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31

Dilemmas of engagement: the experience of non-governmental actors in new governance spaces.

Marilyn Taylor, Joanna Howard, Vicki Harris, John Lever, Antaoneeta Mateeva, Christopher Miller, Rumen Petrov and Luis Serra

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Editor: Professor Jude Howell

The **NGPA Working Paper** (**NGPAWP**) series provides a vehicle for disseminating recent and ongoing research of researchers based at, or linked to the Non-Governmental Public Action Programme (NGPA). It aims to reflect the range and diversity of non-governmental public action, and understand the impact of public action.

Researchers on the Non-Governmental Public Action research programme work with advocacy networks, peace groups, campaigns and coalitions, trade unions, peace-building groups, rights-based groups, social movements and faith-based groups to understand the impact of non-governmental public action. They are based in universities, think-tanks, civil society organizations, projects and networks around the world gathering data, building theory, and strengthening co-operation between researchers and practitioners.

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Introduction

The move from government to governance across the globe has been well-charted (Stoker, 1998; Mitlin et al., 2007; Hickey and Mohan, 2005) along with the emergence of new governance spaces at a distance from the state. Most commentators agree that it is no longer possible in the context of globalisation or, given the complexity of today's society, for the state to govern without the co-operation of other actors. This, along with a parallel enthusiasm for citizen participation and interest in the role of civil society opens up new opportunities for non-governmental actors to engage in government. However, the extent to which these new spaces represent a new vision of the public domain (Fung and Wright, 2003) with a "genuinely new settlement" between the range of potential players and new, more socially inclusive forms of citizenship is contested (see, for example, Cornwall, 2004; Newman, 2001, 2005; Lepine et al, 2007).

Some theorists of governance, as well as many within the developmental sector, offer an optimistic analysis of these trends, suggesting that the emergence of "negotiated self-governance", based on new practices of co-ordinating activities through networks and partnerships, offers participants the opportunity not only to influence policy but to take over the business of government (Stoker, 1998). In contrast, others draw on governmentality theory to offer a more nuanced analysis. They suggest that, while state power has become decoupled from the state as government and is instead produced through a range of sites and alliances "at a distance" from the state (Miller and Rose, 2008), forms of power outside the state can sustain the state more effectively than its own institutions (Foucault, 1980). Nonetheless, it allows for the possibility of resistance by "active subjects", who not only collaborate in the exercise of government, but also shape and influence it (Morison, 2000; Taylor, 2007).

The research reported in this paper sought to explore how non-governmental actors in these spaces perceive the tensions and opportunities they find in new governance spaces and to understand theoretically and empirically how and whether they become 'active subjects'. However, although NGO experience of governance is shaped by common global trends, we can expect the experience and significance of these trends to be shaped in turn by the historical socio-political and cultural context in which they emerge (Deacon, 2007). Indeed, the extent to which a concept of 'governance' that has been developed by Western academics translates meaningfully across different regions

and political cultures is also open to question (Heinelt and Stewart, 2005). Our research therefore explored these questions across four countries - Bulgaria, Nicaragua, England and Wales[1] - in order to establish how far Western debates about governance had resonance in other regions of the world and what we could learn from a cross-cultural comparison.

The paper begins by exploring the governance discourse in the West. It then introduces the research and reports on some of the difficulties of translating concepts across eh different country research teams. The following section provides a framework for comparison across the different sites and discusses the way in which different contexts have shaped both trends towards governance and the way that non-governmental actors navigate these spaces. The paper ends by reflecting briefly on the implications for further research.

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[1] While both England and Wales are part of the UK, the newly devolved arrangements in the UK gave us the opportunity for further comparison and hence we chose to study both England and Wales.

The governance discourse

Governance theory explains the de-centring of state power and the multiplication of governance spaces in modern politics (Rhodes, 1997, Newman et al, 2004), chronicling "the emergence of 'negotiated self-governance' in communities, cities and regions, based on new practices of co-ordinating activities through networks and partnerships" (Newman, 2001, p. 24). Heinelt and Stewart (2005) argue that it is a predominantly Western European account of political change to explain the slimming down of the state and the increased involvement of non-state actors in policy processes and especially in service delivery.

