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In Oliver Richmond and  
Henry Carey eds Subcontracting  
Peace - The Challenges of NGO  
Peacebuilding

## Chapter 3

# Up to No Good? Recent Critiques and Critiques of NGOs

Kim D. Reimann

In the past two decades, the number and influence of NGOs has grown dramatically, leading many scholars and observers in recent years to argue that a paradigm shift has taken place in politics and international relations theory. While the tone of the much of the literature on NGOs has been positive and has presented them in a progressive and idealistic light, the rise of NGOs has not been without controversy or critics. As NGOs have grown in size and influence, their actions have come under much greater scrutiny. Their role as a promoter of good causes has been called into question on several accounts.

This chapter examines the various criticisms of NGOs and calls attention to both the validity of these criticisms as well as contradictions and inconsistencies. Critics of NGOs can be found across the political spectrum, ranging from rightists who object to NGOs in principle to leftists who criticize NGOs for their failures to advance a progressive agenda or for deferring to government preferences. Despite their ideological differences and ultimate objectives, however, critics are remarkably similar in terms of their main complaints about NGOs. During the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, a clearly defined set of critiques of NGOs have appeared focusing on: (1) their performance and actual effectiveness, (2) accountability issues, (3) issues of autonomy, (4) commercialisation, and (5) ideological and/or political interpretations of their rising influence. Now appearing with increasing regularity and frequency in the academic literature, the policy world, and the popular press, these critiques have been directed towards not only NGOs working in the area of conflict resolution (the main subject of this book), but to *all* NGOs: advocacy NGOs, service NGOs, and NGOs working in various issues areas. In order to provide both a comprehensive and a refined examination of the debate, this chapter will present the major criticisms of NGOs in general, while distinguishing critiques as they apply to various types of NGOs.

### I. The Rise of NGOs as the Magic Bullet: 1980s-1990s

For NGOs working in the areas of international development, humanitarian crises and democracy promotion, the 1980s and 1990s were watershed years in terms of material resources available from external funders in the international donor

community. From comparatively low levels in the 1960s and 1970s, official funding for NGOs tripled in the 1980s then doubled again in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> By the mid to late 1990s, an estimated \$6 to \$7 billion dollars of official aid and foundation funding was being channeled through NGOs.<sup>2</sup> These increases in funding for NGOs marked a policy shift in the international donor community away from supporting state institutions towards a neoliberal, privatized approach to development and relief. NGOs were now heralded as the antidote to corrupt and failing states in developing and democratising countries since they would promote bottom-up, 'people-participatory' development and a thriving 'civil society' that would encourage the spread of democratic norms and practices.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the area of humanitarian crises, a shift towards aid privatisation took place in then 1980s and 1990s, with NGOs becoming the major funding recipients and service providers of relief in war-torn countries.<sup>4</sup>

The 1980s and 1990s also saw a rise in the amount of international funding and political support available for advocacy NGOs working in various issue areas, such as the environment, human rights, security issues and women's issues. Although US official aid, with the exception of democracy aid, was generally not available to advocacy NGOs, Canadian and European aid agencies were not shy about funding advocacy groups and provided funds for both international and developing country advocacy NGOs, especially those promoting environmental and human rights causes. However, it was private foundations, and in particular large American private foundations, that provided a major new surge of funding for advocacy NGOs. Starting in the 1980s, international programs of private foundations expanded rapidly, and by the late 1990s, \$1.6 billion was annually spent on international programs by American foundations alone.<sup>5</sup> In this period, advocacy NGOs were also now normatively portrayed by foundations, the UN, and other international elite institutions as a necessary 'citizen' or 'civil society' component of global politics that would hold states and international organisations accountable, provide 'voice' to the underrepresented, promote new norms and universal values, and provide the UN a way to address its 'democratic deficit'.

In sum, the 1980s and 1990s were not only a time of rapid NGO growth, these decades were a period in which NGOs came to be enthusiastically promoted by powerful states, international organisations and private foundations. The rhetoric and propaganda used by these international actors portrayed NGOs as the new citizen saviors that would help solve world problems ranging from 'equitable and sustainable' development to world peace to the spread of democracy and human rights. In addition to their idealistic image as altruistic and selfless promoters of good causes, NGOs were now presented as *functionally* important and contributors to human progress.

