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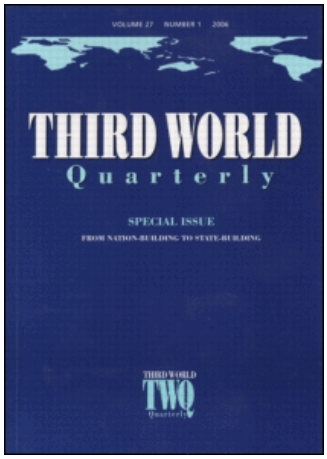

Third World Quarterly
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713448481

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Online Publication Date: 01 February 2008
To cite this Article: Lewis, David (2008) 'Crossing the Boundaries between 'Third Sector' and State: life-work histories from the Philippines, Bangladesh and the UK', Third World Quarterly, 29:1, 125 - 141
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/01436590701726582
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436590701726582

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Third World Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2008, pp 125 – 141

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Crossing the Boundaries between 'Third Sector' and State: life-work histories from the Philippines, Bangladesh and the UK

DAVID LEWIS

ABSTRACT *The three-sector model—encompassing the private, public and non-governmental or 'third' sectors—is important to much of the research that is undertaken on development policy. While it may be analytically convenient to separate the three sectors, the realities are more complex. Non-governmental actors and government/public sector agencies are linked in potentially important (though often far from visible) ways via personal relationships, resource flows and informal transactions. This paper seeks to understand these links by studying the 'life-work histories' of individuals who have operated in both the government and third sector. Two main types of such boundary crossing are identified: 'consecutive', in which a person moves from one sector to the other in order to take up a new position, and 'extensive', in which a person is simultaneously active in both sectors. Drawing on a set of recently collected life-work history data, the paper explores the diversity of this phenomenon in three countries. It examines the reasons for cross-over, analyses the experiences of some of those involved, and explores the implications for better understanding the boundaries, both conceptual and tangible, that both separate and link government and third sector in these different institutional contexts.*

The concept of three institutional 'sectors'—private, public and non-governmental or 'third' sector—underpins much development policy research and action.[1] It has become established as a theoretical model used by social science researchers working on institutions and development (with research on the 'third sector' now a significant sub-field), and it is also a 'policy model' that helps to map institutional landscapes and structure policies among governments and donors. The language of 'partnership', for example, has become a common component of policy relationships between government and business, and between states and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across much of the world.[2] While it may be analytically convenient

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ISSN 0143-6597 print/ISSN 1360-2241 online/08/010125–17 © 2008 *Third World Quarterly*
DOI: 10.1080/01436590701726582

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to separate the three sectors, the realities of course are far more complex. A key challenge for researchers is therefore to examine the relationship between such policy models—and the theories that may underpin them—and the societal realities that such models seek to represent and to influence. This paper examines aspects of the life-work histories of individuals who cross between, or operate across, the boundaries between the 'third sector' and government/public sector in Bangladesh, Philippines and the UK.

There has so far been very little research on this issue, despite passing references to its importance.[3] Instead, there has been a concentration on the characteristics of the sector itself rather than on its boundaries with other sectors. Yet there is widespread recognition of a 'blurring' of sector boundaries and of the rise of hybrid organisational forms such as alternative trading organisations or government-organised NGOs, and concern about autonomy and co-option of NGOs by state or business.[4] There is also a growing awareness that relationships *between* sectors in the context of public policy may be as important as the effectiveness of any *one* of the sectors.[5] Sector boundaries are likely to be more complex, subtle and unstable in 'real life' than a basic three-sector model allows. For example, 'non-governmental' actors are linked in potentially important ways to the other sectors via people, resource flows and transactions, although such links are often far from visible.[6] They may include kinship relations within elite families,[7] age-sets or alumni groups which connect NGO staff with colleagues in other spheres,[8] the social embeddedness of employees within wider communities,[9] and public or private funding streams that create ambiguous roles, allegiances and identities among 'non-governmental' actors.[10]

Boundary crossing between third sector and government can take place in either of two ways. The first is *consecutive*, where a person moves from a job or involvement in one sector to take up a full-time position in another sector. For example, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) has recently recruited staff extensively from NGOs. The second is *extensive*, where a person simultaneously extends their interests and involvements from one sector into another, such as the government employee on the board of an NGO (a formal strategy) or whose close relative in the third sector allows joint work towards shared interests (an informal strategy). Both types of boundary crossing may involve a similar set of experiences: taking ideas from one sector into another, managing transitions between one set of work-place rules and norms and another, and engaging with power relationships in either the maintenance of the status quo or the pursuit of change.

