DOING GOOD? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices

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ABSTRACT

This review surveys current literature concerned with the growing numbers, changing functions, and intensifying networks of nongovernmental organizations which have had significant impacts upon globalization, international and national politics, and local lives. Studies of these changes illuminate understandings of translocal flows of ideas, knowledge, funding, and people; shed light on changing relationships among citizenry, associations, and the state; and encourage a reconsideration of connections between the personal and the political. Attention is given to the political implications of discourses about NGOs, the complex micropolitics of these associations, and the importance of situating them as evolving processes within complexes of competing and overlapping practices and discourses.

> If I knew someone was coming over with the expressed intention of doing good, I would flee.
>
> Henry David Thoreau

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the conception of new world orders (Edwards & Hulme 1996b, Ekins 1992, Holm & Sorenson 1995) has been encouraged by a perceived turbulence in world politics (R Kothari 1993, p. 59; Finger 1994a, p. 48; Rivera 1992; Rosenau 1990), the volatility of culturally plural societies, the acceleration of globalization (Appadurai 1991, Lash & Urry 1994), and the sense that nation-states are no longer obvious and legitimate sources of authority over civil society (Lash & Urry 1994, p. 281). During this period, local, re-

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gional, and transnational collective action has attracted heightened attention from development practitioners, politicians, and social scientists. In the political space created by shifting interdependencies among political actors, by the globalization of capitalism and power, and by the decline of the state, growing numbers of groups loosely identified as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have undertaken an enormously varied range of activities, including implementing grass-roots or sustainable development, promoting human rights and social justice, protesting environmental degradation, and pursuing many other objectives formerly ignored or left to governmental agencies.[1]

Many analysts have noted and commented on the scale of this growth in NGOs (Carroll 1992, Clarke 1993, Edwards & Hulme 1996a, Farrington & Lewis 1993, Fisher 1993, Fowler 1991, Fowler & James 1995, S Kothari 1993, Princen & Finger 1994, Rademacher & Tamang 1993).[2] In the views of some observers, the third world in particular is being swept by a nongovernmental, associational, or "quiet" revolution that at least one analyst believes may "prove to be as significant to the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation-state was to the latter nineteenth century" (Salamon 1993, p. 1, 1994, p. 109; see also Clarke 1996, Edwards & Hulme 1996a, Fisher 1993).

The potential of the global associational explosion has captivated the imagination of a wide variety of development planners, policy makers, activists, and analysts. Economists and development planners laud the role of local associations in alleviating rural poverty and helping communities adapt to modernization (Annis 1988, Bongartz et al 1992, Brown & Korten 1989, FAO 1994, Korten 1990, Padron 1987, Semboja & Therkildsen 1995, Thomson 1992, World Bank 1991, UNDP 1993); political scientists are reevaluating the role of voluntary associations in building vibrant civil societies and their impact on the relationship between society and the state (Barghouti 1994; Bratton 1989; Chazan 1992; Fowler 1991; Fox & Hernandez 1992; Frantz 1987; Ndegwa 1993, 1996; Ng'ethe & Kanyinga 1992; Sanyal 1994; Sethi 1993a,b); scholars of international relations have begun to examine the impact of NGO coalitions and networks on international politics and their role in the formation of an international civil society (Brysk 1993; Carroll 1988; Ghils 1992; Link-

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[1]The evidence of this growth is widespread and includes the increased numbers of officially registered associations, the thousands of NGOs represented at international conferences, the increased proportion of development funding directed through NGOs, the attention paid to cooperation with NGOs by the World Bank and other international agencies, the highly publicized success of lobbying efforts of NGO coalitions, and the growing support provided to NGOs through global networks, including hundreds of World Wide Web sites.

[2]See Princen & Finger's comments on the difficulty of accurately estimating the exact dimensions of the growth of the nongovernmental sector (1994, p. 15).

enbach 1994; Lipschutz 1992; Peterson 1992; Princen 1994; Princen & Finger 1994; Shaw 1992; Sikkink 1993, 1995; Spiro 1994; Udall 1995; Wapner 1994); and some activists and analysts are reconsidering the relationship of NGOs to social movements and their ability to both empower people and contribute to alternative discourses of development and democratization (Escobar 1992, Patkar 1995, Wignaraja 1993a).

Any discussion of NGOs is further complicated by the fact that they have not only increased in number and taken on new functions, but they have also forged innovative and increasingly complex and wide-ranging formal and informal linkages with one another, with government agencies, with social movements, with international development agencies, with individual IN-GOs (international NGOs), and with transnational issue networks (Carroll 1988; Finger 1994a,b; Fisher 1995b; Lopez et al 1995; Shaw 1992; Sikkink 1993, 1995; Peterson 1992; Princen & Finger 1994). These relationships have begun to have profound impacts both on globalization and on local lives.

These changes in the nature of local and global forms of collective action intersect with issues of vital concern to anthropologists. Study of these changes not only enriches our understanding of local and translocal connections that enable and constrain flows of ideas, knowledge, funding, and people, but also invites us to reconsider both conventional notions of governance and Foucaultian ideas of governmentality and how technologies of control affect both the personal and the political, and to examine changing relationships among citizenry, associations, and the state. However, while the associational revolution has generated tremendous enthusiasm and a large new interdisciplinary literature, anthropologists, to date, have made relatively limited contributions to it. This literature as a whole is based more on faith than fact: There are relatively few detailed studies of what is happening in particular places or within specific organizations, few analyses of the impact of NGO practices on relations of power among individuals, communities, and the state, and little attention to the discourse within which NGOs are presented as the solution to problems of welfare service delivery, development, and democratization. An enhanced anthropological contribution would enrich a literature the majority of which is replete with sweeping generalizations; optimistic statements about the potentials of NGOs for delivering welfare services, implementing development projects, and facilitating democratization; and instrumental treatises on building the capacity of NGOs to perform these functions. Unpacking this literature, much of which obscures its political stance in simple categories and generalizations, requires attention to three sets of issues that have concerned some anthropologists: (*a*) how discourses about NGOs create knowledge, define sets of appropriate practices, and facilitate and encourage NGO behavior

defined as appropriate; (*b*) how complex sets of relationships among various kinds of associations, the agencies and agents of the state, and individuals and communities have had an impact in specific locales at specific times; and (*c*) how we can avoid reductionist views of NGOs as fixed and generalizable entities with essential characteristics and contextualize them within evolving processes of associating.

