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REVIEW ESSAY

NGOs and Western hegemony: causes for concern and ideas for change

Glen W. Wright

Since their rise to prominence in the post-World War II period, NGOs have grown exponentially in size and stature. This growth has occurred most notably under the New Policy Agenda, with Western donor states emphasising the role of NGOs in democratisation and service provision. Donors have gained the power to set the development agenda and NGOs have slowly become Trojan horses for global neo-liberalism. The present review surveys the principal ways in which NGOs have become a part of the promotion of Western hegemony in the developing world and presents some ideas for change.

ONG et hégémonie occidentale : raisons de s'inquiéter et idées de changements

Depuis qu'elles sont venues occuper le devant de la scène durant la période post-Seconde Guerre mondiale, les ONG ont vu leur taille et leur stature s'accroître de manière exponentielle. Cette croissance a été tout particulièrement manifeste dans le cadre du Nouvel ordre du jour de politiques générales (New Policy Agenda), les États donateurs de l'hémisphère Nord soulignant le rôle des ONG dans la démocratisation et la prestation de services. Les bailleurs de fonds ont acquis le pouvoir d'établir l'ordre du jour et les ONG se sont lentement transformées en chevaux de Troie pour le néolibéralisme mondial. Le présent bilan traite des principales façons dont les ONG sont devenues un facteur de la promotion de l'hégémonie occidentale dans les pays en développement et présente quelques idées de changements.

As ONGs e a hegemonia ocidental: motivos para preocupação e ideias para mudança

Desde o crescimento de sua proeminência no período do pós-guerra II, as ONGs têm crescido exponencialmente em tamanho e importância. Este crescimento tem ocorrido mais notadamente sob a Agenda da Nova Política, com países doadores ocidentais enfatizando o papel das ONGs na democratização e provisão de serviços. Os doadores têm conquistado o poder de definir a agenda de desenvolvimento e as ONGs têm se tornado lentamente cavalos de Troia para o neoliberalismo global. Esta revisão avalia as principais maneiras pelas quais as ONGs têm participado da promoção da hegemonia ocidental no mundo em desenvolvimento e apresenta algumas ideias para mudança.

ONG y hegemonía occidental: motivos de preocupación e ideas para el cambio

Desde que adquirieron importancia tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, el tamaño y el prestigio de las ONG han crecido vertiginosamente. El crecimiento se ha dado en gran parte en el marco de la Nueva Agenda Política, en la que los estados donantes occidentales privilegiaron a las

ONG para acciones de democratización y entrega de servicios. Los donantes terminaron estableciendo los objetivos del desarrollo y las ONG se convirtieron lentamente en Caballos de Troya para el neoliberalismo global. Este ensayo analiza cómo las ONG se hicieron promotoras de la hegemonía occidental en los países en desarrollo y presenta algunas propuestas de cambio.

KEY WORDS: Aid; Globalisation

Introduction

Since their rise to prominence in the post-World War II period, NGOs have grown exponentially in size and stature. This growth has occurred most notably under the New Policy Agenda, with Western donor states emphasising the role of NGOs in democratisation and service provision. As NGOs have received more funding from donors, their reliance on such funds has increased, while their independence from governmental interests has decreased. Donors have gained the power to set the development agenda and NGOs have slowly become Trojan horses for global neo-liberalism (Wallace 2004). The present review surveys the principal ways in which NGOs have become a part of the promotion of Western hegemony in the developing world and presents some ideas for change.

The present review first gives a brief overview of the current development context and identifies where NGOs are situated in that context. It then comprehensively surveys the principal ways in which NGOs have become a part of the promotion of Western hegemony in the developing world: loss of legitimacy; shifting accountability; *-isation* of internal procedure; displacement of local government; and the assumption that global neo-liberalism is an unfaltering inevitability.

Once the problems facing NGOs have been discussed, this paper will present some ideas for change, concluding that NGOs are best placed to solve these problems by, first, acknowledging them and then implementing counter-measures.