Some accounts of governance describe it as "an interactive process which involves various forms of partnership, whereby government gives up some of its authority to control and decide" (Stoker, 1998, p. 22). "This dispersal of state power", Newman (2005, p.4) argues, "opens up new ways in which citizens can engage in the politics of localities and regions and participate in 'project politics' on specific issues". Advocates of collaborative local governance arrangements have drawn on Habermasian ideas of communicative discourse to advance the cause of deliberative democracy (Healey, 1997).

Other governance commentators take a more pessimistic view. They see the decentring and withdrawing of government as deceptive and argue that a 'metagovernance' endures which maintains state control at arms' length (Jessop, 2003). This echoes Foucauldian accounts of how the exercise of power secures the willing compliance of subjects:

> human beings are enlisted into wider patterns of normative control, often acting as their own overseers, while believing themselves…to be free of power, making their own choices, pursuing their own interests, assessing arguments rationally and coming to their own conclusions.
> (Lukes, 2005, p. 106)

Davies (2007), too, argues that "reformist scholars underestimate the challenge of democratic inclusion", drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' to call into the question the redemptive qualities of deliberative reasoning among "radically unequal interlocutors" and to expose the cultural capital that is embedded in decision-making and scrutiny processes. Empirical studies of partnership in practice, drawing on institutional theory,

argue that the cultures of decision making and the 'rules of the game' continue to favour state (and/or capitalist) actors both explicitly and implicitly (Taylor, 2003).

Nonetheless, there is also in Foucault's notion of power (as in other theoretical approaches) the possibility of resistance, which allows the articulation, and implementation of alternative agendas (Atkinson, 2003, p. 117). Thus, Raco (2003, p. 79), applying governmentality theory to devolution, argues that "new domains and territories of state action provide new platforms and opportunities for the articulation and implementation of alternative agendas". Newman's analysis of governance suggests that it is a contradictory and contested dynamic process which remakes the boundaries of the public sphere and so "produces new governable subjects and potentially opens up new sites of agency" (2005, p. 4). This recognition of the potential for "active subjects" (Morison, 2000) resonates with several other theoretical approaches (Taylor, 2007). Even institutional theorists who have convincingly demonstrated that organisations are subject to the "iron cage" of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) have since revisited their theory to seek an explanation of why, despite these pressures, there is still considerable heterogeneity of response.

While the above theories explain that non-governmental actors might break out of the iron cages that are variously constructed by different theorists, however, they do not explain how this might happen. To explore the role of human agency in changing the structuring effects of discourse, we turned to Nick Crossley (2003) and his development of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital. While Bourdieu's analysis, as cited by Davies above, highlights the ways in which cultural capital creates privileged pathways through different fields, thus reinforcing existing patterns of power, Crossley argues that this pessimistic analysis underestimates the "durable impetus to critique in contemporary society" (2003, p. 45) and the capacity of social agents to reflect upon, criticise and protest against the social structures which disadvantage them in various ways" (p. 49). From this, he developed the idea of "radical habitus", which encompasses a durable disposition to question and criticise, the political know-how to transform this critique into action and an ethos that gives participation a sense of individual meaning and worth. While both Bourdieu and Crossley were seeking to understand contention, we wanted to explore how far their analysis could be applied to more consensual modes of operating to suggest how a disposition to engage more critically with governance might develop at a country, organisational and individual level.

In summary, therefore, theories of governance and agency offer a pessimistic analysis of power and the way in which the compliance of the subject is secured. But they also highlight the potential for agency and the potential for a radical habitus which can challenge existing patterns of power and domination. How then did these ideas translate in the countries which we studied in our research?

The research

The assumption behind our research was that global trends for NGO involvement in governance would translate differently into different national contexts and that the challenges that NGOs faced in relation to governance as well as the extent to which NGOs were able to become active subjects in these spaces would therefore vary according to country.

The research explored these questions through a series of national interviews in each country and a locality case study, which focused on between four and six organisations in each locality, interviewing a range of players in each organisation. In the UK sites, the locality was the second city, in the non-UK sites it was the capital city[2]. Interviews were also carried out with other stakeholders in the locality. Findings were analysed through NVivo. An introductory inquiry group was held in each site to introduce the research and discuss its focus and further inquiry groups and/or organisational feedback sessions were held in each site to feedback and discuss emerging findings.   The study finished with a videoconference between the four sites. Three full team meetings were held during the study which brought together the teams from each country.   An Advisory Group, comprising UK academics and practitioners, met three times during the study to discuss research design and emerging findings.

