# Editorial Introduction

## Are NGOs Overrated?[1]
## Ten Year Anniversary Double Issue

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Ten years ago, the inaugural issue of *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (CICE) asked its authors to tackle the question, "Are nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) overrated?" It was a fitting beginning for a journal meant for international education scholars, who often entered the field because of their commitments to acting upon the theories they develop and critique, and their beliefs that academic work ultimately must be useful outside of the academy. Indeed, CICE's authors and readers routinely collaborate with nongovernmental organizations, and are therefore personally and intimately familiar with the daily challenges of working with these agencies. In framing the first issue of CICE around the efficacy of NGOs, the journal's founding editors were indirectly asking a much larger question that are of universal concern among scholars and activists alike: As outsiders, is it more responsible for us to use our power and wealth to provide for basic human needs or to change entire systems based on our ideas of what social justice looks like? Or, more simply put, how do we use the resources available to us to make the world a more just place?

Before World War II, NGOs were practically invisible in international politics: policymakers and world leaders regarded them as agencies purely designed to deliver services that the state lacked the resources, time, or motivation to provide (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). While collective action among NGOs led to widespread social reform, particularly during the nineteenth century in the areas of labor and human rights, they received little attention from nations vying for global power and financial security. This positioning reflected the widespread belief that the most effective foreign aid was service position, and that it was the job of the people receiving the aid to reform their own nations, systems, and institutions.

NGOs rapidly proliferated in the late 1990s, when governments began the current pattern of seeking out private solutions to public problems (Edwards & Hulme, 1995). As NGOs continue to expand their reach and influence, their role is becoming increasingly complex (Steiner-Khamsi, 1998). Although governments continue to expect NGOs to act primarily as providers of direct services, NGOs often develop ambitious agendas for political reform (Edwards & Hulme, 1995; Mundy & Murphy, 2001; Wils, 1995). Now, the ultimate goal of many NGOs is "mainstreaming," or "the incorporation of NGO models into the official policy framework" of the nations that NGOs serve (Wils, 1995, p. 58). No longer satisfied with addressing the symptoms of poverty, more and more, NGOs are seeking out ways to address the root of the problem itself. This shift has led to successful reform efforts, including the development of the Education for All (EFA) movement (Mundy & Murphy, 2001; Stromquist, 1998). Furthermore, NGOs "implement" the agendas of reformist initiatives ranging from women's rights to environmental protection to anti-nuclear proliferation efforts (Stromquist, 1998, p. 62). Without the action of NGOs, these movements would involve far fewer participants and would be available to far fewer nations.

Because reformist agendas that NGOs are now pursuing may undermine the authority and power structure of the institutions that provide them with financial and political support, scholars and

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activists question whether NGOs can ever truly pursue reformist agendas (Edwards & Hulme, 1998; Mundy & Murphy, 2001; Wils, 1995). Funding institutions often respond to reforms by selectively funding social service programs, which tend to emphasize service provision, more often than economic programs, which tend to emphasize personal empowerment and, eventually, structural change. Additionally, funders demand greater and more specific accountability, asking for data representing "results and impact" (Wils, 1995, p. 60). These reporting requirements place greater value on quantifiable activities (such as the provision of direct services) rather than efforts that are best captured qualitatively (such as the communication of new ideologies and reform measures). While such accountability measures have rewarded NGOs that achieve impressive results (Stromquist, 1998), they may also penalize those that pursue agendas considered too radical or progressive (Edwards & Hulme, 1998).

Critics argue that as a result of these pressures, NGOs often feel more accountable to funders than to the constituents they purport to serve (Edwards & Hulme, 1995; Edwards & Hulme, 1998; Mundy & Murphy, 2001; Wils, 1995). Not only does such questionable allegiance detract from organizations' motivations to work towards widespread change, Wils (1995) claims that NGOs that lose touch with the communities they serve tend to advance policy agendas that are inadequate or ineffective. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the reforms that networks of NGOs and other non-state agencies procure are merely temporary, subject to the whims of global politics and transient international leadership (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). Finally, global policies, such as those derived from the EFA movement, are often not as promising as they first appear: while nations may agree to educational reform, ultimately, many lack the resources and motivation to follow through on the promises they make to networks of organizations that lack the ability to enforce the policies they develop.

The number and impact of NGOs continues to increase alongside the strategies scholars, activists, and policymakers devise to address the problems associated with poverty and oppression. Can NGOs convince entire nations to engage in substantial social reform? Can NGOs receive private funding while remaining primarily accountable to those they serve? Can NGOs be trusted to work for reform that may disrupt the status quo that provides them with their financial and political power? In short, can NGOs actually change the status quo?