Aims of the research

The research has three aims: 1) to reveal more of the multiple identities of those involved in boundary crossing through comparative research; 2) to explore the permeability of sector boundaries by collecting narrative accounts of boundary crossing; and 3) to provide insights into wider policy processes by documenting and analysing the experiences of these unusually positioned social actors.

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The three countries selected—Bangladesh, the Philippines and the UK—each contain a 'third sector' shaped by a different set of political histories and relationships. The Philippines saw many individuals from NGOs moving into successive government administrations after 1986 in search of greater influence. In the UK, the third sector has been drawn into New Labour policy via the 1997 'Compact' with the sector and increasing secondments.[11] For some, government policy is seen as having become more responsive, while for others co-option is a matter of growing concern. Finally, Bangladesh is known for the strength and diversity of its NGO sector, but also for its recurrent tensions with government.[12] Boundary crossing here is less visible, but takes place, for example, when NGOs recruit ex-government personnel. The choice of countries also reflects the view that useful comparisons can be made across contexts normally separated by artificial and potentially patronising separations between 'developed' and 'developing' countries.[13]

The study aims to contribute an anthropological approach to policy,[14] by critically examining how policy is experienced and constructed within social, political and economic relationships of governance. Empirical data for the research was gathered using a version of the 'life history' research method. A purposive sample of individuals in each country was identified.[15] Life-history interviewing has grown into an established research method within social science research,[16] and has been particularly deployed within gender studies, education research and oral history work.[17] The method brings a number of potential strengths, including 'insights into unrecorded and undocumented and raw experience';[18] and a strong element of 'rich description' that may provide a more nuanced and textured view of people's past and present experiences which may challenge the stability of 'received wisdoms'. Life histories tell us not just about one life, but also about how people 'interact with the whole',[19] and can therefore help illustrate the ways in which individual cultural and political identities link with wider history and politics.[20]

The objective of the study was to focus in the interviews on a person's work, whether in the form of professional activity, volunteering or activism, as the main driver of the narrative. I have termed it a 'life-work history', since it synthesises elements from a broad life-history interview with a more focused semi-structured interview. Each interview was recorded and began with an invitation to begin the narrative with the person's earliest paid or unpaid work or activist experiences, and then followed with a minimum of intervention from the interviewer except to clarify or expand a point, or to keep the narrative on track when it was judged to be moving too slowly or quickly. Twenty life-work history interviews with mainly urban middle-class informants were carried out in each country. Interviewees were identified using a snowballing technique that began with known individuals within the research and NGO communities (where I have previous experience in each country), and followed a trail of contacts outwards. A spread of informants was attempted that would best illustrate the main types—though not the extent—of boundary crossing in each context, with a balance of different backgrounds, age and gender of informants wherever possible.

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The following sections discuss key themes that emerge from the life-work narratives collected in each country context. An overview of the main issues arising in each context is summarised in Table 1, where the dominant forms of boundary crossing are set out against different contextual features.

Issues from the Philippines

In the Philippines there has been a high level of fluidity between these two sectors, thanks to the political opportunities offered to reformers from the third sector and to the relatively open civil service structure that allows lateral entry to the bureaucracy at senior levels. The Philippines entered its current democratic era in 1986, after a turbulent period of repression and resistance that followed the introduction of martial law by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972. When activists and development professionals world-wide began paying more attention to the role of NGOs from the late 1980s onwards, the Philippines was already at the forefront of NGO thinking and experiences.[21] Resistance to the Marcos regime had created dense networks of political parties, activist groups and developmental organisations within a relatively highly evolved and self-conscious 'civil society'. With a long history of non-governmental radical activist groups with church roots, such as the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF), and a range of private philanthropic organisations such as the Philippines Business Leaders for Social Progress (PBLSP), this diverse third sector was well placed to develop further new roles when the government of Cory Aquino took power in 1986.[22]

Among NGOs, particularly those on the left, there was extensive debate and discussion about possible strategies in the post-Marcos era. Some took a decision to remain outside government as advocates and critics, seeing the Aquino government as still compromised by local elites and foreign interests. Others in the NGO sector held the view that new democratic spaces were opening up in which opportunities for influence, engagement and even direct participation in government should now be explored. This split was a pervasive one at the time, with many of the NGOs that were close to the national democratic left choosing to remain critics outside of government. For social democratic NGOs, and some others on the left, however, this position was less acceptable since civil society efforts that had been directed towards creating a more responsive democratic government had finally born fruit. As one social democratic informant put it in relation to these debates, the question was now:

> How do we deal with the Aquino government? We put this government in power; don't tell us that now you are going to train your guns [on it]! . . . [The national democratic left] were saying soon after . . . 'the US Aquino regime' . . . But we were not comfortable with that, we'd worked hard for this new government.

