NGOs for promoting 'little-d' development, leading them away from relationships with social movements and towards narrow and specific targeted programmes for 'big-D' development (Power et al 2002; Bebbington et al 2008). This means that the long-lasting ingredients for development, such as local initiative, resilience and cohesion, self-reliance, and resourcefulness are not met (Power et al 2002). The increased professionalism encouraged by donors, therefore, means that the original distinctive values of NGO are under threat in the rush to achieve tangible and quantifiable measures of development (Hailey 2000; Power et al 2002; Elbers and Arts 2011). Increasingly seeking poverty reduction through projects rather than political change and redistribution depoliticises the structural condition of poverty (Mohan 2002; Bebbington 2005).¹³

The external determination of local agendas erodes the concept and processes of grassroots participation. NGOs flutter around the bottom rungs of a 'participation ladder',¹⁴ with communities rarely exercising control over their activities. In service delivery-oriented models of poverty reduction which assume that poverty can be eliminated by increased access to resources or services, participation is not political action, since it makes no attempt to change the underlying structures and processes

¹² The machinery driving the global development agenda has created a strong 'development buzz' to capture public hearts and bring attention to the world's poor (Collier 2007; Cornwall 2007; Lewis and Kanji 2009). The simple messages they convey, however, cannot capture the complex problems and processes underlying the world's development issues, and addressing them as simple 'one-size-fits-all' solutions will be unable to capture the diversity of experiences and drivers of these problems within and across developing countries.

¹³ As Bebbington (2005) further highlights, even the new focus on poverty reduction has depoliticised development. Up to the 1990s, all NGOs in the Andean region spoke far more about development as social change and less specifically about poverty reduction.

¹⁴ Participation ladders distinguish between different levels or kinds of participation, ranging from a narrow focus of beneficiaries being 'informed', 'involved', to achieving bargaining power vis-à-vis NGOs or the state, and finally, to owning the entire process (Ebrahim 2003)

underlying limited and unequal access in the first place (Ebrahim 2003). While rooted in values of participation, therefore, in practice, “most appear to do little to advance these goals” (Joshi and Moore 2000). Participation must be repoliticised and empowerment re-imagined as an ongoing process of engagement with political struggles at a range of spatial scales (Williams 2004).

Other negative influences on participation are grounded in the organisational interests of NGOs, who, given their prioritisation of institutional survival, are incentivised to keep power over decision-making and the distribution of funds between themselves and community groups highly unequal,¹⁵ developing and maintaining patron–client relationships with beneficiary communities, rather than garnering their true participation in programmes, and thereby threatening programme sustainability and empowerment outcomes (White 1999; Ghosh 2009). For NGOs to return to their grassroots-centred approach they must start taking participatory design and implementation seriously. Without greater commitment to their community-driven and grassroots approach, there is no means through which NGO programmes can be realigned with local realities and brought closer to goals of empowerment. As Bolnick (2008: 324) argues,

What needs to be recognized is that it is not possible to talk of real people’s participation or equal partnership when the decision to keep power and resources within the hands of professionals and out of the hands of the communities is one of the preconditions of the engagement.

Implementing bottom-up learning will assist NGOs to better align their practices and core values and allow local realities to form the basis for programme designs, fundraising targets and methods, and management policies, plans and budgets (Power et al 2002).

Where NGOs choose to locate can also limit the proximity of NGOs to disadvantaged groups and communities necessary for grassroots participation. NGOs decide where to locate on a number of factors, including geographic vulnerability, ease of access, the availability of donor funding, and political and religious influence (Mohan 2002; Bebbington 2004; Koch 2007; Koch et al 2009; Brass 2012). Brass (2012) distinguishes between ‘saintly’, ‘self-serving’, and ‘political’ NGOs, differentiating between those which locate themselves according to relative and absolute need, to convenient access to goods, services and infrastructure, or according to patronage networks decided by local

¹⁵ Current systems of ‘resource lodging’ mean that NGOs with headquarters in capital cities have little motivation to increase the proportion of resources transferred to local communities, who are the intended targets of funding received. Resource lodging’ is the practice of financial, human and material resources ‘sticking’ at various points in the aid chain from donors to recipients. This does not see a lack of accountability as a problem in terms of corruption as personal gain, but as leading to organisational practices that lodge or divert resources in or to particular places on the way from source to intended targets (See Harsh et al 2010).

politics, respectively. In her analysis of NGOs in Kenya, she finds convenience factors to be a strong influence on locational choice and that targeting criteria are based on access to services rather than human development indicators, finding NGOs to be both 'saintly' and 'self-serving' in their efforts to balance both pragmatism and their charitable values (Brass 2012).

Donor funding has a strong influence on targeting at the international level. In a study of 61 large international NGOs in 13 donor countries, Koch et al (2009) find that it is neither poverty nor poor governance¹⁶ that influences NGOs' choice of location. Instead, aid becomes tightly clustered in countries where donors are located, resulting in and reinforcing the 'donor-darling'/'donor orphan' divide (Koch 2007; Koch et al 2009) and contributing to uneven patterns of development (Bebbington 2004). Donor geo-priorities have also resulted in an increase in the 'securitisation' of aid, with active realignment by donors with diplomacy and defence (Bebbington et al 2008; Fowler 2011).

Their reliance on the programmatic and geographic priorities and definitions of poverty of donors means that NGOs do not hold, as commonly perceived, strong comparative advantages in grassroots-driven development. Their limitations in designing and following community-driven and participatory development strategies and interventions mean that their interventions tend to align with the social, political and economic agendas of donors, rather than those of local communities and the poor whom they are meant to represent. The increasingly professionalised and depoliticised nature of NGOs marked by this departure from the grassroots leads to many undesirable consequences, including the invalidation of participatory approaches, reduced cultural sensitivity, weakened ties with the local level, and a dilution of the NGO's core values (Elbers and Arts 2011).

