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Look Who's Talking!

Second Thoughts about NGOs as Representing Civil Society

Hans Holmén and Magnus Jirström

Linköping University, Sweden and University of Lund, Sweden

Abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are major players in development aid today. It is widely believed they represent civil society and that, for example, the UN and the World Bank would be strengthened if NGOs were given a larger influence over policy formulation and development. As one can hardly speak of an NGO community, the issue of representation is far from easily solved. NGOs often compete for visibility, clients and influence, and representation leaves a lot to be desired. Hence, governments' and intergovernmental institutions' reluctance to accept immediately NGOs as partners, may be necessary for NGOs to become representative and, paradoxically, for strengthening civil society as well.

Keywords campaigning • civil society • networking • NGO • representation • social forum

The Problem

We live in the age of NGOs. Since the 1980s, their numbers have virtually exploded. So have expectations placed on NGOs. Not only are they expected to speed up development, to safeguard environment, to contribute to poverty reduction and the emancipation of women, to enforce human rights and bring democracy to countries under autocratic regimes – expectations have been particularly high on their ability (and willingness) to give a voice to the poor.

Because NGOs are believed to have an outspoken humanitarian focus and to constitute a democratic alternative, they are often invited to speak for the poor and disadvantaged. They are often seen – and see themselves – as watchdogs, keeping an eye on governments and public institutions. NGOs, thus, act as spokesmen for civil society, if they are not actually equated with it. Through networking, NGOs are able to communicate among themselves in order to present

a common standpoint and, even more important, they can give voice to those who otherwise would have no say in the fora determining their future. Not only do NGOs engage in a range of advocacy and lobbying activities in order to influence governments and inter-governmental institutions such as the UN and the World Bank. Demands have also been raised that NGOs should be given official status in decision-making bodies. It is, however, not self-evident that this would only be for the better.

The claim that NGOs represent a humanitarian alternative, and that they can and do represent the poor and the marginalized, rests on a number of assumptions:

- Decisions made and activities pursued by inter-governmental organizations will improve, be fairer and more effective if NGOs are part of the decision-making process.
- NGOs do not act out of self-interest.
- Governments and inter-governmental institutions are uncivilized whereas civil society is civilized, homogenous and in agreement.[1]
- It is possible to transmit demands and standpoints from below without distortions.
- NGOs are immune to corruption whereas politicians and public employees are not.

Today, there is a heated and somewhat worried discussion about the future governance of an increasingly interdependent world. Many are of the opinion that while governments pursue narrow, egoistic interests, NGOs have a global consciousness and therefore they should be allowed to have a say in global decision making. The answer to that claim is not self-evident, as indicated by the following two statements. On the one hand, it is claimed that 'NGOs participate vitally in the international system … and generally increase the accountability and legitimacy of the global governance process' (Paul, 1999a). On the other hand, NGOs have been viewed as 'unelected and unaccountable special-interest groups [which] disrupt global governance' (*Economist*, 1999).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to an understanding of power and civil society, particularly when it comes to NGOs' role as development promoters and their representation in international institutions. The discussion is limited to those NGOs that penetrate international fora and who also engage in the development of poor countries. We focus especially on our networking, social forums and direct representation. The analysis is based on own research and a literature review.

Great Expectations

Much development theory and most aid-agencies put NGOs at the forefront of contemporary development strategies. Since the 1980s, there has been a

veritable explosion both in the number of NGOs, in the funds they handle and the diversity of tasks they pursue. There has also been a marked shift in orientation from relief and charity work towards a more pronounced role as development agents in diverse physical, social and cultural settings. Many NGOs have also come to prioritize issues such as campaigning and advocacy. For some, this is their main activity.

The concept of NGO is ambiguous.[2] Increasingly, it has come to be reserved for organizations fulfilling intermediary functions in the global chains of aid delivery and advocacy. This is also how we use the concept in this article. NGOs, moreover, are usually distinguished from local or grassroots organizations (LOs), which generally are member-based, whereas NGOs normally are not. Also, while, in the Third World, many LOs are found in rural areas, NGOs mostly are urban-based and often also have a northern origin. NGOs tend to be run by professional or semi-professional staff. This implies that whereas the beneficiaries of LOs are the members themselves, the beneficiaries of NGOs are their clients. Although they too are outside government, LOs are generally small and scattered and tend to be considered weak, unsustainable and without managerial capabilities. Although much hailed in development literature, LOs have no voice and, apparently, everyone wants to speak on their behalf.