From 1986 onwards former anti-Marcos activists within the NGO sector were invited by the new government to take up posts within certain departments,

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TABLE 1. Summary of main types of boundary crossing and emerging issues, by country

	Nature and extent of cross-over	Contextual factors	Emerging issues and questions
Philippines	Large numbers of third-sector activists crossing into government departments as political appointees Political activists from third sector seeking elected political posts A long tradition of corporate philanthropy and charitable work linked to political office	Relatively politicised third sector and flexible bureaucracy. Post-authoritarian democratic 'spaces' opened up Role of third sector in supporting mainstream political or business interests	Lessons for activists—some stay to pursue change from inside, many regroup in civil society 'Non-traditional politics' idea is growing Blurred, less visible boundaries between third sector and politics and business
UK	Rise of secondments of third-sector people into some government departments Expansion of DFID recruitment, in part from NGO sector Activists in the domestic sphere may increasingly care less about sector and more about nature of job and issue	New government interest in the third sector post-1997, eg The Compact Growing job market flexibility, growth of official aid programme, expansion of conflict work New opportunities for job satisfaction; security and values increasingly drive job changes	Co-option or synergy questions (but also a recognition by government of third-sector 'creativity'?). Disappointment with government cultural norms among third-sector people (although a few do stay). Blurring of sector boundaries?
Bangladesh	Little movement from NGOs into government, but some movement the other way Unpaid leave from government through 'lien' system NGOs recruit retired government employees to 'smooth over' tensions	Rigid public sector structures, strong presence of international aid make some NGO salaries higher than those of government Provides opportunities for exit from government for those dissatisfied Relatively high level of distrust between government and NGO sector	Very little learning between NGO sector and government? Loss of expertise from public sector? NGO–government relations are informally 'managed' rather than systematically structured?

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or to contribute directly to policy development through membership of agencies and committees. There was a pressing need to draw specialised expertise into government by novice leader Aquino, as well as a broader political strategy to maintain patron–client ties that could be delivered through third sector organisations linked with urban or rural populations. This trend continued into the subsequent Ramos government (1992–98), the Estrada government (1998–2000) and the current regime of Gloria M Arroyo.

The highest profile example was the revival of activity in the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), a public agency that had originally been created in 1971 by Marcos.[23] In response to civil society pressure for more progress on the redistribution of agricultural land, from 1986 onwards a succession of individuals associated with the NGO sector became instrumental from within DAR in helping to develop a new agrarian reform policy, and in pursuing its implementation. The post-Marcos political settlement required concessions to be made to a wide range of interest groups in Philippines society. Agrarian reform work was largely delegated to sections of the NGO community through their control of DAR. Individuals from within the NGO community also pursued policy influence through direct participation in ministries such as Social Welfare and Education, and in public sector bodies such as the National Anti-Poverty Commission. With 20 years of experience of the phenomenon of 'cross-over' (as it has come to be termed), there is now a level of public discussion about the phenomenon.

What do we learn from the life-work histories of these 'cross-overs'? Some joined government enthusiastically, while many others did so with reluctance. This latter group feared becoming trapped in highly politicised structures of bureaucracy, patronage or corruption but were pressured to join when government called the bluff of its third-sector critics to 'come and do better'. Some left their government jobs after a year or two, either because of dissatisfaction with the reality of working 'on the inside', while others, being political appointees, left when a new government came in. One issue that emerges from the Philippines data is the 'delegation' of certain areas of government to NGOs. The cause of agrarian reform in the Philippines—while still moving far too slowly for most activists—has benefited from the participation of third-sector reformists since 1986. A new and more pragmatic and flexible section of the activist community within the third sector has recognised that engagement through direct participation in policy can bear results in the limited 'political spaces' that open up. To some, this forms a more preferable and constructive position than critical non-engagement. These people speak of a new form of 'non-traditional politics' that the NGO sector has helped to construct, one that engages in struggle with the majority of traditional politicians that still remain in place, but one that also leaves behind the view of government-as-enemy held by 'separatist' civil society critics.

