

Too Far From Home? 'Modulitis' and NGOs' Role in Transferring Prepackaged Reform

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In "Too Close For Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations," Michael Edwards and David Hulme (1996) poignantly elaborate on the pitfalls of a success story. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots organizations (GROs) start constituting themselves in the 1970s. They struggle through a period of scarce resources, political exclusion, and skepticism from state bureaucrats. They survive. Then, their destiny takes a sudden turn in the 1980s. Whatever NGOs and GROs stood and struggled for over the last two decades—efficiency, cost-effectiveness, closer-to-the-people—is high in demand. They gain momentum. The "New Policy Agenda" (Edwards & Hulme, 1996) awards them further prominence and paves the way for increased government funding. They increase in number and size.

Today, BRAC in Bangladesh, for example, has more than 10,000 staff, covers 15,000 villages, and plans to serve three million people and children in over 100,000 schools (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). The success story is based on a trend to use NGOs increasingly as channels for bilateral aid or "official aid." They become institutionalized, mainstreamed, and dependent on external funding. In Bangladesh, for example, there was a fivefold increase of external funding within five years (Hashemi, 1996). In 1988-89, only 162 NGOs were internationally funded, whereas in 1991-92 the number of NGOs in Bangladesh receiving external funds rose to 986. The impact of NGOs' upward accountability to external donors deserves attention. NGO activities have become skewed toward donor-driven agendas for development rather than indigenous priorities.

In sum, the apotheosis of NGOs and GROs as disguised state functionaries and administrators of official aid has created the following result: the very foundation on which NGOs and GROs have been built—smallness, community orientation, efficiency, political activism—is in danger of crumbling. NGOs have not only gained momentum, increased in number and size, become institutionalized, mainstreamed, and dependent, but also, as critics point out, have become co-opted and corrupted by their external funders.

Critique of QUANGOs and Beyond

Edwards and Hulme's analysis urges us to reflect on the crisis of legitimacy among NGOs and GROs. Yet not all NGOs and GROs have become multinational non-profit enterprises that merely function as prolonged arms of governments. As Nelly Stromquist (1998) correctly pointed out, we can easily identify NGOs and especially GROs that have successfully resisted being co-opted and corrupted by governmental functions and funds.

In addition, Edwards and Hulme's argument should be refined to fit various political contexts. In post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, for example, non-governmental and non-profit organizations did not exist prior to the 1990s since the

economy was state-run and was supposed to be not-for-profit (Seibel, 1998). All non-profit organizations, such as the numerous and large voluntary organizations (e.g., sport clubs, pioneers, youth clubs, gardening clubs) were state promoted. For this reason it would be inaccurate to adopt Edwards and Hulme's argument concerning the NGO transformation process from state-independent to state-dependent entities to the situation in post-socialist countries. They simply did not exist as state-independent entities in the socialist era. Instead, we need to acknowledge that national and local NGOs were only established in the 1990s with external financial support. In addition, unlike national and local NGOs in Western Europe or North America, NGOs in post-socialist countries do not receive funding from their own governments, but rather are directly financially tied and accountable to international governmental organizations or international NGOs. Apart from lending agencies (World Bank, Asian Development Bank) and governmental agencies for bilateral aid that have interacted directly with governments in post-socialist countries, international NGOs and donor agencies have more often than not bypassed governments in the process of resource allocation. As a consequence, ministerial staff in countries facing economic crises and political instability often seek funding from international organizations and national NGOs to implement top-down reforms.

Despite the peculiarities in post-socialist countries, the core of Edwards and Hulme's argument remains valid: national and local NGOs act as implementation agencies for external funders. In some countries the state constitutes the external funder, while in other countries international NGOs and intergovernmental agencies provide the funds for national and local NGOs. Therefore, instead of analyzing the conditions under which NGOs have survived, flourished and avoided the trap of external dependency, albeit another much needed study, it is necessary to turn to studies that have explored the changing relations between the state and non-governmental organizations.