IMAGINING NGOs

The need for unpacking the literature becomes clear when we consider the degree to which the literature on NGOs relies upon several key terms—participation, empowerment, local, and community—each of which has been given a variety of meanings and linked in different ways to analysts' perceptions of the origins, capacities, objectives, and impacts of NGOs. Ironically, with reference to these terms, NGOs have been embraced and promoted in the past decade by international development agencies like the World Bank as well as by radical critics of top-down development. Whether NGOs are seen as a progressive arm of an irresistible march toward liberal democracy that marks "the end of history," an extension of the push toward privatization, or a means to resist the imposition of Western values, knowledge, and development regimes depends on the perspective and agenda of the imaginer.

At least since the Rio Conference of 1992 (and the parallel Global Forum at which gathered representatives from over 9000 organizations from 171 countries), nothing short of miracles has been expected from NGOs (Little 1995). The optimism of the proponents of NGOs derives from a general sense of NGOs as "doing good," unencumbered and untainted by the politics of government or the greed of the market (Zivetz 1991). This is reflected in the designations that describe these associations in terms of what they are not: nongovernmental and nonprofit. NGOs are idealized as organizations through which people help others for reasons other than profit or politics (Brown & Korten 1989, Fisher 1993). This idealization of NGOs as disinterested apolitical participants in a field of otherwise implicated players has led theorists and practitioners alike to expect much of them. But as Milton Friedman has observed, "the power to do good is also the power to do harm," a process that is all the more difficult to sort out when "what one man regards as good, another may regard as harm" (Friedman 1962).

NGOs have become the "favored child" of official development agencies, hailed as the new panacea to cure the ills that have befallen the development process (Edwards & Hulme 1996a, p. 3), and imagined as a "magic bullet" which will mysteriously but effectively find its target (Dichter 1993, p. vii; Vivian 1994). Sharp criticism of previous interventionist, top-down develop-

ment efforts, widespread evidence that development strategies of the past few decades have failed to adequately assist the poorest of the world's poor, and growing support for development efforts that are "sustainable" and that include the participation of intended beneficiaries have stimulated existing development agencies to search for alternative means to integrate individuals into markets, to deliver welfare services, and to involve local populations in development projects.

However, the acceptance of NGOs by the development industry has been limited, and the transfer to them of some of the responsibility for the successful implementation of development efforts is not without risk to the autonomy and existence of NGOs. Development has been a fickle industry, first embracing and then casting off a long series of enthusiastically touted new strategies. NGOs, now so widely praised, can anticipate becoming victims of the current unrealistic expectations and being abandoned as rapidly and as widely as they have been embraced.[3]

The appropriate role imagined for NGOs in development depends on the critical stance one takes toward the development industry. Critics of development can be situated within one of two general camps (Ferguson 1990).[4] The first views contemporary development processes as flawed but basically positive and inevitable (Cernea 1988; Clark 1991, 1995; Olsen 1995; Patel 1995). From this perspective, NGOs provide a means to mitigate some of the weaknesses in the development process. The second finds both the dominant development paradigm and the implementation of it fundamentally flawed (see, in particular, Escobar's influential and provocative work, 1995; see also Esteva 1987; S Kothari 1993; Patkar 1995; Rahnema 1992; Udall 1995). They see development as a historically produced discourse "which created a space in which only certain things could be said and even imagined" (Escobar 1995, p. 39). For the more radical critics, NGOs and "local" or "community" associations are valuable in so far as they are a potential source of alternative development discourses and practices. Critics from each camp may promote NGOs for their ability to facilitate participation and empowerment, but the meanings attached to these terms differ.

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[3]There is already evidence of disillusionment with the promise of NGOs as deliverers of development and democracy. For an example, see the 1993 UNDP *Human Development Report* (UNDP 1993). Smillie & Helmich (1993, p. 15) argue that, in discussions of the potential contributions of NGOs, "it has become fashionable to move quickly from their positive attributes…to their obvious weaknesses."

[4]Of course, there are many variations within these two positions. For a fuller discussion of these issues as they affect anthropology, see Escobar (1991) and Little & Painter's (1995) response to Escobar.

The first set of critics is strongly represented in the literature on NGOs, a great portion of which takes an instrumental view of NGOs, regarding them as apolitical tools that can be wielded to further a variety of slightly modified development goals. Development agencies and international NGOs, in particular, support local NGOs for their effectiveness in pursuing the goals of what some have called a "new policy agenda," a heterogenous set of policies based on a faith in two basic values—neoliberal economics and liberal democratic theory (Biggs & Neame 1996, Edwards & Hulme 1996a, Moore 1993, Robinson 1993). As these proponents envision them, NGOs have the capacity to efficiently transfer training and skills that assist individuals and communities to compete in markets, to provide welfare services to those who are marginalized by the market, and to contribute democratization and the growth of a robust civil society, all of which are considered as critical to the success of the neoliberal economic policies (Fowler 1991, Frantz 1987, Hyden 1998).

These analysts see NGOs as everything that governments are not: unburdened with large bureaucracies, relatively flexible and open to innovation, more effective and faster at implementing development efforts, and able to identify and respond to grass-roots needs (Edwards & Hulme 1996a, Fowler 1988, FAO 1994). The common assertion that NGOs have arisen in the face of internal and external exigencies and where state-directed change has failed or faces severe limitations (Adam 1993, Ndegwa 1993) supports the view that NGOs are an important alternative to the state under some circumstances. As the World Bank (1991) has noted, NGOs "have become an important force in the development process [mitigating] the costs of developing countries' institutional weakness" (p. 135). From this perspective, "local" NGOs are a means through which impediments to development can be overcome, and international NGOs are useful insofar as they serve as intermediaries that can facilitate the work of local NGOs (see, for instance, Olsen 1995).