NGOs have claimed – and also often been given – the right to speak for 'civil society' in a number of national and international fora and on a wide range of topics. In fact, 'the United Nations, the main global policy body, has been unusually open to NGO input over the years' (Paul, 1999b). An indication of their current status is given by the former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who declared that NGOs are 'the conscience of humanity' (Paul, 2000). With such reputation, NGOs claim the right to take part in formal decision-making processes as delegates with official or semi-official status in, for example, World Bank meetings and UN summits. It is also not uncommon for political parties to form alliances with NGOs on debated issues and NGOs are often included in and/or used as spokesmen for national, official delegations. This gradual 'officialization' of NGOs is remarkable since NGOs often are seen – and see themselves – as counterweights to governments and inter-governmental institutions. Nevertheless, 'most of the literature on NGOs is exceedingly optimistic on the roles NGOs play in the international, national and local arenas' (Jordan and van Tuijl, 2000: 2051).

This is rather surprising. On the one hand, more is believed than known about NGOs and, on the other hand, the issue of NGO representation is not straightforward. One reason for this paradox is that, 'within NGOs the role of advocacy is often poorly understood' (Hudson, 2001: 1). Another reason is that while, not only NGOs, but even more so NGO networking and advocacy, have been hailed as effective and progressive undertakings, both advocacy and

networking activities are neglected areas in NGO research (Vakil, 1997; Perkin and Court, 2005).

The Heterogeneous 'Family' of NGOs

Even if we adopt a widespread definition of NGOs, designating them as 'self-governing, private, not-for-profit organisations that are geared toward improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people' (Vakil, 1997: 2060), there is no consensus among NGOs about how to accomplish this objective. Particularly, one should be careful not to assume that northern and southern NGOs are of one kind.

Besides 'global' NGOs engaged in charity and humanitarian aid (e.g. Red Cross, Save the Children, Médecins Sans Frontiers), or in advocacy for human rights (e.g. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) and environmental protection (Greenpeace, World Wildlife Foundation), there are others with a more outspoken development orientation (e.g. Oxfam, Action Aid, Ford and Rockefeller Foundations). Among the latter category are northern NGOs such as the Sasakawa Foundation, which can be called mainstream modernizers with a strong belief in technology as a means to overcome food shortages and reduce poverty in poor countries. Such NGOs generally operate in collaboration with governments in the Third World. Other northern-based NGOs (e.g. Twin Trade, Fair Trade, Technoserve), are 'market-friendly' and assist Third World producer organizations in accessing the world market and to get a larger share from exports.

There are also many northern NGOs (e.g. Both ENDS, Friends of the Earth, Grain) claim to be representing 'another development'. They tend to be politically radical anti-capitalists and/or are motivated by environmental concerns. They are sceptical, if not hostile, to 'modernization' and often see themselves as alternatives to mainstream development strategies. Such NGOs, while purporting to represent the 'alternative paradigm', tend to avoid market-solutions and being linked to governments. Some regard themselves as reformists, whereas others claim to have revolutionary potentials.

NGOs in the Third World have likewise been established for a number of reasons and do not always share the same purpose – and also often not that of their supporting northern 'sponsor'. Many have been created as a direct effect of northern penetration. As could be expected, there are fewer objections to development in the South, even if concerns about the social and environmental costs of development are expressed also there. Some southern NGOs are genuine development organizations and do not have a priori aversions towards technology or modernization. Others are deeply concerned about the loss of culture and values that development entails. To different degrees, they base

their work on indigenous resources and are more or less responsive to locally expressed needs.

Being regarded as democratic alternatives, NGOs have, however, often been found to be neither as transparent, nor as democratic as assumed and some are, in fact, one-man enterprises. While many southern NGOs are serious about their business, quite a few have been established with the primary – or even the sole – purpose of gaining access to the flows of foreign financing that now, after implementation of structural adjustment policies, by-pass Third World governments. It is often questionable whether these NGOs have any progressive purpose whatsoever. In fact, many southern NGOs are urban phenomena, their members are 'for the most part from the upper and middle classes' (Destremau, 2001: 156) and they tend to display 'no true grassroots-contact' (Arnesen et al., 2002: 14).

NGO Growth and the Call for Networking

Such contacts could be improved, for example, through networking activities among LOs and between LOs and NGOs. In the literature, NGOs have frequently been associated with words like cooperation, information sharing and policy negotiation, and 'networking' has become buzzword among NGOs. It is often assumed that networks 'can allow local voices – "even the voices of the poor" – to be heard at global policymaking fora' (Perkin and Court, 2005: 5). By networking on prioritized issues, NGOs can gain flexibility, strength and efficiency (Holmén and Jirström, 2000). However, the expectations that different participants have with networking may differ greatly, especially between foreign or international NGOs (INGOs) and LOs. The latter may be more interested in a community service or a profitable income-generating project whereas the former may seek visibility and a platform for influencing policy. Hence, a network that consists of participants with different backgrounds must define its language, methods and priorities according to the needs of its weakest partners.

