

10 | Individuals, organizations and public action: trajectories of the 'non-governmental' in development studies

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This chapter traces the emergence of the 'non-governmental' as a category of research in development studies during the past two decades and seeks to analyse the reasons for this growth of interest. The piece begins with a brief personal review of the growth of writings on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which took place in the 1980s. It then goes on to examine explanations for the growth of 'non-governmentalism' within some sections of development studies, finding them in the increased numbers and profiles of NGOs and the emergence of new opportunities for applied research. Both of these were loosely associated with the ascendancy of neo-liberalism at this time, which brought a disillusionment with states and state-led development, strategies of privatization, an expansion of academic consultancy opportunities and an emerging set of new agendas of 'alternative development'.

NGOs were not, however, new, and the chapter then goes on to, first, uncover some of the hidden history of the non-governmental sector, and then investigate some of the reasons for the 'remembering' of the non-governmental which took place within development studies from the late 1980s onwards. Some of the main problems associated with the academic literature on NGOs are then discussed. It is argued that many of these shortcomings resulted from the conditions under which much of this NGO literature was produced, including normative bias, a sense of parochialism, predominantly non-theoretical content and a strong emphasis on managerialism. Finally, some pointers for productive ways forward for NGO research are briefly outlined.

Encountering the non-governmental

The narrative of the growing preoccupation with NGOs among some sections of development researchers to some extent coincides with my own professional career trajectory within development studies. I therefore begin with some personal, somewhat autobiographical, reflections on this theme. During my years as a social anthropology undergraduate in the early 1980s (having selected as many development-related courses as possible), and subsequently as a one-year postgraduate development studies student, the subject never came

up. I do not recall ever coming across the term ‘NGO’, or indeed discussion about the existence or roles of such organizations, within research literature on either the theory or practice of development during those years. If I return now to some of the texts concerned with development policy and practice that I can remember reading and identifying with at that time, such as Sandy Robertson’s *People and the State* (1984), Norman Long’s *An Introduction to the Sociology of Rural Development* (1977) or Lucy Mair’s *Anthropology and Development* (1984), I find that this is confirmed. There is simply no mention of such matters in the chapter headings or text, and there is not even an entry for ‘NGOs’ or ‘voluntary organizations’ in the index. How and why did all this change?

My first contact with the world of NGOs came with a decision to begin studying for a PhD at the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Bath. It was a personal introduction rather than one encountered through the academic literature. My research, which was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), was concerned with the analysis of new agricultural technology and agrarian change in rural Bangladesh. My supervisor, Dr Geoffrey D. Wood, had, over a decade or so of research work in Bangladesh, built up some close personal ties with a number of local activists and emerging development NGO professionals. In particular, Wood had formed a relationship with an organization known as Proshika, a large Bangladeshi NGO that had emerged in the mid-1970s and had gradually scaled up its credit and Freire-inspired social mobilization activities over large areas of the country. The leader of Proshika, Dr Qazi Faruque Ahmed, was, as a result of these links, one of the first people I met in Bangladesh. The organization was in a sense my introduction to the country, helping me with study visits to several possible rural fieldwork locations courtesy not only of their senior management but also their generous and patient field staff. As it turned out, the fieldwork that I eventually undertook in rural Bangladesh was in a part of the country where Proshika did not actually work, and my subsequent PhD research did not in any way engage with the theme of NGOs.

Nevertheless, the experience of undertaking research in Bangladesh had brought me into informal contact with the subject of the ‘non-governmental’ for the first time. For a variety of reasons, Bangladesh had seen a distinctive and relatively large-scale local NGO sector emerge in the years since liberation from Pakistan in 1971.¹ The country had also become a major area of interest for a new group of international NGO advocates and supporters. For example, I can recall hearing about the work of David Korten, one of the leading writers on NGOs at the time, during this period (1987) when he visited Bangladesh on a consultancy visit for the United States Agency for International Develop-

ment (USAID). Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, which had begun as an action research project on rural credit undertaken by Professor Md. Yunus, a professor of economics at Chittagong University, was at that time also beginning to gain an international reputation for its micro-finance work with rural women (see Holcombe 1995). It became clear to me that growing attention was being given to the idea of development NGOs, chiefly as private organizations delivering services, but also in more radical circles for their advocacy and grassroots mobilization possibilities. Indeed, by the late 1980s there was a distinct 'buzz' around the subject in Bangladesh and beyond, much of it coming from the United States, with an emphasis on service delivery and advocacy work, though with some of the Nordic donors and Canada also providing assistance to NGOs engaging in social mobilization work.²

In the rural development field in particular, there was growing interest in the role of NGOs as innovators of new technologies and approaches to working with the poor, and in 1990 I became involved as a contract researcher with a large-scale research initiative being undertaken by Dr John Farrington at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).³ This project set out to collect a wide range of comparative case studies of rural NGO activity in Africa, Asia and Latin America and to explore evolving relations with government. Initially, I was employed to coordinate the research in Bangladesh, but then later undertook similar work in the Philippines, which was another area where NGOs had been attracting attention for some time. I soon found myself part of a growing community of researchers within development studies, into which many people had stumbled through broadly similar to my own (albeit largely 'accidental'), coming into contact with NGOs through other work on broader development themes such as community development, grassroots politics, gender studies and natural resource management and agricultural technology.