NGOS have also been supported by advocates of the new policy agenda because it is believed that they contribute to democratizing processes. Optimistic expectations for democratization have been boosted in the past decade by the successful challenges citizens made to formerly strong states in Eastern Europe and Latin America. But while NGOs are valued as part of a growing civil society that can engage with the state, few scholars have examined the actual contribution NGOs make either to political change and democratization or to political continuity (for exceptions, see Bongartz et al 1992, Ndegwa 1993). The connections among development, empowerment, and democratization remain speculative and rhetorical. Certainly, democratic optimism reflects a narrowly progressive view of NGOs that is not borne out by the political variety of NGOs. While prevailing policies assume that democratization is a by-product

of development,[5] some analysts have argued that the objectives of development and democratization require contradictory efforts (see, for example, Carroll 1992).

The second set of development critics, those who seek alternatives to existing development paradigms, emphasize rather than downplay NGOs' potential for moral and political influence, seeing NGOs as vehicles for challenges to and transformations of relationships of power. Grass-roots organizations, in particular, are seen as engaged in a struggle for ideological autonomy from the state, political parties, and the development apparatus (Friedman 1992, Lind 1992). Activists and revolutionary theorists attribute significance to local voluntary associations not because they see these groups as part of a growing civil society that engages with the state but because they see them as part of a process that is capable of transforming the state and society.[6] They envision the emergence of alternative discourses and practices of development and anticipate the contribution of NGOs to an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (Foucault 1980, p. 81; see also Fisher 1993, Patkar 1995, S Kothari 1993). Seeking alternatives to development, rather than development alternatives, and skeptical about so-called democratization processes, these analysts, activists, and radical critics of neoliberal development agendas value NGOs for their ability to politicize issues that were not formerly politicized or that were ironically depoliticized through the discourses of development or "democratic" participation (R Kothari 1993, S Kothari 1993, Patkar 1995, Wignaraja 1993a).

Some of these critics of the development industry view the development apparatus as identifying "problems" that impede (or that result from) an imagined linear march of progress, and that require the intervention of government or multilateral development agencies (Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1990, Rahnema 1992). Such critics have recognized as a danger posed to NGOs the resilient ability of the development industry to absorb and transform ideas and institutions. In their view, NGOs are at risk of becoming the new "technical" solutions to development "problems," solutions that can be promoted by international development agencies in situations in which the state is seen an inhibitor (Biggs & Neame 1996).

From the perspective of these critics, the development industry's view of NGOs as efficient new instruments of development largely ignores, down-

[5]In practice, most official financial and logistical support to NGOs goes for development efforts and not democratization. On this topic, see the discussions in Edwards (1996) and Pearce (1993).

[6]NGOs seen as contributing an alternative perspective are often distinguished from more mainstream, cooperative NGOs. See, for example, the directory of alternative NGOs in South Asia compiled by Nachowitz (1990).

plays, or attempts to coopt the political role of NGOs. Through depoliticization, NGOs are in danger of becoming the new attachments to the "antipolitics" machine of development, the practices of which James Ferguson (1990) has described in his seminal work on development in Lesotho. The description of NGOs as part of a voluntary (Brown & Korten 1989), nonprofit, independent (Fisher 1993) or "third" sector (Hulme 1994; Korten 1990; Salamon 1993, 1994) that is separate from both market and state (Wolfe 1991) contributes to the image of these associations as part of a segment of society that is separate from politics.[7] If politics, however, is taken to refer to power-structured relationships maintained by techniques of control, as it is by these radical critics, then politics is not confined to institutions but pervades every aspect of life (Foucault 1991, Gordon 1991, Kauffman 1990, Millett 1971). Antipolitics refers to the obscuring of these relationships. Just as the "development apparatus" has generally depoliticized the need for development through its practice of treating local conditions as "problems" that required technical and not structural or political solutions (Ferguson 1990), it now defines problems that can be addressed via the mechanisms of NGOs rather than through political solutions.

Whether NGOs are seen as collections of individuals engaged in what de Tocqueville called the democratic "art of associating," or engaged in a Hegelian struggle for respect and recognition as human beings with dignity, depends a great deal on the lens through which they are viewed. Perceptions of NGOs reflect the tensions between those who argue that new or alternative means are needed to reach the goals of development and those who argue for a reconception of the ends of development and an acknowledgment that the means by which we strive for or make decisions about those ends matter as much as the ends themselves (Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1990, Fisher 1995c). These perceptions of NGOs are tied up with contested notions of what it means to "do good." At stake are the very notion of the "good" and the process of deciding what it is and how to pursue it.

CONCEPTUALLY LOCATING NGOs

How is it that NGOs have come to be seen as central to such widely different policy and political agendas? It may seem as though the analysts described

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[7]Not surprisingly, many of these organizations and their members describe their organizations differently, emphasizing instead positive qualities of their practices and ideology. Smitu Kothari (1993) has observed that in India, movements with mass participation, in particular, may resent and reject outright the externally imposed classification as NGOs and instead designate themselves as social action groups, political action groups, or social movements.

above cannot all be talking about the same set of associations. The fact is that they are not: Divorced from ethnographic particulars, these debates hinge on two essentialized categories—civil society and NGOs—which are used in different ways by different theorists. Civil society, when it is not used as a synonym for society in general, is used to refer to "that segment of society that interacts with the state, influences the state and yet is distinct from the state" (Chazan 1992, p. 281). The term "NGO" is shorthand for a wide range of formal and informal associations. There is little agreement about what NGOs are and perhaps even less about what they should be called. The generalizations about the NGO sector obscure the tremendous diversity found within it. This diversity means that it is not a simple task to analyze the impact of NGOs at the local, national, and global levels (Carroll 1992, Fisher 1993, Fowler & James 1995, Princen & Finger 1994). Varying terminology, ideological biases, and unanalyzed assertion contribute to an obfuscation of widely varied functions and forms of organizations. How can we break down the "black box" categories of NGO and civil society and examine the way organizations so designated operate in local, regional, national, and transnational contexts? Understanding NGO practices requires that we question the selective use of examples to illustrate the claimed advantages of these organizations, unpack the asserted generalizations about the relative advantages of NGOs, and attend to the ideology and politics of both the associations and the analysts.

