

Revisiting Transformational NGOs in the Context of Contemporary Society

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Ten years ago CICE invited me to comment on five articles on the subject of NGOs. At that time, I stated that NGOs had vital roles to fulfill, and that, despite the critique of NGOs presented in the issue, a significant number of them made important contributions to their society. Since then, I have completed four years of research investigating feminist institutions in Latin America. This comparative study (Stromquist, 2007), and constant readings on the subject of NGOs, have reaffirmed and deepened that understanding.

The breadth of variation among NGOs has continued to increase, making it necessary to distinguish more sharply between them. My attention centers not on recreational associations (e.g., the American Fuchsia Society), philanthropic groups (e.g., Rotary International), or relief organizations that address emergencies (CARE, World Vision), but rather on NGOs that advance democracy, social justice, and a better world in general (e.g., Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, and the multitude of groups that work on gender issues and indigenous rights). I call the latter *transformational* NGOs. My fundamental argument in this article is that transformational NGOs are central to everyday local and global life, for they contribute to the ways in which individuals produce and improve civil society.

Now, more than a decade later, I continue to place the discussion of NGOs in terms of their role within civil society. In principle, nation-states should elevate the cultural and moral levels of their people (Gramsci, 1984), but they need the support of civil society to do so. The various civic-oriented groups in society, through member participation and dialogue, both form and reaffirm identities that promote democratic citizenship. The informal or new formal environments provided by NGOs enable the emergence of new organizational cultures with fewer traditional hierarchies (Grugel, 2000); these cultures tend to challenge previous norms of clientelism and authoritarianism. NGOs transcend political parties, and their agendas represent both a mode of protest as well as the proposal of alternative ways of doing and being (Bibi, 1995). The spaces that NGOs create constitute central mediators between the individual and the state, thus serving to link individual and social wills (Grugel, 2000). In today's hypercompetitive capitalist environment, NGOs also serve as central brokers between state and market forces, raising ethical concerns sometimes forgotten in the shuffle. NGOs, as key organizations within civil society, are critically needed to produce a counterweight to state policies and priorities by bringing attention to problems the state ignores or denies.

Transformational NGOs have shown the ability to set agendas, negotiate outcomes, confer legitimacy, and implement solutions (Simmons, 1998). These are steps that contribute to the production of new meanings in society — meanings that over time develop cohesive representations of values and institutions in the social imagery. Their leaders represent concrete forms of organic intellectuals who perform functions of articulation and critique, promoting new forms of seeing reality and, in the process, oppositional views and solutions to “dogmatic forms of thought and action” (Suárez, 2004, p. 5).

NGO Impact and Leverage

Assertions that NGOs lack legitimacy because they do not have formal representation and usually

face limited accountability miss the greater point of NGO action. By bringing issues that had been under the radar of formal politics to the fore, NGOs generate public opinion about them, which makes active forces from the periphery rather than those of the center of the political arena. Logically, these issues originate outside the political system, within sectors not formally “representative” of the polity. Transformational NGOs are very active at the local level, the first venue in the generation of democratic debate.

The charge made by some observers that NGOs lack accountability needs greater precision. If by accountability one means that NGOs do not formally report to the national constituency, this is true. However, NGOs are accountable to those that they serve; poor responses to constituency needs usually result in an NGO’s failure to survive. Additionally, NGOs are highly accountable to those who fund them, and the demonstration of goal attainment and financial propriety are a regular part of their contractual obligations with donor agencies, which are typically from the North. Their reliance on these funds makes them vulnerable to changes in donors’ policies and priorities. The alternative to external sources of support is often dissolution of the NGO: the work of NGOs is fraught with problems of sustainability since most of their funding is drawn from outside sources. Often they cannot learn from their own performance because they are seldom funded to conduct self-evaluation. It must also be recognized that NGOs, like many other organizations, are not exempt from internal conflict and dissent.

The massive proliferation of NGOs throughout the world is evidence of the growing value of their useful roles. One estimate places the number of NGOs in developing countries at about one million (Haque, 2002). Several bilateral agencies have become willing to work more with NGOs. In 1992, NGOs received 13 percent of all development assistance (about \$8 billion), which represented more than the entire amount transferred by the UN system (Simmons, 1998). Another indicator of their increasing brokering with the state is that 1,500 NGOs had consultative status (i.e., have gained the right to provide advice) in the UN Economic and Social Council in 1998, compared to 976 in 1991 and 41 in 1948 (Simmons, 1998). In Latin America, 43 percent of all aid coming into the region is from EU countries; an increasing proportion of these funds is channeled through NGOs. The strategy by European NGOs (which support many NGOs in the South) is to work on citizenship issues as the only meaningful foundation for participation and development, seeing democratization as a conscious development strategy (Grugel, 2000). This is a crucial logic: domestic NGOs are sought not as mere executors but as social actors that can perform socially reconstructive functions.

A major leverage of transformational NGOs rests on their ability to shame governments, as exemplified by Human Rights Watch, which has highlighted abuses by the state in unlawful imprisonment or physical torture. Since the 1970s the number of human rights NGOs and the scope and intensity of their activity has increased; it is estimated that there are now more than 200 NGOs each in the UK and the US working on human rights, and a growing number in developing countries (Held et al., 1999).

