

NGOs in a New Paradigm of Civil Society

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Since the 1970s the world has seen the emergence of institutions and groups organized outside the state yet making claims on the polity and for the polity. Social movements such as those favoring women, the environment, and peace, or those opposing nuclear power and war become crystallized through the creation of organizations to implement their agendas. The existence of these NGOs (non-governmental organizations) has been examined by scholars in the developing countries and in Europe; interest on the part of US scholars is relatively recent and does not always grasp the core nature of NGOs.

Some NGOs started with religious philosophies and sought to create spaces for ethical reflection; others emerged to mitigate the experience of political authoritarianism; still others are helping shape alternative visions of society and thus fit better as the crystallization of new social movements. There is variation in the objectives and performance of NGOs but the large majority of them are less concerned with their own self-interest than with collective gains. They also tend to produce flatter organizational structures and to foster steady participation in internal decision-making. In developing countries, they tend to be concerned with populations facing devalued or oppressed cultural expression and living under extremely poor conditions of living. And it is quite true, as Ilon (this issue) remarks, that they must balance alternative visions while operating in environments that are increasingly driven by market dynamics and profit rationales.

Functions

Steiner-Khamsi (this issue) observes that many NGOs in Eastern and Central Europe engage in corrupt practices. In the aftermath of a pervasive socialist regime, it is quite possible that NGOs there are staffed by old government officials under new clothing. Other instances of manipulation by government officials, in various Sub-Saharan and Asian countries, have occurred when governments set up their own "branches," under the guise of NGOs. These distortions and forms of co-optation are unavoidable, especially in countries where economic crises prevail.

Ginsburg (this issue) refers to different kinds of NGOs with different levels of wealth and national scope. He contends that how we see them is a matter of perspective, and depends on whether one holds an equilibrium or conflict model of social action. While he is correct in saying that one's philosophical perspectives may shade one's view of the relative social benefit of a particular NGO, let me argue that there are several objective grounds for valuing the contribution of NGOs.

NGOs fulfill at least three major functions: (1) service delivery (e.g., relief, welfare, basic skills); (2) educational provision (e.g., basic skills and often critical analysis of social environments; and (3) public policy advocacy (e.g., lobbying for international assistance for specific purposes and monitoring or promoting pertinent state policies). These functions are critical in the absence of stable political parties or organized low-income

constituencies to carry out such activities.

NGOs acting as implementing agencies is neither bad nor good in itself, but it depends on what they are helping to implement. NGOs tend to enjoy greater access to communities, and to have staff that is more committed, experienced, and sensitive to local needs, thus allowing them to function as better intermediaries than government agencies. This does not occur by magic but is rather a by-product of their need to perform well to survive vis-a-vis both donors and the communities they serve.

Such groups, organizations and institutions, at times assuming the form of social movements, and favoring women, the environment, and peace, or those opposing nuclear power and war often become crystallized. These organizations are, of course, NGOs. Some people have accused NGOs of having no formal representation and thus of having no legitimacy. The counterargument is that they often represent the disempowered who have no possibility of electing their own representatives. In the case of the environment, for instance, whales cannot elect their "representatives." Here, it is not a question of representation but rather of expression that gives NGOs the legitimacy to voice the needs of the oppressed and marginalized. The NGOs in the feminist movement were not elected by women, for women are only now beginning to articulate their interests; and also, many of them have no other means to raise their voices in the public sphere. As Offe (1990) explains, "Sociopolitical movements as forms of collective action usually start in an institutional vacuum with no other institutional resources available to them than the usually partly contested legal and constitutional rights of citizens to assemble, communicate, protest, petition, and demonstrate" (p. 236).

From the perspective of profound thinkers of our social world such as Alain Touraine and Claus Offe, these movements--and their organizations--push the limits of politics by disrupting the existing order when necessary. These groups are concerned with quality of life issues, with the definition and valorization of personal and collective identities, and with the production of new cultural models (Touraine, 1988). Plotke (1990) remarks that "these movements have a mainly negative character, not because they are destructive but because they oppose the manipulation and distortion imposed by large-scale institutions and the compromises and routinization required in conventional forms of interest representation and mediation" (p. 85).

Role vis-a-vis the State

In calling attention to the increased presence of NGOs, Klees (this issue) maintains that NGOs help neoliberal forces by taking the burden of program development and implementation away from the state. He also states that some NGOs thereby unwittingly weaken and delegitimize the state. Regarding the first argument, I would say that the scope of NGOs will never be of such magnitude as to allow them to release government from its responsibilities. Second, many NGOs work on the premise that governments should fulfill obligations and be held accountable for the actions they take or fail to take.

NGOs have taken a crucial role in monitoring government activities. In the case of Latin America, they are acting through two main networks: One is the South American Platform on Human Rights, Democracy and Development, which is developing

economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) indicators for individual countries and setting up new mechanisms to influence national and international decision-making. The other is Social Watch, which produces information on the efforts by governments throughout the world to achieve ESCR goals, and distributes information to the international community on progress made with respect to commitments assumed at international conferences, particularly the eradication of poverty and equal opportunities for women (Kempf, 1998).

The monitoring work that NGOs conduct is not without risk. As women's clinics in the States are targets of anti-abortion extremists, so NGO leaders, particularly those in feminist and ethnic social movements, are vulnerable to reprisals. Recently a woman lawyer member of the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CLADEM), who had been investigating human rights violations through forced surgical sterilization in Peru, had her home raided and evidence removed. The incident happened shortly after CLADEM presented a major report to the Ministry of Health and the People's Ombudsman.