More often than not it appears to be the other way around, with aims and methods defined in a top-down manner. Most 'lower-order' organizations depend on 'higher-order' organizations (and ultimately on donors) for financial resources. Emphasis tends to be on vertical networking, that is, between a northern NGO and its southern affiliate and/or between NGOs and LOs. The result often is a one-way dissemination of information.[3] Most attention in the networking debate concerns how NGOs best link up with grassroots, either through collaborating with existing LOs or, which seems to be more common, by establishing 'their own' local branches. Less attention is directed to the issue of linking grassroots with each other.

Limits to NGO Networking? The Issues of Accountability and Representation

The world of NGOs is much less homogenous than often assumed and there are good reasons to doubt that NGOs as a whole represent some kind of alternative development. Due to the fact that there are so many ideologies, strategies and objectives represented among NGOs, one might ask whether there really is so much to network about. This leads to two issues in NGO networking that deserve some rethinking: *accountability* and *representation*.

Accountability has to do with the possibility, for example, of the members and owners of an organization holding management responsible for its decisions and undertakings. This is made possible because an organization is identifiable. It is not only registered, it also has a formalized structure with legal statutes, defined objectives, and formalized division of responsibilities among its employees and so on. In this sense, it can be said that accountability has to do with backward linkages – from the staff to its owners, but also to the institutionalized legal system in which organizations operate. An organization, for example an NGO, thus, is accountable to its owners/members. When (business) organizations cooperate for some purpose, the scope and forms of this cooperation are generally legally codified (e.g. a contract) in order to safeguard accountability. NGOs have frequently been found to lack accountability in the sense that their clients and beneficiaries have little influence over the NGOs' operations and/or decision making.[4] The issue of deficient NGO accountability is well documented (e.g. Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Hudson, 2001) and needs no further elaboration here. The other aspect, representation, is less well-researched and below, we will penetrate it more thoroughly.

Representation, as we understand it, is something quite different from accountability even if, at first glance, the two concepts seem to have a lot in common. At least for reasons of analytical clarity, it is essential to distinguish between the two. Whereas accountability is 'inward oriented', representation is 'outward oriented' in the sense that it aims to influence others, who are outside the organization or network in question, for example, legislators. Attaining such outward-oriented influence is often facilitated if the spokesperson can show – or make probable – that s/he represents large numbers of likeminded people. Networking is often used for such purposes.

Whereas organizations are formal constructs, networking is characterized by a high degree of informality. Much networking is carried out not by the organizations themselves but by individuals in organizations (hence the informality). Networking is a voluntary activity – as opposed to the regulated (and, hence, involuntary) character of tasks inside an organization – between people in organizations and, even if some (personal) contacts can be long-lasting, networking is often ad hoc and of limited durability. Apparently, it is very difficult to keep a network accountable. Networks tend to have no owners,

only 'participants'. There are, typically, no formal statutes to refer to and the mandate for networking is invisible. Nobody is formally responsible for the result of networking. On the one hand, this seems to be why 'loose forms of co-operation' are so often preferred among NGOs (Holmén and Jirström, 2000). On the other hand, it has consequences for representation.

In the ideal situation, once consensus is arrived at on a topic, those in the appropriate location and with the necessary contacts may be given the mandate to lobby for the network's standpoint. In trans-national networks and/or on 'global' issues, it is not self-evident that the same NGO should always be given the role as spokesperson. Different localities represent different cultural milieus where not only different languages are spoken but, more important, different symbols are used and different codes of conduct and ways of approaching others are deemed appropriate (or not). It is not, therefore, the same thing to lobby in Calcutta or Bamako as it is in New York or Paris. Hence, on this level of trans-national campaigning, different NGOs have comparative advantages, which, if utilized properly, might not only enhance the influence of the network as such, but could also have an equalizing and democratizing effect within the network itself. Unfortunately, we do not live in the best of worlds.

Jordan and van Tuijl (2000: 2051) found that 'the relationships that emerge among trans-national NGO networks are highly problematic'. They conclude that 'the ideal form of cooperation and interaction in trans-national advocacy networks … is the exception rather than the rule' (2000: 2062) which, they say, is largely due to a lack of political responsibility in such networks. Partly this is caused by the difficulty to uphold transparency in large networks and partly due to an absence of formal mechanisms to enforce obligations in networks. Hence, the temptation for the well-placed to use positions to further their own interests rather than those of the network, are sometimes great.

Presently, there seems to be no difficulty in uniting NGOs for national or worldwide advocacy about a generally enhanced role of NGOs for example, World Bank meetings, UN summits and similar fora for policy formulation. This is a shared self-interest that meets few objections. But below this level NGO unity is fractious (Leipold, 2002). NGOs are often found to be fierce competitors, not only in terms of ideology but also for 'market shares', donor funds and clients. Thus, whereas many northern and international NGOs often tend to establish dependants among southern NGOs, 'weak domestic challengers [in the Third World] vie for scarce transnational resources, [and] those groups that gain support have structural or strategic advantages over others' in the internal competition (Clifford, 2001).