Not all cross-over activity takes place within this politicised context. Some people have crossed over as part of the search for better and more interesting work, improved security and status, and in the interest of building a varied

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career. One informant, beginning his working life career in a public transport authority, grew tired of the frustrations of working within an agency fraught with patronage and corruption. He successfully relaunched his career within an environmental NGO, retraining himself on the job and pursuing new fields of personal interest in the field of conservation. Another informant had trained as a lawyer and worked very successfully in private practice, combining this with a high level of participation in one of the business-funded NGOs, before being drawn reluctantly into government as part of ongoing reform efforts in the internal revenue department.

The life-work narratives also highlight aspects of the practical difficulties experienced by people from the third sector who move over to work in government. Many found it difficult to operate within a politicised or highly bureaucratic environment, with its different cultures of work, resistance to reforms from established interests, and the difficulty of mobilising resources effectively in government offices. Some claim to have had to be 'arm-twisted' to move into government at all. This reluctance was also true of those who had been invited into government without a particular political or social agenda other than that of improving governance and a sense of the value of 'public service'. One respondent who worked in both the private for-profit sector and NGOs gave loss of income as a major reason for reluctance to become involved in government. On the other hand, most cross-overs welcomed the chance to learn at first hand the realities of life within government and bureaucracy, recognising the potential power of a more effective public sector to make lasting changes, and keen to break down the often caricatured view government and NGOs have of each other.

The history of cross-over is both a consequence of, and a contributor to, a set of political tensions within the NGO community. These are given new emphasis by the changing positionality and perspective of those who 'cross over'. For example, the view of the NGO sector left behind can change when viewed from a position in government, where suddenly the activities of NGOs can appear less appealing. In particular, some informants have been disappointed by the tendency of some NGO leaders to see colleagues who enter government as somehow 'their people', and so to expect preferential treatment in the allocation of resources and contracts. One informant, having moved into government, said:

> And so I started to see my friends . . . people I had looked up to, including very good friends, changing in front of my eyes. More concerned with brokering, power deals, setting up alliances here and there . . .

From this perspective, NGOs were found to fall short of expectations in relation to ethics and public accountability. For other boundary crossers, the demands of NGOs appeared more utopian and less realistic from a perspective *within* government than they had done from outside it. Such people grew frustrated at the unwillingness of NGOs to engage with the practical implications of reform demands, such as cost trade-offs and technical constraints. A few report having fallen out with erstwhile colleagues in the NGO sector as a consequence of this new position and perspective. Such

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colleagues view boundary crossing as a form of 'transgression', associated negatively with 'having broken the rules'. This has led some observers to argue that the Philippines now has a more diverse and experienced NGO and civil society sector, while others speak of co-option and compromise by those who are seen as having crossed over merely for short-term gain.

Where has this experience left the third sector? Critics allege that it has degraded it, because NGOs have become mere 'stepping stones' for people with political ambition seeking entry to government and greater political power. Such concerns of a 'revolving door' do indeed raise issues of changing forms of 'elite circulation' between third sector and state, reinforcing patronage and interest-group politics. Others counter with the view that a more 'mature' NGO sector has emerged as a result of the cross-over experience, because NGOs have now gained more realistic insights into the policy process. As a result, a few NGO people have stayed on in government, and moved into new positions central to ongoing processes of change, such as that of administrative reform.

Issues from Bangladesh

Like the Philippines, Bangladesh contains a large and dynamic community of third-sector organisations. Emerging as an independent nation after a bloody liberation war with Pakistan in 1971, the new country lacked basic infrastructure and institutions and became the recipient of unusually large quantities of international aid.[24] The growth of its NGO sector was the result of the congruence of a weak state that was unable to single-handedly tackle massive challenges of disaster relief and national building, the influx of foreign aid and the efforts of local-third sector leaders. These included radical student activists imbued with the energy of the recent national liberation struggle, as well as individual professionals with a creative developmental vision from within the private sector and the universities.[25] Like the Philippines, Bangladesh was also transformed from military rule to a democratic political system through a peaceful 'people power' revolution in 1990.[26]

Yet there has been far less movement of personnel from third sector to government in Bangladesh than was observed in the Philippines. Three sets of reasons help to explain this. First, there is the relative rigidity of Bangladesh's public sector bureaucracy, which is structured more formally on civil service careers with little scope for 'lateral entry' from other sectors. Second, there is a growing perception among university graduates that the public sector is a less desirable place to work than it once was, and that there is a more open work culture, better scope for job satisfaction and better pay available in international agencies, NGOs and the private sector. Third, there is a far less openly politicised NGO sector than in Philippines, where many development NGOs identify with political tendencies and movements and may explicitly lend their support to particular candidates at election time.