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[2] The sites have been described in detail in other papers prepared from the research (Howard et al. 2008; Miller et al. 2008; Lever 2008).

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The challenges of comparison

From an early stage in the research, the challenge of comparison became apparent. Firstly, all comparisons are contextual and everyone brings to a cross-national analysis their own cultural capital. Our project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, as part of a wider Programme on Non-Governmental Public Action (NGPA). The nature of the bidding process meant that the proposal was put together and led from the UK, with partners invited in from Bulgaria and Nicaragua. The concepts and assumptions behind the research were thus basically those of the UK team, although the draft bid was shared with our partners before submission. It soon became clear that our Western concept of governance needed unpacking. While it was at least recognisable in Nicaragua, where there was a law on citizen participation, albeit one that was not implemented in our Nicaraguan case study site, our Bulgarian colleagues struggled with the whole notion. In a highly authoritarian state which still bore many of the hallmarks of the communist era, the notion of governance was almost unimaginable - even the concept of 'policy making' was difficult to grasp. Indeed, our Bulgarian colleagues argued that to 'value' governance was in itself to make a political statement.

Similarly, in Bulgaria, ideas of non-governmental action were fragile and emergent, tainted by the legacy of mass membership associations under Communism and the corrupt use of non-governmental forms in the immediate aftermath of the Communist era. UK concepts of non-governmental action were also challenged by Latin American experience, where NGOs have often been seen as "alternative or externally imposed phenomenon that heralded a new wave of imperialism" and have had "limited success as agents of democratisation" (Pearce, 2004). Indeed, NGOs have been seen as an externally driven phenomenon that threatened the development of 'indigenous civil society' and distracted from more political organisations. Others have criticised NGOs in the south for being servile to the policies of the IMF, World Bank, and neoliberal governments via aid mechanisms which serve as a palliative for the worst impacts of the economic system by taking on some state functions in order to maintain 'governability' within the policies of the Washington consensus which favour a free reign for transnational companies (Serra, 2007). Our analysis of 'non-governmental' involvement in governance therefore needs, as Deacon (2007) reminds us, to maintain a critical awareness of the global, national and local interests that support and mediate this involvement.

The second challenge we faced was that we were studying a fast-changing political environment. All our case study countries were in economic transition, subject to global pressures towards marketisation. Three were part of the EU; the other has been subject to IMF/World Bank structural adjustment policies. Three of the countries were also in transition politically – in Nicaragua between polarised political parties, in Bulgaria from the Communist era, in Wales to a devolved system. In comparing our countries, therefore, it became clear that our analysis needed to be dynamic rather than static, recognising the ambiguities and complexities within the system.

A third challenge was that we only studied one locality and a small number of organisations in each country. We cannot assume that they were typical and in some cases, we know they were not. The views of participants and particularly description of the local context were also largely mediated through our researchers. We were, however, able to verify their analysis of their national context - and they ours - through the literature. We also held in-country inquiry groups to gain feedback from participants but we did not have the resources to set up a meaningful discussion across national boundaries between research participants and deepen our national comparisons through this means.

A framework for comparison

Many attempts have been made to classify different welfare and political regimes (Esping Andersen, 1990; Goodin et al, 1999; Linz and Stepan, 2000; Gough and Woods, 2004; Hague and Harrop, 2007). Salamon and Anheier have built on these to develop a "social origins theory" of civil society (1998). But, as we have seen, creating a typology of the dynamic and shifting contexts within which NGOs are operating is inherently problematic and none of these adequately explained the political cultures that framed both governance opportunities and NGO responses to these opportunities in the countries we were studying. Most were also based on macrostudies and difficult to apply to the detailed microstudies that we were carrying out. While we drew on aspects of these, therefore, our empirical data suggested that the experience of governance in our countries was shaped by the following inter-related factors, as outlined in Table One:

- The welfare mix/arrangements for meeting basic needs
    - The role and capacity of the state in meeting basic needs
    - The influence of external actors
- The nature of democratic processes
    - The relationship between the central and local state
    - The party political system and its relationship to non-governmental action
    - Citizen rights to participation
- Political cultures
    - Citizen expectations of the state
    - Sense of collective agency

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Table One: Configurations of NGO-state relations