## II. Backlash: NGOs under Attack

Considering the excessively high expectations and the enormous amount of resources and political access given to NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s, it should not be surprising that numerous critics of NGOs have appeared. Appearing first in the

literature on development aid and humanitarian crises in the mid 1990s and then spreading to other parts of academic literature and popular press in the late 1990s and 2000s, several general criticisms of NGOs emerged as the core complaints and concerns. While closely interrelated, these core criticisms can be divided into the five main categories of: (1) NGO performance and effectiveness in obtaining their goals; (2) issues concerning accountability, representation and transparency; (3) the question of dependence on external funding and NGO autonomy; (4) commercialisation and the emergence of a highly competitive charity and activist 'market', and (5) ideological and politically motivated critiques of the rising influence of Western NGOs.

### Questioning Performance: Are NGOs a Force for Progress or Doing More Harm than Good?

Of all the criticisms directed towards NGOs, among the most serious are those focusing on NGO performance and effectiveness that claim NGOs have had a poor track record and have done more harm than good. These criticisms have been mainly directed at service NGOs working in the fields of international development and relief, but variations of these criticisms have also targeted advocacy NGOs.

#### International Development

In the area of international development, the question of NGO performance and effectiveness became a very central one given the fact that aid agencies and NGOs themselves were aggressively promoting NGOs as a cost effective and better way to reach the poor. Exceedingly high expectations for NGO-led development were bound to lead to disappointments and as early as the mid-1980s studies started to show that NGOs often performed poorly when it came to clear, measurable results and that NGOs did not seem to be living up to their image as vehicles for 'participatory' development.<sup>6</sup> By the mid 1990s, after billions of dollars had been poured into NGO development projects worldwide, Edwards and Hulme and other development scholars came to similar conclusions. While there were many cases of both NGO success and failure, the main body of evidence indicated that NGOs were not performing as effectively as the development paradigm had promised in terms of poverty reach, cost-effectiveness, sustainability, popular participation and flexibility and innovation.<sup>7</sup> Numerous government studies and evaluations on NGO performance and effectiveness have been undertaken since the 1990s, and most of them have found that while many individual NGO projects have often been judged 'successful', work done by NGOs still often falls short when it comes to sustainability, participation and significant improvements in socio-economic conditions or political empowerment.<sup>8</sup>

### Humanitarian Crises

Compared with NGOs working in humanitarian crises and conflict situations, however, the performance failures of NGOs in the area of international development seem minor. Since the mid 1990s, humanitarian relief NGOs have faced intense criticism for not only failing to succeed in their goals but for also often making a bad situation even worse. These 'doing more harm than good' criticisms are among the most damaging for NGOs and they have had a wider impact on the public image of NGOs in general since they have been the frequent focus of negative press exposes.<sup>9</sup>

Although critiques of humanitarian relief NGOs existed in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>10</sup> the more recent outpouring of criticism dates to the early to mid 1990s and flawed relief efforts in Somalia and Rwanda. The first critiques of NGOs performance in conflict zones came from NGOs themselves, with the report of the advocacy group African Rights in 1994 detailing the many problems and blunders caused by NGOs in Rwanda.<sup>11</sup> Since then, numerous studies, books and reports have come to similar conclusions and together comprise a general theory of how NGOs can, despite their best intentions, contribute to the prolongation and escalation of internal conflict.<sup>12</sup> Based on these various studies, relief NGOs are seen as potentially aiding conflict in five ways: (1) by providing resources to warring sides; (2) by contributing to market distortions; (3) by reinforcing societal divisions and conflict; (4) by freeing up internal resources for use in conflict; and (5) by legitimising warring sides.