As in the Philippines, the NGO sector in Bangladesh owes part of its origins to 1960s student politics of resistance and national identity formation, and during the 1970s there were many NGOs that were strongly influenced by the

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work of Paolo Freire. The high level of foreign funding that has helped to create the NGO sector in Bangladesh has contributed to its depoliticisation. In order to be eligible to receive foreign funds, an NGO must be registered with the government and, not surprisingly, the government is particularly sensitive to the creation of an avenue through which foreign donors might influence domestic politics via NGOs. The legitimacy crisis of 2002–03 in which the main NGO umbrella organisation ADAB was accused by the government of having become politically partisan serves to illustrate this point. The government's interest became one of maintaining as far as possible a clear boundary between the two sectors that was 'un-blurred' by party politics, yet it remains a view that is increasingly out of step with the realities of NGOs and third-sector groups that align themselves with opposition protest.[27]

In Bangladesh, where NGOs form their own grassroots groups, there is less of the pronounced distinction between NGOs and 'people's organisations' that characterises the sector in the Philippines. It is therefore far more difficult for NGO leaders to find themselves awarded posts in government in exchange for political support. This is not to say that this type of strategy is unknown. In the case of the leading NGO Proshika, for example, the government took action in 2002 against the its leadership when it appeared to become increasingly identified with the main opposition Awami League political party, freezing its access to foreign funds and bringing trumped-up charges against some of its staff, a few of whom found themselves in jail. In the 1980s there were also cases of NGO leaders who experimented with the tactic of building personal links with individuals within the military government of General Ershad. For example, Zafrullah Chowdhury, founder of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, made significant progress in formalising an essential drugs health policy, but endured hostility from elements within the broader third sector who criticised him for trying to do business with a non-democratic regime.[28] A Land Reform Cell was also created for a brief period, staffed partly by NGO people in the Ministry of Land during the late 1980s, with its origins in informal personal relationships.[29]

In Bangladesh one therefore has to dig deeper to uncover the paths of cross-over that do still take place, and which help construct the relationship between government and NGO in less visible and more subtle ways. Here, one is more likely to find people crossing over from the government sector to the NGOs than the other way around. This can take one of two main forms. Some NGOs have benefited from the movement of young government staff who have quickly become frustrated with working in a public sector context and have sought a more interesting job, and sometimes also a higher income, within the NGO sector:

> I understood that . . . yes, a government job is more sort of sustainable and secure . . . but if you look at the system, your career growth is not so regular . . . [I]t is not based your performance or even your expertise, rather it is time-bound . . . I was looking at which organisation which might be better-placed for me and my career . . . and that might be better-placed to fit with my individual thinking. Then I found that [a particular NGO] was such an organisation. There was potential to grow and to contribute.

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The better-resourced international NGOs have particularly gained in capacity from individuals who cross over in this way, drawn to a more open organisational culture and a higher salary. However, such shifts also raise the possibility of a public sector 'brain drain' problem. There is a sense of frustration with a public sector characterised by low incomes, a perceived high level of inefficiency and a sense of being out of touch with citizens. The high ranking of Bangladesh by Transparency International in recent years in its corruption league table, and the frustrations ordinary people face in accessing public services, have reinforced a negative image of public sector careers.

In other areas of the public sector, such as the judiciary, the picture may be more positive. In some cases individuals may spend some years working in the third sector in order to gain practical or specialised experience (such as in gender rights) before moving into their public sector careers proper. For example, one informant was a human rights lawyer who worked with a leading activist NGO and established a range of local and international contacts before starting a formal career as an advocate within the public courts system. In this scenario NGOs serve as a kind of 'training ground' for activists and help build networks and relationships that may continue to support a career of this kind.

The second main form of cross-over from government to the third sector is the common practice in which an NGO hires a person recently retired from the civil service. As one informant explained:

> So after the end of my government career . . . in Bangladesh we retire early, and we remain active . . . I could not sit idle! So I thought I should try to do something for the country also, after the government job . . . in an NGO.