	Bulgaria	England and Wales[3]	Nicaragua
Welfare mix: Arrangements for meeting basic needs			
Meeting basic needs	State dominant provider with NGOs meeting needs neglected by the state	Increasingly mixed economy of welfare, co-ordinated by the state, with NGOs encouraged to take on service delivery roles previously performed by the state	Needs met by the family remittances and by NGOs with external aid, in the context of a weak economy and a weak state seeking to meet the demands of structural adjustment
The influence of external donors/ actors	**Medium**: the EU now a major player; other foreign aid declining	EU a major player in Wales, less so in England. The UK government a major factor in Welsh identity and policy	**High:** INGOs and foreign governments major players along with IMF and World Bank through structural adjustment
Democratic processes			
The relationship between national and local government	Highly centralised state; local government has few resources or powers	Devolution of powers combined with central regulation; citizen participation agenda driven by the national state	Mediated by political party affiliation. Change of government in 2007 has replaced previous citizen participation arrangements with new party-led structures
The party political system	Multiple parties reducing in number but power remaining with the successors of the communist regime	Three party-system, increasingly focusing on the centre ground, but with nationalist party sporadically significant in Wales	Clientelist politics with power passing between strongly polarised parties (which nonetheless now operate under a joint pact)
Citizen participation rights	Weak: limited to the vote; few governance spaces; Civil society and citizenship values still emergent	Citizenship education & responsibilities a strong theme in government policy; participation encouraged through a "duty to involve" and other "soft" measures,	Strong: Enshrined in law, with a strong sense of entitlement among citizens, but patchy implementation until recently dependent on local government

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[3] Generally, for the purposes of this paper, we treat England and Wales as one case, unless there are significant differences to which we wish to draw attention

		but not enshrined as a right. Strong cross-party commitment to partnership working	and now under central state control.
Political culture			
Citizen expectations of the state	Highly dependent, but mistrustful. Citizens seek advancement through the market	High expectations as a legacy of the welfare state;	Citizens mobilise to make demands of the state, but also seek individual solutions given the low capacity of the state to meet needs
Sense of collective agency	Limited: long history of authoritarian external rule leads to high deference to authority and little sense of collective agency. History of compulsory state-led associations under communism and corruption in the immediate aftermath. Minimal sector identity: "independent" forms of activism fragmented.	Fairly strong but fears of co-option: Long history of collective action, highly professionalised voluntary sector to small solidaristic community-based groups. Increasingly high profile recognition in policy accompanied by decline of traditional labour and other mass voices.	Strong: A history of struggle and strong social movements, with low deference to authority and a strong sense of agency but dependent on "mother" organisations (political parties; the church; foreign donors).

The welfare mix: arrangements for meeting basic needs

The relationship between the state and NGOs in meeting basic needs differs considerably across the four sites. In the UK's mixed economy the role of NGOs is increasingly becoming one of a co-provider of services with acknowledgement of those areas in which the NG sector is better equipped to work, while in Bulgaria the state dominates provision, and needs that fall outside of the state's definition of basic needs are not funded unless through external cooperation. In Nicaragua, the state's capacity to meet basic needs is chronically inadequate, and it is the family, mainly via remittances from family members working in the US or Costa Rica, that meet those needs, alongside the work of community organisations, national and international NGOs. According to the Nicaraguan Central Bank, remittances reached US$739.6 million in 2007, approximately 60% of the amount earned from the country's exports and greater than the amount received in foreign aid - approximately US$500 million p.a. (BCN, 2008).

The welfare mix: The influence of external donors

In both Bulgaria and Nicaragua, international donors have significant influence over non-governmental service provision. In Nicaragua, INGOs are mainly funded by external cooperation to meet welfare needs that the impoverished state cannot. In Bulgaria and to some extent Wales, the EU has been a significant player in promoting governance and providing a template for partnership working. Bulgaria was also a target for foreign investment in the aftermath of Communism as US and other donors sought to influence the development of civil society. In Nicaragua, there have been foreign interventions on either side of the political struggle over the decades and today, external actors are funding and supporting a wide range of activities from technical support to human rights promotion and political influence. These external actors all have the potential to rebalance the power relationship between the state and NGOs although this does raise questions about the legitimacy of interventions which may undermine the elected government. It also raises questions of dependency. However, Serra (2007) identifies these relations as a local expression of a growing "global civil society" with new values of solidarity and argues that as such, the "dependency" of Nicaraguan NGOs on external aid needs to be redefined in terms of interdependence and alliances between Northern and Southern NGOs.