4.2 Accountability and autonomy

'Good governance' is not a concept limited to state activities. Even the most ardent supporters of NGOs highlight that good governance is critical for the sector to maintain its credibility, and to be viewed as representative they too must operate in a transparent, accountable and participatory manner (Atack 1999; Barr et al 2005). Accountability is the process through which individuals and/or organisations report to a recognised authority and are held responsible for their actions (Edwards and Hulme 1996). Different forms of accountability include upwards and downwards accountability to patrons (donors) and

¹⁶ The argument for donor funding to NGOs suggests we can expect more NGO aid to go to countries with poor governance conditions, given the ineffectiveness of government-to-government transfers under these conditions that leads to greater donor engagement with civil society actors. There is no evidence, they find, to show that NGOs complement official aid objectives through engaging in the difficult environments in which state aid agencies find it difficult to reach needy citizens (Koch et al 2009).

clients (beneficiaries) as well as internal accountability in meeting their responsibility to their vision and mission (Ebrahim 2003). Today's unclear lines of accountability between NGOs and citizens indicates that NGOs have traversed the path they were early advised against, not to simply adopt the development agendas of others and in doing so, "run the risk of becoming yet another system of aid managers and disbursers rather than development agents in their own right" (Drabek 1987).

Their bottom-up approach to development suggests implicitly that NGOs are accountable to the communities they represent, and it is this downwards accountability that impacts upon NGO effectiveness in empowerment outcomes for poor and marginalised groups (Kilby 2006). Although NGOs are considered 'independent' organisations, however, they are characterised by a high dependency on donor funding, depending on donor funds for around 85 to 90 percent of their income and risking collapse without continued support (Fowler 2000; Tvedt 2006). Such dependence has skewed the alignment of NGOs away from beneficiaries and towards donors in terms of accountability. Critiques of NGOs as unaccountable to and unrepresentative of their constituents must, therefore, be understood within the context of the broader aid chain, within which NGOs are forced to grapple with multiple accountabilities to donors, beneficiaries, staff and supporters, and host governments (Fyvie and Ager 1999; Hudock 1999; Joshi and Moore 2000; Bebbington 2005; Bebbington et al 2008; Lewis and Kanji 2009).

Unequal relationships between donors and NGOs lead to the irreconcilable position in which they represent grassroots communities but are accountable primarily to external organisations (Mohan 2002). The aid system is today structured so that as long as NGOs can keep donors satisfied, they can grow, thrive and expand even when providing inadequate services (Mohan 2002; Power et al 2002). The cost of accountability to donors is high, being a resource-intensive activity requiring money, time, skills and effort, all of which detract from field operations and goals of poverty reduction (White 1999; Stiles 2002; Ebrahim 2003; Hearn 2007; Harsh et al 2010; Rose 2011; Elbers and Arts 2011; Simon Morfit 2011).¹⁷ In emphasising upwards and external forms of accountability (Ebrahim 2003), NGOs have proven themselves unable and/or unwilling to innovate to find greater downwards accountability, prioritising their organisational imperatives over their development vision (Bebbington et al 2008). In addition, Ebrahim (2003) finds that since both donors and NGOs focus on short-term functional accountability, longer-term strategic processes necessary for lasting social and political change are often overlooked. The more time NGOs spend 'professionalising' and meeting donor requirements for reporting and evaluating, the less time they spend interacting with

¹⁷ These effects are magnified when donors prefer short-term funding periods and one-off contracts, which do not offer stability necessary for building and maintaining expertise and long-term planning, ensuring that 'chasing funds' becomes a permanent priority capturing the lion's share of time and resources (Elbers and Arts 2011).

clients and beneficiaries, leading them to lose contact with their original values, style and approach (Lewis and Kanji 2009).

There is, of course, good reason for ensuring accountability in fund usage, with several studies highlighting examples of misrepresentation or misreporting by NGOs of activities and impact (see, for example, Alexander 1998; Barr et al 2005; Ghosh 2009; Burger and Owens 2010). While commonly perceived that NGOs possess an intrinsic value base through which they act on altruistic motives, in reality, as with all organisations, survival is paramount, and to survive, they must put their own interests before those of others, including donors and beneficiaries (Hudock 1999, Power et al 2002). That NGOs may choose to misrepresent information when the demands of donors disagree with their strategy or mission has been called a strategy of 'deflecting' (Alexander 1998). Misreporting is not always limited to financial activities. Across 300 NGOs in Uganda, Burger and Owens (2010) find that NGOs are likely to misrepresent information regarding self-reported finances *and* community consultation, with the need to maintain good reputations pressurising them to misrepresent the extent of community consultation in programme design and impact evaluation. Good intentions, they conclude, "do not provide insurance against human fallibility", and they caution against an over-reliance on self-reported data from NGOs when regulating, monitoring, or surveying NGOs (Burger and Owens 2010: 1274). Concerns about the effectiveness of aid spending are also grounded in donor justifications for aid spending to their domestic constituencies (Murray and Overton 2011).

Even within their heavy reliance on donor funding, there are strategies NGOs can utilise to reduce this dependency and avoid the dangers of cooption, in which NGOs become subordinated 'agents' with strict prescribed contracts.¹⁸ NGOs able to turn down offers of funding that do not closely align with their vision and priorities can be seen as those 'true to their values' (Kilby 2006).¹⁹ Avoiding reliance on one funding source and achieving some degree of financial autonomy, therefore, is critical for NGOs to make strategic choices and prevent them from becoming passive in the face of structural constraints in the aid chain (Bebbington 1997; Bebbington et al 2008; Elbers and Arts 2011; Batley 2011; Rose 2011). Given the magnitude of these constraints, however, strengthening SNGOs to remain autonomous and responsive to grassroots constituencies also requires altering funding structures and opportunities to provide them with more flexible funding alternatives (Bebbington 2005; Hudock 1999; White 1999; Ghosh 2009). A study

¹⁸ When any organisation enters into a relationship with a powerful external agency there is a real danger of cooptation, in which the smaller organisation is brought in line with the powerful organisation's interests, thereby limiting its autonomy and capacity to represent the interests of the poor (Joshi and Moore 2000).