Associations designated as NGOs differ from one another in functions; the levels at which they operate; and organizational structures, goals, and membership. They include, but are not limited to, charitable, religious, research, human rights, and environmental organizations and range from loosely organized groups with a few unpaid staff members to organizations with multimillion dollar budgets employing hundreds. While NGOs are often purely voluntary groups with no governmental affiliation or support, some groups so designated are created and maintained by governments. The term NGOs has been applied to groups providing social welfare services; development support organizations; social action groups struggling for social justice and structural changes; support groups providing legal, research, or communications support; and locally based groups. Some are focused on a single issue or operate in a specific location. Others provide legal, research, or communications support to more locally based groups. The designation has been applied to groups with mass membership as well as claimed by small, opportunistic "brief-case" NGOs formed by members of an urban middle class to seek funding.

In an attempt to conceptually organize such diverse groups, analysts have distinguished among associations according to various sets of criteria, littering the literature with acronyms. Designations like CBOs (community-based organizations), GROs (grass-roots organizations), or POs (people's organiza-

tions) distinguish membership-based, locally autonomous groups from groups of urban intellectuals working in relatively impoverished settings as intermediary support organizations (ISOs), which are sometimes varyingly designated as MSOs (membership support organizations) or GSOs or GRSOs (grass-roots support organizations) (see, in particular, Carroll 1992, Fisher 1993, Korten 1987, 1990). Other acronyms call attention to the varying autonomy of NGOs, distinguishing fully autonomous NGOs from government-organized or -supported groups or GONGOs (Brown & Korten 1989, Ching 1994), quasi-autonomous NGOs or QUANGOs (Sinaga 1995), and donor-organized NGOs or DONGOs. Still other distinctions are made among NNGOs (NGOs in Northern or industrialized countries), SNGOs (NGOs based in Southern or developing countries), and INGOs (international NGOs). Acronyms like VOs (voluntary organizations) and PVOs (private voluntary organizations) differentiate those organizations that are nonprofit and voluntary from those with professional staffs, while others like LDAs (local development associations) identify the primary activity of the organization.[8]

The distinctions identified by these various designations can be important in specific instances, but the creation and use of acronyms remains inconsistent within the field and in any specific case often derives from a narrow objective on the part of the analyst. Categorizations that distinguish among NGOs based on function, organizational structure, and relationship to a locality or to a state are typical of that portion of the literature that addresses the means by which NGOs, or at least some categories of NGOs, can be facilitated by or built into the development arm of international and state development agencies. These categorizations are a poor basis either for forming development

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[8]More comprehensive attempts to organize the field call attention to changes in the field and the practices of the associations over time. In an essential work on NGOs, Korten addresses the diversity of the field by distinguishing three generations of NGOs: the first committed to relief and welfare, a second attending to small-scale, local development projects, and a third consisting of community organizations interested in building coalitions (1990, pp. 115–27). Elliot (1987) has outlined a similar typology of NGOs based on distinctions among charity, development, and empowerment work. In Korten's view, first-generation relief and welfare NGOs, which predominate in the developing world, often have close ties to state and international development aid organizations and do not overtly engage in political activities. Second-generation development NGOs organize individuals locally to address issues like public health and agricultural development. These groups frequently help their constituents to overcome structural constraints, to challenge local and regional elites, and to avoid dependency relationships. Third-generation NGOs explicitly target political constraints, engaging in mobilization and "conscientization." Their focus is on coordinating communications and linkages among webs of people's organizations. These networks help to spread awareness of the practical local successes of some second-generation development strategies and to serve as catalysts for wider social movements. While these types of distinctions help to clarify the different practices of NGOs, they are still more ideal than real. In practice, these three categories or generations of NGOs are not exclusive.

policies or for guiding the pursuit of social justice. The oft-stated aim of "doing good" is undermined by an inadequate understanding of what NGOs do in specific circumstances. By constituting NGOs as an area of investigation, the discourse of development renders independent groups as objects of "scientific" study which provides and defines knowledge of these objects in such a way as to make them amenable to control. Objectifying discourse about NGOs facilitates what Charles Reilly (1992) calls their colonization by a variety of actors ranging from local elites and government agents to international agencies and INGOs (see also Jhamtani 1992).

The trick is to differentiate among various forms of organizing while avoiding reified and reductionist uses of the concept NGO. As noted above, not all NGOs operate in similar cultural, economic, and social contexts, nor do they all have the same political significance. Much of the literature on local NGOs, for instance, is concerned with those groups that are involved with challenging the state and local elites. This bias ignores the diversity of the NGO field that includes numerous examples of NGOs organized and financed by landlord, commercial, or political interests.[9] What is at issue is not what NGOs are good for, nor whether a specific association is or isn't an NGO, a QUANGO, a CONGO, a GRO, or a GSO, but an understanding of what happens in specific places and at specific times. Anthropological studies that have remained alert to specific contexts have made more significant contributions to rethinking the nature of NGO relations. Maxine Weisgrau's (1997) excellent ethnography of NGOs in northern India, for example, which focuses on the ongoing renegotiation and reinterpretation of development among NGOs, villagers, and development agents, helps us to understand what happens in a specific time and place above and beyond the stated intentions and goals for development planners and NGOs. This kind of ethnographic detail exposes the simplicity of universalizing models of and discourses about NGOs. By conceiving of NGOs as "an arena within which battles from society at large are internalized" (Clarke 1996, p. 5), rather than as a set of entities, and by focusing on fluid and changing local, regional, national, and international processes and connections, which both potentially support and suppress "an insurrection of subjugated knowledges," such studies avoid simple generalizations and reveal the rich ideological and functional diversity of NGOs.

