NGOs, Civil Society, and Development: Is There a Third Way?

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For more than a decade, there has been talk by politicians, academics, and others of a "third way," referring to means and principles of social organization other than the State and the market (Giddens, 2000). Most of this discussion about a third way for development focuses on the roles that can be played by NGOs and other elements of civil society. The overarching question that guided this journal issue, "Are NGOs Overrated?" relates very closely to whether there really is a third way.

For this paper, I was asked to reflect on the paper I wrote ten years ago (Klees, 1998) in response to that same overarching question. While that paper, entitled "NGOs: Progressive Force or Neoliberal Tool?," did not discuss the idea of a third way, it was implicit in the examination of NGOs as a progressive force for development. Looking back on that paper, I find that the main points still apply today. However, what I find missing from that paper is the ways in which NGOs are embedded in the "dialectic of the global and the local."[1] Below, I discuss both what was in that earlier paper and some of what was missing from it.

In Klees (1998), I made five principal points. First, I began with underlining the progressive promise of NGOs, mostly drawing on my personal experience where I consistently found local NGOs to be innovative organizations in touch with the grassroots and led by committed social activists. At their best, NGOs empowered individuals, communities, and nations to face, resist, and transform the unequal relations of neoliberalism.

However, most of my paper was about the other side, how the NGO sector has been an integral part of a system that reinforces unequal development. This brings me to my second point: the incredibly rapid expansion of NGOs since 1980 has been the consequence of the neoliberal focus on privatization and curtailing government.

Third, as a consequence, the nature and environment of NGOs has changed drastically. Cooperation among NGOs was often replaced with cutthroat competition for funding. To get funding, NGOs became apolitical, and service delivery was emphasized over advocacy. NGOs thus became the new temp workers of development, useful to national and international agencies for specific tasks but easily discarded as circumstances changed and consequently limited in their ability to challenge development practice.

Fourth, I argued that despite NGOs' good efforts and intentions, rather than contributing to sustainable poverty alleviation, at a systemic level, they contribute to sustaining poverty. This argument sees neoliberalism (again, without bad intentions) as reproductive of the social order in the sense that its structures and policies maintain poverty, inequality, and marginalization. NGOs, chiefly by contributing to the delegitimization of the State, are part of that reproductive apparatus.

Fifth, NGOs which are dedicated to progressive social change are in an incredibly difficult position. Resources are scarce and, when available, come with many strings attached. NGOs try to remain true to their own agenda by a variety of strategies: not taking money from those agencies they

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disagree with; not depending too much on one funding agency; and playing agencies off against one another.

Despite my belief that these five points hold true today, I think it important to elaborate and embed them in ways that offer a better look at the dialectical workings of the local and the global. Below, I consider some of these issues.

Local Specificity

While global forces are key, how things play out depends very much on the specific nature of local circumstances and context. An important part of that is that NGOs are embedded in a web of relationships with other civil society organizations (CSOs) – trade unions, media, social movements, religious and traditional organizations, community based organizations (CBOs), local associations, and informal groups. The question of whether NGOs are overrated is really one of whether civil society is overrated in any particular instance.

Moreover, NGOs themselves are very varied, complicating the analysis. A variety of distinctions are made among NGOs to capture some significant differences in their form and functioning: e.g. local (LNGO), national (NNGO), and international (INGO); or to substitute a political economic characterization for a geographical one, Northern and Southern NGOs. There are also donor-organized NGOs (DONGOs), government-run NGOs (GONGOs), advocacy NGOs (ANGOs), public interest NGOs (PINGOs), and business and industry associated NGOs (BINGOs) (Kamat, 2004; Edwards and Hulme, 1997). Thus, the question of what is progressive, of where a third way might lie, is complex.

While analyzing how these differences play out is beyond the scope of this paper, the answer to the question of whether civil society is overrated will be answered differently in different contexts. For example, while often the relationship between INGOs, NNGOs, and LNGOS is best characterized as contractual relations, sometimes "the power relationship has been more equal" and there is a true partnership (Malhotra, 2000, p. 658). While often CSOs take an accommodating stance with government, in some places, like Malawi, coalitions of CSOs follow national-level confrontational strategies (Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, & Wolf, 2002). Moreover, there are very different contexts in which CSOs are operating. For example, in conflict or even post-conflict societies, outspoken CSO representatives may face assassination or imprisonment. Therefore, the performance of CSOs is very dependent on local context.

Global Forces

However, the contextual specifics that govern part of NGO and CSO behavior are greatly influenced by global forces and circumstances. In Klees (1998), I talked about neoliberalism but was not explicit as to how that ties to globalization. There is merit to the argument that globalization and neoliberalism are not synonymous. Tickel and Peck (2003) call them "overlapping and intersecting project[s]" (p. 4) and further emphasize that "neoliberalism is far from a monolithic, undifferentiated project." Santos similarly recognizes that there is not "a single form of globalisation" and that it is "a very complex phenomenon riven by deep cleavages and contradictions" (Dale & Robertson, 2004, p.148). Nonetheless, both recognize the phenomenon of what some call "neoliberal globalization" (p. 150). From this perspective, neoliberal policies and structures condition the form globalization takes.

Despite local variation, neoliberal globalization has provided the underlying context in which the nature and role of NGOs and CSOs have evolved around the world. A central feature of this

environment, as Kamat (2004, p. 162) examines, is "the new policy context of privatization and a shrinking state." Some consequences of this were discussed in Klees (1998) and summarized above, but others are also important. NGOs have become massively involved in "surrogate service provision" for the State (Malhotra, 2000, p. 658). Malhotra (2000, p. 659) likens their role to a "global soup kitchen," designed to keep "the lid on simmering public discontent and social explosion" that would follow from the delegitimization of the state if no one was there to fulfill some of its roles.

Thus, as Kamat (2004, p. 164) argues, "an effective policy for trade liberalization and privatization requires a minimalist state and a dynamic civil society," the latter because "the work of the state still needs to be done." Nonetheless, while available funding directs most NGOs to service provision, there are still many NGOs that engage in advocacy and monitoring, and often NGOs engage in both service provision and advocacy. Sometimes, engaging in service delivery even serves as a cover for advocacy activities (Fowler, 2000, p. 640). Moreover, advances in information and communications technology have helped ANGOs to network nationally and internationally, resulting, for example, in the World Social Forum. Nonetheless, the World Economic Forum clearly predominates and multinationals, BINGOs, and other representatives of the private sector often have substantial influence in policy forums that are supposed to feature civil society (Kamat, 2004).

Conclusions

What can we conclude from this thumbnail sketch of the nature and role of NGOs and CSOs? In Klees (1998), I concluded that while the NGO phenomenon had been "overrated" by progressives, it was still both a "progressive force" and a "neoliberal tool." That is still true, although today I would add that this plays out differently in different contexts. Nonetheless, many progressives would argue that the "bulk of NGOs" have been 'compromised and co-opted' (Fowler, 2000, p. 641), and the State has been further weakened and delegitimized. Under these circumstances, the so-called 'third way' principally becomes part of a structure that furthers the neoliberal market agenda, maintaining poverty, inequality, and marginalization. Still, there is progressive potential in the flourishing of civil society. The serious commitment many CSOs have to grassroots activism, participatory democracy, and social justice combined with unprecedented ability to network opens the possibility of transforming State and market in new ways, perhaps even a third way, towards a fair and sustainable development.

Notes

[1]. This comes from the title of Arnove and Torres (2002).

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