¹⁹ Both very large and very small NGOs are more vulnerable to an erosion in values: the very large because the complex webs of relationships within and outside the organisation can sometimes lead to 'value compromise', and the very small because they have fewer options for support or funding (Kilby 2006).

of 15 NGOs in India, for example, revealed that the few NGOs with formal mechanisms for downwards accountability to beneficiaries were also those with flexible funding arrangements from donors (Kilby 2006).

While critiques and recommendations of NGO accountability are long-standing, NGOs have been slow to implement innovations to improve their accountability and strengthen their legitimacy, and also slow in taking steps to change their relationships with donors and/or reduce their aid dependence (Hulme and Edwards 1997; Edwards 2008; Hulme 2008). Renewed availability of aid, the recent rise of philanthropists and foundations and more effective marketing and fundraising have allowed many NGOs to drift on while avoiding genuinely strategic thinking (Hulme 2008). Problems of accountability, autonomy, and distancing away from the grassroots are, therefore, closely interlinked. Whether NGOs can still design and pursue a development alternative under donor conditions that undermine the importance of local ownership and participatory design and implementation is a prominent question.

4.3 Innovation

Alongside their participatory roots, the ability of NGOs to be innovative and experimental are said to underlie the secrets of NGO effectiveness (Drabek 1987). While frequently proclaimed an attribute of NGOs, however, this is rarely tested. Alongside the external determination of local agendas, a number of internal and external factors constrain the innovativeness of NGO activities, which instead fall into a 'predictable range' of activities, varying little by region, country or continent (Fyvie and Ager 1999).

In the early 1990s, criticisms suggesting that NGOs were not fulfilling their potential in social transformation led to increased focus on the scaling-up of programmes, and of greater capacity-building²⁰ and partnerships (Lewis 2005). These goals of organisational growth in scaling-up, however, pose a fundamental weakness when it comes to innovation and experimentation. Korten's (1990) influential work on NGOs argues that organisational expansion leads NGOs to become unresponsive bureaucracies. Others, too, suggest that focusing on scaling up leads to NGOs behaving more like businesses than development organisations (Atack 1999), through shifting focus away from localised projects and grassroots innovation towards the quest for an effective 'model' that can be implemented regardless of context (Fyvie and Ager 1999). As Uvin et al (2000) highlight, a focus on scaling up NGO activities must concentrate on 'expanding impact', *not* 'becoming large'.

²⁰ A shift in focus towards capacity building recognised that while southern NGOs had the foundations for successful innovation through ideas, they did not necessarily have the expertise or resources for successful implementation of them, and this underlined the, "apparently paradoxical observation that NGOs possessing organizational characteristics associated with innovation display little actual innovative activity" (Fyvie and Ager 1999: 1388)

Dependence on donor funding also narrows scope for innovation given the high demand from donors to find simple, neat and comprehensive solutions to complex development problems (Vivian 1994; Fyvie and Ager 1999; Bebbington et al 2008). NGOs, therefore, are ill-advised to try risky innovative and unproven pilots for fear of losing funding (Vivian 1994).²¹ In effect, this means NGOs are also less likely to innovate in tackling the more difficult and structural conditions of poverty. Visible results are easier to achieve when projects address less entrenched forms of poverty, shifting NGOs away from the neediest people, most innovative programmes, and higher-order outcomes such as empowerment (Koch et al 2009).

4.4 Sustainability

Sustainability is another concern discussed in relation to NGO programmes, given their reliance on short- and medium-term project-based funding. Projects with defined time-scales, measurable outputs, and an emphasis on physical capital development are not well suited to long-term structural change, particularly when implemented by multiple and competing small-scale NGOs (Murray and Overton 2011).²² Research in Uganda highlights the high turnover of NGOs, with the study's authors only able to trace 25 percent of the 1,777 NGOs registered with the government (Barr et al 2005).

It is concerns of financial sustainability and organisational survival that drive the erosion of an NGO's original values and mission, with NGOs forced to focus on financial sustainability, professionalism and survival as they expand. In Bangladesh, Stiles (2002) discusses the influence of large-scale donor support on the direction and strategies of the NGO sector. Programmes based on mobilisation and anti-hegemonic stances became less common as NGOs were encouraged by donors, who wanted to avoid long-term commitments, to become more professional and sustainable organisations. Growing rapidly in size, the primary concern of NGOs throughout this became to keep funds flowing, feeding into their programmatic choices at the grassroots level (Stiles 2002). Fierce competition for donor funds exacerbate these problems, preventing NGOs from forming networks or coalitions that could be beneficial for obtaining funding, advancing their advocacy work, and fulfilling their objectives in line with their value bases (Hudock 1999). This also poses a threat to the sustainability of NGOs as sustainable civil society organisations. In the Andean region, for example, as international funds diminished, NGOs were forced to become increasingly reliant on national governments,

²¹ This strong focus on success also leads NGOs to be secretive and isolated, sharing little information with other NGOs and development actors and being reluctant to encourage evaluations (Vivian 1994; Clark 1995; Fyvie and Ager 1999)

²² A shift towards longer-term programmes was one reason driving the good governance agenda that put the state back to its central position in national development. Channelling aid through states means larger-scale operations and potentially greater levels of efficiency of aid spending (Murray and Overton 2011).

deepening the relationships they had previously sought to avoid and drawing them away from the grassroots (Bebbington 1997).

