NGOs AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society has been termed 'a notoriously slippery concept' by more than one
commentator (Bebbington and Riddell, 1995, p. 880; Edwards, 2004, p. vi), while the
struggle to define the notion of nongovernmental organisations remains unfinished.
Despite this, donor agencies across the spectrum have tended to hinge their 'civil
society strengthening' programmes around capacity building support to NGOs. An
important implication is that – if the meanings of both NGO and civil society are
multiple and unclear – 'civil society strengthening' programmes implemented via
NGOs are not all a cut of the same cloth. While some may aim to foster a broader and
more inclusive public sphere for the exercise of democratic politics, others may be
promoting a very particular form of liberal democracy coupled with particular forms
of market liberalisation. Civil society and NGO are not then merely slippery concepts
– they are deeply contested.

Approaches to civil society
The emergence of civil society within social science and social policy debates over
the past two decades was catalysed by the popularity and relative success of anti-
authoritarian and pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe, Latin America and
sub-Saharan Africa during the 1980s and early 1990s. In terms of development
studies, this coincided with a moment known as the 'impasse' (Booth, 1994), which
included a strong disenchantment concerning how the previously dominant state and
market paradigms were responding to the continued challenges of uneven
development. Two of the ideological positions to emerge from this impasse have
provided particularly fertile ground upon which civil society debates have flourished,
namely the neoliberal approach that emphasises a reduced role for the state, and more
radical post-marxist and post-structural approaches that view the civil arena as a
potential locus for alternative forms of development and politics. These 'mainstream'
and 'alternative' positions on civil society in international development (Howell and
Pearce, 2001), can to some extent be aligned with the two quite distinct analytical
approaches to civil society. The first of these understands civil society primarily in
terms of associations, while the second understands it as 'the arena … in which
ideological hegemony is contested' (Lewis, 2002, p. 572; Gramsci, 1971). Both are
relevant to development theory, and each has been acted upon in development
practice.

The associationalist approach is the more familiar in development studies, and begins
with Hegel's delineation of civil society as the arena of association between the
household and the state – a 'third sector' distinct from both the state and the market.
This sector may be a source of services that neither state nor market are able to
deliver, or deliver as effectively and efficiently (e.g. Salamon and Anheier, 1997). In a
more de Tocquevillian sense, such associations may act as a counterweight to the state
and market, exercising some degree of control over them, and promoting processes of
democratisation (e.g. Putnam, 1993: see also social capital, this volume).

Approaches that understand civil society in terms of organisations nonetheless offer
distinct interpretations of the forms such organisations take. Organisations can be
understood primarily in terms of their forms and functions (what they are and what
they do), or in terms of the state-society and political economic relationships within
which they emerged. The former approach tends to confer more agency to these

organisations, while the latter understands organisations in terms of their relationships to particular class, ethnic or other groups within society, and structures of power and resources.

The second approach traces its roots to the work of Antonio Gramsci, although it has also taken form in the works of Jurgen Habermas. Gramsci understood civil society as the arena in which ideas and discourses become hegemonic, serving to stabilise and naturalise capitalist systems of production and exchange. However, he also understood this arena as contested – hegemonic ideas could always be resisted, questioned and potentially destabilised.

These ideas were critical to many post-marxist and post-structuralist theorists who viewed the (new) social movements of the 1980s and 1990s as potential vehicles through which counter-hegemonic ideas (around, for instance, democracy and patriarchy) could be constructed and promoted (Alvarez et al., 1998; Peet and Watts, 2004). Slightly different approaches emphasise the importance of building a healthy and inclusive public sphere that would allow for democratic deliberation over different socio-political projects (Habermas, 1984).

Within both of these approaches, there tends to run a normative thread, suggesting that civil society is in some way a 'good thing' – that a "civil society" is a good society (Edwards, 2004). However, this tendency has become increasingly problematic in light of evidence that many organisations operate as sources of exclusion as much as cooperation, while the public sphere can be understood as inherently riven by conflict and inequality. Non-governmental associations pursue a range of often conflicting goals many of which will not be in tune with general notions of 'the good society' (c.f. Tarrow, 1996), rendering normative positions further problematic. Importantly, the promotion of civil society as 'a good thing' may be viewed as an ethnocentric imposition on other contexts and peoples, particularly given the critique that civil society is a particularly western concept born of a specific period in European history. For some, the tendency to conceptualise civil society in contradistinction to the state reinforces state-society dualisms, which may not be helpful for understanding social order and change (Ferguson, 2004; Mamdani, 1996). Here, the challenge is to examine how the political trajectories of particular political communities leads to the emergence of social movements, and to then examine these before coming to conclusions about what forms of civil society these movements might comprise.