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[9]For example, see Silliman's (1994) discussion of the Sugar Development Foundation in the Philippines. In addition, while the focus on the Narmada conflict in India has emphasized those NGOs opposed to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam, the controversy has involved a wide range of NGOs with different political interests, ideologies, and strategies. Some of these NGOs have cooperated with the government and the World Bank to ensure proper implementation of resettlement policies, and some have supported the project outright (Fisher 1995a).

LINKING THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Once firmly rooted in an ethnographic understanding of the heterogeneity of histories and processes from which NGOs emerge and within which they operate, we are prepared to explore the further opportunities for and constraints on NGOs that stem from their multiple translocal connections. Shifting the emphasis from a set of organizations to a fluid web of relationships reveals the connections of NGO actions to numerous levels and fields and draws our attention to the flows of funding, knowledge, ideas, and people that move through these levels, sites, and associations (Appadurai 1991, Lash & Urry 1994). These multiple relationships include those among intermediaries, governments, constituencies, communities, leaders, elites, municipalities, state institutions, other local, national and INGOs, social movements, and NGO coalitions. As R Kothari (1993) has noted for NGOs in India's nongovernmental sector, the establishment of new linkages transcending local and even national boundaries created new and innovative possibilities for NGO practices. NGOs networks and loose coalitions now connect local, regional, national, and international levels, and at each of these levels there are additional informal linkages to governments, international funding agencies, and INGOs (Brysk 1993; Finger 1994a; Fisher 1993, 1995b; Kamarotos 1990; Leatherman et al 1994; Lipschutz 1992; Lopez et al 1995; Peterson 1992; Shaw 1992; Sikkink 1993, 1995; Udall 1995). This proliferation and interweaving creates numerous intersections that deserve anthropological attention.

Some recent studies begin by acknowledging that the different agendas and interests within complex local sites do not all originate there, nor are they all played out there (Forbes 1995, Peters 1996). These studies of NGOs, which both alert us to the complexities of local sites and direct our attention from local sites to larger contexts, are, as George Marcus (1995) has observed, both in and of the world system (see, for example, Baviskar's insightful 1995 study of adivasis along the Narmada River). Unpacking the micropolitics of NGOs is dependent upon placing these associations within larger contexts, understanding them not as local wholes subsumed within larger national and global political contexts but as fragmented sites that have multiple connections nationally and transnationally (Marcus 1995). Resistance to a particular development project, for example, is often conducted with the assistance of national coalitions and transnational issue networks of individuals and INGOs even when the agendas of these disparate players are not wholly consistent (Fisher 1995b, Patkar 1995, Princen & Finger 1994, Rich 1994, Udall 1995).

Some of the most important insights about contemporary collective action and NGOs have emerged from the literature on social movements. The best of this work tends to avoid overessentializing NGOs, to attend to the multiple

subjectivities of actors, and to take into account the fragmented field within which NGOs operate. Unfortunately, the important and dynamic relationships between NGOs and social movements at the local and national levels have often been overlooked.[10] This oversight occurs in part because analysts of social movements generally stereotype NGOs as primarily social development agencies and contrast the bureaucratization or institutionalization characteristic of some NGOs with the more fluid and fragmented nature of social movements (see, for example, Frank & Fuentes 1990). This view ignores the evidence that NGOs often initiate or sustain social movements (Lehman 1990) or are the institutional vehicles that articulate protest and collective action (Diani 1992). As Clarke (1993) has demonstrated for the Philippines, some social movements are composed to a significant extent of NGO coalitions. Uniting the separate literatures that have developed around social movements on the one hand and NGOs on the other would help illuminate their complex interrelationships and also encourage us to see how these processes of association change over time (see also Diani 1992, Wignaraja 1993a). Acknowledging the commonly strong links between NGOs and social movements does not mean that NGOs should always, or even generally, be seen as progressive. As Starn (1995) has effectively argued, the motives behind the practices of individuals and associations are multiple, and both NGOs and social movements may support the state or the status quo as well as oppose it (see also Ndegwa 1993, 1996; Ng'ethe & Kanyinga 1992).

While the moniker "nongovernment organization" suggests autonomy from government organizations, NGOs are often intimately connected with their home governments in relationships that are both ambivalent and dynamic, sometimes cooperative, sometimes contentious, sometimes both simultaneously (Chazan 1992, Clarke 1993, Farrington & Lewis 1993, Ndegwa 1996, Weisgrau 1997). For example, some analysts have argued that a key factor affecting the orientation of NGOs and their ability to organize freely is sympathetic public space provided by governments (Banuri 1993, Korten 1990). This space may be provided unwillingly and only when governments are prodded by INGOs or international development agencies. In the past decade, many governments in the third world have been forced by economic necessity and international agencies to cede recognition and autonomy to NGOs (Bratton 1989, Vergara 1989). Not surprisingly, governments, on their part, have often seen NGOs as undermining state hegemony (Bratton 1989, Fowler 1991, Ng'ethe & Kanyinga 1992) and have attempted to bring them under control through government agencies set up to service them (see, for example, Clarke 1996, Rademacher & Tamang 1993). This relationship becomes even

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[10]Some exceptions to this include Bebbington (1996), Sethi (1993a,b), and Landim (1993).

more tense when NGOs become competitors with their governments for for-
eign development funding or when the work of NGOs with human rights or-
ganizations to further the rights of individuals and associations places them in
direct confrontation with state practices (Fowler 1991).