NGO beginnings: a very brief history

Though NGOs in some form existed before the twentieth century, NGOs as we currently know them arose initially out of World War I, and then gained prominence repairing Europe after World War II. The 1950s and '60s saw an increase in NGO interest in Third World development and *modernisation*, importing Northern ways to the South. This approach came under criticism, and in the 1960s and '70s NGOs moved toward self-help strategies. After realising the limitations to this approach in the context of political and economic constraints, NGOs moved toward empowerment, *conscientisation*, and advocacy. NGOs have since experienced a boom, increasing in number and presence in what one commentator calls the associational revolution, commenting that '[t]he rise of the nonprofit sector may well prove to be as significant a development of the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation-state was of the latter nineteenth century' (Salamon 1993: 1).

The new policy agenda

The end of the Cold War marked a new phase in NGO discourse as donor agencies began to pursue what has been termed the *New Policy Agenda* (Edwards and Hulme 1998; Kamat 2004; Mayhew 2005). This agenda emphasises the development of good governance, democ-

racy, and civil society (Mercer 2002; Fisher 1997) and the provision of services (Brinkerhoff 2007). As a result of this agenda, NGO funding from government donors has increased rapidly, in the belief that NGOs are apt to meet the agenda's goals.

This is based on two assumptions (Marcussen 1996: 408; Edwards and Hulme 1998: 6). First, it is assumed that NGOs encourage democracy through the strengthening of civil society. Starting with Bratton (1989), *'a wealth of literature has emerged ... that has indicated the increasing... support for the role of NGOs in promoting democratic development'* (Mercer 2002: 6). As Mercer notes, this assumption is particularly concerning given the role NGOs have come to play in the deployment of Government-, World Bank-, and IMF-funded projects. Second, NGOs are assumed to be *'more efficient and cost-effective service providers than governments'* (Edwards and Hulme 1998: 6).

While the accuracy of these assumptions has been increasingly questioned (Marcussen 1996; Mercer 2002), the fact remains that the dual emphases of the New Policy Agenda reflect the dominant Western development paradigm of socio-economic development based on neo-liberalism. NGOs receive large amounts of funding under this agenda and it is against this background that the present review explores the ways in which NGOs have come to be propagators of Western hegemony.

NGO funding

Detailed and reliable statistics on NGO funding are difficult to find, because of their diverse and disparate nature. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is a useful source in this regard: the DAC, comprising 24 OECD countries, publishes detailed figures. It dispersed US\$103.5 billion of aid in 2007 (OECD 2010: 172), 6.5 per cent of which was dispersed through NGOs (OECD 2010: 219). These figures, however, do not present the full picture, as they do not include the percentage of aid from the USA that goes to NGOs, nor do they include the percentage given to multilateral agencies that in turn disperse funds to NGOs; these agencies received US\$35 billion in 2008 (OECD 2010: 212). Overall, it is estimated that 15–20 per cent of total development aid is channelled through NGOs (Mayhew 2005).

There have been two consequences of the increasing dispersion of funds through NGOs. First, there has been an increase in the number of NGOs (Brinkerhoff 2007); around one-fifth of all NGOs were created in the 1990s (Bendaña 2006: 1). Second, NGO reliance on government funding has increased (Edwards and Hulme 1998; Wallace 2004); for example, in the UK, Oxfam relied on the government for 15 per cent of its income in 1984, but 24 per cent in 1993 (Edwards and Hulme 1998: 20).

Weakening legitimacy

Perhaps the most obvious consequence of the increased reliance on funding from Western governments is the weakening of legitimacy of NGOs: why are they called *non governmental* organisations when they receive substantial funding from governments? Legitimacy in this context includes a number of different concepts. It may conjure notions of authenticity and genuineness (Edwards and Hulme 1998: 14), popular support, local participation (Fisher 1997: 455), and voluntarism; i.e. using *'discussion, bargaining, accommodation and persuasion... rather than bureaucratic control'* in conducting NGO affairs (Edwards and Hulme 1998: 14). If an NGO receives a substantial amount of funding from governmental donors, it may be perceived as less authentic or genuine and, as will be discussed later, local participation may falter in favour of bureaucratic control.

