

POLICY ARENA

MOVING FORWARD RESEARCH AGENDAS ON INTERNATIONAL NGOS: THEORY, AGENCY AND CONTEXT

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Abstract: This paper sets out an argument for moving forward research on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) within development studies. The body of research on NGOs that emerged from the late 1980s onwards focused primarily on NGO roles as development actors and their organisational attributes, but paid less attention to theory and context. While such research had many positive strengths, it was also criticised for its normative focus, and for its vulnerability to changing development fashions and donor preoccupations. Today, attitudes to NGOs have grown more complex and ambiguous, and the institutional landscape in which NGOs are embedded is undergoing rapid change. A new wave of NGO-related research is underway which gives particular emphasis to theory, agency, method and context. Such approaches have the potential to consolidate the field of NGO research within development studies as a more stable and theoretically-grounded subject area. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE UBIQUITY OF THE NON-GOVERNMENTAL

The rise of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) since the 1980s within development policy has been extensively documented (Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Lewis, 2005). Today, NGOs remain as an important and large-scale presence on the

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landscape of international development, from the current international campaign to 'Make Poverty History' to the ongoing reconstruction efforts by outside and local NGOs still underway in Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka after the *tsunami* disaster of December 2004. Alongside the more familiar roles of service delivery and campaigning NGOs have also become active in a complex range of broader development activities that include democracy building, conflict resolution, human rights work, policy analysis, research and information provision. It has sometimes seemed that NGOs have been a *tabula rasa* onto which an ever-growing set of development expectations and anxieties have been projected (Lewis, 2005). The particular flexibility of NGOs as an institutional form within neo-liberal policy agendas has ensured that non-governmental actors have remained prominent within international development and humanitarian policy in both North and South, and among post-socialist contexts (Fisher, 1997).

As a result, NGOs now have ever-stronger global and national public profiles. Images and representations of NGOs and their worldviews have become mainstream and recurrent. In the UK each weekend, at least one carefully-produced NGO fundraising leaflet is likely to fall from the supplement of the Sunday newspaper, more often than not featuring a photo of a young wide-eyed African or Asian child. NGOs have also entered the cultural mainstream. For example, in the Hollywood film *About Schmidt* (2002), the main character played by Jack Nicholson is drawn into an arc of moral redemption after responding to a televised NGO fundraising appeal and deciding to sponsor an African child. In Helen Fielding's popular novel *Cause Celeb* (1994) a heroine wishing to escape an empty life of London yuppie-dom gains meaning in her life by becoming involved in the field with an international NGO working among victims of African famine (Hilhorst, 2003; Lewis *et al.*, 2005). Although it is difficult to find comparative macro-level data on NGO types, activities and resource-flows¹, NGOs—and the 'third sector' more widely, are increasingly ubiquitous.

Yet there also seems to be a paradox, as we will argue below. Talk to a funder such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) or the World Bank and one finds that NGOs are no longer regarded as positively as they once were.² The era of NGOs as the international development donors' 'favoured child' (Hulme and Edwards, 1997)—which we can now perhaps identify with hindsight as the 1990s—has passed. During this period, NGOs were seen as new mainstream development actors of largely untapped potential—a 'magic bullet' in the words of Vivian (1994). They were seen as having specific comparative advantages in organisational terms in terms of this perceived flexibility, commitment and community responsiveness (Lewis, 2001). They were believed to work effectively with local communities to reduce poverty through grassroots organising and service delivery and to develop innovative solutions to development problems. In particular, they were seen as able to contribute to greater aid effectiveness through

¹This may seem surprising, but the complex ways in which NGOs access funding from individual donations, governments, different forms of local and international donors and through contracting and project partnership arrangements, makes it almost impossible in practice to collect reliable data. One recent effort for example to ascertain the proportion and trends over time of DFID official development assistance going to UK NGOs has proved impossible to complete, let alone verify, despite considerable efforts by the researchers (Tina Wallace, personal communication).

²The diversity of NGOs is itself a complex and controversial matter, and not once we wish to engage with in any depth here. The arguments made in this paper refer to the broad category of international NGOs involved in both development and emergency relief work that interact with the wider aid industry as recipients of funds and/or as advocates for particular positions within development policy.

overcoming the ‘stumbling block’ of the developing country state that stubbornly resisted reform that would improve efficiency (Wallace *et al.*, 2006).