The nature of democratic processes: central and local government and political parties

In all three countries the state is highly centralised. In Bulgaria, municipalities have little autonomy and few resources and there is little for NGOs to engage with. In England and Wales, by contrast, while the state is highly centralised, there has been a strong emphasis recently on devolution. However, while responsibilities are being devolved, most local authority finance is centrally determined. In Nicaragua, responsibilities are devolved but not finance and the resources available to municipalities are therefore limited. Local councillors are selected on a list system here and in Bulgaria, in contrast to the UK where they are elected to wards. In both the UK and Nicaragua, the governance agenda has been driven by central government with patchy implementation at local level.

Party politics are very different in the different countries. While Nicaragua has seen power swing between strongly polarised parties, in Bulgaria, despite the existence of multiple parties, power remains in the hands of the successors to the communist regime. England and Wales, competing political parties in a pluralist system increasingly focus on the centre ground.

Democratic processes: citizen rights

Citizen participation rights are enshrined in law in Nicaragua, with a strong sense of entitlement among citizens. Both parties have insisted on the creation of local participation structures, though these remained poorly implemented under the previous government and heavily centrally controlled under the present one.

In England and Wales, participation is not yet a right (citizens are, in fact, subjects) and is dependent on the government of the day. That said, in England, citizenship is a strong theme in New Labour policy and there is a cross-party commitment to partnership working. Here, local government reform legislation has introduced a duty to involve which comes into force in 2009, along with a range of triggers and mechanisms for individual citizen involvement. In Wales, partnership is central to the devolved administration's ethos. This contrasts strongly with Bulgaria, where citizen participation rights are confined to the vote.

Political cultures: citizen expectations of the state

Non-governmental understandings and expectations of governance are partially framed
by the history of state-civil society relationships in the country and locality.

In England and Wales, the legacy of state welfare is still strong and expectations of the
state remain high. This contrasts with Nicaragua where citizens mobilise to make
demands of the state but also seek individual solutions given the low capacity of the state
to meet needs. In Bulgaria, citizens remain highly dependent on the state but also very
mistrustful. They do not look to the state for advancement but to the market.

Political cultures: sense of collective agency

In Nicaragua, a large part of the sector has its roots in protest and the experience of the
mass Sandinista organisations of the 1980s; a consciousness that "together we can", and
that citizens must be active participants in local and national development. Nicaraguan
NGOs also see their role as "co-participants in public policies", and as citizen auditors of
services provided by the state - in other words, there is a conviction that participatory
democracy is both possible and, indeed, a necessary complement to representative
democracy which confers a strong sense of agency to NG actors. Thus, where the City
Council in our case study area failed to set up the required municipal development
committee required by law, the NG response was to create an alliance of local
community organisations that could lobby the Council and replace the missing
governance space which was their constitutional right. The director of the health centre in
the district observed that:

> The community has power. If something happens in the community, they tell me,
> they have enough confidence and they know their rights and duties.

However despite this sense of agency and citizens" rights, many NGOs were also
dependent on "mother organisations" (Serra, 2007): INGOs and foreign donors, the
church and political parties.

In Bulgaria, by contrast, there is a debilitating mixture of deference and mistrust of the
state, born of years of occupation. Bulgarians have always been part of an authoritarian
society, subject to the Turks and the Ottoman empire and part of the Austro-Hungarian
empire before the Soviet era. NGOs are either the successors of the mass organisations
of the communist era (the 'old' NGOs), still controlled by the state with 'compulsory'

membership, or organisations that have come into being in response to foreign funding and according to foreign agendas ('new' NGOs). The concept of participation with the state in governance in any kind of partnership, for our participants was unimaginable and there was little sense of identity within the sector or mobilisation to defend citizens' or other human rights.

In Wales there is a sense of common interests and a heritage of opposition to the English. But here, as in England, the political culture is becoming increasingly consensual. There is a strong expression of agency in both countries, arising from a long history of collective action, but increasingly this is joint agency. Nonetheless, in our Welsh site, in particular, there was a firmly expressed view among state and non-state actors that NGOs brought at least as much to the table as their state partners – at least in terms of knowledge and expertise. Thus, one organisation reports on their partnership with a Welsh Assembly Government department that it:

> very clearly puts our staff on an even playing field with their staff.. It's certainly a partnership in which we're valued, we get lots of feedback.