In **Bridge Over Black[ened] Water: A New Refrain for NGOs**, Mark Ginsburg reviews how recent events, such as the case of Blackwater Worldwide, have changed the way scholars and activists evaluate the role and effectiveness of NGOs.

In **Donor Logic in the Era of Gates, Buffett, and Soros**, Gita Steiner-Khamsi explores the impact of philanthropic funding sources, many of whom are not required to abide by tight regulations imposed by states, on the ways NGOs operate.

In **The Growing Market for NGO Influence**, Lynn Ilon addresses the positioning of NGOs as recipients of aid from organizations with ulterior political and economic motives, and questions the ability of NGOs to do reform work within this context.

In **NGOs, Civil Society, and Development: Is There a Third Way?**, Stephen Klees discusses the ways in which local and global forces compromise the ability of NGOs to achieve lasting reform. Klees then outlines a new type of reform effort integrating grassroots activism, participatory democracy, social justice, and networking into a truly transformational organization.

In **Contested Alliances**, Iveta Silova visits the many roles that NGOs play in authoritarian and postauthoritarian settings.

In **From NGOs to CSOs: Social Citizenship, Civil Society and "Education for All" – An Agenda for Further Research**, Karen Mundy advocates using a social citizenship lens to both evaluate the impact of civil society on the effectiveness of Education For All, as well as the potential of NGOs to create widespread social change.

In **Revisiting Transformational NGOs in the Context of Contemporary Society**, Nelly Stromquist argues that transformational NGOs can and have improved the daily lives of everyday people by reshaping the way that individuals participate in civil society.

Although the roles of international education scholars, activists, and policymakers, both within and outside of NGOs, remain uncertain, unfortunately the same cannot be said about the realities of poverty and oppression, which remain stubbornly consistent. For the past decade, the editors at CICE have had the honor and a pleasure to participate in scholarly dialogues surrounding the many manifestations of the pursuit of social justice currently occurring in the field of comparative and international education. I know I speak for my past, present, and future colleagues when I express my genuine hope that the journal will continue in this role for decades to come.

**Notes**

[1]. Thanks to Cambria Dodd Russell, Andrew Shiotani, and Pete Cronin with their help on earlier drafts.

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# Bridge over Black[ened] Water: A New Refrain for NGOs

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In 1970, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel released their award-winning album, "Bridge over Troubled Water."[1] Although the album's title song was not produced as part of a social marketing campaign for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), its lyrics seem well-suited for that purpose. For example, the first verse and refrain state:

> When you're weary, feeling small
> When tears are in your eyes,
> I will dry them all
> I'm on your side
> When times get rough
> And friends just can't be found
>
> Like a bridge over troubled water
> I will lay me down
> Like a bridge over troubled water
> I will lay me down (Simon and Garfunkel, 1970)

In particular, the lyrics above could be used to promote one of the images of NGOs – those "new great organizations" – that I mentioned in my contribution to the first issue of *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (Ginsburg 1998). Such NGOs could be described metaphorically as a bridge, available to help people in need to cross over, whether the troubled water refers to hunger, disease, poverty, or inadequate education. The conception of NGOs as "new great organizations" is informed by a preference for "privatized" democracy (see Sehr, 1997), and can be contrasted with a view of NGOs as "no good organizations," which undermine opportunities for people to engage in "public" democratic (Sehr, 1997) processes to shape state policy and action. Simon and Garfunkel's song is less likely to support this latter image of NGOs, however, unless the troubled water is seen as the workings of authoritarian and corrupt states.

I still feel comfortable with what I wrote ten years ago, that how one views NGOs depends on one's perspective, and thus my reflections here will focus more on extending the analysis, rather than revising it. I will do this by considering three relatively recent developments, which in different ways have provoked me to keep wrestling with the question posed in that 1998 article: "what's in an acronym?"

The first development connects to my activity as a journal editor and a scholar. In working with David Suarez on his manuscript that was eventually published in the *Comparative Education Review*, I came to appreciate how intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) can serve as "receptor sites for transnational ideas… promot[ing] and diffus[ing] … global models at the national level" (Suarez, 2007, p. 53). Building on Suarez's analysis of the role of NGOs in developing and diffusing ideas and practices in human rights education, Mayumi Terano and I analyzed the role of NGOs in mobilizing participation in UNESCO's Culture of Peace Programme, specifically in India and Japan (Terrano and Ginsburg,

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