

## NGO-State Relations: An Argument in Favor of the State and Complementarity of Efforts

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In "Too Close for Comfort?" Michael Edwards and David Hulme (1996) note that in recent years the level of official funding for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in development efforts has increased dramatically. This expanded funding forms an integral part of the neoliberal "New Policy Agenda" currently promoted by powerful donor agencies like the World Bank, USAID, and the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA). This agenda has the primary aims of (1) strengthening civil society for the purposes of achieving political pluralism and democratic forms of governance; and (2) achieving greater efficiency by subjecting social programs to market forces.

Yet the obverse of strengthening the civil sector is the dismantling of the role of the state in providing basic education and health services. We argue that the state cannot be replaced, and that there are certain indispensable things that it must do. The issues facing marginalized and systematically discriminated-against populations in most societies (i.e., women, young children, ethnic minorities, the working class and peasantry) require a strategic response at the macro or societal level: changes in laws and in the workings of major institutions. These changes require the mobilization of resources, both financial and human, on a national level.

Within the United States, data accumulated by third sector policy institutes indicate that many NGOs often have small staffs--frequently only one or two paid individuals--as well as very limited and precarious sources of funding. In short, most are fragile institutions. Approximately five percent of third sector agencies command more than 80 percent of all the assets of agencies working between government and the business sector. These observations in the resource-rich United States obtain throughout most of the developing world and have serious implications for the viability of NGOs. Such uneven resources threaten the durability of NGOs despite the fact that they have proliferated in absolute numbers by the hundreds, even thousands, in individual countries in recent years.

It can be substantiated generally that NGOs are able to perform with greater ease and flexibility than the state in responding to local needs. However, they also have very limited resources and are frequently unable to carry small projects to scale (see Klees, this issue). Furthermore, increased competition for resources on the open market (1) forces organizations to divert attention and time from programming to fund raising; and (2) may force out of existence smaller organizations or agencies whose political bases are not in line with those of dominant funders.

Our general argument, therefore, is that NGOs and the state require complementarity of effort. We acknowledge Edwards and Hulme's concerns that such arrangements may lead to the co-optation of NGOs, weakening their legitimacy as independent voices for grassroots groups and their members. Clearly though, the beneficial or deleterious

consequences of such relationships depend on context (see Ginsburg, this issue).

In exploring these issues, we briefly cite three cases: literacy initiatives in Nicaragua and Papua New Guinea and early childhood programming in the Palestinian Territories. Nicaragua, in the post-Sandinista period, has increasingly relied on NGOs to provide basic adult literacy services. In a country where the illiteracy rate has climbed once again to over 50 percent of those aged ten and older--or more than one million individuals--the government has been spending insignificant amounts (for example, in 1994-95, less than \$25,000) on basic literacy efforts. The government, instead, has been relying on NGOs. Although these organizations are innovative and sensitive to local concerns in their literacy and sustainable development efforts, they cannot have a significant impact (less than 10%) on the numbers of illiterate youth and adults. Nor are they able to generate jobs and income for a society where the poverty and unemployment rates run well over 60 percent (Arnové, 1994). But, of course, literacy and adult education--especially for those over 30 years of age--are no longer a priority for major international agencies, with the exception of UNESCO and UNICEF. Nicaragua needs now the same level of commitment of state resources to address illiteracy as was available in the 1980 National Literacy Crusade and follow-up program of popular and adult basic education.

Basic literacy provision in Papua New Guinea offers another fascinating case of strengths and limitations of NGO involvement and of potential tensions within the NGO community. In PNG, a country of approximately four million people with over 860 different languages, NGO literacy efforts increasingly involve cooperation between the state and the NGO community. Malone (1997) points out the complexity of examining state-NGO relations in designing, implementing, and evaluating maternal language literacy programs for children and adults. Defining NGOs is central to this examination. As Edwards and Hulme (1996) point out, it is crucial to differentiate NGOs from community or grassroots organizations (GROs) and clarify the roles they can play relative to one another as well as to the state. Although NGOs may be international, national, and also regional/local, they are frequently international agencies beholden to trustees, not to local members. In addition, they frequently compete with one another and have differing notions of literacy and how best to provide it, making the development of coherent national programming difficult. Yet local NGOs with strong ties to their communities can be instrumental in overcoming obstacles to national policymaking and in launching successful programs in the midst of language diversity.

In assessing the potential for state-NGO complementarity, Malone (1997) uses the metaphor of a group of PNG villagers coming together to construct a house and achieving in a relatively short time what no single person or family alone could accomplish. Cooperative work among individuals with differing skills is common within the social structures of PNG, and she argues that it can be extended to the provision of literacy services. She proposes providing community-based literacy, connecting learner-identified needs with appropriate assistance, which is accepted and supported by the government agencies responsible for educational standards. Her case study provides valuable insights into the way diverse NGOs, with different resources and skills, can collaborate with the state to increase accomplishments in the critical area of maternal language literacy provision.

In the Palestinian case, the evolving relationships between NGOs and the state are particularly potent. The long history of NGO responsibility for social service design and provision in the absence of an indigenous Palestinian government, and the complicated arrangements for the funding of development initiatives in the newly autonomous areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip magnify tensions. Negotiation for power, finances, and control over the nature and extent of programming, as well as the amount of regulation to be applied to NGO activities by the state, is contentious. However, a current dissertation case study of a prominent early childhood NGO (Christina, 1998) assesses the potential for local agency and control as an outcome of greater cooperation between the governmental and non-governmental sectors. Christina examines the interaction of the state, local and international actors in meeting local needs and responding to global influences, such as the internationalization of norms within the field of early childhood education and development. She posits that increased collaboration in the areas of teacher education, curriculum design, and community outreach, as well as greater integration of strong NGO voices into the policymaking process, can contribute significantly to the development of holistic, progressive and locally-relevant early care and education for Palestinian children.

The various types of government-NGO relations represents a rich research area for comparative education, and indeed responds to Thiesen's (1997) call for building "bridges among donors, governments, and ourselves [in development work]" (p. 403). Such research should take into account the different interactions between international donor and technical assistance agencies, the state and local actors. Both theoretically and pragmatically the cases cited above illuminate some of the complexities involved in NGO activity. We, as comparative educators, can make a contribution to improved educational policy and practice by engaging in these issues. This requires that we maintain our critical judgement and play an advocacy/activist role on behalf of education programs that contribute to democratization and poverty alleviation as well as respond to community needs and promote sustainable development.

### References

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