This, we believe, explains the frequent reports that NGOs are unwilling to share information or to coordinate activities (e.g. Meyer, 1997; Schweigman, 2003; Michael, 2004).[5] Thus, for all the talk about NGOs contributing to partnership, empowerment and so on, NGOs 'have shown little ability to form

equitable relations, or true partnership, among themselves' (Fowler, 1998: 137; Bhatia, 2000; Chapin, 2004; Kapoor, 2005). Networks tend to become rather exclusive and often resemble informal brotherhoods. The implications of this are highly problematic, not least when it comes to representation. A few examples may illustrate this delicate but often overlooked issue.

Problems with Representation

Even for such famous NGOs as the CNCR,[6] by the World Bank deemed to be 'truly representative' of the majority of Senegalese smallholder peasants (Bosc et al., 2002: 35), the representativity can be questioned. McKeon et al. (2004: 20) found 'anomalies in its leadership' and that 'the relationship between the social base and the formal base [is] far from ideal'. Similarly, the NGO network ROPPA,[7] which purports to represent West-African smallholder interests internationally (McKeon et al., 2004), despite its accomplishments, is not truly representative of West African peasants: 'ROPPA is considered a network, but [has a] pyramidal organisational model' (Destrait, 2003: 5). Long chains of communication lead to situations where ROPPA 'cannot wait for all farmers to be informed' (Destrait, 2003: 5). Moreover, with its emphasis on the 'values of smallholder agriculture', this 'deliberately sets ROPPA apart from efforts to promote commodity-based groups and networks' (Bingen, 2003: 6).

Northern NGOs and INGOs propagating 'another development' and/or 'cultural and ecological diversity' often claim to represent smaller and weaker NGOs and LOs and to use their stronger voices to spread attention to peripheral concerns. Often enough, this is also correct. However, 'NGOs are no think tanks' (Lockwood, 2005: vii) and they often make ideologically biased but misinformed 'analyses' of local realities. On a number of occasions, large, strong and well-connected NGOs have been found to use this platform to pursue completely opposite agendas while still pretending to be the voice of the unheard. In the 1980s, the Chipko movement (tree-huggers) in the Indian Himalayas was hailed as a genuine grassroots protest against undesirable development, which, it was claimed, would only destroy environment, livelihoods and preferred lifestyles. A multitude of NGOs in the North saw an opportunity to speak on Chipko's behalf. However, when it was realized that the Chipko protests were not against development but rather against not being part of it, these self-appointed spokespeople lost interest and, being 'oblivious to the process of marginalisation', they ceased using the movement in campaigning (Rangan, 1996: 222).

Likewise, massive global campaigns were launched against plans in China and Uganda to build dams and resettle people, allegedly because indigenous people opposed these projects due to fears of being dislocated and impoverished. In reality, the big NGOs were 'flat wrong on the facts' (Mallaby, 2004: 54) and

those 'spoken for' were of quite different opinions. In Uganda, the only local opposition came from 'those living just outside the project perimeters. They were angry because the project would not affect them, meaning no generous payouts' (Mallaby, 2004: 52). In the Chinese case, protests were aired because 'many more people wanted to move [into the project area] than the project could accommodate' (Mallaby, 2004: 57). Chapin (2004) likewise shows how a number of big INGOs – allegedly campaigning on behalf of poor, indigenous peoples and cultural diversity – betray their clients when these are found to prioritize development and economic well-being over preservation of natural resources. As one interviewed NGO representative put it: 'Quite frankly, I don't care what the Indians want. We have to work to conserve the biodiversity' (Chapin, 2004: 21).

NGOs have often been found to be weak on participation and empowerment – highly valued buzz-words among NGOs. Actually, sensitizing and empowering activities often turn out to be efforts to make grassroots see things the outsider's way (Holmén and Jirström, 1996). The question therefore is whether NGOs really represent grassroots, or if it may not be the other way around?

Competition for Visibility

Development is a slow and arduous process, which many NGOs apparently are too impatient to engage in on the ground. Instead, they 'seek to move into the faster lane of … influencing … decision-makers at critical levels' (Nyamugasira, 2002: 7). Many NGOs spend a lot of time and energy on lobbying and campaigning. Campaigns, says Leipold (2002: 80), may not change realities on the ground, but they are 'an excellent, possibly even the best, tool to gain symbolic victories'. And symbolic victories may be just as rewarding as real ones. For many NGOs it is increasingly important to be present at World Social Forums and at national and international fora such as the World Bank or various UN 'world summits'. Not only because this might provide an opportunity to influence policy but, since social forums and world summits are intensively covered by the media, presence gives visibility and enhances the possibilities for future participation. This strengthens their position in the above-mentioned NGO competition.