A provocative angle to the study of state and NGO interaction has been provided by scholars in Third Sector research (e.g., Hood, 1986; Anheier & Seibel, 1998; Seibel, 1998). In particular, the emerging body of literature on Quasi-Non-Governmental-Organizations (QUANGOs) deals with the hidden public sector, a sector consisting of organizations that are purposefully initiated and established by the state and that function very much like governmental split-offs. Statistics on the growing number of national NGOs that are allocated state funds, bilateral funds or intergovernmental funds in order to implement specific projects that were formerly seen as prototypical state tasks (e.g., education, public health) lead us to suggest that most national NGOs have de facto been transformed into QUANGOs. The line is blurred between "artificial" non-governmental organizations acting as prolonged arm of external institutions (government, international NGO, international lending agencies) and "real", autonomous, self-determined, non-governmental institutions. Thus, critical analyses of QUANGOs as powerful agencies of the emerging hidden public sector or the "shadow public sector" (a notion put forward by Third Sector researchers) is relevant for studying NGOs.

In "Too Far From Home? 'Modulitis' and NGOs' Role in Transferring Prepackaged Reform," I will draw attention to educational export administered by national and local NGOs and funded by international lending agencies (World Bank, ADB, etc.),

intergovernmental organizations (UNDP, UNESCO, etc.), philanthropic foundations (Ford Foundation, Open Society Institute, etc.) and governmental aid agencies (USAID, CIDA, DANIDA, etc.). "Too Far from Home?" reflects on an NGO legitimacy crisis: the loss of NGO advocacy for community needs or local needs. It is a matter of great concern that many NGOs are engaging in the international trade of educational models instead of confronting these imported reform packages with local realities. Before immersing ourselves in a critique of NGOs, however, the conceptual framework of "Too Close For Comfort?" (Edwards & Hulme, 1996) should be broadened to accommodate the focus on agency and interdependency proposed in "Too Far From Home?"

Identifying Agency and Interdependency

I propose to take Edwards and Hulme's line of argument one step further (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). There are two additional perspectives that help to further substantiate their argument.

First, Edwards and Hulme explain the changing relations between the state and NGOs exclusively in terms of macro-sociological changes, thus, neglecting changes on the micro-level and on the intermediate level ("meso-level"). Changes at the micro- and meso- levels should be regarded as equally important driving forces for the fusion of NGO functions with governmental functions. A meso-level analysis focusing on the two institutions, the state and NGOs, allows us to acknowledge and identify active agency. The aforementioned institutional perspective is much needed as in Edwards and Hulme's analysis, it is not clear who is doing what to whom. NGOs are seen as passive recipients of official aid, and states, in turn, are framed as victims of public and political pressure to decentralize and to share power with non-governmental entities such as NGOs and "civil society."

Second, "Too Close for Comfort" tends to focus on the state's increasing dependency on NGOs, not on the interdependency between state and NGOs. A more dynamic approach examining the interaction between the two institutions allows us to recognize the inverse: NGOs' increasing dependency on the state. The same argument applies for the growing dependency of NGOs on intergovernmental organizations.

There are plenty of policy documents from United Nations organizations that reflect an increasing collaboration with NGOs. In June 1994, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, for example, signed the Oslo Declaration that includes the Partnership in Action Plan (PARinAC) leading to a close working partnership between UNHCR and NGOs. By 1997, UNHCR had project agreements with 322 national NGOs in over 130 countries. More important to note is the fact that seven out of ten contracted NGOs are national NGOs who implement two-thirds of all the projects funded by UNHCR (UNHCR, 1998). Allocation of intergovernmental funds to national NGOs is also common practice for other UN organizations (Baehr & Gordenker, 1994; Kempf, 1998).

Again, a focus on the changing relations between the state and non-governmental organizations calls first for an analysis at the "meso" or institutional level; and second, for an analysis that sheds light on the interdependency between the two institutions. GROs are excluded from this analysis to make the argument more concise. Instead of

unfolding the story of the fallen angels (non-governmental organizations collaborating with the state), it is more instructive to elevate the analysis to an institutional level neglecting the existence of individual states or individual NGOs that do not engage in cooperation. This level of analysis also notes Nelly Stromquist's (1998) observation that there are indeed NGOs and states that do not fit the generalizations made by Edwards and Hulme (1996), and Stromquist's critiques are restated here.