Legitimacy is also bound up with notions of independence. If an NGO is subject to the whim of a donor, it is subject to the constantly changing policy focus of that donor (Wallace 2004). As an African proverb puts it: *'if you have your hand in another man's pocket, you must move when he moves'* (Kramer 1981: 158). Legitimacy is therefore not only conceptually important, but has real ramifications for development in practice as changing fashions in the Western donor states can rapidly move funding away from much needed projects in the ultimate recipient states.

The most direct weakening of legitimacy occurs when an NGO does not just have its hand in another's pocket, but is actually steered by Western governmental, corporate, or political interests, which can utilise the presumed legitimacy and independence of NGOs as a front. For example, US NGOs sent to provide training to Cambodian political parties included the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, which are affiliated with the two big US parties and were heavily biased against the ruling party of Cambodia at the time (Rajagopal 2003: 138). Likewise, the US National Endowment for Democracy, which Ronald Regan helped found, is directly financed by the US Congress and was key in advancing Western preferences in Central America. While there are examples of this more direct exploitation of NGOs, not all NGOs are so explicitly co-opted, and it would be necessary to examine their links to state institutions and sources of funding of an NGO to determine whether or not this particular form of illegitimacy is present. In cases such as those identified, it is clear that the NGO lacks legitimacy, and that it is promoting Western hegemony; NGOs are less the Trojan horses of imperialism (Wallace 2004) and more the outright policy instruments of the West.

Distortion of accountability

Typically, NGOs are accountable to different groups; for example, to their partners, host governments, and staff (Edwards and Hulme 1998). Ultimately, however, an NGO's main accountability is, or should be, to its beneficiaries – the people whose lives their activities affect. The New Policy Agenda has distorted this accountability, because funds given to NGOs by governments must be accounted for (Srinivas 2009), resulting in the moving of accountability away from the people NGOs aim to help to the donors who demand to see concrete results. Programmes are *'not accountable to local people but to overseas donors who "review" and "oversee" the performance of NGOs according to their criteria and interests'* (Petras 1999: 433).

This shift in accountability changes the focus of NGO practice; the NGO must account for the money according to a Western standard that emphasises numbers, statistics, and efficiency over the qualitative aspects of development. For example, if an NGO's stated goal is the empowerment of impoverished people, this is very difficult to measure discretely and the NGO may, therefore, move to a specific programme that can be better measured, at the expense of a more holistic approach. In addition, donor preferences gravitate toward specific projects, rather than support for *'long-term operations, organizational support, renewal, and growth'* (Brinkerhoff 2007), so there is an opportunity cost for NGOs, who accept funding but cannot use it for increasing the capacity of their organisation. NGOs must spend more money on meeting their increased upward accountability, rather than spending that money on long-term development and social change on the ground. ActionAid experienced this shift in accountability firsthand: *'[w]e realized we had no end of upward accountability systems in place, but what we really didn't know was what difference our work was making'* (Rowden and Irama 2004). ActionAid took the bold step of doing away with data-centred reports and moving back toward a holistic approach to development.

There is a risk that this upwards accountability allows NGOs to be co-opted by donors. Take, for example, an NGO that wishes to empower women, funded by the World Bank (Ilon 1998: 43). The NGO may decide to empower through a literacy programme, while the World Bank, its goal being market creation and stabilisation, sees literacy as a means of moving people toward market-based economies. The NGO may view empowerment as involving '*political sensitization and organizing the poor for their social and economic rights*' (Kamat 2004: 169), whereas the World Bank focusses on '*the capacity of poor people [to] become "clients" who are capable of demanding and paying for goods and services*' (World Bank 1995). In such a context, where the two actors are using the same means but to vastly different ends, it is usually the goals of the NGO that are subordinated (Ilon 1998: 43), resulting in the NGOs abandonment of its social justice-driven mission to become the '*implementer of the policy agendas of Northern government*' (Edwards and Hulme 1998: 19).

This example of women in development is a pertinent one for an enquiry into the shifting accountability of NGOs, as Yudelman's (1987) study of how NGOs incorporate women into development showed that the interests of women on the ground are often subordinated. He gives two examples Firstly, an NGO in Asia initiated a wide range of programmes for women, including pre-income sewing projects and organisational skills, without enhancing the women's traditional role in farming and in spite of their protestations. Secondly, he describes an NGO in Africa that took the seemingly positive step of identifying women's traditional role in food harvesting, marketing, and processing, only to disregard it entirely in favour of a pottery-making project (Yudelman 1987: 183). In both cases, the shift in accountability away from the beneficiaries is brought into sharp focus.