When I later decided to seek a full-time academic job in the UK (in early 1995) I was surprised to see that the London School of Economics was recruiting a 'lecturer in non-governmental organizations'. It was to be within this institutional setting that I began more systematically to undertake research and reflection on the NGO theme for the first time. The LSE's interest in NGOs had not come from the direction of development studies but instead from UK social policy.⁴ A successful masters programme on organization and policy issues in the British voluntary sector had gradually begun to attract international attention, and small numbers of NGO staff and researchers, particularly from India, had begun to find their way into the MSc programme. The idea for developing specialized research and teaching on the NGO and development theme was then born.⁵ As a result of this post, I spent much of the years between 1995

and 2001 working on NGO issues as my primary area of research and teaching at LSE. Perhaps this makes the reflections on NGOs and development studies that I present in this chapter essentially those of the outsider, since they are made from a formal positioning within another discipline.⁶ I have, however, remained a member of the Development Studies Association (DSA) and the wider development studies community both at the UK and international levels. I have also worked as part of the ‘academic consultant’ community, which, as I will argue, has, not always for the best, helped to bring the agenda of NGO research more clearly into focus within development studies. This account is by no means definitive, however, and remains a very personal one: there is no doubt much more to be written about the ‘archaeology’ of this subject.

NGOs in development studies

The period of relative invisibility of NGOs within development studies ended suddenly with a slew of books and articles which began appearing from the late 1980s onwards.⁷ In the United States, the writer and activist David C. Korten’s influential 1987 article on NGO ‘generations’ was followed later by his book *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda* (1990), which set out the case for NGOs, and particularly those of ‘the South’, as key actors in development. This was a wide-ranging advocacy document which brought together many of Korten’s influential papers and articles of recent years alongside many new and emerging ideas. Broadly populist in its orientation, the book combined a theoretical critique of the idea of development as economic growth along with an attack on the conventional institutions and practices of the international development community. Korten advocated instead a ‘development as transformation’ approach at both the institutional and the personal levels as part of an emerging school of alternative development embodied in the writings of Robert Chambers. While not under any illusion that many NGOs were yet working towards such goals with any real degree of success, the book was confident in its claim that NGOs constituted an important site for potential positive change in development practice. Korten’s perspective was therefore both normative and idealistic:

[NGOs] ... seldom had a clear strategic focus, often lacked technical capability, and seemed reluctant to cooperate with other organisations ... Yet ... the constraints faced by NGOs are largely the self-imposed constraints of their own self-limiting vision. NGOs are capable of shedding these constraints, as many have demonstrated. Their participants need only the courage to embrace a more expansive vision of their roles and potential. (Korten 1990: xiii)

There were similar kinds of publications also emerging from the UK at the end of the 1980s. The first and one of the most influential of these was John Clark's *Democratising Development: The Role of Voluntary Organisations* (1991). This was written by an author with long insider experience at Oxfam, who also saw the potential importance of NGOs, particularly those from the South, as vehicles for transforming development practice. During this period another prominent writer from the UK was Alan Fowler, whose PhD thesis at Sussex University on NGOs in Kenya was one of the first in-depth studies of the new field. His work was widely circulated. Fowler was prolific in his writings on NGOs, which combined academic analysis with more practical material directed at NGO staff and donors.⁸ The first academic conference on NGOs in the UK took place in 1992 at the University of Manchester (co-organized with Save the Children Fund UK), and it was from this conference that the widely cited volume *Making a Difference: NGOs and Development in a Changing World*, edited by Mike Edwards and David Hulme, emerged. The three ODI volumes on *NGOs and the State* plus the *Reluctant Partners?* overview volume were published later in 1993 (Farrington and Bebbington 1993; Bebbington and Thiele 1993; Wellard and Copestake 1993; Farrington and Lewis 1993). Within the same crop of NGO publications at that time, Carroll's (1992) book was also influential. Its focus on NGOs and agricultural development in Latin America was more research-focused in tone and structure than many similar studies of the period, and paid close attention to history, context and politics. Carroll's book provided a detailed and systematic comparative study of rural development organizations, which pre-empted many of the NGO debates that would later unfold.