Nearly all of the criticisms of the effectiveness and poor performance of humanitarian relief and other NGOs working in conflict situations fall into one of these five categories. One of the most common criticisms, for example, has focused on how relief aid and NGO presence in a conflict situation invariably brings in new resources from the outside that are used and manipulated by warring sides in ways that fuel and/or prolong conflict. Large-scale theft and misappropriation of relief aid has often led to substantial amounts of aid being channeled into war-related activities and NGOs often directly support warring factions when they hire local armed guards for protection, and when they pay fees and other sorts of payments to warlords in order to be allowed to operate in some conflict zones.<sup>13</sup> NGOs have come under harsh criticism for prolonging conflict and reinforcing divisions within society by appearing to take sides when they provide relief to a targeted victim group. As was the case in Rwandan and Cambodian refugee camps, relief can end up in the hands of the 'wrong' side and support new waves of violence and conflict.<sup>14</sup> Refugee camps themselves can be a strategic resource for one side in a conflict, providing an internationally protected base for regrouping and for recruiting soldiers.

Another huge source of criticism has emphasized the market and economic distortions that NGOs and relief aid either cause or reinforce and how NGOs contribute to the creation of dysfunctional wartime economies. Food aid has been repeatedly criticized for its negative economic effects such as creating food import dependency in formerly self-sufficient states, enriching corrupt elite and rebels who use food aid for power and personal enrichment, and putting small scale

farmers and local distributors out of business by flooding the market with cheap imported food.<sup>15</sup> In addition to their role in providing food aid, NGOs also are criticized for their contribution to a dual war economy when they appear in the hundreds and pay exorbitantly high prices for housing, supplies, salaries for local staff and other local expenses.<sup>16</sup> In general, the aid industry has tended to reinforce pre-existing income disparities by disproportionately benefitting local educated elite (who own property and can speak English) and corrupt, powerful actors who are best positioned to exploit outsiders.<sup>17</sup> In cases where the aid industry becomes a major source of employment and business for the local population, it can unintentionally create a stake in the continuation of the conflict since peace would mean a potential withdrawal of aid and loss of jobs and economic livelihood.<sup>18</sup> By not adequately planning and preparing the local population for their eventual departure, NGOs have been criticized for creating dependency on aid and contributing to the general decline in local self-sufficiency and self-help that makes the transition back to a peacetime economy even more difficult.<sup>19</sup>

### Advocacy NGOs

Although most of the criticisms of NGOs regarding effectiveness and performance have been directed towards service-providing NGOs, advocacy NGOs have not been immune to similar criticisms.

In area of democracy promotion, for example, advocacy NGOs have been criticized for failing to live up to the high expectations of international donors and although civil society aid has been successful in stimulating a surge in the number of advocacy NGOs in transition countries, this increase in the number of groups promoting democracy has not necessarily led to the vibrant, flourishing and independent Tocquevillian civil society as envisioned by Western donors. So far, assessments of effectiveness of advocacy NGOs have been mixed and largely negative with only scattered evidence that they are adequately performing the various functions of 'civil society' in supporting the growth of democratic practices and values. Most studies have found that these newly created NGOs function poorly, lack popular support and participation and, when they do perform well, tend to do so as elite lobbyists and trustee organisations located in a country's capital.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the small world of democracy promotion, advocacy NGOs promoting a variety of causes internationally and transnationally in areas such as the environment, human rights, and trade have been criticized for misrepresenting facts and doing harm to those they intend to protect. Scientists, for example, have sharply criticized Greenpeace and other environmental NGOs for their strong stance against all genetically modified organisms (GMOs) which, they claim, has resulted in declining funding for GMOs in developing countries and has ended up hurting farmers there seeking to lower pesticide usage.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, advocacy NGOs protesting against child labor in developing countries have also been accused of doing more harm than good by depriving child workers and their families of needed income when multinational corporations like Nike shut down their overseas factories in response to boycotts and negative press.<sup>22</sup> In the past few

years, scholars and practitioners have become more critical and discriminating in their study of transnational advocacy NGO effectiveness and have found that a wide variety of cases exist ranging from high profile success stories in which local populations were empowered and benefited from their ties to transnational actors to cases of miserable failures in which Western NGOs actually *disempowered* local groups. As Lisa Jordan and Peter van Tuijl have argued, not all international NGOs are 'politically responsible' about maintaining sufficient levels of communication and information exchange with the local populations they claim to represent. In such cases, Western NGOs have often ended up running campaigns that directly competed with campaigns and goals of local groups and ultimately led to 'solutions' contrary to the real interests of the local population.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Watching the Watchdogs: Issues of Accountability, Representation and Transparency*

Strongly interrelated to the question of NGO performance and effectiveness is the question of accountability. If NGOs are not performing well, how can they be held accountable for their mistakes and other questionable practices? Nearly all critics of NGOs, friendly and unfriendly, bring up the problematic issue of ensuring accountability due to the lack in many countries, of a sufficient and useful set of regulations and standards for NGO performance, governance and transparency. In addition to performance accountability problems discussed in the previous section, accountability issues include questions of finance, representation and transparency.