2 THE POLICY PARADOX: ARE NGOS ‘IN’ OR ‘OUT’?

What has happened to bring about this change? In donor policy circles, talk of ‘NGOs’ has to some extent given way to an emphasis on ideas about civil society, citizens’ organisations, governance and cross-sectoral partnerships. Partly, this change is the result of the continuously evolving search for ever new terms and approaches which seems endemic in the development industry (cf Craig and Porter, 2003). But there has also been a measure of disillusionment with NGO performance in some key areas of development work. For example, a range of donor-commissioned NGO impact studies in the late 1990s all pointed to numerous ways in which development NGO performance fell well short of expectations in relation to performance, sustainability and impact (Lewis, 2001).

There is also now a more explicit engagement with the ‘governmental’ in development policy in the form of budget support, governance reform and poverty reduction planning. Donors have for some time been making stronger claims about ‘bringing the state back in’, or at least, for finding ways to ensure that governments create a more consistent general policy framework for pursuing strategies for economic growth and poverty reduction. The 1997 World Development Report stated that ‘...state dominated development has failed, but so will stateless development. Development without an effective state is impossible’ (World Bank 1997, p. 25). The emphasis is therefore increasingly on building frameworks for government to government assistance. As Wallace *et al.* (2006) put it:

The dominant belief is that aid that is given to governments without appropriate policies and structures for delivery achieves little. . .

The new aid architecture which has been erected to promote these new appropriate policy frameworks has led, as Mosse (2005) has termed it, to a more ‘intrusive aid’ that engages more directly with governments and with a reduced involvement of NGOs.³

Approaches currently in vogue include those of direct budgetary support to government ministries and the drawing up of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). In these models, NGO participation was initially hailed in the late 1990s as an important and innovative new approach. Today, NGOs and civil society are still invited through various forums to contribute ideas and perspectives reflecting the agendas and needs of the poor, and perhaps to maintain a watchdog role on the performance of governments in implementing anti-poverty policies. But NGOs may also be used to play a legitimating role and maintain a perception that these processes are participatory and ‘owned’ by a wider section of the population. Within these new scenarios, there are nevertheless signs that NGOs are no longer seen today as being in the mainstream of development. Within the PRSP approach, for example, it has been suggested that in some cases NGOs have been involved in the process merely ‘as proxy representatives for the marginal’ (Craig and Porter, 2003, p. 53). Earlier ambitions by donors of NGOs as broad ‘partners’ with government in development are less common now. There are signs that the dominant policy view of NGOs in agencies such as DFID or the World Bank has also become somewhat

³Whether this architecture is actually new, or simply a return to new forms of earlier state-focused aid is of course a moot point.

paradoxical: for some donors, NGOs are seen primarily as practical service delivery partners (in either development or humanitarian contexts); for others, higher up the management of aid hierarchies in London or Washington, NGOs are merely shrill, less than accountable critics of development aid ready to launch campaigns against official policy.⁴

Nor is it as easy for NGOs to be seen, as they once were by donors and others, as sources of 'alternative' development ideas at a time when mainstream neo-liberal approaches to development dominate. Many earlier ideas and approaches that were promoted by NGOs—such as empowerment and participation—have arguably been assimilated or co-opted into mainstream thinking (Wallace *et al.*, 2006). For some observers NGOs are seen merely as co-opted social movements, and it is among the latter that creativity and dynamic alternative thinking is to be found (e.g. Kaldor, 2003). At the same time, the approaches taken by development NGOs themselves have changed, such as for example in the shift by many NGOs towards different conceptual frameworks for their work, such as a focus on 'rights-based approaches' (Molyneux and Lazar, 2003). Meanwhile outside the field of 'mainstream' development, NGO roles as actors dealing with post-conflict reconstruction (Afghanistan, Iraq), humanitarian relief (the *tsunami*-affected countries, recent earthquakes in Iran and Pakistan) and the general containment of disorder (Sudan, Congo) have continued to expand. So to some extent have NGO roles in democracy building and NGO policy think tanks, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Baltics.