The work of NGOs is not always visible—the mainstream media does not report on it, and not even academic researchers investigate it. In many nations, legislative advances have occurred due to the intervention of NGOs. These advances are related to communal rights to property, the way property is used, and rights to informed participation about land development options. Advances in international legislation, also due to NGO intervention, make it necessary for communities holding mineral resources to grant “social license” regarding the use of their property before mining companies can come in. Within the US, NGOs have been important actors in the questioning

of undemocratic decisions by legally challenging questionable decisions by governments. For instance, in 2006, in response to a letter sent by the FBI to all companies requiring all employees to sign a “national security letter” (NSL), the American Civil Liberties Union (a long-standing NGO) succeeded in obtaining legal judgment considering the requirement unconstitutional. The case was originally filed in April 2004 and is part of a series of cases against the NSL section of the Patriot Act. NGO opposition to driftnet fishing in 1992 led to the US Dolphin Conservation Act of 1994 (Simmons, 1998). As was the case for the civil rights struggle in the US, many American NGOs work through incremental but no less persuasive ways to erode negative practices and to promote fair legislation.

Women’s and Feminist NGOs

A way to illustrate the work of NGOs is by highlighting feminist NGOs’ contributions to social change. Most of the rights women have achieved in the past three decades can be traced to the activism of the women’s movement and established feminist NGOs. The four UN Conferences on Women, the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women, *Roe v. Wade*, and Title IX have all resulted from calculated NGO effort

The issues for action involve both distributive policies—those providing new symbolic and material benefits to all within designated categories—as well as redistributive or structural policies—those that seek reallocation of benefits between or among class, ethnic, racial, gender, or other collectivities (Barnett, 1986; Stromquist, 2004). Generally, the educational work of feminist NGOs focuses on issues of empowerment, domestic violence, and income-generation. Unfortunately, most do not touch formal education and thus fail to question it, leaving schooling as an unquestioned institution even though it plays a substantial part in the reproduction of gender ideologies.

With their sensitivity to and knowledge of the private sphere (i.e., intimate and domestic gender relations), these groups have expanded the view of the political, going beyond electoral politics and the politics of public office to include the power and powerlessness that exists at the micro levels in intimate relationships and the household. It must be recognized that women’s NGOs did not emerge from the erosion of confidence in the capacity of democratic institutions to intervene effectively in shaping social and economic life. Rather, they emerged because the state was doing little to transform the status quo. So, it was not a response to state “erosion” but to state “blindness.”

Women’s groups, especially in Latin America, have made major contributions to the intellectual construction of an “amplified” or “full” citizenship, which brings to center stage social rights in the widespread, politically focused conception of citizenship (Sojo, 2002). Through their discourse and action, they have expanded conceptions of democracy to include not only institutionalized political and civil rights but also social rights. The research I conducted on three feminist NGOs (one in the Dominican Republic and two in Perú) shows that these groups—which seek to advance the situation of women *and* transform gender relations—promote collective action, thus giving women a public voice as well as the knowledge and skills to engage in the public sphere. Although women are fractured by differences in race, class, and sexuality, the category “women” has proven to be an adequate basis for mobilization (Stromquist, 2007). These groups concentrate on adult women and their claim to material benefits and citizenship rights. They pay considerable attention to the restricted private space women experience in their everyday life and attempt to expand their rights in the household and intimate relations by demanding sexual and reproductive rights and striving to eliminate domestic violence against women. At

the same time, these NGOs are bringing previously “private” issues into the realm of the public – for instance, women-led NGOs have advocated for the incorporation of gender in all areas of decision-making, a position adopted since the Fourth World Women’s Conference (in Beijing, 1995) known as gender mainstreaming.

Conclusion

Certainly, NGOs cannot solve such widespread problems as poverty and cross-national inequalities, programs that require not only knowledge and persuasion but also the ability to exercise political and economic pressure. Nor should NGOs be conceptualized as forms of service delivery operating in areas left unattended by state downsizing (as some international financial institutions would want). Yet, their role remains crucial in contemporary society. Transformational NGOs address much more than identity politics; often, they can serve as precursors to new ways of imagining global society and thus global citizenship. Transformational NGOs are not disinterested apolitical participants, nor are they a magic bullet. But by being one or more steps removed from formal politics and structured governmental bureaucracy and by having the possibility to dialogue in unmonitored spaces, they enjoy freedom to be innovative and to pursue controversial agendas shunned by political representatives. They serve as central counterweights to the state, a purpose more precious than ever before given the frequent dominance of the executive branch within the democratic state at the expense of more judicial and representative authorities. Transformational NGOs expand the debate, demand to cover felt needs and problems not reflected in what are usually elite political transactions, and deepen democracy to include the voices of those from the margins. Moreover, in a globalizing world increasingly characterized by competition and individualization, NGOs may contribute to making the reflexivity of social actors anticipated by Giddens (1991) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) a reality, and in so doing accomplish the realization of a transformed imaginary of citizenship.

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