By contrast, a World Bank collection edited by Paul and Israel (1991) drew the NGO work of Korten and others firmly into the emerging policy framework of the period, setting out the reasons for the Bank's decision to begin 'an institution-wide effort to expand its work with NGOs' (Beckman 1991: 134). This decision was based on the recognition that states and markets had limited capacity to reduce poverty while NGOs had distinctive competences such as closeness to the poor, committed leadership and capacity to build access to services for the poor. This was the start of the period of explicit recognition of NGOs from within the unfolding neo-liberal development agenda, which gained confidence rapidly following the end of the cold war. 'Neoliberalism' was a return to the preoccupations of an earlier economic liberalism in the nineteenth century, which privileged the market as 'the proper guiding instrument by which people should organize their economic lives' (MacEwan 1999: 4). While this market-oriented policy agenda brought centre-stage the impor-

tance of market competition and theories of comparative advantage, it also shifted ideas about government away from national planning and state services towards markets and the ‘non-governmental’ actors. It envisaged a new ‘enabling’ role in which the function of government was to secure the conditions in which markets could operate more fully across a range of areas of social and economic life. For example, the reorganization of wider social service delivery to citizens could be seen in the growth, for example, of non-formal education in Bangladesh and other countries provided predominantly by NGOs. These policies were also highly supportive of the provision of micro-credit aimed at the strengthening of women’s incomes. The result was a dramatic explosion in the numbers of micro-credit organizations (mostly in the non-governmental sector) and programmes in both rural and urban areas and the growth of a veritable global micro-finance industry.

Many other policy-level documents on NGOs soon followed, such as the OECD’s (1993) *Non-governmental Organisations and Governments: Stakeholders for Development* collection of overviews of donors’ NGO policies and the Commonwealth Foundation’s (1995) *Non-governmental Organisations: Guidelines for Good Policy and Practice* document. Some emphasized the growing discourse of ‘partnership’ between NGOs, government and for-profit actors, while others set out guidelines for improving the internal organization of NGOs through improved governance, management capacity and impact assessment. The managerialist language of organizational strengthening, capacity-building, strategic planning and best practice was an essential aspect of this agenda, and much of it began to drift a considerable distance away from the more radical approaches of writers on NGOs such as Korten, Fowler and Clark.

While all this publishing activity created a high profile for the ‘new field’ within development studies of NGOs and development, and created a potentially useful new interface between activists and researchers, it did not add up to a rigorous or theoretically grounded research literature. Indeed, this was probably not the intention of most of these activist/researcher-writers. Instead, this literature contained much empirical case study material (mostly collected by the organizations concerned), a range of prescriptions concerning new sets of development policy agendas and a tendency for NGOs to serve the purpose of a ‘blank screen’ on to which reflections and images drawn from the growing movement of ideas and models of ‘alternative development’ could be projected. For example, Korten’s work, which was tinged also with what can perhaps be described as ‘utopian managerialism’, synthesized emerging ideas about ‘organizational learning’ and ‘strategic management’ with strong idealism.

Korten drew heavily on his own extensive practical involvement with NGOs, with donors such as USAID and with the new People-centred Development Forum. Korten had extensive field experience and sought practical solutions to real-world problems, but sometimes more personal interests and reflections seemed to tug in a different, more idealistic direction.⁹ Clark, on the other hand, was writing as a more pragmatic idealist, concluding his wide-ranging overview of NGO activities within development with a clarion call for NGOs to inform and confront the centres of power in order to shake up prevailing and failing development visions and practices. Soon afterwards, Clark went to the World Bank, where he established its NGO unit, partly as a result of the institution taking him up on the challenge presented by his book.

The gist of this work was broadly positive about the potential of NGOs, and particularly those of the South, to contribute to new ways of thinking about and performing development.¹⁰ Many focused on the ways in which NGOs were being 'held back' in their potential capacity for social transformation, as represented in the debates about 'scaling up', 'capacity-building' and 'partnership' prevalent at that time.¹¹ There were relatively few doubters among this first crop of writings, though we have noted Tandler's much earlier critique. Dissident voices that were raised at this time from an academic standpoint included Brett's (1993) call for a more rigorous theorization of the comparative advantage and accountability claims made by, and on behalf of, NGOs, while Vivian (1994) questioned the 'magic bullet' philosophy that underpinned a tendency for some pro-NGO writers to construct NGOs primarily as all-purpose solutions to development problems. Interestingly, the strongest voices of dissent came from the activist community within the international humanitarian aid field. Hanlon's (1991) book on Mozambique portrayed international NGOs as a major barrier to post-conflict reconstruction and development. De Waal and Omaar's (1993) work was equally savage in the criticisms made of international NGOs' roles in the Horn of Africa. The lack of ability of humanitarian NGOs to coordinate and cooperate in Sudan during the famine relief operation in 1985 was a major theme of Abdel Ati's (1993).

A second batch of publications began to develop a more critical edge in the mid-1990s, with two more Manchester-edited volumes. The initially optimistic theme of 'making a difference?' had in the ensuing two years shifted to 'beyond the magic bullet?' and 'too close for comfort?', a change that was beginning to reveal a range of anxieties in the minds of the editors and some, though not most, of the contributors who continued on the whole to present a positive face of NGOs and alternative development. Of the contributors, to all three of these volumes, at a rough tally thirty-six were NGO staff or supportive