Habitus

We summarised the above as producing three broad configurations of the relationship between non-governmental action and the state (or civil society formations, Miller et al, forthcoming) and suggested that these were likely to foster a very different habitus among individual citizens.

	Bulgaria	**England and Wales**	**Nicaragua**
NGO-state relations	Manufactured/manipulated	Institutionalised/disciplined	Clientelist
habitus	Marginalised/fatalistic	Self-disciplined	Contentious

Thus, we describe Bulgarian non-governmental public action as being 'manufactured' or manipulated, with non-governmental public action – at least among the 'new' NGOs we studied who were meeting the needs of those neglected by the state - marginalised, on the fringes of society. The long tradition of authoritarian rule produced a fatalist habitus among citizens. In discussions at the inter-site video conference, the Bulgarian participants found it amazing that the English and Welsh participants felt that they could indeed influence the state and make a difference.

We described Nicaraguan non-governmental public action as characterised on the one hand by clientelism insofar as the influence of individual NGOs depends heavily on which political party is in power, but the social movement and revolutionary tradition produced a radical – or contentious - habitus among our respondents. In the videoconference, the Nicaraguan participants did not see how NGOs could expect to collaborate with a neo-liberal capitalist state.

We characterised non-governmental public action in our English and Welsh sites as increasingly institutionalised as a significant part of the governance of these two countries. The habitus of our respondents could be described as self-disciplined in the Foucauldian sense that most NGOs saw their interests very much as congruent with those of the state. Despite all the challenges that they reported, our UK videoconference participants were positive about the prospects of governance and committed to it.

In making these broad comparisons, we were aware, of course, of the dangers of overgeneralisation. Non-governmental action is by its nature diverse and there were particularly strong fault-lines in each country – between 'old' and 'new' NGOs in Bulgaria, between party allegiances in Nicaragua, between the more professionalized voluntary organisations and community-based organisations in England and Wales. NGO expectations of governance are also framed by the structure of NGOs (membership or service-oriented), their involvement in state-funded service delivery, and their connectedness with wider social movements and local networks. All these affected agency.

Constraints and limitations to agency

From the above, it would seem that the strongest sense of independent agency can be found in Nicaragua – albeit constrained by political polarisation and clientelism - where NGOs have taken the initiative to organise their own spaces where government fails and where the state is highly dependent on NGOs to deliver. However, there is also a strong sense of agency amongst service-providing organisations in our Welsh site. In our English site, despite the withdrawal of funding from three of our case study organisations, there was still a strong sense of individual resilience and agency and personal growth.

On the other hand, NGOs in all four sites could provide examples where agency was excluded or where key decisions were made outside the spaces into which they have been invited. In our Nicaraguan site, as we have seen, the local state failed to provide the governance spaces which by law it was obliged to provide and NGOs reported that:

> When the government consults civil society but ... takes the decision it wanted before the consultation process, then the spaces of governance become illegitimate, the people get tired of that game because they realise their proposals are not taken seriously.

In England and Wales, where there is more of a rhetorical commitment to empowerment on the part of the local state in both sites (the local authority in our English site, for example, is one of the Network of Empowering Authorities), experience on the ground was still reported as disempowering, especially by community-based organisations. It is arguable that, as the sector becomes more central to state agendas, it paradoxically becomes more controlled. Thus, while the importance of the sector was increasingly recognised and built into the institutional arrangements of governing, non-governmental service providers from both UK sites reported that the commissioning agenda was bringing with it a more managerial approach, while participation in strategic policy making was highly dependent on state funding (initially from the central state and latterly from the local state). In our English site, rationalisation of funding by the local authority meant that two umbrella organisations that were funded specifically to support NGO and citizen engagement with the local state had their funding removed towards the end of our study period. Partnerships here also tended to run according to rules of engagement and constraints still set by the state. So, despite the very strong rhetoric of partnership on the part of the state nationally and locally, some NGOs were very negative:

> There's distrust there. You just feel like whatever you say or do, the council will do what they want in the end anyway right and they say…it's not something you can prove, it's just that feeling all the time.

In Bulgaria, as we have seen, exclusion was endemic.

In each setting, respondents commented on the dependency of NGOs on the state, although this took different forms. In England and Wales, proximity to the local and national state could lead to a dependence on state recognition and state funding and there was, as we have seen, a sense of NGOs looking to the state for solutions, compared with Nicaragua, where expectations of the state are low. In Nicaragua, while NGOs may act independently of the local state, they may still be dependent on a political party or an international donor for resources, even if the latter can enhance their legitimacy as effective actors in local development. Dependence can be financial and, in some cases, psychological, even where, as in our Bulgarian site, this dependency is associated with distrust.