It should be accepted that the emergence of delivery systems as alternatives to government is in some cases appropriate, especially when governments are corrupt or fail to act on crucial matters. NGOs often do better than government in certain basic matters such as distribution of emergency aid. The most current example is the mobilization of NGOs in the provision of food, medicines, and clothing in Honduras today after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch.

Steiner-Khamsi notes that NGOs' agendas are being driven by donor agencies because the latter are the main source of support. The same argument could be extended to governments that depend to large extent on external sources. To receive external support certainly creates a risk for the development of nationalistic agendas; the successful negotiation of priorities will be a function of the integrity of the recipient party.

Support

Serving mostly low-income populations, it is obvious that NGOs cannot generate sufficient revenues from such groups. Over the past 15 years, NGOs have gained greater support from external assistance. Even so, by 1985, NGOs captured only five percent of net financial flows to developing countries (van der Heijden, 1987); the proportion reached about 8 percent by 1995. NGOs today enjoy more diversified funding, as they receive not only bilateral assistance but also funding from multilateral agencies such as UNDP, UNICEF, and the Commission of the European Communities. In cases of extreme national poverty, there is high dependency by NGOs on international NGO and bilateral agency support. Some Sub-Saharan countries reportedly have dependency rates exceeding 90 percent (van der Heijden, 1987, p. 111).

If donor agencies are giving more money to NGOs, it is not a consequence of mere predilection for NGOs but of the NGOs' ability to show results. Many social movements and their concrete organizations emerge because of "learning incapacities" and structural lack of "responsiveness" by established institutions (Offe, 1985, p. 848). At the same time, NGO reliance on external support forces them to oscillate between actions based on

ethical convictions and "a logic of efficacy, which leads them to submit to the influence of political actors" (Touraine, 1988, p. 136).

The international conferences on various social issues and the subsequent governmental declarations that follow them are a tenuous terrain. But they constitute the most public and concrete commitments to action to which people in the progressive movements can refer. Today, NGOs are accepted partners in international conferences. Their participation, most coming from developing countries, has increased from the 700 that participated in the UN Environment and Development Conference (Rio) to more than 5000 in the Fourth World Women's Conference (Beijing). In both the Conference on Social Development in Copenhagen and the Conference on Women in Beijing many governments included NGO representatives in their official delegations, thus reflecting new forms of articulation between government and civil society. Most NGOs have participated in intergovernmental meetings by organizing parallel NGO conferences. Their activities face criticism from two sides. Government may critique their lack of clear "representation;" when they collaborate with government, they are critiqued by other NGOs for becoming part of the "establishment." Klees and Arnove (this issue) argue that small NGOs cannot bring out changes for societal problems that require structural transformation. This is true, but some change would never be launched were one to wait for optimal conditions to emerge.

Several observers, including Edwards and Hulme (1996) and Steiner-Khamsi, seem to assume that NGOs that have grown significantly in membership and funding reflect internal corruption and co-optation by external funders. Cited by both as a case in point is BRAC in Bangladesh, unquestionably the largest NGO in the world. BRAC is supported by multiple donors and carries out tasks that go from nonformal education programs for girls to micro-enterprises with conscientization for adult women. According to external evaluations, BRAC has succeeded in creating a highly effective and disciplined organization, with tangible benefits for individuals and community members. Its performance, far from threatening that of the government, is serving to demonstrate that large organizations are not incompatible with clarity of purpose and accountability.

Today the state is becoming smaller than in previous decades. It would be a mistake, however, to attribute this to the increasing presence of NGOs. Globalization forces and structural adjustment programs (including regulation and privatization) have been the main promoters of state minimalism, not NGOs. In fact, often NGOs argue for the provision of more services by the state, particularly for health and education access for poor people.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, different historical and cultural contexts have played a role in NGO formation and affect their functioning. The term NGO--as other concepts that stand for good things such as democracy, empowerment, participation--stands a high probability of co-optation and misuse.

In the worst of cases, NGOs may be benefiting those who pretend to speak for the disadvantaged but in reality usurp funds given to those causes or act as unreflexive

implementors of erroneous government policies. Fortunately, these cases are a very small minority. In the best of cases, NGOs represent a fundamental change of values and a critique of the unrealized dreams of modernization--without becoming postmodernist.

There is a need for the existence of NGOs. In some contexts, they can help build bridges between donors, governments, and communities. In many other instances, they are essential to act as the voice of the suppressed conscience in many countries and, especially, to help visualize societies and relations among individuals and groups that are based on more egalitarian and ethical rules and assumptions. As Plotke (1990) observes, NGOs "politicize previously uncontested relations or repoliticize previously settled relations" (p. 101). This does not guarantee that every NGO will successfully attain its goals, that internal struggle will not split its membership, that co-optation will not be tempting. But the presence of NGOs does guarantee that new spaces for reflection and creative action permeate civil society and thus provides a promise for social mutation toward higher ends.

Notes

First of all, my congratulations to the graduate students of Columbia University for establishing this on-line journal and thus pioneering a means for intellectual exchange on comparative and international education that permits rapid dissemination and response. Second, my thanks to them for asking me to respond to the preceding five articles on NGOs.

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