consultants, seventeen were academics in consultancy mode and only fifteen were researchers writing if not entirely working 'outside the aid system'. Other books appearing at this time were Smillie's (1995) *The Alms Bazaar*, a good general critical survey of the emerging perceptions of the world of NGOs. The optimistic strain of writings on NGOs as the main future of development was augmented by books such as J. Fisher's *The Road from Rio* (1993) and *Non-governments* (1998). More theoretical writings on NGOs did not arrive until later in the decade. William Fisher's (1997) piece on NGOs engaged with the context of neo-liberalism, and examined the political implications of NGO discourses. Likewise, Stewart's (1997: 12) paper in the *Review of African Political Economy* commented on the apolitical nature of the new 'NGO management science' on one side and the prevailing ideology of 'NGOs do it cheaper, better, faster' on the other. Outside the more obvious field of writings on and about NGOs, interesting work was beginning to appear in which NGOs were not on the whole the main subject but were important actors that could be analysed within wider institutional landscapes and histories.¹² Clarke's (1998) work on the Philippines was one such study, as was Devine's (2002) research, which critically examined government and donor assumptions about the role of NGOs in the policy process.¹³

Re-remembering hidden histories?

According to Jean and John Comaroff (1999) the resurgence of interest in the concept of civil society around the late-twentieth-century Western world can be best characterized as an act of ideologically triggered 're-remembering' rather than as something qualitatively new. A similar case can be made for NGOs, since there is a long history to the NGO phenomenon which predates their rise to prominence within the development studies discourse.¹⁴ As Sogge (Sogge et al. 1996: 1) puts it: 'After decades of quiet and respectable middle-class existences, private development agencies have come up in the world.'

While NGOs had been present on a small scale for many years, they had rarely troubled the landscape of development researchers or policy-makers. In a lengthy article entitled 'Two centuries of participation', Charnovitz (1997: 185) summarizes a long history of NGO activity at the international level, some of which has remained largely hidden within development studies. He is critical of the ahistoricity of both NGO researchers and supporters: 'Although some observers seem to perceive NGO involvement as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon, in fact it has occurred for over 200 years. Advocates of a more extensive role for NGOs weaken their cause by neglecting this history because it shows a long time custom of governmental interaction with NGOs in the

making of international policy.' Charnovitz traces the evolution of NGO roles from 'emergence' in 1775–1918 through to what he terms a current phase of 'empowerment' since the 1992 Rio conference. He begins with the rise of national-level issue-based organizations in the eighteenth century, focused on such issues as the abolition of the slave trade and peace movements, and shows that by the early twentieth century NGOs had built associations to promote their identities at national and international levels. At the 1910 World Congress of International Associations there were 132 associations concerned with issues as varied as transportation, intellectual property rights, narcotics control, public health, agriculture and environmental protection.

After the Second World War, Article 71 of the United Nations Charter provided for NGO involvement in UN activities. Though they were active, however, NGOs' influence was little more than 'nuisance value', since they were hampered by cold war tensions and a weak UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the body liaising with NGOs. It was only in the 1970s that there was an increased 'intensification' of NGO roles, such as a growing presence at the UN Stockholm Environment Conference in 1972 and the World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974. NGOs then played a key role in the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since 1992, NGO influence has continued to grow, as evidenced by the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which saw NGOs active in both its preparation and within the conference itself.

NGO histories can also be recovered from many other parts of the world. In Latin America, the growth of NGOs was influenced by the Catholic Church and the growth of 'liberation theology' in the 1960s, signalled by some sections of the Church's commitment to the poor, and to some extent by the growth of popular Protestantism (Escobar 1997). The political philosophy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, with his ideas about 'education for critical consciousness', were also influential (Blackburn 2000). Peasant movements seeking improved rights to land and against authoritarianism also contributed to the rise of NGOs (Bebbington and Thiele 1993). Sen's (1992) account of NGOs in India highlights the influence of Christian missionaries, the reformist middle classes and Gandhian ideas. In Africa too there is a long history of research on voluntary associations in relation to issues such as urbanization and social integration (Lewis 1999b). Research by Honey and Okafor (1998) on home-town associations in Nigeria shows how community organizations are increasingly important for mediating resources and relationships between local communities and global labour markets, educational opportunities and village resources. Middle-class local and international charitable works, grass-

roots activism of many kinds and the long-standing activities of missionaries each meant that the non-governmental theme had always been marginally present within development studies research: but it had rarely if ever become explicit.

If NGOs, or the non-governmental more broadly, were not new, then we need to explain the sudden appearance of the NGO agenda within development studies. The growth of writings on NGOs from the late 1980s onwards was largely driven at the level of policy by the privatizing imperatives of neo-liberalism, as we saw in the previous section, both at the intellectual level of ideological recruitment and at the practical level of creating more opportunities for applied research. The crisis of development theory in the 1980s (see Booth, 1993, 1994) had contributed to the loss of confidence that development could be produced by the state, and coincided with the rise to prominence of neo-liberal analysis which had long argued that state intervention was the problem rather than the solution. Neo-liberals came to dominate in the international financial institutions, many governments and in significant sections of the development industry. Policies of privatization, market liberalization and administrative reform came to represent the dominant solutions to development problems (Schech and Haggis 2000). All this led to greater levels of funding for NGOs, particularly those engaged in service delivery.¹⁵

This would not be the first time that research agendas in development studies shifted with the changing priorities of donors. For example, when international donors began to develop bilateral approaches to funding governments in the 1960s there was a tremendous growth of development studies research on the state (Tvedt 2003). Such shifts are in many ways to be applauded, since one might expect a mix of critical and supportive findings (from the donor point of view) to emerge, a blend of applied and theoretical approaches, and a resultant increase in the overall *relevance* of development research (see Bebbington 1994). But in the case of NGO research, four sets of outcomes can be identified, and these are tied up with the ways in which NGOs found their way on to the development studies research agenda. Most of these outcomes have not been particularly positive from the perspective of the strengthening of development studies. These are discussed in the next section.