Being widely considered as platforms for social justice movements and arenas for struggle against capitalist globalization, World Social Forums (WSF) gather tens and even hundreds of thousands of participants and allegedly give voice to the global NGO community, in particular to the global South. It is, however, questionable if that is what they do and whether such a 'community' exists. Huish (2006: 1) found that 'the WSF is hardly an open scene for governance'. It has rather evolved 'in a hauntingly corporate structured direction'. Moreover, he says, 'one of the greatest misconceptions about the WSF is the use of the word "world"'. The WSF in Porto Alegre, Brasil, in 2005 allegedly represented

the world, but in reality it was 'a Brazilian event that invite[d] guests from around the world to attend' (2006: 3). Following Huish (2006), the WSF has been reduced to a logo – a logo that some NGOs can use to further their own cause. Larmer (2007: 25, emphasis in original) likewise found that 'while the influence of Africans on the *global* social justice movement remained limited, southern African movements are utilizing the Social Forum model to strengthen their own struggles'. The following case is illustrative.

A few years ago, a South-African NGO was asked to prepare the NGO Forum at 'The World Conference Against Racism' so that the forum would become inclusive and 'the voice of civil society [would be] heard on a range of issues' (ANC, 2002). This NGO, however, 'opted not to pursue these objectives. Instead "Civil Society" was reduced to a narrow network of … organisations affiliated to [it], who were themselves inadequately consulted' (ANC, 2002). From our own experiences from having worked with a global, UN-sponsored NGO network revealed similar tendencies when it came to be the national NGO representative in the 'global compact'. There are many examples. Notions such as 'we, who have taken upon ourselves the task to speak for the grassroots' (Nigerian NGO manager 1998, personal communication) perfectly illustrate this tendency to represent others – whether they want it or not.

The plight of the poor, of southern NGOs, community groups and indigenous peoples are supposed to be centre-stage in WSFs. However, their presence is hampered by lack of resources. Participation in WSFs is 'largely dependent on a theoretical equality of opportunity that most capitalist businessmen would embrace: anyone is free to attend in the same way as anyone is free to buy a Ferrari' (Larmer, 2007: 26). The result is that WSFs remain biased towards western agendas (Larmer, 2007). It has even been suggested that WSFs 'could reasonably be viewed as part of the civil society infrastructure of modern-day imperial expansion' (Manji, 2007: 1; see also Bleiker, 2002).

This tendency is not confined to 'alternative' gatherings such as WSF, it is present also at more official world summits organized by, for example, the UN. The UN-brokered World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 attracted attention from NGOs because this was 'a "high-level" UN event offering NGOs, however defined, full participation rights rather than merely an observer status' (Franklin, 2007: 309). Some participants were small and with limited capacity, whereas others were big and resourceful. The latter tend to globe-trot from one event to another and 'a number of NGO delegations to WSIS events were also active in World Social Forum summits' (Franklin, 2007: 310). For some participants, initial enthusiasm soon faded and 'a number of smaller – more radical or less well-endowed – NGOs left the summit because they were dissatisfied, *inter alia*, with the "combative negotiating styles within the civil society …"' (Franklin, 2007: 313).

Also at other UN summits, NGOs pursue different strategies and co-operation and networking for a common cause is not always a prioritized issue. For example, at the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, some NGOs chose to attend the alternative international forum (INGOF) and hoped to influence collectively the official assembly by presenting a shared vision and an alternative consensus. Other, better-connected NGOs, however, favoured the individual approach. Thus, whereas 'some of the larger NGOs viewed the INGOF process as a distraction and chose to focus on direct interaction with decision-makers' (Biggs and Dodd, 1997: 4), government representatives 'went to NGOs they already had a relationship with, which [not only] continued to reinforce a predominantly northern bias' (Biggs and Dodd, 1997: 5), but also reinforced the trend of establishing an NGO aristocracy.

World summits and WSFs are important arenas where it is imperative to be seen. Visibility and media exposure enhance the chances to obtain external financial support. Although much literature on NGOs and networking warn about the risks of NGOs being corrupted by accepting external funding, many NGOs depend on donor funding and the temptation to channel external money through networks is sometimes great. It is likely that a network hub – commonly a northern NGO that already enjoys a certain amount of centrality and visibility – by accepting to channel donor-funds through the network, will intensify its contacts with the donor(s) and thereby increase its potential for representation and consultancy. Its thus further enhanced visibility leads to further contacts and new opportunities. Hence, competition about the possibility to represent others is sometimes fierce and it should not be surprising that many northern NGOs, while advocating empowerment, 'are opposed to aid being channelled directly to southern NGOs' (Manji, 2000: 75).