The relationships between NGOs and governments are so heterogenous that
it is difficult to generalize about the potential impact of NGOs on the state and
patterns of governance. Some analysts assert that NGOs are important new po-
litical actors who make significant contributions to political life and political
change (see, in particular, Clarke's useful 1996 study), but observers disagree
about the kind of impact NGOs can have. Some discuss the transformational
impact of NGOs on political structures and processes (Fisher 1993) while oth-
ers focus on their ability to influence legislation and public policy (Edwards
1996). The existing evidence suggests that so many factors influence the abil-
ity or desire of any particular NGO to affect policy or political structures that
no easy generalization is possible. There is no simple or consistent story of
good NGOs confronting evil governments. Just as the NGO field is a heteroge-
nous one encompassing a wide range of groups with different ideological
agendas, the state, too, needs to be acknowledged as a complex, heterogenous,
and often fragmented actor. NGOs do not always successfully pressure local
elites or local governments (Hirschman 1987, Sanyal 1994), and they are as
likely to maintain the status quo as to change it (Chazan 1992, Fowler 1993,
Ndegwa 1996, Starn 1995). The insufficiency of the data and the lack of clear
comparative categories have led some analysts to wisely suggest abandoning
as unanswerable the question about which type of NGO has greater political
impact (see, for example, Clarke 1996).

Another factor that has differentially affected the relationship between
Southern NGOs and their host governments is the recent proliferation of innova-
tive linkages involving local NGOs, social movements, and transnational net-
works (Brysk 1993; Fisher 1995b; Kamarotos 1990; Leatherman et al 1994;
Lipschutz 1992; Lopez et al 1995; Princen & Finger 1994; Shaw 1992; Sikkink
1993, 1995; Udall 1995).[11] The thickening webs of transnational networks in-
volving Southern NGOs and transnational issue networks are cited as evidence
for what some observers have identified as an emerging international civil so-
ciety (Lipschutz 1992; Lopez et al 1995; Shaw 1992; Sikkink 1993, 1995).
Finger (1994a) argues that the clearest example of an emerging global civil so-
ciety is apparent in the international environmental movement (Princen & Fin-
ger 1994). In recent years, there has been an explosion of transnational NGO
coalitions and communications networks punctuated by international confer-

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[11]For a discussion of the effect of recent changes on the opportunities for Northern NGOs, see
Dichter (1991).

ences and aided by regular use of fax and the Internet. These links bring together Northern human rights organizations, environmental activists, and Southern grass-roots groups within a "raucous, yet highly structured battleground" (Little 1995). The international campaign against the World Bank–funded Sardar Sarovar project on the Narmada river in India is one example of an effective coalition of Southern NGOs and a transnational network (Aufderheide & Rich 1988, Patkar 1995, Rich 1994, Udall 1995, Fisher 1995a). In the view of some theorists, specific campaigns that come together for a short time and then dissolve are enabled by an amorphous collection of networks that constitute a more durable "imagined" or "virtual" community of activists and associations.[12]

More studies on the flows of information among these networks would clarify when and why local struggles become international and in which cases they do not; what encourages and constrains the internationalization of local interventions; and how the international and the local appropriate, commodify, and affect one another. The flows among sites are not seamless, smooth, or consistent, and organizational structures may function as points that constrict as well as encourage flows of money, people, information, development workers, bureaucrats, and activists. Not all Southern coalitions have been able to avail themselves of transnational networks, and coalitions of northern NGOs have selectively assisted Southern groups, depending upon the utility of specific issues for furthering their own agendas. The Narmada campaign is a case in point, selected by Northern NGOs as an appropriate conflict to facilitate a strategy linking coalitions of environmentalists from both the North and South, and from capital city and grass roots, to lobby political forces with influence over development banks (Aufderheide & Rich 1988, Rich 1994, Udall 1995).

These translocal and transnational connections entail risk as well as opportunity, however. On the one hand they may offer Southern NGOs increased leverage and autonomy in their struggle with national governments, while on the other hand, they expose these NGOs to direction or control by other sources. The fact is that the heterogeneity of the NGO field makes it easy for political forces to establish or coopt NGOs. One of the ways this occurs is through funding. Funding of both Northern and Southern NGOs by development agencies, for example, has increased so much that NGOs not dependent on official aid for the majority of their budgets may be the exception rather than the rule (Edwards & Hulme 1996a). The dependency of local SNGOs and GROs on the un-

[12]Despite growing evidence of widespread "imagined" communities of principle-based, transnational issue networks and idealistic predictions of a growing global community, some observers argue that it is difficult to conceive of a single international civil society. In their view, it is more significant that national borders have remained enforced and national loyalties have not been superseded by global loyalties (Peterson 1992).

certain largess of donors has several direct and indirect effects (Desai & Howes 1996, Edwards 1996, Gariyo 1996, Hellinger 1987, Lara 1990, Smillie 1995, Smillie & Helmich 1993). It redirects accountability toward funders and away from the group's grass-roots constituencies (Biggs & Neame 1996, Covey 1996, Edwards & Hulme 1996a, Fisher 1994b, Fowler 1996, Fox & Hernandez 1992, Smith 1987, Tandon 1994, Zadek & Gatward 1996): NGOs become contractors, constituencies become customers, and members become clients. Extranational connections entail another danger by exposing NGOs to attacks within their own countries, raising questions about whether they "legitimately" represent their constituents (Bratton 1989). In India, for example, NGOs with foreign connections have sometimes been regarded as antinationalist agents of capitalism and Western political and cultural values (Karat 1988).

The vulnerability of their position as beneficiaries of outside funding and support may make NGOs less willing to advocate positions that run counter to those taken by the agencies funding them or their home governments (Clarke 1996). Multilateral development agencies (MLAs) tend to select for funding those NGOs that are MLA-friendly (Pratt & Stone 1995). The efforts of these selected NGOs are diverted away from social mobilization and toward the provision of services and development initiatives. This process has a ripple effect when well-funded SNGOs are able to provide more employment opportunities and attract qualified individuals away from other local NGOs that continue to focus on empowerment and social mobilization (Pearce 1993). In the views of some observers, the degree of cooptation of NGOs by development agencies through funding and joint initiatives is so advanced that NGOs are destined to become the organizational mechanism for an international welfare system, doomed to be little more than the frontmen for the "lords of poverty" (Farrington & Bebbington 1993, Fowler 1996, Hancock 1989).