Nongovernmental organisations
The definition of NGOs is equally contested. If one simply took practice as a guide, and considered the range of organisations funded by donor NGO support programmes, the category would include the Red Cross, national and international Oxfams, place based citizen groups working with place based groups elsewhere, trades unions, cooperatives, conservative and leftist think tanks, and many more. These organisations share little except that they are not government, and they have diverse social, political and historical origins, and differing goals, internal structures and geographical reach. Efforts to develop taxonomies of NGOs have sought some pattern (e.g. Clark, 1991; Vakil, 1997), and seek to classify NGOs according to what they do, what they are, what they stand for, how they relate to poor populations, whether they are northern or southern – and often some mix of these criteria.

However, development studies has increasingly focussed on formal, and at least partly professionalised organisations that are concerned in some way with development and relief activities (Vakil, 1997) – organisations at times referred to as nongovernmental *development* organisations. As with civil society, NGOs have been considered as the key agents for both neoliberal roll backs of the state and alternative development, with its focus on people-centred and empowering solutions (Drabeck 1987; Tandon, 2001).

In all these tussles to define NGO, the focus has remained largely at the organisational level. Yet in more recent years the transnational nature of relationships among NGOs has become clearer. NGOs become one of several means through which 'activists without borders' work together on issues they believe in (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) – and transnational networks might create NGOs as legally recognised organisations through which such networks can act. Such transnationalism is not necessarily heralded as desirable. Ferguson (2004) notes that while the rise of NGOs in Africa is often viewed as a step towards democracy, what may often be happening is that greater control over services and other dimensions of socio-economic life is being transferred to organisations over which local populations have little control, which are themselves more responsive to the demands and dynamics of these transnational relationships and which show little or no inclination to challenge real structures of state and economic power. Reflections on such transnational networks hook up with a related discussion on the concept of a global civil society (Hyden, 1997) – a discussion in which once again one can find both understandings of global civil society that emphasise the existence of global associations as well as views that emphasise the idea of a sort of global public sphere in which hegemonic global ideas are naturalised and contested, and in which the voices of international organisations (including international NGOs) crowd out local voices. The transnationalisation of NGOs and of civil society is not, then, necessarily democratising, and, for some observers, the increasingly transnational community of NGOs might operate more as an essentially neo-imperialist transmission belt for western ideologies and management practices aimed more at control than empowerment (Townsend et al., 2002).

Such concerns have not stood in the way of efforts to create NGOs, and the number of organisations registered as NGOs has grown remarkably in recent decades. Estimates suggest that NGOs reach around 450-600m people – roughly 15-20% of the world's poor (Fowler, 2000a, p. 16). This reflects structural changes – most notably democratisation and neo-liberalisation – which have opened up greater political and economic space for NGOs. Although precise figures on NGO funding are very difficult to come by, it is currently estimated that development oriented NGOs disburse between $10-15 billion annually (World Bank, 2001), which could be as much as 20 per cent of official aid.

As funding for NGOs has grown, the composition of this funding has changed. The proportion of funds deriving directly or indirectly from donor country governmental sources has increased, as has that from multilateral sources. Funding from Southern governments has also increased, as governments increasingly sub-contract the implementation of public programmes. This has steadily brought NGOs closer to governments – in both the North and the South – and arguably 'too close for comfort' (Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Hulme, 1995). Observers worry that NGOs have become increasingly subject to the restrictions and upwardly oriented

accountability mechanisms that come with public funding, and particularly that such resource dependence can reduce the extent to which NGOs will voice certain criticisms and positions in public debates, or work in fields not fashionable amongst donors (Wallace et al, 1997). In the terms of the above debates on civil society, the concern is that the apparent strengthening of civil society in an associational sense (more and better funded NGOs) might weaken it in the public sphere sense, as organisations self-censor in order to ensure funding access, and as they pay less attention to facilitating the participation of social movements and other grassroots actors in public debate, and more attention to ensuring their own visibility and fundability.