The relationship between government and NGOs in Bangladesh is frequently troubled and characterised by increasing political tensions. There has been only limited progress from the position characterised as 'antagonistic cooperation'[30] a decade and a half ago. This arrangement connects an NGO with potentially valuable information and networks, and the ability to 'smooth over' tensions and speed up bureaucratic processes within government. For example, tensions regularly emerge between NGOs and the NGO Affairs Bureau over approval of projects. Sometimes such ex-government people do not play a particularly important management or operational role within an NGO aside from this one.

A third avenue through which government employees find their way into NGOs is through the system of unpaid discretionary leave known as 'lien'. This has long been deployed by those in government who wish to take advantage of a job offer to work in a more lucrative or stimulating setting for up to five years, often within international agencies or projects, but sometimes also within some of the better-resourced organisations in the third sector such as international NGOs or foundations.

In Bangladesh it was also possible to find examples of 'extensive' boundary-crossing in which less visible relationships linked individuals active

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in both sectors. This 'cross-over by proxy' is an important element of the strategies used by elite families to build and consolidate a political and economic power base. For example, one informant with a long career in various international NGOs eventually left and established her own local community development NGO. At the same time she has long been an activist in one of the main political parties. By building support within the national and local party hierarchy, she was eventually able to gain election to parliament as one of the nominated female members permissible under the system. Combining a political career with development work in this way reflects the pervasive patron–client relationships that continue to structure institutional and political life in Bangladesh.[31]

If we try to 'map' emerging issues from the narratives collected from the Philippines onto the different context of Bangladesh, we find the differences quite stark. Rather than individuals moving into government, we find instead a pattern of people moving out, helping to structure the sensitive relationship between government and third sector through informal personal relationships, but perhaps at the same time contributing to a potential weakening of the quality of public agencies and reflecting a diminished 'public service ethic'. While we do find aspects of government being delegated to NGOs, it is in relation to service delivery rather than policy formulation. While important areas of service provision have long been occupied by some of the larger NGOs, this has largely been the result of the lack of government coverage in key sectors—such as credit and rural education—rather than by any planned ceding of responsibility by government.

Today, when donors and government accept the role of NGOs as important 'partners' in development processes, this only tends to be in relation to service provision. A recent World Bank report on NGOs in Bangladesh outlines the case for a 'pluralist service provision regime' in which NGO experiments and innovation in the fields such as credit, non-formal education and village-based community health are scaled up into government-co-ordinated national programmes.[32] Recent donor shifts towards government budget support and away from funding NGOs directly seems set to continue this trend. There has not yet been any significant delegation of government roles to NGOs through a movement of NGO staff into particular government departments.

Issues from the UK

The 'third sector' in the UK is now more extensive and commands more attention (and expectation) from policy makers than at any period since the highpoint of Victorian philanthropy.[33] The sector in the UK is increasingly caught up in the 'new governance' arrangements,[34] in which the boundaries between the three sectors have become increasingly blurred and in which 'self-organising networks' of public, private and third-sector organisations and individuals increasingly interact within a deregulated policy environment. According to some observers, the boundaries between third sector and state have also become subject to increased political control under the new Labour government that came to power in 1997.

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The UK third sector is distinctive since, like many third sectors in the rich countries with long traditions of international action, it has become divided into two quite distinct spheres or sub-sectors—those organisations that are working domestically and those that work overseas, usually in the developing or transition countries. The former are generally known as 'voluntary organisations', while the latter are termed 'NGOs'.[35] Both categories of organisation have been considered within the choice of informants for the study, since boundary crossing takes place between the domestic voluntary sector and government departments such as the Home Office or the Charities Commission, as well as between NGOs and the DFID.

Two sets of wider policy factors have increased opportunities for exchange between the sectors in the UK. For the domestic third sector, a new enhanced role in social service delivery began in the 1990s with the growth of the 'mixed economy of welfare' in which a combination of public, private and voluntary service providers were seen as providing the optimum framework for improving services and making them more cost-effective. After the Labour government came to power in 1997, this trend was taken further with the new 'Compact' arrangement between the voluntary sector and the government designed to increase mutual recognition and partnership nationally and locally.[36]