For NGOs, therefore, the end of the first decade of the 21st century was characterised by their shrinking room for manoeuvre and cooptation into the international aid system (Townsend et al 2004; Fowler 2011). Ultimately, the inability and/or unwillingness of NGOs to fulfil their strengths of grassroots orientation, innovativeness and experimentation, and accountability and autonomy, undermines their legitimacy as true 'development alternatives' as well as their impact in structurally entrenched forms of poverty. That there has been little action from NGOs to overcome these problems has been called the 'elephant in the room' that NGOs and the wider development community are reluctant to acknowledge (Edwards 2008). While their potential for offering development alternatives remains high, their leverage over long-run drivers of change will continue to be weak and NGOs will never achieve the impact they aim for (Edwards 2008). Criticisms aside, however, perceptions remain that NGOs will and must continue to play a key role in development. Their potential strengths remain constructing and demonstrating 'alternatives' to the status quo, a need that has never been more pressing (Bebbington et al 2008). Priority, therefore, must lie in finding ways through which NGOs can return to their roots, regain their distinctive values, and remove these institutional distortions (Bebbington 1997; Hailey 2000). How can NGOs reengage with offering genuine development alternatives? While NGOs are often seen as synonymous with civil society, drawing a road map to reach these goals requires a better understanding of the position of NGOs within broader civil society.

Increasing recognition of NGOs' limitations in offering true participatory development has been accompanied by a subsequent shift in interest in broader civil society, in which NGOs are only one actor, and the strengthening of civil society became a specific policy objective for donors within the good governance agenda. The following section discusses the role of civil society – and that of NGOs within it – in creating and sustaining a new development paradigm focusing on the processes and outcomes of poverty and structural inequality. Through a greater focus on politicised activities that directly challenge social and political inequity, this marks a shift towards 'small-d' development and the realignment of development with the grassroots. While NGOs and civil society are often treated synonymously, there are distinct differences between them.²³

²³ There are three key arguments of donors with regards to civil society: i) that civil society is not only distinct from the state but also in conflict with it; ii) that civil society is at the heart of the democratisation struggle; and iii) that since NGOs form a significant part of civil society they are driving forces of democratisation (Mohan 2002).

5. “Returning to the roots”: strengthening NGOs as civil society organisations

While ‘strengthening civil society’ became a specific policy objective for donors in the 1990s shift towards good governance,²⁴ progress has been limited because of their simplistic view of civil society as a collection of organisations rather than a space for interaction and negotiation around power. The real power of civil society lies in the context and space in which organisations are formed and interactions take place, rather than the organisations and activities themselves (Lewis and Kanji 2009). This is not reflected in the development community’s tendency to view the rise of NGOs as an indication of the strengthening of civil society, with donors treating and funding NGOs as a democratising element of civil society (White 1999; Fowler 2000). While NGOs comprise *part* of civil society, they are far from synonymous with civil society, and do not automatically strengthen civil society, given the pressures they face to respond less to community needs than to those of donors (Hudock 1999) and that they are unable to engage in highly politicised debates and arenas. There is some debate as to whether NGOs are an externally-driven phenomenon threatening the development of indigenous civil society and grassroots activism by distracting attention and funding from more politicised organisations (Clark 1998; Stiles 2002; Bano 2008; Bebbington et al 2008; Chhotray 2008; Racelis 2008). At worst, given their incentives to operate as non-political institutions, NGO involvement can bring an end to citizen-driven movements, losing the transformative power of radical ideas and threatening the sustainability of long-term processes seeking structural change (Bebbington 1997; White 1999; Kaldor 2003; Townsend et al 2004; Bebbington et al 2008; Lewis and Kanji 2009; Elbers and Arts 2011).

In their early days, NGOs were encouraged to embrace a strong advocacy role alongside their role as service providers and to forge alliances with broader social movements in order to ensure their legitimacy (Drabek 1987). With their strong connection to the grassroots and their quest to find innovative and people-centred development alternatives, NGOs emerged as organically-linked actors to social movements pursuing transformative agendas (Bebbington et al 2008). Many came to life

²⁴ Edwards (2011) highlights the dangers of such ambitious and ambiguous aspirations, which would be difficult to meet or intervene in without reducing the richness and diversity of the concept to a set of predefined, actionable instruments of limited value and coherence in those areas amenable to external funding and support. Encarnacion (2011) too, discusses the threat to civil society when driven by the international development community from an uncritical and superficial stance. In part, this is why civil society was earlier replaced by narrower and more easy to operationalise sectors, such as NGOs and the ‘third sector’. This has led to tensions between radical and neo-liberal interpretations of civil society, the former seeing it as the ground from which to challenge the status quo and build new alternatives, and the latter as the service-providing, not-for-profit sector necessitated by market failure (Edwards 2011). Indeed, we have seen the effect that reducing NGO programmes to actionable and depoliticised interventions has had in drawing them further away from goals of democratisation and social change.

as highly political organisations primarily aiming to mobilise communities and/or disadvantaged groups and promote their development through advocacy and empowerment, prioritising ‘small-d’ development approaches and focusing on a true transformative agenda, with physical changes and improvements seen as second-order goals below their overarching vision of social change.

The shift to ‘big-D’ Development, centred around project-based and target-oriented programmes with a strong focus on material poverty, however, has led to the erosion of broader social goals and the political nature of operations, drawing the development activities of NGOs “into the safe professionalised and often de-politicised world of development practice” (Lewis and Kanji 2009). Inadequate NGO performance over the past 20 years has led to greater recognition that NGOs and their activities should be redressed by concentrating on the *causes* of development problems, not their symptoms (Fowler 2011), realigning NGOs with a stronger power-related, participatory and rights-based approach to ‘small-d’ development (Fowler 2011). Bebbington (2004) highlights the need to ‘rediscover’ a *normative* meaning of development if NGOs are to help reverse patterns of unevenness and inequality and to achieve social justice – the notion that development projects ought not to be about targeted poverty reduction, but rather about redistributions and transformations. This is a risk-strewn path away from NGOs’ existing comfort zone, however, and it remains far from clear whether NGOs can link up with social movements and play a stronger role in the transformation of highly unequal power relations in society.