The *-isation* of NGOs: inside NGO operations

The *-isation* of NGOs refers to a number of processes, including bureaucratisation, technicisation, homogenisation, and corporatisation, which can turn NGOs into propagators of Western hegemony. These processes are poorly attended in the literature and so will be discussed at some length here.

This focus on technical management and bureaucracy has homogenised the approach to development, leaving no space for the heterogeneous mix of ideas and approaches that arise from varied local contexts and that are necessary for social change (Srinivas 2009). Instead, that context and diversity is eradicated by forcing in the Western perspective. Thus, small Ghanaian and Ugandan community organisations are now well versed in the language of log-frames and SWOT analysis, a language that has become universal, despite the fact that these bureaucratic processes carry '*specific cultural values, definitions and understandings*' (Wallace 2004: 211) and are reflections of Western '*technological objectification*' (Murphy 2000: 339). To take just one example of this obsession, pressure from international donors required the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in India to track 89 different statistics, including farm yields and school graduations, in the rural villages it worked in (Ebrahim 2003: 87).

An interesting parallel can be drawn between Western NGOs and colonial states in this regard. Tandon (1991) notes that colonial governments viewed diversity as an obstacle: while civil society was receptive to the unique social, cultural, and political dimensions of their communities, the state created uniform policies that did not account for these nuances, because accommodating them was seen as too much effort. This led to the '*homogenization of models, approaches, practices, structures and programmes*' (Tandon 1991: 6). The same Northern governments that led the colonialist charge are now at the forefront of the New Policy Agenda, pursuing the neo-liberal goal of bringing '*the entire planet into one clear, concerted, and unified road [to] progress... liberal capitalism*' (Murphy 2000: 339).

Elitism and professionalism are also on the rise (Petras 1999) in NGO staffing, along with a corporatisation of the running of NGOs. As NGOs become unwieldy bureaucratic machines, elites and professionals are drafted in to run them and the NGO begins to run like a business. While having the best minds at work is not necessarily bad, it must be conceded that these elites and professionals generally come from very different backgrounds from their intended beneficiaries and *'often will not understand [them], especially if they are poor, uneducated, and from the global South'* (Lehr-Lehnardt 2005: 22). Thus, the professionalism and elitism of NGOs further distances them from the people they seek to help. Ronald Reagan once joked that the most terrifying sentence in the English language is: *'I'm from the government and I'm here to help'*. Given the distance that the corporatisation of NGOs has created between the representative and the represented, the most terrifying sentence in the developing world may come from international NGOs: *'we're not from the government, but we're here to help'* (American Enterprise Institute 2003).

Petras is particularly scathing in this regard:

[h]undreds of individuals sit in front of high powered PCs exchanging manifestos, proposals and invitations to international conferences with each other. They then meet in well-furnished conference halls to discuss the latest struggles. (Petras 1999: 434)

Eventually, the NGO passes down its plan for development, a plan now devoid of grassroots participation and legitimacy, to the local people at the bottom of the chain. Wallace (2004) compares the top-down development practised by corporatised NGOs to the practice of Coca Cola in marketing its products. Unfortunately, as NGOs rely on donor funding, when the donor wants efficiency and statistical results, NGOs are driven to corporatise or die (Brinkerhoff 2007) and they, somewhat understandably, make the choice to corporatise, losing some of their essential values in exchange for continued existence and funding.

This criticism is not confined to Northern NGOs. In the South, NGOs have in some circumstances become a *'last-chance business, and may represent one of the few sectors where paid, professional jobs are still available'* (McDougall 2004: 15), thus attracting local elites who are just as detached from those they claim to represent. These NGO elites live lives of *'privilege and comfort, and progressively grow distant from a life of struggle'* (Odinkalu 1999). This trend has been noted, for example, in Africa (Odinkalu 1999) and Bolivia, where *'development NGO activists, supported by international funding... can be found in the best restaurants on any day of the week'* (Lehr-Lehnardt 2005: 22).