In terms of financial accountability and corruption, a recurring problem mentioned frequently in the literature is the phenomenon of 'fake' NGOs set up in developing countries by local entrepreneurs, gangsters, for-profit businesses and government officials in order to tap into the many funding opportunities now available for NGOs.<sup>24</sup> Such NGO pretenders have become so prevalent in countries where international funding for NGOs is available that a whole new set of names and acronyms have been created to describe them: briefcase NGOs (BRINGO), come and go NGO (ComeN'Go), commercial NGO (CONGO), criminal NGO (CRINGO), government-owned NGO (GONGO), government-run and initiated NGO (GRINGO), mafia NGO (MANGO), party NGO (PANGO) and my own NGO (MONGO).<sup>25</sup> With the rise of these sort of NGOs, the difficulty of sorting out legitimate and 'good' NGOs from the corrupt, profit-seeking and 'fake' ones has led to general cynicism and skepticism towards NGOs, especially among local populations in the developing world.

Issues and criticisms relating to financial accountability are not, however, restricted to these most obvious cases of fake NGOs in developing countries. Legitimate NGOs with extensive operations and projects, particularly large Western-based service NGOs that operate worldwide, have been taken to task and criticized for spending too much money on overhead and administrative costs and too little on the on their actual projects. Pressure to keep overhead costs to a minimum have led many NGOs to 'fudge' some of their accounting, leading to criticisms and minor scandals when it is occasionally discovered that a portion of program costs was in fact spent by NGO headquarters for administrative expenses.<sup>26</sup> Some of the sensationalist criticisms of the 1990s aimed at NGOs

involved accusations that a substantial percentage of private donations were not being used to help the poor but to fund large salaries, jet-setting costs of plane tickets and hotels, and other administrative costs.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the financial bottom line, many critics have focused on issues of accountability related to representation, such as the so-called problems of a 'democracy deficit' and 'voice accountability'. Although supporters of NGOs and NGOs themselves have an idealized image of NGOs as representatives of 'the people' and 'civil society', critics have emerged who question the ability and the right of NGOs to make such grand claims.

#### *No Longer Nongovernmental? Funding Dependence and Issues of Autonomy*

Since governments and multilateral institutions began channeling billions of dollars of aid through NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s, an increasing number of NGOs have become dependent on official sources of funding for their activities. Various studies in the 1990s, for example, concluded that Western-based INGOs working in development and relief were 30-90 per cent dependent on official funding and a large number of Southern NGOs were 80-100 per cent dependent on foreign sources of aid.<sup>28</sup> As ties between many NGOs and the state have deepened, critics have accused NGOs of being coopted by the state and of effectively losing their autonomous 'nongovernmental' status as they become the subcontractors and policy instruments of states and IGOs. These criticisms have mainly applied to service NGOs working in international development and humanitarian relief which receive the bulk of official funds, but they have also extended to advocacy NGOs in developing countries working in the area of democracy, democratisation and 'civil society' representation which have also relied heavily on outside funding from bilateral aid agencies, multilateral donors and private foundations.

According to the critics, aid contracts and official funding rob NGOs of autonomy and legitimacy as an independent actor in several ways. First, as NGOs rely more on official funds, their projects and activities have often become more concerned with donor interests than with the needs of the local constituencies they claim to serve. To get funding, NGOs have become 'donor-driven' and have shifted their activities to match the goals of donors, starting projects not because there is bottom-up demand but rather because there is top-down supply of resources.<sup>29</sup> In addition, once on the government payroll, onerous reporting requirements and the need to respond to demands of donors can comprise NGOs by diverting their energy away from their grassroots constituencies and forcing them to sacrifice both institutional and programmatic integrity.