5.1 What is civil society?

Civil society is the arena, separate from state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested across a range of organisations and ideologies which challenge and uphold the existing order (Lewis 2002; Mohan 2002; Kamat 2004; Lewis and Kanji 2009). To the extent that individuals cannot accomplish certain tasks alone, they typically fall to voluntary associations or civil society organisations, which exist to change or challenge the existing structures and processes underlying exclusion or disadvantage (Lewis 2002; Sternberg 2010). While in mainstream development usage, civil space is often viewed as “an unqualified ‘good’” (White 1999: 319), it represents all interests and contains many competing ideas and interests that may not all be good for development (Lewis and Kanji 2009).²⁵

²⁵ Largely missing from the international development community’s understanding of civil society is the possibility of ‘uncivil society’, for example, that under deteriorating political conditions, civil society can emerge as a foe rather than friend of democracy, most likely by being hijacked by antidemocratic forces. In supporting civil society development at the expense of political institutionalisation, therefore, democracy promotion may harm rather than advance the cause of democratisation (Encarnacion 2011).

Civil society is a broad and hazy concept, and if we see diversity in the NGO sector, we see even greater diversity within it, covering all non-state, non-market, non-household organisations and institutions, ranging from community or grassroots associations, social movements, cooperatives labour unions, professional groups, advocacy and development NGOs, formal non-profits, social enterprises, and many more. In recent decades, 'old' social movements of trade unions and labour have been joined by movements focusing on issues such as gender, environment and a wide diversity of other citizen interests (Bolnick 2008). Context, therefore, is key to civil society and must be key to any analysis and understanding of it (Edwards 2011b).²⁶

In both authoritarian and democratic regimes we see citizen protests and other forms of engagement, regardless of attempts to weaken, repress or suppress them (Edwards 2011). Social movements have emerged as a regular feature in contemporary democratic politics, with problems such as the alienation of groups by the aggregation of issues, the neglect of certain concerns, or majority representation becoming politicised when individuals regard them as neither self-caused nor a matter of fate (Rucht and Neidhardt 2002). Not facing the same pressures to be non-political from donors and NGOs, civil society organisations and social movements can be more assertive in challenging power structures. Inherently politicised and activist and at the heart of all revolutionary movements (Stiles 2002), the most important role of social movements is to challenge hegemonic ideas in society about how things should be. They see civil society as oppositional rather than accommodating with respect to the state and private sector, bringing together a multiplicity of individuals, groups and organisations around a shared collective identity and common interest (Stiles 2002; Bebbington et al 2008; Della Porta and Diani 2011).

'Best practice' in civil society associations is full control and/or ownership of the organisation by constituents through an active membership structure (Clark 1998; Atack 1999; Kilby 2006; Bano 2008; Fowler 2011; Kunreuther 2011). They gain legitimacy by working locally through an active membership base that identifies and participates in development activities, and build trust and cooperation with members through regular interaction (Kamat 2004).²⁷ Their active membership base differentiates them from

²⁶ It is important, therefore, that where the concept of civil society is 'exported' to non-Western contexts, that it is not to be applied too rigidly to allow scope for locally relevant meanings and actors (Lewis 2002; Encarnacion 2011; Edwards 2011; 2011b). Some criticisms, for example, suggest that donors have created NGOs in developing countries without first understanding the complexity of civil society that already existed, in the process allowing the emergence of an 'old' and a 'new' civil society in some countries (Bano 2008).

²⁷ Indeed, this is the very reason that donors justify funding towards NGOs to create and strengthen social capital and civil society through their operations. That is why, contrary to reality, NGOs are portrayed as voluntary associations of altruistic citizens, responsive to their beneficiaries, accountable to their constituencies, and advocates for the poor (Bano 2008). NGOs and donors both want this value-oriented perception of NGOs to continue, giving them a special status in public opinion and justifying continued funding to the sector.

NGOs, allowing them to be characterised by more democratic and less hierarchical forms of governance and accountability and the predominance of volunteers (Kunreuther 2011). A study of 40 civil society organisations in Pakistan highlights the destructive impact foreign funding has on membership, with organisations reliant on development aid destroying the evolution of cooperative behaviour and vastly reducing an organisation's ability to attract members (Bano 2008).²⁸ Similarly, Joshi and Moore (2000) find organisations not strongly rooted in local populations unable to establish strong membership. What remains, therefore, for the role of NGOs in contributing to stronger civil societies across the developing world?

5.2 NGOs and civil society

NGOs are not institutions of the poor because they are not based on membership, and therefore face difficulties being recognised as genuine civil society actors since they rarely truly represent their constituencies (Gill 1997; Bano 2008; Sternberg 2010). As they operate today, therefore, NGOs help the grassroots, but have experienced a shift away from representing the grassroots (Srinivas 2009), with weak grassroots linkages and downward accountability linking NGOs instrumentally, but not structurally to their constituencies and limiting empowerment outcomes (Kilby 2006). A "civil society" function for NGOs entails moving from a supply-side, service-based approach, to a 'demand-side' approach that assists communities to articulate their concerns and participate in the development process, keeping NGOs bonded and accountable to civil society (Clark 1995; Fowler 2000). It also requires a shift away from conventional approaches to advocacy – in which NGOs generate campaigns on behalf of the poor – to more effective advocacy work that strengthens the bargaining power of the poor themselves to defend their rights and enhance their capacity for organisation and collective action (Ibrahim and Hulme 2011). Some see this move as a natural progression as NGOs adapt to changing institutional environments. This includes Korten's (1990) 'fourth generational' strategy of NGOs that is linked closely with social movements, combining local action with activities at a national or global level aimed at long-term structural change.²⁹

²⁸ This compared 20 civil society organisations that draw upon foreign aid and 20 voluntary organisations that do not, and are funded by domestic donations. The fact that donor funding is associated with a lack of members, low organisational performance and increased aspirations of NGO leaders leads to a plausible causality chain in which aid increases the aspirations of NGO leaders, which leads to lower organisational performance and renders them unattractive to potential members (Bano 2008).