Providing services, displacing governments

The shift to using NGOs as service providers under the New Policy Agenda is displacing the governments of the developing world. Rather than helping states build institutional capacity, Northern donors are funding private actors to run basic services. Yet, if ministries of health and education were given access to the same level of funding as NGOs, they too could, over time, provide the same services in an effective manner (Edwards and Hulme 1998). Thus, weak state provision, part of minimal-state neo-liberalism (Bendaña, 2006), becomes self-perpetuating, as Western donors both fail to provide the support needed to strengthen state provision, and further undermine it by providing superior private provision through NGOs. This again highlights the disjuncture between NGO and beneficiary, and the lack of accountability between the two.

In a more theoretical way, this process displaces governments by re-writing the social contract between government and citizen. This is because the accountability relationship between a private actor, the NGO, and its client, is very different to the relationship between a citizen and

government. This has led to the emergence of *franchise states* (Wood 1996) – states where government is no longer accountable to its citizens as it no longer provides services to them. Instead, the government provides weak central oversight for a patchwork quilt of services run by NGOs.

This displacement can be seen in Haïti where, by 2004, aid NGOs provided almost 80 per cent of basic services, and in Ghana, where the government is reliant on NGOs (Engler 2007). Again, it is not only Northern NGOs operating in the developing world that can cause this problem. In Bangladesh, for example, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) has administered US\$1.8 billion of funds and is largely self-supporting, with less than one-fifth of its funds coming from overseas donors (Whewell 2003). While this may set BRAC up as a successful model without the taint of neo-colonialism, it has been noted that Bangladesh is probably the '*most visible case of a very large and very powerful NGO sector... displacing government*' (Whewell 2003) as NGO service provision has become a proxy for governmental social services.

NGOs at the end of history

Thus far, the New Policy Agenda has been criticised for its effect on NGO practice and the increased propensity for NGOs to act as propagators of Western hegemony. However, NGOs and the development discourse generally, might be criticised at a deeper, more theoretical level. The New Policy Agenda is based on the ideals of neo-liberalism; yet, the issue of whether neo-liberalism itself is in fact a justifiable or effective development policy, and the position of NGOs in relation to that policy, is rarely discussed. Instead, both commentators and NGOs have assumed that we are at the *end of history* and that neo-liberalism is the inevitable end point of human progress (Fisher 1997; Murphy 2000). While commentators have increasingly questioned whether the New Policy Agenda's goals are achievable, they have not questioned whether those goals are justifiable. Yet, '*[i]f the North's NGOs are genuinely seeking ways to help overcome the poverty in the South, they have yet to find many answers*' (Berthoud 2001:1). Nevertheless, Northern governments press on with the neo-liberal development paradigm. The question is, what role do NGOs play in this march to the end of history?

There are two main roles that NGOs play. First, they act as a softener for the damage caused by the West's structural adjustment policies in the developing world, thus lessening resistance to those policies; and second, they diffuse the grassroots political resistance to neo-liberalism. In addition, the homogenisation of development, already discussed, is also relevant in this regard.

As to the first, the service provision role that NGOs have come to occupy merely offers a palliative, '*ameliorating the worst effects*' (Murphy 2000: 343) of structural adjustment and thus defusing political anger (Roy 2004). Thus, rather than challenging the neo-liberal policies causing the problems, the problems are simply masked. NGOs take a fatalistic view of the world: neo-liberalism is inevitable and '*nothing significant or structural can be changed*' (Murphy 2000: 343), so the only option is to help those being left behind. In this way, the dominance of neo-liberalism is reinforced. So strong is this link between NGOs and their facilitation of the neo-liberal project that Roy (2004) has called NGOs an indicator species: '*the greater the devastation caused by neo-liberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs*' (Roy 2004: 44). This outbreak is a result of increased aid in areas where structural adjustment hits hardest, so an influx of aid, '*mostly from the core capitalist countries and international financial institutions... flow[s] into countries alongside... Northern NGOs*' who play '*an increasingly central role in the control and disbursement of such "aid"*' (McKinley 2003: 6). Thus, Northern

governments actively exploit NGOs to further their own agendas, and NGOs, no doubt wishing to do good, willingly oblige.