Problems of NGO research in development studies

While there were strengths to some of this new literature, there have long been criticisms within development studies of the research literature on NGOs. These criticisms can be grouped into four main categories and each is discussed in more detail below. The first is that much of the work has been driven

by normative agendas, and characterized as written by people with insufficient distance from their subject of research. The second is that there has been a strong ideological emphasis to much of the work on NGOs, such as the strong tendencies for NGO researchers to be either 'for' or 'against' NGOs in some broad sense, or the influence of managerialism in writings about NGOs. A third set of issues centres on the idealism of many of those writing about NGOs, and the result that expectations have been projected on to NGOs that most are by definition unable to live up to. Finally, work on NGOs has suffered from its perceived location (on the applied side) within wider and persisting debates within development studies about 'applied' versus 'pure' research. Each of these criticisms is related to the routes through which research on the non-governmental has (re-)entered development studies and can be seen as outcomes of these trajectories.

Najam (1999: 143) has contrasted the massive growth of interest in NGOs with the relatively small number of research writings on NGOs that were produced:

... our conceptual understanding of this terrain is even more scant than the terrain is expansive ... Despite a few notable exceptions, the broader literature on the subject continues to be restrictive for at least three important reasons. First, the scholarship has been overwhelmingly *descriptive* with little effort to synthesize the wealth of descriptive evidence into analytic frameworks, empirical typologies or holistic conceptual maps of the entire sector as a sector. Second, the focus of the literature is largely *sectarian* in that studies have tended to concentrate on restricted bands of the larger, and much broader, spectrum of activities that these organizations indulge in. Third, much of the literature is *parochial* in that most studies focus exclusively on narrow segments of the sector that they are familiar with (or aware of) with little effort to establish connections with other segments. The result of these chronic deficiencies is a sporadic and temperamental appreciation of the behaviour of this sector, as a sector. (*My italics*)

There are others who share the view of researchers such as Najam (1996) that overall the research literature on NGOs within development studies is both normative and weak. Tvedt (1998: 3), for example, argues that the whole field lacks conceptual clarity and that 'Definitions have tended to be normative and ideological or so broad as to make discussion and comparison difficult.'

These characteristic weaknesses follow from the conditions under which this literature on NGOs has evolved. The normative dimension is the first

outcome of the process described above, since increases in academic consultancy opportunities for financially beleaguered university departments led to a great preponderance of NGO-related evaluation studies and impact assessments which subsequently found their way into published literature.¹⁶ Also contributing to this process was the tendency for those working within NGOs, suddenly presented with the opportunity of an audience within academia, to present accounts of their own organizations and activities in relatively uncritical documented form.

A second outcome was the ideological character of some of what can be termed the 'pro-NGO' literature. In particular, the practical concerns of perceived inefficiency and corruption in the public sector which led many donors to view NGOs as new and alternative channels of funding to government contributed to an at times somewhat virulent strain of anti-state sentiment within the NGO literature. For example, central to Fisher's (1998: 2) upbeat account of the rise of NGOs as 'Non-governments' were assumptions about the '... increasing inability of the nation-state to muddle through as it confronts the long-term consequences of its own ignorance, corruption and lack of accountability'. This type of thinking led to many accounts of NGOs which took on a strongly functionalist logic. In such accounts, NGOs were often represented as having a set of comparative advantages in relation to public sector agencies such as cost effectiveness, less bureaucratic operating styles, closeness to communities and reduced prevalence to corruption (Cernea 1988).¹⁷ One aspect of the ideology of 'non-governmentalism' was therefore a rather conservative strain of populism in which NGOs were represented as essentially private, non-state protectors of the public interest.