²⁹ Korten (1987) outlined the generational shift in focus of NGOs from: i) prioritisation of basic needs focusing on relief and welfare; ii) movement towards building small-scale, self-reliant local development initiatives; and iii) a stronger focus on sustainability and influencing the wider institutional and policy context through advocacy. He later (1990) discussed a fourth generational strategy in which NGOs are more closely linked with social movements and combine local action with activities at a national or global level aimed at long-term structural change.

We have seen in previous sections that in many countries NGOs started life not as actors in their own right, but as support organisations for wider popular movements (Bebbington 1997; Gill 1997; MirafTab 1997). Sometimes NGOs may support the creation of social movements, in others NGOs may emerge from them,³⁰ but it is not the case that all NGOs can or will become, or partner with, social movements. Doing so entails their repositioning to become secondary actors in the development process, raising questions as to whether NGOs are willing and able to make this transition. Amidst changing political influence at the national and international level,³¹ their roles and available funding have expanded and evolved to place them as leaders in the 'problem' of Development, and they face little incentive to turn this around so that communities and the grassroots replace them in the driving position. Indeed, NGOs have proven unwilling or unable to establish strong connections with social movements that are more embedded in the political processes essential to social change (Edwards 2008). While, for example, many NGOs in Bangladesh started off with the vision of organising and empowering the poor, one by one they have been pressured by donors to set aside radical messages (Stiles 2002).

As wider concepts of public action have risen to prominence, it is now more widely recognised that NGOs play a part, but no longer form the central theme of development (Lewis 2005). NGOs have a unique position in the interface between governments at different levels, local communities and donors (Chhotray 2008), and efforts must focus on how their vision and objectives can be realigned with the grassroots as part of a broader struggle to redefine power relations (Bebbington et al 2008). Articulating alternatives for how NGOs can make this happen is less commonplace, however, and the institutional landscape – both in terms of supportive institutions and a body of knowledge – for this sector has yet to be established (Clark 1998; Bebbington et al 2008). NGOs marking the way have had to carve out a slow and incremental path to their agenda of alternative development, often requiring them to inch forwards, backwards and horizontally to avoid being overcome (Bebbington et al 2008; Racelis 2008).

³⁰ Interestingly, in an argument similar to the transition of NGOs away from their clients as a result of upwards accountability to their donors as they 'professionalise' and expand, Ghosh (2009) describes a similar pattern, in which social movements moving towards the formation of NGOs may also lose direction, spending too much time and resources on 'NGO-isation' (accessing the hardware and infrastructure necessary for their new role and spending time primarily on project proposals and strategic plans, rather than their primary mandate).

³¹ In Latin America, return to democracy was a key trigger in the transition of NGOs, with NGOs beginning to work independently and take the lead in proposing solutions, rather than supporting community-based organisations and grassroots associations to do so, as they had done previously. (Bebbington 1997; Gill 1997; MirafTab 1997). As Section 4.2 discussed in greater detail, it is also their position within the broader international aid chain and their dependence on donors that encouraged this shift, drawing NGOs away from their grassroots towards the more powerful development stakeholders.

NGOs must move from 'development as delivery to development as leverage', requiring more equal relationships with other civil actors, new capacities, and stronger mechanisms for accountability (Edwards 2008). This highlights the role of NGOs within the broader context of civil society, in which representation and accountability (or a lack thereof) can be challenged and negotiated. One solution is to develop a paradigm in which NGOs and constituents are both clients simultaneously to each other (Najam 1996), finding a place for NGOs as the organised face of more deeply-seated, networked forms of social action, in which people are already pursuing strategic goals, and create NGOs in order to further these strategies (Bebbington 2004). NGOs can be involved in facilitating long-term processes of citizenship formation, but this will be dependent on their capacity and willingness to build relationships, particularly with people's movements that offer action at scale to provide a platform for challenging existing development approaches (Bebbington et al 2008).³² Figure 1 illustrates the changing direction that NGOs must take before they can truly be called people-centred and empowerment-driven approaches.

Paradoxically, therefore, civil society is nurtured most effectively when donors and NGOs do less, stepping back to allow citizens themselves to dictate the agenda and evolve a variety of civil society organisations to suit their contexts and concerns (Edwards 2011). This approach entails a new strategic direction for NGOs, who must evolve to limit their roles to support and facilitation, so as not to take on what individuals and communities can do on their own (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2004). NGOs, therefore, must work in solidarity and equal partnership with civil society organisations, building their capacity as they mobilise and strengthen their collective assets and capabilities (Kilby 2006). This approach implies that NGOs are not legitimate actors in their own right, but gain legitimacy through their support of popular organisations in the elaboration of development alternatives that popular sectors would then carry forward (Bebbington 1997).

This is not a natural or easy transition for NGOs to make from their current position of relative autonomy in programme design and implementation, decision-making, and fund management. The move towards rights-based approaches amongst some NGOs is a positive indicator in this area (Bebbington et al 2008), and Townsend et al (2004) highlight the importance of learning from NGOs pursuing these alternative visions of change, no matter how few NGOs this entails and how small their contributions. In the Philippines, 'People's Organisations', supported by their NGO partners, have broadened and protected democratic spaces through mobilising, taking action and engaging in advocacy for social reform, structural change and redefinition of donor priorities and operational models (Racelis 2008). Through this process, locally generated priorities are

³² These relationships must be based on equal partnerships to ensure that the proliferation of NGOs does not lead to the institutionalisation of social movements and their subsequent weakening (Clarke 1998).

the result of a long consultative process and a more egalitarian relationship founded heavily on trust, not only between donors and NGO partners, but within NGO and partner communities too (Racelis 2008).