The second role of NGOs is what Bendaña (2006: 1) calls the “‘NGO-ization’ of movements and politics’. Western NGOs enter civil society in the developing country and then ‘*assure control over popular mobilization and mass movements*’ from within (Robinson 1996: 69). As Third World movements have arisen and united around claims for rights and democracy, ‘*a host of [INGOs] have emerged to program this new era*’ (Rajagopal 2003: 155). This programming involves selecting the voices that are legitimate and channelling those voices through the avenues acceptable to the Western world. As the activities of social movements do not conform to the technicised modes of operation of NGOs, they are rarely selected as legitimate voices and, therefore, seldom receive the support they need to thrive (Pratt *et al.* 2006). Thus, social movements are either crippled or de-radicalised, abandoning education and empowerment programmes that seek to question the dynamics of power and inequality because the Western NGOs do not see these as legitimate, and instead adopting ‘*a technical managerial solution to social issues of poverty and oppression*’ that can be log-framed and measured (Kamat 2004: 168).

Another facet of this is that NGOs take the would-be leaders of social movements away from that role and instead toward an NGO role (Roy 2004): ‘*academics, journalists, and professionals have abandoned earlier excursions into the poorly rewarded leftists movements for a lucrative career managing an NGO*’ (Petrus 1999: 430). This form of depoliticisation is made easier because, as noted previously, NGO work is often one of few jobs available in countries already blighted by the neo-liberal project. This leaves local movements fragmented and without the leadership that they would have otherwise had. As Roy (2004: 46) notes, there is no substitute for true social change at a grassroots level: ‘*[r]eal resistance has real consequences. And no salary.*’

Neo-liberalism is not, as many would assume, the logical and inevitable conclusion of human history. As George (1999) succinctly puts it, ‘*it has been created by people with a purpose. . . [it is] a totally artificial construct*’. In order to challenge this construct, ideas need to be able to develop and be discussed and debated. Some NGOs, however, in their moves to appease donors, have homogenised and corporatised development, reinforcing the Western way as the only way. This homogenisation further promotes Western hegemony and neo-liberalism. While many in the North believe that neo-liberalism is inevitable and so NGOs must work within these constraints, it is submitted that NGOs can only be true agents of change if they do not allow a Northern viewpoint to constrain them. Instead, development must be de-homogenised and ideas for change must be permitted to flow freely; NGOs ‘*do not have to be cogs in the machine*’ (Murphy 2000: 345).

Ideas for change

While the ‘*complexity of the issues and of the differing natures, mandates and ideologies of the players would appear to make [the criticisms discussed here] insurmountable*’ (Smillie 1994: 186), there are a number of ideas for change. In some cases, change can be effected by governments and in others it will be effected by NGOs themselves.

One simple way, at least in theory, of removing donor pressure from NGOs would be to establish an intermediary funding agency to channel funds to NGOs. For example, the OECD-DAC, rather than simply being a forum for donor states, could become an institution for the receipt and dispersal of funds. However, as the Northern states have steered the development discourse using the New Policy Agenda, they may not wish to give up the control they presently have over the NGOs, and other actors, that receive their funds.

Alternatively, Northern donors could remove the need for a middle man by themselves acknowledging the flaws in viewing NGOs simply as cheap service providers and investigating more effective aid measures. In this regard, the current questioning of NGO effectiveness, and the moves by some NGOs to refuse donor funding, may force donors to rethink this strategy. Either way, donors should move toward long-term institutional support for NGOs, as opposed to outputs and targets, and look at NGOs as '*valued development agencies in their own right*' (Smillie 1994: 187).

The first, and most obvious, point to make is that NGOs must become more self-aware. This is a prerequisite to combating the problems discussed in the present review; NGOs themselves must acknowledge these problems, rather than becoming lost in the technicisation and bureaucratisation of their organisations. This awareness involves not just a negative acknowledgement of the problems, but also a positive awareness and reaffirmation of the ultimate goal of development NGOs. If NGOs can reaffirm a commitment to the people they seek to help, rather than those that provide funding, they can regain the independence and accountability essential to their legitimacy.