Nongovernmental organisations in civil society
NGOs are, then, neither synonymous nor entirely congruent with civil society – whether understood as a realm of associations or a public sphere. Indeed, the relationships both among different NGOs and between them and other types of association have not always been easy. Some social movements and popular organisations have criticised NGOs: for imposing agendas; for not allowing people's organisations sufficient say in the management of the financial resources that NGOs raise; for pursuing their own organisational imperatives at the expense of those of social movements; and for claiming to represent poor people in public debates and in the process marginalising people's own organisations. Other observers refuse to locate NGOs within the civic sphere, arguing that their ideologies, activities and lines of accountability are more characteristic of the private, market sector (e.g. Stewart, 1997; Uphoff, 1995), and that they tend to treat beneficiaries as clients rather than citizens (e.g. Miraftab, 1997). Attempts to resolve this dilemma include the suggestion that NGOs should adopt a 'fourth position' – embedded within the 'values' of civil society but institutionally located at a critical distance from state, market and civil society (Fowler, 2000b) – although this runs counter to suggestions that, if NGOs are to realise a comparative advantage, they may need to focus their attentions more clearly on working with one of these institutional arenas (Bebbington, 1997).

Notwithstanding the non-congruent relationship between NGOs and civil society, donor programmes have often assumed the two to be largely the same, and even where they have not, they have still tended to privilege NGOs within civil society strengthening programmes (Howell and Pearce, 2001). The reasons for this are understandable – it is practically and at times legally more difficult to transfer financial resources to movements and people's organisations that may not be legally constituted or registered, that may lack the internal capacities funding agencies require to ensure adequate use of public resources, and that themselves may not be representative of their ostensible membership. Nonetheless, the focus on development NGOs has tended to obscure the importance of more political actors within civil society.

Three main types of such civil society strengthening programmes might be identified: those which seek to strengthen the capacity of civil society to deliver services, those which strengthen civil society as part of a good governance agenda, and those which seek to strengthen and democratise the public sphere. Much work on NGOs has emphasised their significance as sources of service provision. Efforts to chart the sheer scale of the third sector (Salamon and Anheier, 1997), suggest that NGOs are a vital source of social and economic services. Arguably such a message falls on

particularly fertile ground among more neo-liberally oriented agencies concerned to reduce the scope of government in social life (Arellana-López and Petras, 1994), and there remain concerns that NGOs have so far struggled to ensure that such services reach the poorest groups (Riddell and Robinson, 1995).

A second type of programme draws inspiration from the argument that civil society organisations play important roles in holding state institutions to account, and thus in securing the foundations of democracy. Such programmes seek to strengthen organisations' roles in a range of activities – voter registration, citizen education, election monitoring, monitoring public expenditure and policies, human rights work, the liberalisation of the press, etc. Some argue that such programmes are also broadly neo-liberal because they tend not to question the relationship between democratic procedure, asset distribution and the exercise of power in society. The success of NGOs in this more political role has been questionable (Mercer, 2002).

The third approach aims to build stable and socially inclusive public spheres – on the grounds that struggles over development are really struggles about hegemony and that therefore ideas about development must be continually contested and reworked in society. Such programmes support advocacy NGOs, unions, social movements, membership groups, interest groups, think tanks and research institutes. Radical, social justice agencies and conservative donors alike have sought to strengthen the role of like-minded actors in public debate (Hearn, 2001). Indeed, the temptation of some donors to reduce support to research and divert funds towards direct poverty reduction can reasonably be seen as ceding ground to more conservative forces in the struggle to define hegemonic ideas.

Wrap up

Civil society has born multiple meanings in development research and practice, and certain of these meanings have assumed most power, reflecting both dominant world views and underlying material interests. Those meanings have underlain particular types of action with important material effects. Nongovernmental organisations have been both *actors in and vehicles* of these struggles over the meaning of civil society. As *actors* they aim to foster particular meanings of civil society. In some respects, their own diversity itself reflects different ideas about the type of civil society that should be worked towards or struggled for, and about the ways in which civil society, state and market should be linked and embedded in each other. As *vehicles* they have sometimes become the means – again, wittingly or unwittingly – through which other actors have aimed to promote particular meanings of civil society and visions of development. Whatever the definition of civil society one might choose, struggles over its meaning have material effects. NGOs are one of many actors engaged in these struggles. NGOs are not the same as civil society – but they play an important role in determining the forms that it takes.

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