First, the proposed analysis is based on methods of inquiry that target meso-level explanations as opposed to theories that relate only to micro- or macro- levels of analysis. It acknowledges that institutions are active agencies and that they learn, that is, adapt to changes experienced by individuals (micro-level) or that they respond to societal changes (macro-level). More precisely, these institutions react to and generate political, economical, ecological and other social changes.

The time period Edwards and Hulme (1996) refer to--the 1970s through the 1990s--is an era during which the role, scope, and size of both institutions, the state and the non-governmental organizations, have undergone major changes. The government has become smaller and weaker, and the non-governmental organizations have become bigger and stronger, only to mention one undisputed, yet significant development (see Hall, 1996; Barber, 1998; Hyden, 1998). Given this global move towards smaller and weaker governments, NGOs, private in their form but public in their purpose, fill the resulting void of public space. They perform an important role as public agencies that carry out public tasks paid for by public funds (Gordenker & Weiss, 1995; see also Weiss & Gordenker, 1996). I do not need to reiterate the political and economic contexts that have accounted for these developments since Edwards and Hulme (1996) list a few of these contextual factors: the shift of decision-making authority from the centralized state level to decentralized forms of governance, or the emergence of the "civil society" discourse framed as counterweight to state power.

In addition to macro-level explanations listed in Edwards and Hulme, there are also micro-level theories that explain the expansion and external funding pattern of NGOs in the 1990s. When we move to a micro-level analysis, the intersection between local contexts and individual career patterns becomes an important space to explore. For example, Carine Bachmann Cheterian traces the career background of senior staff in Armenian NGOs dealing with ecological issues (1998). She found that in 1995, many of these national NGOs were created and staffed by senior policy makers of the Ministry of Environment. A senior staff member at the Ministry had chosen a dual career path, NGO director and state functionary, in order to secure a complementary source of income. This choice is understandable given the fact that in the last few years the cost of living rose while the income of state employees either has remained the same or fallen. There were political reasons that became apparent at the micro-level as well as economic reasons for the close cooperation between NGOs and the state. A common pattern was, for example, the instrumentalization of local NGOs by the former intelligentsia. This pattern applied particularly to the former intelligentsia who had lost their political posts, their social status, and their jobs as a result of political changes. They established local or national NGOs and submitted project proposals that were then funded not by their own government, but by international NGOs. In times of scarce resources, or to state it more bluntly, in times of bankrupt states in "democracies of transition", international money

channeled through national and local NGOs had become the only available means for the former intelligentsia to regain what they had lost as a result of political changes: income, social status, political recognition for their innovative work with "Westerners".

It is important to bear in mind that collaboration goes both ways. The new government, in turn, facing uncertainty about future political alliances also pursued a double strategy. The government expelled the former intelligentsia from the administration to publicly signal a move toward transition and democracy, on one hand, while continuing to collaborate with the former intelligentsia in the newly created hidden public sector (NGOs), on the other hand. A micro-level analysis helps us to explain why individuals in NGOs rely on external funding from international NGOs but, at the same time, establish alliances with national government officials. In addition, a micro-level analytical approach enables us to challenge the assumption of a unidirectional "corruption" process of NGOs by external funds. As the Armenian case study illustrates, governments, more precisely senior government staff, have clearly benefited from international NGO funding.

The dictum of structural-functionalism also prevents us from including micro- and meso-level theories for explaining the interdependence between NGOs and the state. Very often, macro-sociological explanations unnecessarily rely on structural-functionalist oriented social theories that tend to be very reductionist and have little interest in identifying agency. Structural-functionalist theories that contend themselves with identifying an anonymous entity (society) as a source for all good and evil that individuals and institutions are supposedly experiencing in similar ways does not help us to uncover the multitude of subject positions, interests and stakes that various groups and individuals of a society are holding. Returning to the need for a meso-level analysis, I would like to emphasize the point that institutions learn and act. There are particular reasons, for example, that a specific funding mode (official aid money for NGOs) has resonated with NGOs only in the 1980s and 1990s, and not in the 1970s.

