

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

Anthony J. Bebbington, Samuel Hickey and Diana C. Milton, eds., *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives*. London, Zed Books, 2008.

Kirk D. Helliker  
*Department of Sociology*  
*Rhodes University*  
*Grahamstown*  
*South Africa*

This edited collection is based on papers delivered at the fourth 'Manchester' conference on NGOs, in 2005. Besides two introductory chapters and a conclusion, there are fourteen chapters divided into three thematic sections. These chapters cover an incredibly diverse range of NGO forms and practices, including research, advocacy and development, and they are written by academics, practitioners and activists. Amongst other foci, there are discussions about health promoters in Bolivia, the international mobilization of slum/shack dwellers, and village-based interventions in rural India.

The volume raises important points about the complex and contingent relations between indigenous NGOs, international NGOs, global donors, nation-states, local government systems, and social movements. Regrettably, the chapters do not sufficiently interrogate the notion of 'non-governmental organization'; in fact, it seems unlikely that the different chapters are even talking consistently about the same organizational form. As used in this collection (and in the 'NGO literature' more broadly), the term NGO is so all-encompassing and inclusive that it becomes almost nebulous and without meaning. The notion needs to be unpacked with finer and more nuanced conceptual thinking and tools, or discarded altogether if found conceptually wanting.

The overarching theme that is meant to draw the chapters together is the question of NGOs as 'alternatives', although this is pursued with considerable unevenness. Of course labelling NGOs as alternatives is not a particularly new conceptual endeavour. After all, much of the earlier literature on NGOs (including publications based on previous 'Manchester' conferences<sup>1</sup>) sought to identify and define the 'comparative advantage' of NGOs vis-à-vis nation-states in Africa, Latin America and Asia. In this sense, NGOs (as part of civil society) were seen as 'alternatives' to corrupt and inefficient states, or perhaps as complementary to them.

The international turn to NGOs, and indeed the massive explosion of NGOs from the 1980s, was part and parcel of neo-liberal restructuring on a global scale, including programmes of privatization, 'de-regulation' and de-centralization. Intriguingly, nowadays NGOs are posited to be 'alternative' insofar as they bite the hand (the neo-liberal donor community) that feeds them, i.e. to the extent to which they seek to move beyond the ideologies and practices of neo-liberalism. This is one key sense in which the editors (in their introductory chapter) employ the term 'alternative', though not the only sense (see below). The three main sections focus on NGO alternatives under pressure, pursuing alternatives and being alternative.

Generally speaking the chapters cover thematic ground that has been trod often in the voluminous NGO literature, including recurring points about NGO upward and downward accountability, NGO effect and impact, and the space/room available for NGOs to manoeuvre. However, to their credit, many of the chapters offer reasonably 'rich descriptions' of NGO and donor practices (for example, chapter eleven on the Dutch NGO known as ICCO and its current organizational restructuring) and of social and political processes (for instance, the relationship between state policy formation/implementation and the varied use of evidence by advocacy NGOs, as discussed in chapter seven).

Without doubt, each reader of this volume will find a few chapters that are noteworthy and innovative from his or her perspective. I highlight two chapters that I find especially significant and illuminating, both of which are found in the section on 'alternatives under pressure'. I end with a few comments on the introductory chapter by the editors.

Chapter three, by Evelina Dagnino, neatly and perceptively captures the intricate relationship between neo-liberalism and NGOs when she speaks about the 'perverse confluence between participatory and neo-liberal political projects'. Although these projects are said by Dagnino to be fundamentally different in substance, in practice there are often remarkable similarities in these 'projects' (used in the Gramscian sense) in terms of discursive meanings and institutional practices. She highlights this in relation to the different understandings and applications of the notions of civil society, participation and citizenship. Her argument implies that sensitive renderings are required when evaluating whether particular NGO forms and practices are challenging and transcending neo-liberalism or contributing to its reproduction; the substantive content of these forms and practices must be thoroughly investigated before any such conclusion can be made. This means that a particular NGO practice (for example, initiating and supporting community forestry ventures) cannot necessarily be labelled as neo-liberal simply because it is consistent with neo-liberal restructuring (in this case, the privatization of state forests).

Chapter six (by Alan Fowler) raises the critical point of the 'new security agenda', in the light of the 9/11 attacks on American soil. Given the ongoing and (in fact, deepening) dependence of NGOs on official development aid, Fowler brings to the fore 'serious questions' around 'the growing integration of overseas development assistance ... into a comprehensive security strategy for the West'. He outlines the numerous constraints, some seemingly self-generated and self-imposed, which inhibit progressive NGO work in the context of the global 'war against terror'. Indeed, as Fowler indicates, poverty reduction measures may merely become just another instrument (almost literally) for reducing social and political instability in the nations of peripheral capitalism, thereby reducing any challenges to the world hegemony of the United States. Disturbingly, this is a position that USAID has officially adopted (and practiced in Iraq), whereby American foreign policy is seen to rest on the 'three D's' strategy, that is, diplomacy, defence *and* development.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the introductory chapter by the editors focuses on the critical distinction between reformist 'development alternatives' and more far-reaching 'alternatives to development'. This relates to the distinction, also noted by the editors, between – respectively – 'big d' and 'little D' development, in which the former involves specific

development interventions in peripheral capitalism (by outsiders) and the latter involves the contradictory development processes embedded in world capitalism.<sup>3</sup> According to the editors, NGOs are normally involved in (if not restricted to) refining development methodologies – i.e. in formulating development alternatives – by changing the mix of participatory and partnership techniques (along the lines regularly emphasized in the development series published by Oxfam<sup>4</sup>). Despite their lofty missions and best intentions, NGOs have clearly failed to demonstrate a similar disposition and capacity to engage in alternatives to the unevenness of global capitalism, or to seek an alternative to development alternatives so to speak.

At the same time, whether or not NGOs are ‘designed’ to facilitate alternatives to capitalist development is highly debatable. In order to clarify this point, more general sociological theorizing of NGOs as a particular kind of ‘social form’ in modern capitalism is needed. Unfortunately, in terms of conceptual work and insights, this volume (like much of the ‘NGO literature’) remains within the confines of middle-range theory. Mega-theorizing about NGOs remains a serious weakness in the NGO literature, but is a necessary basis for advancing our understanding of the world and work of NGOs.

## Notes

1. Particularly influential has been the volumes edited by Michael Edwards and David Hulme.
2. See for example USAID, 2002. *Foreign Aid in the National Interest* Washington.
3. Crewe and Harrison make a similar distinction, between the development industry and the development system. Crewe, E. and E. Harrison, 1998, *Whose Development? – An Ethnography of Aid*, London, Zed Books.
4. For instance, Eade, D., ed., 2003, *Development Methods and Approaches – Critical Reflections*, Oxford, Oxfam GB.