NGOs have also become targets of public debate and criticism outside the development industry. One line of attack is around post-colonial power and morality. A growing band of critics has emerged in recent years, putting forward arguments that seek to challenge many of the widely held public assumptions about NGOs. For example, Anderson and Rieff (2005) suggest a model for understanding NGOs as that of 'a contemporary secular post-religious missionary movement' which is:

simply the analogue of the Western missionary movements of the past, which carried the gospel to the rest of the world and sought in this way to promote truth, salvation, and goodness' It is a movement with transcendental goals and beliefs. It is self-sacrificing and altruistic' (p. 31)

Echoing such a position, and bringing in another increasingly familiar theme—that of shortcomings of NGO accountability—is *The Economist* which in 2000 set out an exposure of the 'sins of the secular missionaries' by focusing, among things on the extent of government funding going to NGOs. Another article echoed a similar theme in 2004 by showing that the European Commission (EC) was engaged in a 'rigged dialogue' with its citizens, since it merely consulting a range of European NGOs which the EC itself predominantly funded. An article in *Prospect* magazine by Michael Shaw Bond in 2000 extensively critiqued NGOs' lack of accountability to citizens. Mallaby's (2004) writing on James Wolfenson's World Bank is also scathing about the activities of unaccountable international NGOs whose advocacy efforts he suggests are poorly articulated with the local populations in the South that they claim to represent, but whose campaigns he argues obstruct and even derail the Bank's efforts at broader poverty reduction.

Another frequently heard complaint is that the NGO sector has grown too corporate and professionalised. For example, *Newsweek* in September 2005 ran a story which emphasised the 'big business' of NGO activities, citing data from Johns Hopkins University in the United States that shows that by 2002 the NGO sector across 37 countries had grown to an

⁴This changing view is one that is emerging from ongoing research by Lewis in UK and Bangladesh.

estimated operating expenditure of US\$1.6 trillion. Finally, critical voices within governments—which have always been ambiguous about their day to day relationships with the NGO sector, as suggested by the ‘reluctant partners’ research of the early 1990s (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993)—remains a common source of complaint about NGOs. This has particularly grown recently in Russia and many post-Soviet states where NGOs—often engaged in activities such as democracy building as well as other more traditional welfare activities—are increasingly portrayed as meddling foreign agents (Ishkanian, this issue).

In sum, attitudes to NGOs have grown more complex, ambiguous and controversial. While NGOs were ‘in’ for some time—favoured by development donors—they have in recent years been pushed ‘out’ as policy makers, partly disappointed with the need to scale down expectations of what NGOs can achieve but also all too ready to go searching for the next ‘magic bullet’, have—as Tvedt puts it (this issue)—‘fallen out of love’ with the NGOs that they courted so vigorously during the 1990s. The next section argues that (a) one important reason for this controversy is the lack of a sound research foundation on the topic of NGOs in development has led to low levels of rigour within policy debates in relation to NGOs and (b) that the challenge for development studies, if it is to contribute more fully to these policy debates, is to rethink its approach to research on NGOs and embed it more fully in perspectives on theory, history and context.

3 HAS NGO RESEARCH BEEN LEFT BEHIND?

As development studies researchers, how well equipped are we to engage with these public and academic debates about the changing profile, extent and role of the NGO sector? An extensive research literature on NGOs emerged within development studies during the past decade or so, with a wide engagement with NGO roles in development and emergency work in a variety of geographical contexts. But a growing critique of this body of work has emerged, which has argued that NGO research has exhibited key limitations. These problems can be summarised as an over-emphasis on organisational case studies that are rich in detail but lacking in contextualisation and a relatively weak theorisation of the NGO phenomenon, both of which stemmed from a set of methodological problems centring around the positionality of researchers (Najam, 1996; Stewart, 1997; Tvedt, 1998).

The ideological and material circumstances under which much of this work was produced was one that formed part of new interest in ‘alternative’ development and grassroots initiatives. This was partly driven by a reaction to the perceived theoretical impasse of development studies of the 1980s (Booth, 1993), or was the result of output from donor-funded consultancies written by researchers in cash-strapped academic institutions. This dimension certainly gave the new work on NGOs many positive strengths. These included an up-to-date quality and a sense of engagement with grassroots and policy issues, such as empowerment and partnership. Such work was also usefully illustrative of the new roles NGOs were undertaking within development projects and some of the innovative ideas organisations were generating, such as new practices around participatory ideas. But the work was often theoretically weak, insufficiently contextualised and heavily normative. As DeMars (2005, p. 4) puts it:

Many analyses tend to celebrate and promote the NGOs they profile. The tendency by scholars to credit utopian promises based on mundane practices reflects the self-

understanding of NGOs themselves. Such scholarship identifies too closely with NGO goals and reiterates in theory the self-legitimizing discourse of NGOs.