Others in England and Wales highlighted the dangers of collusion and incorporation, as NGOs become institutionalised, become comfortable in their new roles and lose their cutting edge. In all these senses, the state agenda is still inscribed in spaces 'at a distance from' the state.

Becoming "active subjects"

Strategic choices

Faced with these challenges, NGOs in our study made a number of choices. These could be summarised as:

- exit
- confrontation
- engagement/compromise
- creating their own spaces.

Some decided to pursue their own aims and purposes independent of government, although exit took various forms. In Bulgaria, for example, the availability of foreign aid and the paucity of services for disabled people left plenty of space for some organisations to operate independently of the state. In our Welsh site, a community-based organisation left a partnership from which they felt excluded. In our English site, some participants simply drifted away from governance arenas that, they felt, did not justify the investment of time demanded.

A small number, who felt abused by what they saw as false spaces, actively confronted the state, as in the case of a Bulgarian respondent who was using the media and strike action to confront government policy.

Nonetheless, across all four case study sites, many chose to participate in the new governance spaces, even those who were most pessimistic about the influence they could have. One respondent from Sofia, for example, argued:

> I have to stay there and to experience difficulties and make some compromises – but this is the only way to be heard and to fight and try to be part of the policy.

Members of the Welsh community organisation cited above which chose to withdraw from a partnership, rejoined because they felt they needed the access to information that being 'on the inside' provided.

Finally, in Nicaragua, as we have seen, faced with a local state that did not comply to the citizen participation law, NGOs created their own "popular" space (Cornwall 2004). This Alliance explicitly developed the capacities of member organisations in political advocacy and engagement, and that strengthened their participation in other 'invited' governance spaces as well as offering a springboard for more informal bilateral relationships with allies and power holders within the state[4].

We also found examples where governance operated without a formal structure, as in our Welsh site where NGOs in the mental health field who had been at loggerheads with state services had over time found ways of working informally with other providers to develop what all now agree is a good collaborative service.

Opportunities for agency

The focus of our research, however, was to study those NGOs who chose to engage in 'invited' governance spaces and, for those, our analysis suggests a number of propositions about the scope for agency.

The first proposition is that agency depends on **time.** This might be time already invested - a range of studies in England and Wales besides our own have suggested that partnership is most likely to work in localities with a long tradition of state investment in the NG sector and joint working. It might be a willingness to give governance time to work. A Welsh NG respondent reported that sheer perseverance had led, in some cases, to progress:

> when then somebody starts saying something and it's… they've had a
> eureka moment, then I'm not going to turn round and say "Well actually I
> said that six months ago and you completely disagreed with me", because
> that would completely blow up, … it's that drip, drip, approach, and then
> once they've got it, they got it. It's… more than one way to skin a cat really
> isn't it.

The second is that agency is more likely where there is an **interdependency** between the state and NGOs. This plays out differently in each country setting. In Nicaragua, the state is highly dependent on NGOs to meet basic needs. In England and Wales, the increasing policy emphasis on the role of the third sector gives it leverage both as a

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[4] The Ortega government, elected towards the end of the study has now introduced its own structures at local level and it is uncertain how this will affect the Alliance.

service provider and as a channel for community voice. State actors frequently referred to the knowledge and delivery resources that professional NGOs brought to the governance table:

> As a local authority, there are things that we can't deliver on our own and things we need the voluntary sector to help us deliver, I mean advice provision is, I think, is a good example of that, but also working in partnership in terms of community engagement and that sort of legitimacy as well.

Related to this is the third proposition that agency is more likely in **service-oriented** partnerships than more generalist 'democratic' or 'place making' partnerships. We found at least three different orientations in governance spaces: a service orientation, a democratic orientation and a place making orientation – the latter in partnerships set up at neighbourhood level to improve local conditions and empower local people. Often these different orientations were mixed or confused. But, generally speaking NGOs felt that they had greater agency in service oriented than the other, more generalist governance spaces. Perhaps this was because these had a clearer, more tangible purpose, with NGOs valued for a recognised professional (or service user) expertise. The more democratically oriented partnerships raised issues about the relationship between participatory and representative democracy that were more difficult to address.