In the UK international third sector a second set of developments has contributed to the growth of 'boundary crossing' within the field of international development as DFID has rapidly expanded its work. There has been an overall expansion of UK bilateral development assistance under the Labour government since 1997, which is now committed to reaching the UN target of 0.7% of GDP by the end of the decade (or coming close to it). This will involve a substantial increase of development assistance funding that will require an expansion of DFID's capacity. This has created new jobs which people with an NGO background are well qualified to take, particularly as there is an increased focus on conflict settings where UK NGOs have long been working. The changing nature of DFID work, which has required more expertise in the conflict and emergency field, is an important factor. In filling its newly expanded set of 'conflict adviser' posts, for example, DFID has explicitly drawn in expertise from the NGO community from organisations with a long history of such work. One informant who crossed from a well known British NGO to become a DFID conflict adviser commented:

> I actually saw jobs in *The Guardian* [newspaper] advertised by DFID for conflict advisors . . . [T]hey were saying, 'We want people with experience from outside government, with some real understanding of conflict because we the government, we DFID, are in effect wanting to kind of ''beef up'' our own expertise in this area'.

A job in DFID may be attractive to NGO workers for either or both of two main sets of reasons. For those moving towards middle age, and perhaps with a growing family, it is likely to bring a better salary than a job in the NGO sector. For people (also) interested in policy influence, it brings the

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promise of an opportunity to operate on a far larger scale than the piecemeal efforts of NGOs, with more resources and the promise of greater impact. This is particularly of interest to people working in policy advocacy, either because they see the chance to get closer to the centre of power in relation to policy change, or because they want to learn more about how policy works in order to take it back to the NGO setting where their primary loyalty lies.

But such a shift also, as we shall see, brings with it a set of new challenges within an official bureaucracy for those used to more informal, value-driven working methods. The expansion of opportunities within DFID has led to difficulties that feature in the narratives of some UK informants in relation to a difficult cultural transition from third-sector into public sector bureaucracy. One type of boundary-crosser increasingly encountered within the UK NGO sector is the person who briefly entered DFID, but found the experience unsatisfactory and returned within a few years to the third sector. For example, one informant complained of a less analytical culture in government, where the focus was on 'moving money':

> When you talk only in terms of flows of money, you can then apply terms such as 'efficiency' and therefore [have] less staff... and so I didn't fully agree with the aid philosophy either. I didn't, [and] it took some time to get used to the lack of a 'questioning' approach.

Another informant, while finding a lot of objective potential in DFID as a place to do more meaningful work than in the NGO sector, was disillusioned by the civil service workplace culture and relationships with colleagues:

> There were things that were disappointing like... a lack of collegiate spirit at a high level... so everyone was out to get your job, rather than kind of... to help you do your job well.

Such people may see the experience of a temporary sojourn within government as valuable, since it can provide an opportunity for practical learning about how government and policy making work. The experience of being in government is almost always considered by informants to be useful for carrying back to the NGO sector. It has value whether in the form of a more detailed understanding of possible opportunities for advocacy and influence in policy processes, or a stronger sense of government funding or partnership priorities. Even an 'unhappy' experience in government may be productive in the longer term and may also reinforce the dominant identity of being an 'NGO person'.

Similar issues of identity are raised by informants who work in the broader voluntary sector and who move into non-development-related areas of the UK public sector. One narrative is from an informant who went into the Department of Health on secondment, working in the social care reform field, but was then later invited to stay on as a permanent civil servant. Despite the offer, she found the organisational culture inhospitable, the

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language unfamiliar and the lack of questioning around policy eventually to be unpalatable:

> I learned very fast that that wasn't what they meant, and that words are used completely differently. But nobody in the civil service thought to tell me.
>
> *Q. Were you tempted to stay in the civil service?*
>
> Sort of, but not really. I decided it wasn't me, I didn't feel comfortable. I had also been very involved in legislation that was highly . . . some parts of it I'd found very very difficult. And I'd thought, this isn't the life for me, I can't wear the clothes of this . . . and do 'whatever policies come up'.

At the same time there are also those—as in the Philippines—who appear to have successfully made a transition from NGO to government agency, finding in DFID an appropriate and satisfying role to pursue development work. One interviewee who had been recruited to DFID from the NGO sector post-1997 had had previous links with the minister through having been an activist in the Labour Party, and quickly found his feet within the new institution, where he felt he gained greater influence and closeness to power:

> I mean it was amazing, I was probably as a young relatively junior official, mid-career point I'd come into DFID, I was seeing more of the minister, I mean on a sort of monthly basis putting up submissions.

Former NGO staff who remain in the public sector may continue to play an informal role in cross-sector relationships. For example, one of the informants from within Oxfam spoke of the continuing usefulness of people popularly known as 'ex-Fams': former NGO employees now dotted around DFID, the Foreign Office and other government departments who are sometimes willing to provide inside information to their former organisation.