THE MICROPOLITICS OF NGOs

Amid their wide range of translocal connections, all NGO practices remain discursively constructed through reference to the "local." Yet while a notion of the local remains centrally important to the legitimacy of NGOs, it is frustratingly illusive (Forbes 1995, Peters 1996, Ribot 1996a). NGOs are praised and valued for connections to local communities and the grass roots, whether these connections are direct, or indirect through the GROs they service. Their acceptance as legitimate NGOs depends on their connections to or usefulness for local constituencies (Edwards & Hulme 1996a). The concept of the local is central to the pursuit of the varyingly interpreted, contemporary development objectives of participation and empowerment (Vettivel 1993). The embracing of these objectives by the development establishment and the use of national and

international intermediary NGOs to facilitate, fund, promote, and provide planning and organization assistance to so-called grass-roots organizations have resulted in the paradoxical attempt to generate participation through a top-down process of planning and organization (Chambers 1995).

Like other popular and politicized buzzwords of development (Fisher 1995c), participation and empowerment are given different meanings by different actors (Rahnema 1992). In the view of radical development critics, development policies may now stress participation (often confusing it with empowerment), but this is little more than a rhetorical flourish and is not reflected in actual or actualizable goals. As Chambers (1995) has noted, top-down planning, top-down funding, and upwards accountability negate participation. Rather than regarding participation as a general good, we need to ask in each instance in which "participation" is a claimed objective, "what responsibilities are being devolved and to whom?" These critics question the practices pursued under the rubrics of participation and empowerment: Incorporation into existing economic markets and political systems may bring advantages, but incorporation also brings new encumbrances and dependencies. Governments and development agencies express support for NGOs and participation even as they find ways to fit these new elements into old models of governance or development. Thus, the pursuit of participation by development agencies frequently fails to live up to their rhetoric, which seems to promote it and yet can amount to no more than the restructuring of control (Ribot 1996). Development agencies may allow an NGO to "represent" indigenous people at decisions taken in Washington, DC, or elsewhere, but the selection of some NGO to stand in for people is quite different from ensuring that decisions affecting the lives and resources of indigenous people are not taken without their informed consent.

To be sure, studies of specific cases have demonstrated that particular NGOs can be said to stimulate effective local participation and set objectives that contribute to the political empowerment of marginalized groups. See, for example, Ahuja's (1994) study of an NGO engaged in rural development work, Marulasiddaiah's (1994) study of Swasti, Wacker's (1994) discussion of Kikuyu women, and Viswanath's (1991) account of women's groups in India.

However, there is considerable evidence that NGOs frequently fail to live up to the expectations development agencies have of them (Bebbington & Thiele 1993; Carroll 1992; Farrington & Lewis 1993; Fowler 1991, 1993; Hashemi & Schuler 1992; Hogg 1992; Lehman 1990; Riddell & Robinson 1995; Vivian 1994; Wellard & Copestake 1993). Why, then, does the development establishment continue to support them? As Ferguson (1990) demonstrated for development interventions in Lesotho, it may be that the unspoken or unintended consequences of development support for NGOs serve the purposes of governments and development agencies.

NGOs cannot be understood as a forum in which real people are social and political actors without attention to the micropolitics of these groups. But while the need for local participation has become an article of faith in many quarters, particularly among the development community (Annis 1988, Korten 1990), most contemporary studies of the "thickening of civil society" (Fox 1992) do not include systematic analyses of power relationships within the groups and associations of civil society and the forms and channels of participation that affect power relationships.

NGOs are vulnerable to all the problems that befall other kinds of institutions, including the dangers of routinization and the gradual conversion of democratic to oligarchic rule. Weisgrau (1997) and Mehta (1996) have analyzed NGO practices in Rajasthan to show how the relationships between organizations and their constituents come to replicate older patron/client patterns. Baviskar (1995) has detailed the gap between the rhetoric of NGOs (in her case, the Narmada Bachao Andolan) and the failure of these organizations to live up to their own egalitarian rhetoric (see also Bebbington & Thiele 1993, Carroll 1992). The tendency of organizations to drift from participatory to oligarchic political structures has been presented by some institutional analysts as an "iron law of oligarchy" (Fisher 1994a, Fox 1992, Michels 1959, Uphoff 1996). Cases that support this "law" raise questions bound to trouble those who look for the transformative possibilities of NGOs: Are NGOs doomed to repeat the patterns of the societies within which they emerge? Can they empower without simultaneously victimizing? Can they enable as well as constrain? Can they do good without doing wrong?

One way to answer these questions is through a conception of civil society not as a sector that contests the will of governments but as a "vector of agonistic contentions over governmental relations" (Gordon 1991, p. 23). This emphasis on the way NGOs contribute to civil society by fueling ongoing contentions rather than merely through the multiplication and differentiation of structures (Clarke 1996) refocuses our attention on the processes and not merely the institutions of civil society. The recent expansion in the numbers of associations and the struggle for new linkages and truths support Adam Ferguson's processual view of society as an entity that repeatedly tears itself apart and endlessly remakes itself (Ferguson 1995; see also Gordon 1991). Some theorists find optimism in this expansion of civil society precisely because they see the transformation of civil society leading to transformation of the state, not the other way around. Empowerment, Rajni Kothari (1986) has argued, emerges through a decentralized self-government. In his view, "conscientization" and the struggle for new alternatives (and alternative truths) produce a new class of activists.