Another manifestation of non-governmentalism was more idealistic, even utopian, in character. This is the third outcome of the 're-remembering of the non-governmental' which occurred in the late 1980s. NGOs became seen by some as a kind of tabula rasa on to which could be projected a set of ideas – again, born of the frustration with decades of disappointing development interventions – about issues such as empowerment, participation and new forms of management. David Korten epitomized this line of thinking. His book drew together his ideas about NGOs, citizen action and organizational learning into a potent and readable, if somewhat rose-tinted, blend. Korten's presentation of powerful ideas about new forms of participative 'strategic management' and the evolution of NGOs through several ever more sophisticated organizational 'generations' towards the goal of mobilizing citizens, rather than providing services, was rooted to some extent in his work with some impressive organizations in South and South-East Asia, but they were

not always applicable to the 'real world' of NGOs at large, except perhaps as forms of inspirational writing.¹⁸

Finally, the other outcome that needs to be mentioned here is the tendency among many development researchers to conflate the critique of 'applied research' within development with a dismissal of the NGO research agenda itself. The study of NGOs became strongly associated with what Thomas (2000) has argued is a dominant trend in development thinking which associates the idea of development mainly with 'practice' rather than theory. Perhaps stemming from this tendency is an assumption that most of the people who do research on NGOs must necessarily be people who are broadly in sympathy with NGOs or work for them and are not fully committed academics.¹⁹ This is in part understandable, because much of the increase in consultancy work in development studies during the 1980s was concerned with applied research in relation to NGOs.²⁰ And it was also the case that many NGOs themselves, as they became more prominent, began to commission research and evaluations from academics in consultancy mode.

But research within development studies which is critical of NGOs has sometimes been more critical of the 'applied origins' of much of the NGO research rather than of NGOs as social phenomena. It is therefore important that a development studies research engagement with the subject of NGOs draws on its own data sources and analyses and not simply on the assertion that all NGO-related research is necessarily 'applied' research. The fact remains that a considerable portion of the applied research being undertaken by members of university departments for development agencies had little to do with NGOs, which, on the whole, have been quite keen to avoid academic scrutiny. Although it has always been difficult to obtain accurate figures, it is estimated that even at the height of NGO funding by donors only around 10–20 per cent of foreign assistance worldwide went through or to NGOs, leaving the vast bulk of foreign aid firmly rooted in bilateral and multilateral government relationships.

The conventional view of the weakness of NGO research, however, which has been argued by several people such as Najam (1999) and Tvedt (1998) is by now to some degree an oversimplification. NGOs have increasingly been subjects for development studies research as much in passing as subjects in themselves. Examples of this type of work include Crewe and Harrison's (1998) study of power and inequality within development encounters in Zambia and Sri Lanka, Hilhorst's (2003) research on local level politics and organization in the Philippines and Fox's (1998) analysis of the cultural practices of development. It can therefore be argued that areas of the 'NGO literature' are also

now driven by theoretical interests in such subjects as new social movements, gender and identity and the changing nature of global and local political institutions. This latter type of research seems set to increase as the donor interest in NGOs and civil society has begun to fade as just another policy fashion.

The prospects for future research in relation to NGOs now seem brighter than they have for some time, perhaps precisely because it is becoming possible to separate out more clearly research funding on non-governmental issues from the development donors themselves, who are letting go of their overheated expectations of NGOs. For example, this year (2004) saw the launch in the UK of a major five-year inter-disciplinary UK ESRC Research Programme which perhaps symbolizes the movement of the subject towards mainstream respectability as an inter-disciplinary research topic in the social sciences. Organized around the wider theme of non-governmental public action rather than focusing simply on NGOs themselves, the programme will structure a portfolio of research projects designed to underpin research which will build theory, generate empirical knowledge and strengthen the relevance of research to both academic and non-academic users. Research can be undertaken at various levels – at the level of global processes and impacts, national and local non-governmental ‘sectors’ or networks, or at the level of individual organizations themselves. A key challenge for this type of research is the building of links between disciplines on non-governmental themes, as well as the need to connect up research perspectives from both ‘industrialized’ and ‘developing country’ contexts to challenge the parallel-worlds problem and to engage more fully with the global and international dimensions of non-governmental action.

NGO-related teaching within development studies still appears to be expanding with courses or options with development studies, development management and social policy attracting considerable interest from students in the UK and from overseas. The challenge for the future within more theoretical perspectives on development studies is to embed the study of NGOs more effectively within courses across major areas of development studies – including the history of development ideas, the economics of state transformations, the changing nature of social services, the workings of the aid industry, and the politics of global development identities and processes. Within more applied development studies teaching NGOs will no doubt remain an important topic, and the main need for the future will be to ensure that teaching focuses not only on NGOs but on their relationships with state, market and other civil society actors.

Looking back at the rise of non-governmentalism

The rise of 'non-governmentalism' in the late 1980s and 1990s can in a sense be seen as a projection of a number of different anxieties about development by both policy-makers and academics. The first was the sense of disillusionment, as Broadhead (1987) points out, with more than two decades of government-centred development initiatives in both North and South and the search for alternatives to government aid and new development practices. In the context of the perceived failure of official aid, the development industry discovered NGOs as a possible solution to various problems, such as a demonstrable lack of impact on poverty, based primarily on the idea that they were 'not government' (Stewart 1997).