To lobby for a standpoint – even for a factional interest – is, of course, quite legitimate. Democratic governance depends on the possibility for different opinions to make themselves heard, not least in order to counter the sometimes self-interested behaviour of public institutions. Western-style democracy mandates governments and generates trade-offs, which will always be sub-optimal for some groups within the polity. It is, thus, an inherent civic right for any individual or group to lobby for, for them, preferred policies. Anyone can (ideally) do this, alone or in collaboration with others, and representativity is not per se a requirement for advocacy. But advocacy can be done in different ways. It can be issue-based, for example, highlighting perceived potentials or risks associated with genetically modified organisms (GMOs), or it can be a demand that western protectionism and the dumping of subsidized agricultural products in poor countries should be abolished, because it undermines their possibilities for development. In this kind of issue-based advocacy, it is the argument that counts. It is not necessary that lobbyists represent many people, although it would probably help.

This is not to deny that NGOs frequently have been the source of new insights on a number of issues in, for example, the UN. They certainly have. The problem arises when someone, for example an NGO, claims to speak for a large number of people – sometimes even for people throughout the Third World.[8] When claims are made that someone is representing others, s/he who makes such claims must be able to show that those others actually want him/her to speak on their behalf. And this, many advocating NGOs fail to do. As Cooley and Ron (2002: 36) point out, 'there is no doubt that many of today's INGOs are motivated by normative agendas. Insecurity and competition, however, often pushes them to behave in … rent-seeking ways'.

Would Policy-making Institutions Benefit from Giving NGOs Official Status?

There is also another side to this problematic. The above sections have focused on those who want to represent. What about the fora where representation is to take place? It is frequently argued that the UN would be strengthened if NGOs where given enhanced influence and even formal representation in its sessions and decision-making bodies. The argument is that many participating governments are not democratic and do not represent their citizens. NGOs could therefore enhance international democracy by giving 'the other' a voice. As shown above, it is highly questionable if that is really what NGOs would do. For example, in the UN, rather than speaking for 'civil society', NGOs tend to represent vested interests, that is, there is often a northern bias, certain social strata and organized groups tend to have their interpretations and interests represented more than others and so on (Dunér, 1996). It is thus not self-evident that the UN would be democratized if NGOs were given official status. Moreover, whereas governments, at least the democratic ones, need to take responsibility for complex totalities, many NGOs and NGO networks are single-issue entities.

But it is not true that NGOs are not being represented under the present system. Although not being elevated yet to the rank of equal partners to governments, in recent years we have seen an 'increase in the number of mechanisms for NGO involvement, particularly evident within the United Nations' (van Rooy, 1997: 107). Also, the World Bank 'has made increasing efforts to involve such organisations in policy dialogue' (Kanji, 2001: 122). Hence, 'NGOs have had an impact on the UN-programmes and deliberations in a multitude of ways' (Adams, 1995: 177). This, however, has not always been for the better: 'Donors have been distracted from their core mission by development faddism and pressures from 'single-issue' interest groups' (Timmer, 2005: 23). The result is a blurred focus in these organizations and reduced efficiency as development promoters (Timmer, 2005; see also Mallaby, 2004).

Even if NGO influence is often indirect, there is a clear tendency among many NGOs to try to become 'insiders' wherever possible and on many occasions, well-connected NGOs have managed to get their members into government delegations formally partaking in UN sessions (Adams, 1995; Klugman, 2000). It can be reasonably suspected that only those NGOs that are on speaking terms with their respective governments have the possibility to become insiders. If that is so, they do not represent an alternative voice but rather reinforce opinions that are already being represented. In 2005, Oxfam seemed to have lost credibility among other NGOs for precisely this reason. Rightly or wrongly, Oxfam was criticized for misrepresenting the NGO community and for working too close to – even being co-opted by – the British government. As one NGO official said: 'They have incredible access, and … Oxfam are the ones who are always asked to speak for the whole development movement. [But] they differ on policy from other groups' (Quarmby, 2005: 10; see also Bond et al., 2005).

Do NGOs Represent Civil Society?

The concept of 'civil society' is obscure. Hence, it is an open question whether it really can be claimed that NGOs strengthen civil society, let alone represent it. For one thing, there is no consensus on what 'civil society' is. Often it is seen as a third sector outside government and business, a benevolent sector without aspirations for power or profit. Moreover, civil society is often equated with NGOs and the terms CSO and NGO are frequently used as synonyms. If civil society is seen as synonymous with the NGO 'community', it is a tautology to say that NGOs strengthen 'civil society' – and it does not clarify the matter.