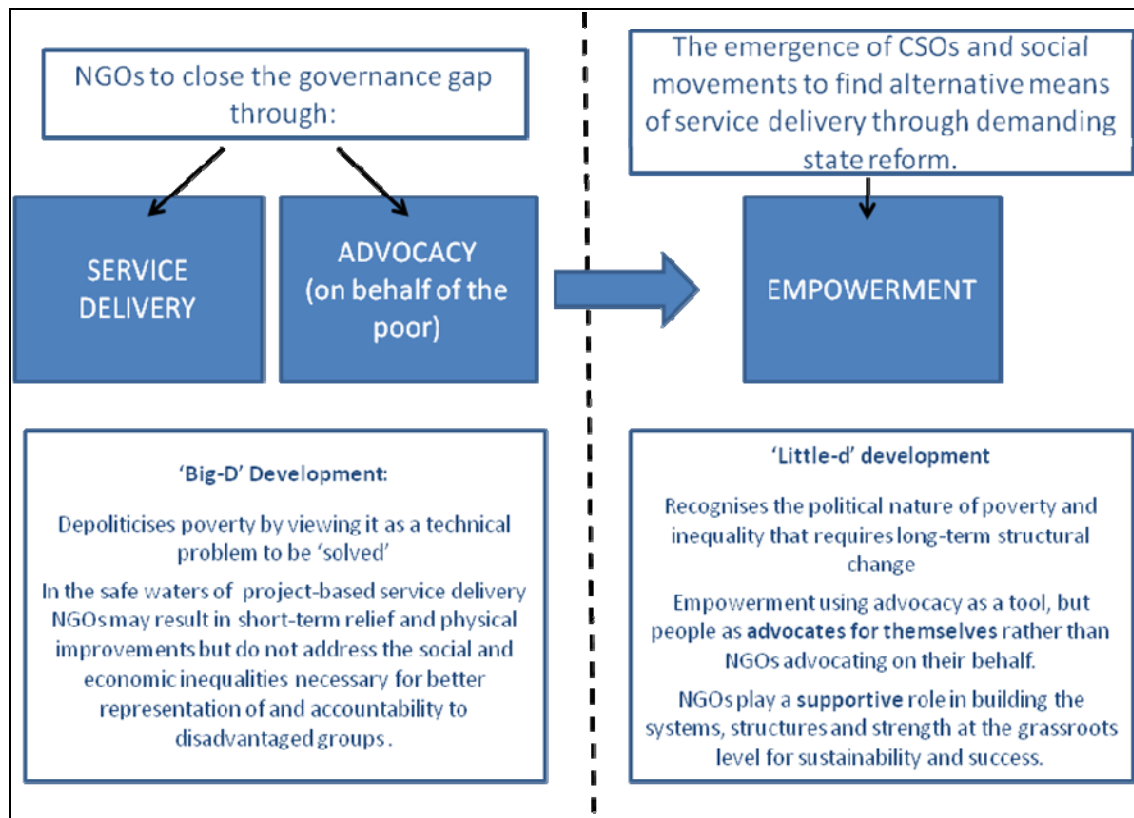


Figure 1. The challenge for NGOs claiming to be involved in advocacy and empowerment

While predominantly working at the grassroots and local level, alliances between civil society organisations can link local work with broader efforts at the national and international level to build civic voice and change the underlying systems and structures of power in society (Kunreuther 2011). As the experiences of one successful movement illustrate (Box 2), NGOs play an important role in supporting associations at the local level and Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), in which communities at the grassroots constitute the primary actors and stakeholders in negotiations and advocacy work with the state. In this model, communities are at the forefront of all strategies and activities. In contrast, NGOs are functional to the needs and demands of the social movement as a whole, supporting it in monitoring public policy, mobilising members, and creating new information resources, allowing the approach to maintain its grassroots-driven and participatory approach and encouraging and supporting the urban poor to

lead negotiations with the state and its agencies to extend and obtain entitlements for themselves (Patel, Burra and D’Cruz 2001; Bolnick 2008; Banks 2011; Ibrahim and Hulme 2011). This has proven a constant struggle for the network, given pressures within the development sector that encourage NGOs to ‘go it alone’ (Bolnick 2008).³³

Box 2. Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI)

With most aspects of urban poverty rooted in local contexts, local power structures, and local institutional performance, changing the relationships between the government and low-income communities is critical to building the foundations for sustainable future improvements, namely the systems, structures and strengths that communities need to challenge and transform their relationships with the state (Satterthwaite 2001; Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2007; Mitlin 2008).

Launched in 1996, SDI is an alliance of country-level organisations (or ‘federations’) of the urban poor across 33 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Its mission is to link poor urban communities and cities in the South and to transfer and adapt the successful mobilisation, advocacy and problem-solving strategies that they develop through their negotiations with local and national authorities to other communities, cities and countries. Links between community associations at both the national and international level allow low-income communities to share ideas and lessons learned in negotiating and overcoming obstacles they have faced in promoting their interests and securing resources.

SDI works in a supportive role with local community associations to help them build relationships and partnerships with local governments that produce, control or regulate the commodities they need for their development and livelihoods, including land, water, sanitation, electricity and housing finance. This approach means that grassroots organisations have been able to move away from confrontational demands towards addressing their needs amicably through negotiation. This is apparent both in their interactions with the state, but also in their ethos: all federations within the SDI network are collectives of slum dwellers,

³³ There is, therefore, danger that federations will be co-opted by partner NGOs and donors. Indeed, SDI’s history illustrates this well. During the 1970s, SDI’s predecessor, the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) in India tried and failed to work with NGOs, who persistently attempted to dominate the federation through means such as strategic strangulation of resources (Bolnick 2008). Deciding to break ties with NGOs and ‘go it alone’, the federation faced great difficulties receiving funding elsewhere: donors refused to fund the movement, the government required technical data, and the Federation’s organic, grassroots means of mobilisation and communication was unable to translate into a formal context (Bolnick 2008). In 1986 it had greater success, evolving a strong relationship with an NGO called the Society for the Promotion of Area Research Centres (SPARC) in subsequent years, a template that was adapted and replicated in 14 other countries as Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI).

whose central activity is the operation of savings schemes. Activities are based around community participation, and while negotiations take time and experimentation (and not all are successful), federations choose specifically to negotiate solutions. Initiatives undertaken by federations demonstrate how shelter can be improved for low-income urban groups and how city redevelopment can avoid evictions and minimise relocations (Bolnick 2008).