Second, Edwards and Hulme's (1996) analysis is very convincing when it comes to documenting NGO dependence on the state and understanding the impact of this dependence on NGO work and legitimacy. Their analysis is reminiscent of Jürgen Habermas' colonization theory (1984). According to this theory, the state has succeeded in intruding, controlling and instrumentalizing the public sphere. Edwards and Hulme (1996) do not refer to this theory, but their approach to view NGOs as instruments and puppets of the state provokes associations with Habermas' colonization theory. Edwards and Hulme state little on the process of interdependence between state and NGO, and even less on the state's dependence on NGOs. It would be misleading to interpret the dependence of states on NGOs as a victory for NGOs, or as a sign of democracy and civil-society building, for that matter. In other words, there is little evidence to believe an inverse colonization theory that would explain how the public (NGOs) has intruded, controlled and instrumentalized the political (state). My interpretation of the state's dependence on NGOs rather suggests that international NGOs are important allies for those nation-states that have a political and economic interest to act globally. They are misused as local and national partners for implementing pre-packaged reform developed elsewhere.

Exporting Modules and Packages for Democracy

There are few studies that examine the impact of the existing labor division between external funders and national or local NGOs on educational programs. Very often NGOs are reduced to the role of local and national partners that implement pre-packaged educational projects. These projects are designed and developed abroad, and then, upon local completion, are evaluated by foreign consultants. NGOs' reduction to project implementers, local and national networkers, disseminators, and budget administrators explains, in part, a phenomenon in international education that is epidemically spreading in all parts of the world-"Modulitis".

The concept "Modulitis" attempts to explain the international convergence process of educational programs. This paper does not intend to explain why educational programs in different parts of the world are converging, that is, are increasingly becoming similar, but how educational programs are transferred from one cultural context to another. In Comparative and International Education, there is a long history of research on educational transfer. We also look back on a strong tradition of skepticism toward "borrowing" and educational transfer (Steiner-Khamsi, 1999). Most research on educational transfer, however, has focused on borrowing by governmental officials and policy analysts, and little has been said about the role of national and local NGOs in importing educational programs.

I observed the rapid spread of Modulitis over the last six years during my consultancies for international NGOs in the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the areas of civic literacy and what sometimes is naively referred to as "education for democracy." At this preliminary stage of research, I can merely support my key argument with anecdotal evidence: within a few years, national and local NGOs that were established in early- and mid-1990s lost touch with local communities. These NGOs now act as transcultural entities that import and administer prepackaged educational reform models from the United States and Western Europe.

Wherever I have been contracted as a consultant, I have been presented with modules and manuals that other North American or European consultants had left behind. These modules and manuals cover a broad spectrum of topics, starting from program management for local NGO staff including, for example, manuals for program evaluation, manuals for human resource management, or budget planning, to modules that are used for local workshop trainers such as modules on civic education, change management, or student-centered learning. Unlike the manuals for NGO staff, the modules for local workshop trainers had been translated into the local language and minimally culturally adapted, that is, indigenized. For example, the reference to the Constitution of the United States had been replaced with a reference to the constitution of the respective country; or, the names and illustrations in the imported manuals had been indigenized.

It would be too narrow conceptually to restrict Modulitis to the global dissemination of modules and manuals developed in the First World. Educational transfer by NGOs applies also to models of school reform (e.g., school-based reform), models of governance and participation (e.g., school-based management, community-based education), models of vocational training and "education-for-programs" (e.g.,

"education-for-democracy", "education-for-reconciliation"). It would greatly enhance our understanding of educational transfer if studies would examine more in-depth how bilateral aid agencies, international NGOs and lending agencies acquire the authority to speak and disseminate their particular model of education in different parts of the world. An in-depth study of NGOs' role for educational transfer would enable us to explore the impact of official aid on globalization and on the convergence processes in education.

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