The second was the theoretical cul-de-sac that many in development studies acknowledged had been reached by the mid-1980s. As Booth (1993: 49) suggests, this 'impasse' consisted of a loose bundle of different problems. The theoretical debates derived from Marxist approaches which had promised so much had not progressed as far as expected and no longer provided coherent 'guidelines for a continuing research programme'. At the same time, there was a widening gulf between 'academic enquiry and the various spheres of development policy and practice'. In an influential article written in 1989, Michael Edwards, writing from a position from within a UK NGO, developed a polemic on 'the irrelevance of development studies' in which he argued that development studies researchers used predominantly extractive research practices and usually contributed little or nothing to the lives of individuals or communities being researched through direct engagement or indirect policy influence (Edwards 1993). One way out of the impasse for many researchers was to simply focus more on empirical studies of the 'new' non-governmental development actors and emerging alternative approaches to development work.

Following on from the issues raised by Edwards and others, a third reason for the rise of a non-governmentalist discourse within development studies was the attraction among a selection of researchers and practitioners of viewing NGOs as a site for 'working through' some of these troubling researcher/practitioner tensions. Since NGOs had traditionally been concerned mainly with local, small-scale projects, research 'with' NGOs on the new participation and empowerment approaches towards grassroots development became a means of rethinking relationships between researchers and practitioners, and rethinking the ethics and morals of development research and action:

In contrast to 'pure' science and art history (for example) development studies concerns real, living people and cannot therefore be conducted in the abstract.

This is particularly true for ... NGOs such as my own, for which there is no role in the world without moral discourse. At the very least we need to be about the implications of our work for people's lives, and to declare our beliefs and allegiances openly instead of sheltering behind a spurious 'objectivity'. (ibid.: 81)

Such an approach, however, while positive in many ways, produced only limited understanding of NGOs themselves as development actors. Research *with* NGOs is not necessarily research *about* NGOs, and many NGOs have come to retain a strong vested interest in this status quo, which exists around research.

Finally, this spirit of 'non-governmentalism', which became part of a wider applied development studies, came to dominate some UK university departments as a result of new systems of resource allocation and incentives. Universities in the 1980s did not find themselves immune from the restructuring impulses of neo-liberalism and departments such as development studies and anthropology in particular were in many cases driven farther into the commercial world of academic consultancy. At the same time, the NGO community became more interested in and organized for research, as evidenced by the establishment of the International NGO Research and Training Centre (INTRAC) by NGO staff and academic researchers.

All four of these sets of factors, which are of course interrelated, contributed to the rise of non-governmentalism, which has been both a positive and a negative force within development studies. This chapter has tried to unpack some of the themes and approaches that make up the NGO literature. Yet as we have seen, much of this NGO writing never pretended to be academic research, but simply found its way into development studies as part of the 1990s debates about these wider issues, dilemmas and concerns.

Conclusion

On one level, the subject of NGOs has entered development studies in a relatively haphazard and unstructured way, similar to the trajectory suggested by the personal account of my own encounter with NGOs presented at the start of this chapter. One result of this process has been the difficulty that has been experienced within development studies of building up a solid body of research on NGO themes and issues. Yet on another level the rise of non-governmentalism, while largely undisciplined, has been far from accidental and needs to be viewed against the broader contours of the landscape of neo-liberal ascendancy through which those of us presently mid-career in development studies have lived.

Perhaps the 'moment' of strong interest in NGOs within development studies has now passed.²¹ It may be that there is now a recognition that the importance of NGOs was exaggerated during the late 1980s and 1990s, or simply that research has fragmented into a more diverse range of topics relating to a wider concept of 'public action' (see Mackintosh 1992), such as governance, services or rights, in which NGOs play a part but no longer form the central theme. Nevertheless, NGOs remain a dominant force in the contemporary world, in relation to a broad range of areas that include development, globalization, human rights and conflict. NGOs need to be studied both in their own right and as a keyhole into wider processes such as privatization, state transformation and changing gender relations.

Research on NGOs has been important as an entry point into the analysis of neo-liberal policies at local, national and global levels, and as a focus for understanding elements of resistance to those policies. NGOs are also likely to remain a focus for the recurring debates on theory and practice between academics and activists. A new and perhaps more fruitful trajectory for researching the non-governmental will be one that understands NGOs as part of ongoing debates about development as neo-liberalism and globalization, as both instruments of, and sites of, resistance to the transformations of principles and practices within these current paradigms.

Notes

1 There were many reasons for this. These reasons included the post-1971 liberation local and international humanitarian effort, the large quantities of foreign aid that quickly came to dominate the country's institutions and economy, and the problems of state-building in the new nation. For more discussion on this see, for example, Lewis (1993) and White (1999).

2 Perhaps the first significant publishing event that reflected this attention was a 1987 'supplement' volume of *World Development*, edited by A.G. Drabek, which contained twenty-four short articles written mainly, though not exclusively, by consultants, activists and policy-makers. These papers set out an agenda of issues in relation to an emerging vision of NGOs as actors which were beginning to present a set of 'development alternatives'. At the same time, there was at least one strong voice of dissent among the crowd. Tandler's (1982) review of the capacities of a sample of seventy-two US NGOs was scathing in its criticisms of their basic management capacity weaknesses.