One of the critical 'weapons' in the arsenal of SDI affiliations has been information, a free resource that community groups have organised around. Governments have been surprised at the numbers of people living in informal settlements, who have previously been invisible from the authorities. While recognising that there is still a long way before they can take on political motivations surrounding their exclusion from the wider city, federations keep on raising their voices and finding different ways of engaging with different Ministers, politicians, councils, municipal officials and service providers who may be sympathetic to their cause.

Its successes are many: the network has mobilised over two million members, all of whom are savers and interact on a daily basis around savings and loans, and over 250,000 families have secured formal tenure with services (Bolnick 2008). Of course, all of these activities require funding. The Urban Poor Fund International (UPFI) has been set up as an ongoing and expanding financial facility that provides capital to SDI-member, national urban poor funds, who in turn provide capital to savings federations undertaking urban and housing improvement projects. Until 2007 this was operating on a smaller scale, with a total of US\$5,000,000 over a five-year period from donations from private foundations. In 2007, the fund received a grant of US\$10,000,000 through IIED financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support the projects of affiliates, finance exchange schemes, and strengthen the Secretariat, providing them with a source of funding that allows the flexibility in spending to meet the needs of savings federations at the grassroots level.

Source: adapted from Banks 2011.

It is not only NGOs that must change their approach in this direction; donor strategies too must be adjusted to improve the flexibility of grants and ensure that resources reach their intended beneficiaries. The SDI model requires two different levels of funding: the funds necessary for running and maintaining the network's activities (including supporting NGOs); and funds to supplement the savings of federations for carrying out community-identified priorities and activities (Banks 2011). While at the local level, many of the developmental activities are supported by savings federations, once the scope of activities extends beyond the neighbourhood and city, internal resources are insufficient

and external resources are required (Bolnick 2008). That SDI has been unable to escape the fact that the aid industry is a major benefactor highlights the limitations of radical social movements as the major vehicle for social and economic transformation in the South (Bolnick 2008). The hegemony of foreign aid will and must remain, this suggests,³⁴ but it can increase its potential for promoting social and economic transformation through learning more appropriate forms of funding. Co-financing, in which donors fund a partner's strategy rather than specific projects, is a step forward in this domain (Bebbington et al 2008).³⁵

Another key characteristic of the SDI model is its leverage of information in the processes of social and economic transformation. There is a strong need for a more cooperative and dialogic aid structure, in which differences between actors are seen as a resource, rather than a problem, for knowledge production (Wilson 2007). The ability of NGOs to offer development solutions in the future will not only depend on material factors, but equally if not more strongly, on non-material factors, including building relationships with other actors and strong engagement with ideas, research and knowledge (Bebbington et al 2008). Evidence and research will be key to the legitimacy of NGOs, both 'doing' evidence and using it strategically as they seek to influence the policy process (Bebbington et al 2008).³⁶

6. Conclusions

Seen to offer participatory and people-centred approaches to development that were both innovative and experimental, NGOs rose to prominence on the basis of their strengths as local, grassroots-level development organisations offering the potential for innovative bottom-up agendas reflecting the needs and wants of local communities and disadvantaged groups. Their close grassroots linkages meant that NGOs were seen to be more than just alternative service providers, also offering a route to empowerment through allowing communities and disadvantaged groups to articulate their needs in programme design and implementation. Early views of NGOs as 'heroic' organisations, however, have been replaced by recognition of their increasingly professional and

³⁴ In the overview of a special edition journal on 'NGO futures beyond Aid', Fowler (2000) discusses a future in which NGOs no longer rely upon aid for their role, work and continuity, arguing that NGOs should not continue to be complicit or unwitting instruments of northern globalisation policy, and with aid as an option, NGOs have been leaving reform too late.

³⁵ The importance of such funding was recognised even prior to the NGO boom, with NGOs arguing that they can best demonstrate the feasibility of people-centred development if they are given core funding on a sustained, rather than project-based basis (Drabek 1987). Core funding gives greater sustainability, as well as flexibility, and means that existing resources are used primarily in operations, rather than the regular preparation of funding proposals. In addition, the more predictable a programme and its funding, the more it is worthwhile for social activists to invest in learning about it and mobilising around it (Joshi and Moore 2000).

³⁶ Knowledge creation, too, has followed a 'Big-D'-'Little-d' divide, with donors focusing on funding research related to specific policy ideas within Development, rather than the underlying processes of uneven development (Bebbington et al 2008).

depoliticised nature and their subsequent limitations in promoting long-term structural change. Greater acknowledgement and concerns emerging from their closer proximity to donors and governments than intended beneficiaries also brought into question the very comparative advantages once lauded. NGOs could no longer be viewed as the autonomous, grassroots-oriented, and innovative organisations that they once were, raising questions about their legitimacy and sustainability.

While NGOs have failed to respond to many of these criticisms, NGOs remain an important part of an emerging civil society that creates a more balanced relationship between governments, markets and citizens. An increasing recognition of NGOs as only one component of broader civil society has drawn attention to the need to find a more effective role for NGOs in strengthening civil society. This requires, however, a reorientation of NGOs in line with their original strengths and vision, putting communities and the grassroots back at the centre of strategies and participatory approaches back at the centre of activities. This will not be an easy transition, requiring NGOs to relinquish power over programme design, planning, and fund management to the grassroots and requiring deep thinking across the international aid chain which has contributed to drawing NGOs away from their original mandate. Only through this change, however, can they contribute to the redistributions and transformations necessary for longer-term structural change that tackles the roots causes – rather than symptoms of – poverty and its related social and economic vulnerabilities. Learning from successes such as SDI highlights the scale and impact which can be achieved through such an approach by effectively linking thousands of community-level associations at the national and international level.

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