A combination therefore of an over-identification with NGOs, an excessive emphasis on technical/organisational issues and a lack of theoretical-contextual analysis can now be seen to have severely weakened much research on NGOs to date (Lewis, 2005).

3.1 Rethinking the NGO Research Agenda

Can it therefore be possible that the more extensive and complex that NGO roles have grown, the less we actually know about them? How effectively are current research approaches within development studies able to engage with the complexities and nuances of a rapidly changing NGO policy landscape? Recent writings on NGOs are beginning to set out these challenges by setting out a revised agenda that both addresses the weaknesses of previous NGO research and adjusts to the new realities. For example, Igoe and Kelsall (2005, p. 8) argue for a reconceptualisation of NGO research that goes beyond the narrowly organisational in its focus, arguing that

rather than assume that NGOs have universally intrinsic qualities, it is more fruitful to assume that they will reflect the socio-historical conditions of the locale in which they operate.

In a recent study of NGOs and social movements in Central America, Molyneux and Lazar (2003, p. 4) argue for a closer and more fine-grained analysis of broader, emerging aspects of NGO work in the field of rights, pointing out that 'we know little about the ways in which NGOs have worked with rights. . .'. Within critical writings on NGOs there has also been a lack of attention to detail and the specifics of power, history and context. For example, critical academic writings on NGOs that do exist, written mostly from a political economy or post-development perspective, have argued that NGOs are associated with new forms of cultural and economic colonialism, or form part of global neo-liberal systems of global regulation but rarely engage fully with a three dimensional, nuanced view of NGOs (Wallace *et al.*, 2006, forthcoming):

. . .these analyses of NGOs . . . have painted an over-generalised picture. They have not captured well the concrete mechanisms and specific effects of what are in fact complex and contradictory relationships and processes.

There is a growing recognition of a challenge among researchers for the study of NGOs to move into a new phase that will both keep abreast of changing policy in relation to NGO practices and do justice to the complexity and diversity of NGO forms and contexts.

3.2 A New Wave of NGO Research?

The articles presented here in this 'policy arena' are therefore intended as a contribution to the challenge of rethinking approaches to and priorities within NGO research agendas. The five papers with this introduction are presented in order to highlight such questions, stimulate debate and suggest some possible ways forward, particularly in linking the study of NGOs as social phenomena more broadly with the analysis of institutions and policy.

Moving beyond the existing (and often somewhat polarised pro- or anti- NGO) writings normally found within development studies, we also argue that it has become necessary to reinvigorate research on NGOs with a stronger grounding in social and political theory. This is necessary not just for producing higher quality, more nuanced research on this topic, but also because it can better capture the realities of current policy and, perhaps, in doing so will ultimately provide firmer ground for policy making.

The field of NGOs is an extensive one, with a large and diverse universe of organisations and activities, located within a varied set of organisational and policy environments. We do not attempt to engage here with the full range of issues. Challenges facing international NGOs, for example, are not the same as those faced by those in the South, and it makes little sense to conflate the problems of African NGOs with those faced by their counterpart organisations in Latin America. Instead, we take as an illustrative example the general case of international NGOs located within the wider aid industry. Using this sub-set of NGOs, we attempt to offer an illustration of where NGO research needs to go if it is to move beyond its somewhat problematic origins within development studies and achieve the status of a mature sub-field of study within the contemporary social sciences, while keeping abreast of rapidly changing policy realities. The articles presented in this 'policy arena' therefore make diverse arguments, but all seek to address some of these problems by analysing NGOs more closely in relation to the environments in which they operate, rather than by focusing only on their organisational attributes. Our aim is to present five different papers which taken together, illustrate the need to strengthen the general field of NGO research by (a) forming a stronger connection with social science theory and (b) embedding organisational analysis within a more detailed examination of institutional and policy contexts.

Each paper seeks to expand the theoretical depth and contextual detail of research on NGOs within current systems of international aid. The argument made by each author rests on the assumption that a more detailed analytical understanding is needed of the complex realities of the international policy environments in which NGOs operate alongside states, donors and inter-governmental actors. By embedding research on the NGO phenomenon more tightly within these wider aspects of institutional systems, policy discourses and organisational politics, the authors are able to open up more nuanced understandings of NGO agency. What roles do NGOs play within these systems, what are they capable of, and how are they constrained?