The fourth proposition is that agency depends on **a vibrant local politics** beyond formal state-led governance spaces. In the UK, especially in Wales, reference was made to a past where non-conformist churches and the labour movement had been the focus of a strong dissenting tradition. More recently, organisations in both England and Wales could trace their roots in the tenants' movement, civil rights and other social movements. These roots seemed to have become more tenuous as partnership working advanced. This contrasted with our Nicaraguan site, where the strong legacy of contention meant that NGOs were more likely to maintain an independent stance, as the example of the Alliance shows. It remains to be seen whether, in our English site, where funding had been withdrawn from the two infrastructure organisations which were rooted in these traditions, whether this will lead to action independent of the state to maintain their voice and find other routes to influence. In our Bulgarian site, meanwhile, the potential for developing these alternative spaces is constrained both by the absence of broader politics and/or a deep cultural mentality that inhibits agency.

Related to this is a fifth proposition - that agency depends on the presence or absence of **a sense of collective identity** within the sector. The Nicaraguan experience suggests that effectiveness in governance spaces depends on the capacity of NGOs to build alliances and develop a collective consciousness. But, for very different reasons, this appears to be more difficult in the UK and Bulgarian case study sites. There was little sense of a sector at all in our Bulgarian site, where a history of compulsory state-led 'voluntary' and professional associations under communism has left a negative legacy and where alternative forms of activism are as yet very fragmented. In the UK, the community sector often feels that it faces very different challenges from those facing the more professionalised voluntary sector. In addition, funding pressures and competitive tendering can lead to fragmentation within the sector.

Conclusions

Is autonomous agency a realistic aspiration in the new governance spaces or will they inevitably be inscribed with state power? It is certainly possible to argue the latter case. We have observed that: key decisions still take place outside new governance spaces; that paradoxically, as NGOs become more central to state policy, they are also more subject to control; that many spaces are increasingly managerial rather than political, allowing for expertise but not voice; that NGO dependency on the state – both financial and psychological - can blunt their influence.   In this view, governance can be seen as a device used by the state to incorporate and neutralise forces with the potential to transform the status quo. The challenge for non-governmental action then becomes: how can agency be nourished in unpromising circumstances? On the other hand, we have also reported that NGOs have a variety of choices in addressing the challenges of governance and that the very interdependency between state and NGOs that governance implies as well as the dynamics of relationships over time can open up opportunities. As Cornwall (2004:9) has argued:

> People who have never had anything to do with processes of rule are being brought into arenas of governance and are learning about how they work: lessons that may stand them in good stead in other arenas – may be incremental, but not inconsiderable.   Even where institutionalised participation has little or no policy efficacy, there are tactics to be tried, alliances to be built.

Here the challenge is to identify and widen the opportunities that change provides.

Our comparison between the different countries suggests that how this plays out in reality is dependent on the relationship between the state and NGOs in meeting need, citizen rights and expectations, the influence of external actors and more deep-seated political cultures.   Across countries, it depends too on the investment of time, on interdependency and the nature of the partnership. However, our research also suggests that agency may also depend on the existence of alternative frames – popular spaces beyond the invited spaces of state-initiated partnerships which can provide anchors for NGO players within them. These exist in our Nicaraguan case study. They do not appear to exist to any significant extent in Bulgaria. They have existed in the UK, but our analysis suggests here that, if NGOs are to continue to express a distinctive voice in new governance spaces, new autonomous spaces and dialogues will be needed.

However, Leach and Scoones (2007, p15) suggest another possible scenario. Drawing on previous work by Ellison (1997), they argue that "in a world increasingly influenced by the dispersing and fragmented effects of globalisation, there is a need to go beyond state-centred or even pluralist accounts of citizenship". A multiplication of identities, affiliations and forms of solidarity in their view requires a more interactive vision with the dissolving of more conventional boundaries between the public and private, the political and the social. In the UK, we encountered a number of hybrid organisations that started life as state-initiated governance spaces, related to particular central government policy initiatives but which reconstituted themselves as an "arm's-length body, in order to demonstrate community ownership and/or to increase their sustainability beyond the life of a particular bounded initiative" (Howard and Taylor 2008). While this has created highly ambiguous spaces, with a lack of clarity about roles, powers, boundaries and the status of state and non-state actors, it may be that spaces such as these offer an alternative beyond autonomy and incorporation, asking new questions about the nature of the nature of the democratic process.

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