Once this awareness has been raised, one way to escape the confines of the New Policy Agenda would be to become financially self-sufficient. While this sounds simple, in practice it presents a considerable challenge. As governmental funding has increased, so has reliance. Heavily reliant NGOs will find it especially difficult to eschew governmental funding. Amnesty International, as noted previously, does not receive governmental funding, but this may be easier for a campaigning organisation, as opposed to an organisation that undertakes projects, where funding is more fundamental. In any case, becoming self-sufficient will not necessarily solve the problems discussed. For example, BRAC is almost self-sufficient, but nonetheless undermines the government through its wide-scale provision of services. Likewise, changing funding may not necessarily change the viewpoint of an NGO; deeper consideration of ideology and methodology is needed.

Accountability can be improved in a number of ways, and Edwards and Hulme (1998) note that a number of NGOs are already experimenting with these. One Zimbabwean NGO has implemented a bottom-up democratic structure to ensure that those at the local level are being heard. While this may be more difficult for a large international NGO such as Oxfam to replicate, there is certainly value in ensuring that voices on the ground are at least heard in some way. Other NGOs are using social audits to ensure that stakeholders set the performance indicators (Zadek and Gatward 1996). In this way, the intended beneficiaries set the goals for the NGO to maintain and the NGO can better meet the needs of the beneficiaries, rather than subjecting them to a top-down development plan.

As to the displacement of governments, it would benefit NGOs to consider whether their strategies are likely to provide long-term development. NGOs should acknowledge that their funding may not be guaranteed and should be careful of encouraging dependence on NGO-run services, instead helping people become self-reliant. NGOs must be aware that their provision of services on a large scale, or on a smaller scale, but in concert with other NGOs, may undermine the local government and redraw the government–citizen relationship. Thus, it may be that it is more beneficial in the long term to assist communities in building up their own services or to assist governments build institutional capacity, rather than taking over their role as service providers.

There is a more radical call to NGOs which relates to the criticism that NGOs replace social movements and advance the neo-liberal agenda. Murphy (2000: 344) has asserted that a '*renaissance of transformative NGOs*' is necessary – smaller, more politically minded organisations that shun altogether the notion that neo-liberalism is inevitable and that the only choice is corporatisation or death, instead opting for strategies that promote grassroots

development and the heterogeneous mix of ideas that are necessary for real social change. Petras (1999: 439) goes as far to say that NGOs should deconstruct themselves altogether, converting themselves into members of social/political movements in order to '*avoid being lumped with the tens of thousands of NGOs feeding at the donors trough*'. At the very least, it is submitted, NGOs should not assume that neo-liberalism is the pinnacle of human development and should acknowledge that the assumption that it is undoubtedly looks a lot like colonialism. Instead NGOs should seek to engage with local ideas for development and social change and seek to question more thoroughly their own conceptions of development.

While this radical call for change seems lofty, George (1999) suggests that the *people power* is there and that NGOs must merely organise it:

[T]here are far more losers than winners in the neoliberal game. We have the ideas, whereas [neoliberalism is] finally coming into question because of repeated crisis. What we lack, so far, is the organisation and the unity.

Thus, rather than merely being conduits for the Western neo-liberal agenda, NGOs can actually become conduits for ideas, voices and real social change.

Conclusion

Encouragingly, the academic world and NGOs themselves are starting to engage with the issues raised in this paper. This engagement with the problem, and the suggestions for change, are positive steps and it is submitted, albeit tentatively, that NGOs can once again contribute to the '*sustained, equitable and just transformation of the planet to the benefit of all mankind*' (Murphy 2000: 331), rather than a transformation that consolidates Western hegemony and the assertion of neo-liberalism as an inevitability. A formidable hurdle along the way is the need for Western NGOs and those in the development sector to engage in a frank and open dialogue about the nature of their organisations and the work they do in their respective Southern beneficiary states. It is only with acknowledgement and engagement with these issues from those on the front line that true change can be made to NGO practice.

One optimistic commentator notes that '*[t]he urge for hegemony and preponderance by some will be matched with greater intensity by the longing for dignity and justice by others*' (Roy 2004). For the legitimacy of NGOs and for non-hegemonic development, it can only be hoped that this is true.

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