The view of observers like Rajni Kothari is built upon several significant assumptions about the connections of individuals, society, and the state and

the possibilities for transforming them. First, this view sees macrogovernmental rationalities emerging from the articulation of microprograms and technologies of power (Simon 1995). Those holding this view see modern governmental mechanisms and rationalities as simultaneously directed at individualizing and totalizing; that is, they are about governing or making governable both individuals and society (Gordon 1991). Foucault's view of modern civil society as "the concrete ensemble within which…economic men need to be positioned in order to be adequately manageable" also emphasizes the constraints that microlevel practices place upon the individual, and the shape they give to macrolevel governmental rationalities (quoted in Gordon 1991, p. 23).

Second, while this view acknowledges the participation of NGOs in a coherent general policy of order, it also holds out the possibility of changing that policy by changing the micropractices and the discourse from which they emerge. The process within which NGOs participate can contribute to social restructuring around and under the state and the market, undermining traditional foundations and forcing adaptations to changed practices and circumstances. This change requires and emerges from the "forging together, wrenching apart and recreation of discourses which break with their predecessors" (Adam 1993, p. 329). The framing of calls for sustainable development and social justice is an instance of what Foucault has called "the strategic reversibility" of power relations, a means by which the terms of governmental practice can be turned into focuses of resistance (see also Gordon 1991). Change rests on the ability of individuals and associations to challenge the terms of governmental "truths" and struggle to change the limits of what is "thinkable." "Change the way people think," argued Stephen Biko, "and things will never be the same."

One perspective on how this change can be brought about is contributed by analysts and activists interested in the connection between personal and social change. These scholars follow Foucault insofar as they "analyze institutions from the standpoint of power relations rather than vice versa" (Foucault 1983, p. 222). In part, their analysis considers the relationship between the attempts of individuals to free themselves from the constraints of cultural or class backgrounds and attempts to empower or liberate others. The focus on personal and societal emancipation turns their attention to "the technologies of domination over others and those of the self." Changing the self and changing society both require a rejection of the representation of self imposed by relationships with others. Individuals and groups struggle for the freedom to define themselves and their relationships with others on their own terms, an effort Carmichael & Hamilton (1967) called "the first necessity of a free people and the first right any oppressor must suspend" (p. 35). The work of some empowerment NGOs contributes to this emancipatory process through the politicization of previ-

ously depoliticized realms and issues—for example, issues concerning gender or the environment. They turn issues that directly engage the self, subjective experience, and daily life into crucial sites of political contestation. The identity politics that emerge from this process are a means by which local groups maintain tenuous autonomy and reduce their susceptibility to cooptation and colonialization by external political actors. They are what Kauffman has described as a "liberating new synthesis of the personal and the political" (Kauffman 1990, p. 67).

This perspective emphasizes the tight relationship between ethics and politics. Many NGOs and the translocal coalitions they participate in are "inspired by a particular vision of the society they wish to develop" (Tandon 1994, p. 53; see also Brown & Korten 1989, Fisher 1993). These values differ—they may see themselves humanizing the policies of structural adjustment, helping constituents adjust to top-down development projects, or inducing changes in social and economic orders—but they are not value neutral: Their primary motivations are beliefs about what is right and wrong (Sikkink 1995). Although NGOs may present ethical judgments as neutral standards of judgment that stand outside political contest (see Simon 1995, p. 67), these judgments are essentially political.

In this view, power is exercised through the strategic manipulation of the options of the Other. Power is thus less a confrontation between two adversaries than it is a question of government, in which to govern is to structure the field of possible actions of others (Ferguson 1990). The relationship of NGOs to this practice of governing is complex. Since, as noted above, NGOs differ radically from one another in nature and composition, it follows that NGOs may emerge from, contribute to, or challenge the moral regulation inherent in governing.

In practice, specific NGOs may move in either democratic or oligarchic directions, depending on their constituencies and their particular circumstances. NGOs may serve both as extensions of regimes or practice, like development, and as sources of alternatives to such regimes. The transformative potential of the NGO sector may emerge less from ordered and controlled participation than from relatively chaotic sets of multiple opportunities and interdependencies. Liberty, argued Foucault (1986), is "a practice… never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee it" (p. 245). Foucault further argued that "it can never be inherent in the structure of things to guarantee the *exercise* of freedom" (my emphasis). Some NGOs face routinization, bureaucratization, and institutionalization that encourage the drift toward oligarchy or sap them of their creative potential, while other NGOs are in a process of permanent resistance against that which is "never inherently evil but always dangerous" (see Gordon 1991, p. 47; Simon 1995, p. 87).

Thus, the objective of empowerment or "liberty" may not be served by institution building or perpetuating existent organizations, and may even be un-

dermined by bureaucratization. It may be inappropriate to regard the fluidity of the NGO field as a weakness or the impermanence of any give NGO as a failure. Rather, we might look for permanence in the rebellious process from which many NGOs emerge and within which some NGOs remain engaged. NGOs and social movements may come and go, but the space created in their passing may contribute to new activism that builds up after them. For a particularly interesting account of a conscious effort to avoid the dangers that come with formal organization and engagement with the state, see Esteva (1987).

CONCLUSION

The growth of a multicentric world and the practices of growing numbers of nonstate national and transnational actors have had significant impact on the sites and communities that have been the focus of anthropological research. Understanding what is happening within and through organizations such as NGOs and adapting to the changing conditions within which they operate present challenges to anthropological researchers. Community-based organizations may be close to the traditional sites of anthropological concerns, but the networks and alliances they increasingly have come to form open up new sites for ethnographic research, and the wide cast of these networks, which may appear only through chaotic public spectacles of ritual performance like international conferences, call for innovative research methodologies. As researchers, we need to reconsider how to approach problems located in or flowing through multiple sites. Additional work by anthropologists will not only contribute to knowledge of what NGOs are doing but will also provide insights into anthropological conceptions of communities, local and translocal networks, technologies of control, and the political role of intellectuals. The challenge is to consider nongovernmental organizations as one specific possible form of collective action and human community and to set the stage for a comparative analysis of the different configurations these forms of collective action have taken and are taking in a complexly woven field of translocal flows.

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