The first paper by Tvedt sets out the scale of the challenge and, in broad brush strokes, constructs a new conceptual framework for understanding development NGOs. The paper argues that in recent years NGOs have come to occupy significant new roles as central actors within an international social system of power that influences the practice of development, and impacts on the development of civil societies in both rich and poor countries. He suggests that the emergence of development NGOs the past two decades constitutes a major historical innovation, but one that is commonly misunderstood. This is the result of a dominant research tradition that has tended to limit its focus to the impacts of NGOs at project level, to the advocacy capabilities of NGOs or to the capacities of NGOs to work for the poor or more recently, to a romanticised image of NGOs as institutional representatives of civil society. Tvedt argues for no less than a radical reconceptualisation of the field that brings analysis of NGOs more fully within the overall language and concepts of social science, and sketches out the foundations of a new conceptual framework that can be used for this purpose. This, he suggests, can help researchers and policy makers to capture the NGO policy field's historical uniqueness, its particular blend

of state-society relationships, of foreign and national policies, of interest-optimizing actors and the dominant rhetoric of altruism.

Martens' paper examines NGOs within the United Nations system, and continues to argue the case for a conceptual reframing of the NGO research field. Since the 1990s, there has been a historically unparalleled integration of the activities of NGOs into the operations of the UN and its agencies, but Martens argues this integration has been poorly understood by researchers. The reason, Martens argues, is because of the use of theoretical frameworks that have focused too much on the *impact* of NGOs on the UN—in terms of the power of NGOs to 'transform' the UN and to 'partner' the delivery of services—and not enough on the *incorporation* of NGOs into the UN system. For example, Martens shows the broad spectrum of activities undertaken by humanitarian NGOs within UN policy development and implementation with different degrees of political interaction with governmental and UN bodies. Martens therefore sets out a 'corporatist' theoretical perspective on UN/NGO relations which—she argues—better fits the evidence of the political and institutional realities of these linkages and histories, and of the role of NGOs in international affairs more widely.

Like Tvedt, Nelson regards the challenge to research as one of better understanding the nature and extent of NGOs' embeddedness in broader political and institutional systems, but in contrast Nelson retains an organisational perspective. Nelson's paper takes the organisational life of the NGO as its starting point and sets out a six point model of its dimensions that takes account of technical, legal, political aspects, human relationships, resources and values. He then explores World Bank relationship with NGOs, which he argues has been a primarily practical and instrumental one. As a result, NGOs that engage with Bank projects can only be understood effectively with reference to the ways in which their manner of integration into this wider aid system is negotiated or coerced along all six of these dimensions. Rather than emphasising only the 'heroic' dimensions of NGO activities, in which they are seen only as principled moral and political actors opening up spaces for new voices and ideas, a more multidimensional analysis of relationships of power and negotiation will, Nelson argues, produce a far more convincing account of NGO relationships with states and donors. This multi-dimensional, dynamic approach to analysing NGOs, he argues, achieves a better fit with the realities of NGO–World Bank relations—such as the Bank's growing 'use' of NGOs and civil society and the ways in which such engagement with the Bank brings NGOs into closer relationships with the international aid system. In order to understand these relationships and transformations, he calls for a systemic analytical framework, which moves beyond structural analysis to include political, institutional and value-based aspects of NGOs and their roles.

Following logically from and complementing Nelson's analysis, Seckinelgin's paper is also concerned with the social and political context of NGO work, this time in relation to the broader institutional systems and policy discourses of the current international effort to combat HIV/AIDS. Seckinelgin picks up the question of NGO agency—about which policy makers and donors are particularly fond of generalising—and links it to broader policy systems. In line with Tvedt's challenge, Seckinelgin also brings the study of NGOs more closely into broader social science questions through the use of Giddens' definition of agency and Foucault's concept of governmentality. Policy makers make assumptions about NGOs that they are innovative, flexible and efficient, but Seckinelgin shows how such 'claims' about agency are less do to with inherent NGO characteristics than they are social constructs of the social and political environments in which NGOs operate. The paper seeks to move research on NGOs away from the preoccupations with the organisational

characteristics of NGOs—while recognising of course, like Nelson, that these are important—towards looking more closely at the means by which NGOs are institutionalised within international systems. Seckinelgin points to a profound paradox in which NGOs are given opportunities by donors to participate in the international system because they claim close community links with people, but the form of this institutionalisation serves only to disarticulate their links within local institutions. This, he argues explains why the performance of NGOs in the HIV/AIDS sector is unlikely to live up to the expectations of policy makers. The extent of NGO agency is therefore best seen as contingent rather than inherent.