3 The ODI project also employed many other researchers, including from the UK Anthony Bebbington for Latin America and James Copestake for Africa, and boasted a wide range of links with in-country institutions and researchers, such as Aurea Mical-Teves at the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) in the Philippines and Satish Kumar at the Administrative Staff College of India.

4 A specialized research and teaching unit known as the Centre for Voluntary Organization (now renamed the Centre for Civil Society) in LSE's Department of Social Policy was established in 1987.

5 The separation of research into work undertaken by social policy researchers on non-governmental organizations in the domestic UK 'voluntary sector' and other work undertaken by development studies academics on non-governmental 'development' organizations in other parts of the world prompted me to write about these two 'parallel worlds' of research and the strange, artificial separation between them. Broadly similar debates about issues such as the accountability of organizations, the privatization of service delivery and the tensions between NGO advocacy and service provision were preoccupations of both development studies NGO researchers and social policy academics working on domestic voluntary organizations in the UK, yet there seemed to be no one connecting up the concerns of these two research communities (Lewis 1999a).

6 It is nevertheless striking how debates in social policy in relation to the voluntary sector to some extent mirror those in development studies in relation to NGOs. Both are inter-disciplinary fields with similar preoccupations, such as poverty and social and economic change, and both fields are also prone to tensions and soul-searching about the relationships between theory and practice.

7 There were books published on NGOs before this period but these tended to be popular journalistic accounts of agencies such as Oxfam (e.g. Jones 1965) or Voluntary Service Overseas (e.g. Adams 1968).

8 It was not until 1997, however, that Fowler's substantial book on NGOs and development entitled *Striking a Balance* emerged.

9 Korten went on to help found *Yes! – A Journal of Positive Growth*, which focused on issues such as environmental justice, voluntary simplicity and fair trade as well as spiritual growth and 'nurturing your inner wisdom'.

10 Stewart (1997) suggests that in this new discourse NGOs and civil society were frequently spoken of in 'hallowed tones'.

11 The tendency for a 'SNGOs good, NNGOs bad' line of thinking to dominate areas of this literature is another result of this populism, and it was only challenged later in the work of writers such as Lister (2001) and others.

12 This has been one of the intentions of the ODI case study books on NGOs and the state in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and the conceptual framework for the *Reluctant Partners?* overview volume had tried to take important first steps in this direction.

13 Stewart (1997) identified a paradox in much of the NGO literature at the time, namely that the general, theoretical overview writings tended to be positive about NGOs while the large numbers of individual NGO case studies produced tended to come up with empirical findings critical of NGO performance. Why, she asked, did the case studies get ignored while the general overviews were taken as fact?

14 The rise of the 'civil society' and the 'NGOs and development' discourses, while separate, are of course linked in important ways. The focus in this chapter is on NGOs, however. For an overview of the rise of civil society ideas in development in relation to Africa, see Lewis (2002).

15 Among other things, the rise of the 'good governance' agenda of the early 1990s was a tempering of the more extreme approaches towards privatization in favour of a more balanced view of potential synergies between state, market and the non-governmental sector. It led to the funding of NGO activities beyond service delivery to include advocacy. It has also subsequently led donors to move away from favouring NGOs as they did in the early to mid-1990s to, in many cases, a rejection of NGOs in favour of a new discourse of 'civil society'. While there are differences among

donors in the ways this is defined, it generally refers to the idea that NGOs are out of favour and that grassroots membership organizations, business associations, 'faith-based groups' and sometimes even trade unions are 'in'.

16 Since I have sometimes used this route to publication myself, I should mention that there are also some points to be made in its favour! One is that it can generate insider accounts of organizations and processes for which few NGOs would ever grant access to 'formal' academic research. NGOs tend, in the words of Edwards (1993: 81), to be 'often protective, defensive and resistant to criticism'. Another is that relatively up-to-date data can be generated and published through this method.

17 More sophisticated than most work of this kind, Fowler's (1990) discussion of the comparative advantage of NGOs suggested that it was not an innate or automatic characteristic, but needed to be operationalized through a conscious strategy.

18 Some suggested that even in relation to these organizations the ideas were somewhat romantic, particularly as some of the organizations grew ever larger and more bureaucratic and retained single, ever more powerful founder-leader individuals firmly in charge at the top.

19 Apart from the idea that it would be impossible to be committed overall to an NGO agenda when there are so many different ones available (from traditional charity approaches to campaigns for radical trade reform), there is an irrationality to the idea that in order to do research on NGOs you have necessarily to have worked for one. As someone who has spent time doing research on NGOs, I have lost count of the number of times I have been asked this question by other academics. I have now taken to responding in kind: for example, if the person asking the question is, say, a researcher on health policy, I now ask them whether they have ever worked in a hospital.

20 It is easy to see how such a perception has arisen. For example, the UK DSA NGO study group has from time to time been made up almost entirely of people from NGOs wanting to talk about their organizations' research rather than wishing to talk about research in relation to NGOs as organizations.

21 Donor reviews of NGO sector funding had by the end of the 1990s started to instil a sense of disappointment that NGOs had not lived up to expectations (e.g. Oakley 1999).

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