Actually, NGOs do not represent civil society, they represent interest groups of varying size and often with quite specific agendas. Nevertheless, donors, scholars and international institutions have developed a habit of treating NGOs as if they were civil society. On many occasions, NGOs have seized the opportunity to exploit this attitude but have also been accused of '"monopolising" civil society, diverting attention from other associations' (Stiles, 2002: 839). NGOs, apparently, are merely a privileged sub-section of civil society that may not be representative at all.

NGOs are numerous and, through their networks and hierarchies, they have acquired an impressive influence on donors, multilateral institutions and development paradigms. The question remains, however, whether this is good or bad. It is definitely the case that much of this influence is due to 'naïve assumptions often associated with the promotion of NGOs' (Devine, 2004; Igoe, 2004), assumptions, which have often been ill-founded.

Moreover, due to the growth of many NGOs, the widening range of activities they undertake and the growing number of lower-level NGOs they support, many

NGOs which previously relied on voluntary work and personal acquaintance are now in need of hired, professional management and, hence, will represent their members to a lesser degree than previously. Although NGOs are often distinguished from private enterprise, both the lay character and the degree of voluntary engagement are, in many cases, diminishing (Bhatia, 2000) and it becomes increasingly difficult to separate NGOs from the private sector. It has thus been found that 'profit-making bodies are clamouring for NGO status while traditional NGOs are now absorbing the mode of discourse and orientation of the for-profit organisations' (Puplampu and Tettey, 2000: 253). In this sense, NGOs tend to represent less of an alternative than what is often believed.

Even if NGOs, in some cases, have strengthened civil society, there are also places and situations in which civil society has been weakened due to NGOs and external support for NGO activities. For example, it is not uncommon for foreign NGOs to subsidize small businesses that they support in Third World countries, thereby unfairly competing with indigenous efforts to develop 'from below'. Moreover, Stiles (2002: 839) reports that 'in Bangladesh, the growth of the NGO-community has generally not coincided with the strengthening of civil society'. For example, in Bangladesh, NGOs and NGO-supported economic activities enjoy unfair competitive advantages and they do not permit their staff to join trade unions (Stiles, 2002), a type of organization that many would definitely include in 'civil society'.

With this vagueness of the concept 'civil society', it is disturbing that 'few NGOs have explored the full theoretical implications of civil society, or clearly articulated their own interpretations of its nuances' (Whaites, 2000: 127). Therefore, but also due to the above-mentioned heterogeneity of interpretations and approaches, the question is whether NGOs indeed do strengthen civil society, or rather try to mould it in ways they consider desirable.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that none of the five assumptions about NGO qualities and comparative advantages listed in the introduction of this article have been confirmed, at least not on a general level. There are, no doubt, exceptions to the not too rosy picture painted here but reality tells a rather grim story. Even if one supports the idea that NGOs should be represented in national and international political fora, considering the fact that NGOs are so numerous and that their numbers still increase, not all can be represented in those fora that count. Hence, a selection has to be made as to which NGOs can be allowed to participate in, for example, UN sessions. Presently, NGOs are invited, usually because they possess some kind of expertise. Isn't this good enough? On which other basis should such a selection be made? Should only those NGOs be invited that represent a certain ideology, or maybe only those representing

the 'South'? Perhaps those who make the most noise? Or should they not be invited at all, and instead (s)elected by the NGO community? There are strong reasons to doubt that this can be democratically done. Is there, in fact, such a 'community'? In whichever case, those claiming to represent others will have to show their mandate to do so and also, for how long and in relation to which issue this mandate pertains.

Hence, it will not be enough to state, as is sometimes done, that it is 'a myth that NGOs must be representative organisations in order to be legitimate participants' (Schweitz, 1995, quoted in van Rooy, 1997: 110) or that 'the legitimacy of NGOs does not reside in being representative organisations but is enhanced by their commitment' (Klugman, 2000: 113). It is rather the case that, as the World Bank underlines, because 'not all NGOs are genuinely representative and democratic … this role *has to be earned*' (World Bank, 2002: 72, emphasis added). Hence, NGOs must respond to doubts about their legitimacy and accountability. This is all the more urgent because today, according to a self-critical voice from within, '[the] civil society often spends a lot of time discussing … policy problems, but little time discussing their own engagement' (Diakonia, 2004: 3). Hence, it is imperative that NGOs pay serious attention to the degree to which they can claim to be a legitimate voice of others.

This is so, not necessarily because governments and UN officials jealously try to preserve their own domains, as argued by Naidoo (2003). Neither is it, as Shutt (2001: 64) would have it, because those organizations that are allowed to participate 'must … be essentially "non-governmental", that is to say, legally powerless'. Some NGOs are not powerless at all. What governments, the World Bank and the UN *must* do when the 'international NGO community' demands representation and influence, is to ask for their mandate to speak for others. Considering the fact that NGOs often have weak grassroots contacts and that they are neither as democratic nor as transparent as one would like them to be, this is unavoidable if these official institutions are not going to jeopardize whatever legitimacy they may still have.