The final paper by Ishkanian continues this theme of NGOs and agency, but shifts to the very different historical and political context of the post-Soviet countries of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, an area that has so far received relatively little scholarly attention within development studies research on NGOs. Based on an anthropological approach, the paper develops a conceptual framework for examining different stances taken by various NGOs in relation to the PRSP process. The analysis is set against a recent history of intense donor support for NGOs which first mushroomed in the immediate post-Soviet era. This donor approach now faces a backlash from both government that sees NGOs as tool of foreign interests and citizens that now confront the dramatic reversal of development indicators in the region in the past decade. The paper examines the diversity of NGOs and their strategies, but also focuses on issues of agency and the challenges involved in influencing policy dialogue in increasingly authoritarian contexts.

4 CONCLUSION

We are not suggesting in this policy arena that development studies have failed to engage with the issue of NGOs, but we do argue that such engagement has been limited. Our aim therefore is to draw attention to the need for development studies to draw more fully on themes that are emerging from new work that can help us to focus research more fully on non-governmental action in relation to theory, agency, method and context. While there has already been some important work of this kind undertaken, too much NGO research has been hampered by the methodological limitations that we have noted and furthermore, has become increasingly out of step with the changing realities of policy. Yet the influence of this work has been wide-ranging, among both critics and supporters of NGOs. It has informed increasingly outmoded policy models and ideas about NGOs (such as the idea of the complementary division of labour in service delivery between government and NGOs), while the more critical work has fuelled equally crude and often highly generalised ideas about the limitations and ‘failures’ of NGOs (such as the view of NGOs as self-serving vehicles for individual gain). The heavily normative approach to NGOs defined in/by the dominant literature has been influential at the policy level and provided, and continues to provide, the rationale for the continuous use and support by governments and donors of NGOs and their roles in development.

What is needed, as Tvedt argues, is a new analytical framework, which eschews organisational essentialism and normative instrumentalism and better reflects empirical realities of the world of NGOs, including their wide diversity. Work of this kind, which explores a new and embedded political economy of NGOs but rooted in ethnographic study that links global and local contexts, is beginning to emerge (e.g. Hilhorst, 2003; Igoe and Kelsall, 2005). This new agenda is exciting and diverse, ranging from the moral dimensions of NGO work and the shifting meanings and representations around ideas of non-

governmental action, to the complex ways in which NGO roles and relationships are changing within new and expanding systems of international aid.

What might be the value of this proposed reconceptualisation of NGO research to policy makers? As Tvedt suggests, it is important to achieve the institutionalisation of the NGO field as a stable and theoretically-grounded subject of research within development studies (and social sciences more widely) precisely because of the way that NGO research to date has too often been buffeted by the changing fashions of development policy. If development research is to be 'relevant' research—as Bebbington (1994) put it—then both researchers and policy makers have a strong and mutual vested interest in achieving a consistent academically-grounded dialogue around NGO issues. If closer links are to be constructed between research and policy (Court and Maxwell, 2005), then we need to go beyond dominant thinking about simply bridging 'a gap' between researchers and practitioners to understand more clearly the ways in which knowledge is produced. We must therefore seek to improve our understanding of NGOs as both subjects of development research, and as actors in development processes, since these are inextricably linked. This means locating NGO research more firmly within the structural context in which NGO activities take place. Just as research on NGOs has often adopted an overly organisational focus, policy discussions on NGOs have also taken place within a similar organisational framework in which NGOs are frequently challenged to organisationally 'scale up' or refocus their activities if they are to remain 'relevant' (Lewis, 2001). Yet the current evolution of NGOs and their development roles cannot simply be seen as an organisational response to existing development problems, but also as an effect of specific policy decisions by donors and governments.

If the main contribution of this collection is a call to reframe NGO research away from its organisational focus, the same applies to NGO policy discussions. These policy discussions need to shift to the context, policies and practices of the international aid system itself, which creates expectations, as well as the conditions for NGOs to address them. This is not to impose structural analyses on all discussions on NGOs, for as Nelson (in this issue) argues, organisational characteristics do still matter. Rather, our aim is to stress the importance of the structural context in which NGOs operate—and in particular that created by donor policies and practices—in relation to NGO organisational performance. The ability of NGOs to contribute and respond in different ways to these policies and practices is ultimately shaped by their political stance and level of financial dependence. A greater level of understanding of NGO agency may therefore ultimately inform a set of policies that can achieve a better fit with the realities and potentials of NGO roles in development.

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