

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Are NGOs Overrated?

. . . the past decade has witnessed an erosion of belief in the capacity of democratic institutions to intervene effectively in shaping social and economic life and help solve our most pressing problems. A common refrain is that government is part of the problem, not the solution. . . . Deregulation, privatization, reduction of social services, curtailments of state spending—these have been the watch words, rather than participation, greater responsiveness and more creative and effective forms of democratic state intervention.

In the context of these global political developments, rethinking a wide range of questions about democratic institutions is a matter of urgency (Wright, 1995).

The dramatic changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s produced political and economic shifts in the relationship between the state, civil society and markets worldwide. Many academics and practitioners vigorously debate the social implications of these changes. Three central theoretical approaches explore these trends: 1) states are large bureaucracies disconnected from the constituencies they were meant to represent—this view, accordingly, supports a shift in responsibilities and resources from ineffective state institutions to nongovernmental organizations; 2) NGOs may have merits, but it is unclear whether they can maintain autonomy and legitimacy; 3) the state is a dominant force which reflects and reinforces power relations found in the market and the market, in turn, controls NGOs.

To acknowledge changes in large social processes, and in the interest of tracking the trends and analyzing the results of these changes, Teachers College organized a symposium in 1998. That symposium at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) annual conference examined the roles and responsibilities of NGOs in the shifting political arena. It was designed to respond to a provocative article by Michael Edwards and David Hulme [1], also posted here, courtesy of World Development. The following five articles featured in this issue are based on the authors' presentations during that symposium.

Governments, bilateral and multilateral agencies and local actors have promoted NGOs for many of the reasons you will find discussed in this issue of CICE. Strengthening nongovernmental organizations is a key element in the building of civil society. Therefore international agencies have launched large initiatives to create free-markets and build civil society on the assumption that democracy would follow. Educators and social advocates proclaim the virtues of local NGOs in promoting social change. The authors express varied concerns regarding the simultaneous proliferation and vulnerability of local NGOs around the world.

The title of this issue, "Are NGOs Overrated?" is deliberately broad to provoke debate on the purpose, significance and activities of various types of NGOs.

Mark Ginsburg's article *NGOs - What's in an acronym?* highlights some of the problems inherent in the characterization and evaluation of NGOs. He notes that the heterogeneity of NGOs, (in terms of sectors they serve, their scope, and their level and sources of funding), the varying theoretical approaches used to analyze NGOs, and different conceptions of democracy, often result in contradictory depiction of NGOs.

Gita Steiner-Khamsi highlights the "crisis in NGO legitimacy." In *Too far from home? 'Modulitis' and 'NGOs' role in transferring pre-packaged reform*, she observes that critiquing NGOs for moving from "state-independent to state-dependent entities" does not apply to post-socialist countries. She calls attention to the changing relations between NGOs and the state, and the role NGOs play in the transfer of educational modules and models of school reform.

Perhaps NGOs and state forces would be better served in reaching their goals if they worked more closely together. Robert Arnove and Rachel Christina's *NGO-State relations: An argument in favor of the State and complementarity of efforts*, provides excellent examples of case studies in Palestine, Papua New Guinea and Nicaragua in which "increased complementarity of NGO-state relations" could have been and sometimes were accomplished with significant success.

Steven Klees and Lynn Ilon share a concern for market forces dominating NGOs' agendas. In *Can NGOs provide alternative development in a market-based system of global economics?*, Ilon explains that market demands compromise the service delivery goals of many NGOs. Klees comments in *NGOs: Progressive tool or neoliberal force?*, on the pressure on NGOs to take on responsibility for projects that were not part of their original objectives. Although Klees observes that "the NGO sector has been...part of a system that reinforces unequal development," both authors believe that NGOs offer promise for social change.

In this issue Nelly Stromquist and Michael Edwards are discussants of the previous five articles. In *NGOs in a new paradigm of civil society*, Stromquist reflects on the emergence of NGOs since the 1970s as a force "making claims on the polity and for the polity." She acknowledges and responds to the specific arguments made by the other authors. She observes that NGOs risk co-optation and misuse, but believes their presence guarantees that "new spaces for reflection and creative action permeate civil society."

It is fitting that Michael Edwards offer a response to the debate. In his article, *Are NGOs overrated? Why and how to say "no"*, he reviews some of the reasons for the criticisms leveled at NGOs and proposes that there must be "room-to-manuever" to allow agencies to profit from opportunities and manage threats. He urges NGOs and researchers to collaborate to create "environments for learning that nurture both reflective practitioners and engaged academics."

As political shifts have affected our institutions, we are fortunate to have technological innovations that have made it possible for CICE to debate these shifts. This is a continuing discussion. We hope that internet resources will allow global citizens to

imagine a new kind of community. This inaugural issue signifies our hope that wide discussion will stimulate social and educational creativity.

Notes:

[1] Edwards, M. & Hulme, D. (1996). Too close for comfort? The Impact of official aid on nongovernmental organizations. *World Development*, 24 (6), 961-973.

Reference:

Wright, E. O. (1995). Introduction. In E.O.Wright (Ed.), *Associations and Democracy*. (1). London and New York: Verso.