In the UK the motivation for working in the public sector tends to be a sense of wider possibility in engaging with power and, at the personal level, a better salary than that found on average in NGO work.

Conclusion

While the research presented in this paper is still underway, these life-work histories begin to open up further understanding of the institutional geographies of power and choice among individuals whose careers have cut across the boundaries of the third sector and the public sector, and the complex and elusive nature of this boundary.

What do we learn about the boundary itself? In all three contexts, the boundary is regularly transcended by both consecutive and extensive forms of cross-over. At one level it is a merely a conceptual boundary, an *idea* that helps to map out the complex landscape of organisational life and the shifting institutional relationships of the neoliberal policy terrain. As such, it is highly artificial, since in the real world of organisations people constantly carry ideas, relationships and practices with them as they travel across from one side to the other, as they change job, develop alliances or operate

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simultaneously in both sectors. As an 'ideal type', the three sector model is at odds with the messy realities of political, personal and organisational life, where neat separations across the boundary are impossible, and where context and history create very different sets of structures and incentives from place to place. But, at another level, people may experience the boundary as very real, where the 'rules of the game'—in terms of cultures, norms and laws—vary between sectors.

In terms of structural change, the different narratives of 'cross-over' in the three countries each reflect shifts in resource incentives and political opportunities more widely—such as changing the policy priorities of governments and international agencies. More 'flexible' organisational structures are favoured under increasingly neoliberal economic and social policy frameworks, such as the 'new public management', which seeks to combine elements of markets, voluntarism and public administration. As part of these processes sector boundaries are in a constant state of being constructed and unmade, as individuals make purposive shifts as leaders, organisers, activists and managers between the different sectors. Such people can therefore be usefully analysed as sector 'brokers'[37] in relation to changing configurations of power within fields of public and private action.

At the level of individuals the narratives highlight issues of motivation and identity. Individuals who cross between third sector and government normally do so in the expectation that life and work will be different on the other side of the boundary. They may be motivated by the power to promote change more effectively, by access to more interesting work, or simply by the promise of a higher level of remuneration. In each of the three contexts, and among different individuals, these motivations vary widely. So do the outcomes. Some individuals find that their expectations are met by boundary crossing and may generate creativity and positive change in the new setting. Others discover that the change is not to their taste—and that they are overwhelmed by bureaucracy, constrained by *Realpolitik*, or disillusioned by short-termism and lack of impact.

These factors also affect changing identities around work and activism. A person who moves from a third-sector setting may find that they are simply adrift as an NGO person 'out of place', or they may find that their identity becomes firmer or more fixed once they move into a different and unfamiliar context. Some informants found that they were unhelpfully labelled as an NGO person (or a government person) and therefore disempowered by those around them, even as they themselves tried to leave this identity behind. But, for a few people, the boundary does not really exist much at all—their narratives indicate that they try simply to follow the job or the opportunity regardless of whether it is in one sector or another. This growth of 'un-sectored' workplace identities may also be related to the neoliberal emphasis on increasing levels of labour-market flexibility and third-sector professionalism.

For those who can make the transition successfully, there may be potentially positive change for both individuals and organisations. Cross-over may lead a person to bring new and different approaches from one

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context to another and thereby trigger new ideas and creativity, or they may look back on their old sector home differently, perhaps more critically. It is here that potentially valuable forms of creativity—arising from different perspectives and positions, and of using existing capacities and skills in new contexts—can come into play. Yet positive change for one type of organisation may constitute co-option or neutralisation for another. At a practical level such work may therefore also tell us more about how policy innovations take place and how cross-sector organisational relationships operate and are perceived. Such insights may further inform and strengthen the complex practices of 'partnership' that are now in vogue, but which are often found to under-perform in various ways.

Notes

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under the ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action Programme (Grant Reference RES-155-25-0064). I am extremely grateful to all my informants who gave so generously of their time and insights. I would also like to thank Jasmin Abad, Shaheen Anam, Phillip Choudhury, Shaila Rahman, Paola Grenier, Abul Hossain, Richard Fries, Nick Deakin, Bo Sundstrom and most particularly Ria Teves for support during fieldwork. I also thank Nazneen Kanji and Joseph Devine for useful comments on an earlier draft, along with Jude Howell and other participants at the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) conference in Bangkok in July 2006, where the study was first presented, several anonymous referees, and finally Dianne Josephs at LSE for her valuable help with formatting the paper.

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