Actually, by demanding a mandate, governments and international institutions are trying to force NGOs and would-be NGO representatives to become more transparent and democratic – something that many NGOs have so far avoided. In this sense, this 'harsh' attitude from the official institutions may, in fact, turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Following the logic of de Tocqueville (1835, cited in Whaites, 2000), civil society may function as a counterbalance to the increased capabilities of the modern state. But, as Whaites (2000: 132) notes, '[the] logical extension of de Tocqueville's view of civil society as a buffer against the state is that the latter must be capable of … acting as a safeguard against competing [rent-seeking] social groups'. There is no doubt that many NGOs are doing a good job but, frequently, NGOs are not what they are believed to be. At the end of the day, it is perhaps not so much 'civil' society

through NGOs that strengthens 'uncivil' governments and inter-governmental institutions, but rather the established – and frequently not so uncivilized – governments and formal institutions that might strengthen civil society by continuously demanding proof of its spokespersons' legitimacy. The process, then, is dialectic rather than unidirectional.

Notes

1. That this distinction is not totally taken out of the blue is indicated by a recent report entitled *Civil Society and the Uncivil State* (Bush, 2004).
2. The concept is negative and only says what an NGO is not – or pretends not to be. NGOs sometimes constitute GONGOs (government organized NGOs) or QUANGOs (quasi-NGOs) or in other ways, maintain tight links to governments. Also, many NGOs seem to constitute springboards for political careers, eventually allowing their 'owners' to become part of the state apparatus that they are now believed to be an antidote to.
3. See, for example, Vakil (1997: 2063, emphasis added), who defines networking NGOs as 'national or regional NGOs which channel information and provide technical and other assistance to *lower order* NGOs and individuals'. Also see USAID (2000) for a similar emphasis on NGO networks at national and international levels for the dissemination of information *downwards*.
4. Most NGOs depend on external (donor) funding for their projects. As it is well known, he who pays the piper calls the tune, and much influence is removed from local members and/or beneficiaries. On the one hand, 'NGOs are very good in identifying, responding and prioritising the needs in line with donor expectations' (Stiles, 2002: 837). On the other hand, 'when the poor were asked to indicate what might make the greatest difference to their lives, they responded: 'Organizations of their own so they can negotiate with … NGOs; … they want NGOs … to be accountable to them' (Alkire et al., 2001: 4).
5. Generally, tendencies of NGO colonization are reported from the Third World where northern NGOs rather than collaborating with local NGOs and LOs often have been found to create 'their own' subsidiaries. However, this practice is no longer confined to the Third World. Italian NGOs, for example, complain that Italy is being colonized by other northern (primarily British and American) NGOs who prefer to set up their own branch-offices rather than network or collaborate with indigenous organizations (Pallottini, 2002, personal information).
6. *Conceil National de Concertation et de Coopération des Rureaux* (National Council for Rural Dialogue and Co-operation).
7. *Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (West African Network of Peasants' and Producers' Organizations).
8. This is exactly what some NGOs and NGO networks aim to do. For example, the stated objective of the Third World Network is, inter alia, 'to provide a platform representing broadly Southern interests and perspectives at international fora such as the UN conferences and processes' (TWN, 2005).

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Hans Holmén is Associate Professor in social and economic geography at the Department of Water and Environmental Studies, University of Linköping, Sweden, where he teaches geography and development studies. He received his PhD at Lund University in 1991, was promoted to Associate Professor in 1996 and joined Linköping University in 1997. He was a visiting researcher at IIASA (International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis) in Laxenburg, Austria, in 1996 and is a fellow of ICER (the International Centre for Economic Research) in Turin, Italy. His main research experiences are from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Hans Holmén has conducted research on organizations and development since the 1980s and is, since 2001, a member of the African-Swedish research team *Afrint,* which investigates ways to enhance agricultural productivity and food security in sub-Saharan Africa.
Address: The Tema Institute, Department of Geography, Linköping University, 581 83 Linköping, Sweden. (Hanho@tema.liu.se)

Magnus Jirström is Associate Professor at the Department of Social and Economic Geography at Lund University, Sweden. He received his PhD at Lund University in 1996 and did post-doc periods at UC Berkeley, USA, in 1996/7 and at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen in 1997/8. Magnus Jirström specializes in rural and agricultural development and teaches Development Studies and Human Geography. His main field experience is from Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2001, he is a member of the Swedish-African research programme Afrint, which combines local- and macro-level data to study the drivers of changes in agricultural production and productivity in nine sub-Saharan countries.