A second and related criticism is that as NGOs have become more dependent on official sources they have been less likely to be involved in advocacy or any activity that might be construed as overly political or critical of their donors.<sup>30</sup> Due to their eagerness for funding and their fear of losing funding once they get it, NGOs have been politically muzzled and have shied away from any meaningful 'empowerment' activities that could lead to real change for the poor they seek to serve.<sup>31</sup> According to critics in this area, this loss of political autonomy has meant that many NGOs have essentially become policy instruments of the state and IGOs.

Third, and finally, the issue of funding dependence on official sources raises problematic questions about legitimacy for Southern NGOs in developing countries where official funding is often foreign funding from a bilateral agency, an multilateral institution, or a Western foundation grant. Southern NGOs that depend on foreign funding have been attacked by their governments as 'agents' of Western cultural imperialism and their ties to Western governments and INGOs make Southern NGOs vulnerable to such accusations.<sup>32</sup> This has been particularly true for advocacy NGOs working in the democracy aid industry that promote human rights or in some way challenge states.<sup>33</sup> Almost inevitably, local NGOs that are heavily dependent on foreign funding will tend to be viewed by both governments and local populations as less legitimate and less authentic than those that receive no outside support.

*Competing in the Do-Gooder Market: Commercialisation, Professionalisation and the Loss of the 'Voluntary' Spirit*

In addition to concerns about NGOs losing the 'n' in 'nongovernmental organisation' abbreviation, some critics have also worried that NGOs are losing the 'n' in their status as non-profit organisations. As NGOs have grown both in number and in size in the past two decades, critics have also focused on how the growth in official funding and the emergence of a competitive charity market have transformed NGOs into large, highly professional organisations that behave less like voluntary, non-profit 'citizen' organisations and more like governments or for-profit organisations. In the process of becoming more professional, these critics argue, NGOs have also become increasingly bureaucratic and income-driven and have lost many of the original comparative advantages and features that made them special in the first place – i.e. their idealism, their spirit of voluntarism, their small scale and innovative flexibility, and their ability to engage with people at the grassroots level.

The surge of funding for NGOs since the 1980s has contributed to these trends in several ways. First, in the industrialized world, a substantial amount of official funding for development and relief has often gone to a small group of Western-based INGOs that have become multi-million dollar mega-NGOs with enormous staffs and operations worldwide. Donini and Smillie have noted how an oligopoly of eight families or confederations of INGOs controlled up to half of the total funds available for development and relief activities in the 1990s, with many of them having budgets of \$500 million or more.<sup>34</sup> Similarly in the developing world, one can find numerous examples of Southern service-providing NGOs that expanded enormously as they became the favorites of donors as channels for 'people participatory' aid. In both cases, as these NGOs grew into mega-NGOs they quickly became more hierarchical, more bureaucratic and more like the governments that they were meant to be a pragmatic alternative to.<sup>35</sup> Although originally prized by aid agencies for their small-scale and innovative responses to local conditions, NGOs ironically started losing these traits and comparative advantages once they started applying for and getting large amounts of aid for 'scaling-up'.<sup>36</sup>

Secondly, critics point out that being part of the official aid industry itself has had a commercialising effect on NGOs and has remolded them into more corporate-like organisations. Because of the need to be accountable to official aid agencies for increasingly large sums of funding, NGOs have had to adopt a more market approach to their programs, measuring 'inputs' and 'outputs', costs and benefits and overall efficiency.<sup>37</sup> The result, these critics claim, is that NGOs have moved towards a corporate model and have lost touch with the original community-based, voluntaristic principles which made them special and separate from the market. As they have become more market-oriented, NGOs view communities as 'clients' and move away from principles of reciprocity, obligation and community solidarity.<sup>38</sup>

But official funding is just one part of the picture. The emergence of a lucrative 'charity market' of private donations in the 1980s and 1990s also brought about increasing levels of competition among NGOs, especially in the mid to late 1990s as funding levels stabilized. These market pressures and the desire of NGOs to increase or at least maintain their share of the market has encouraged a more corporate approach that emphasizes efficiency, market principles and professionalism.<sup>39</sup> Dichter, for example, has noted how large NGOs working in the area of international development have adopted management and corporate financial strategies such as transfer pricing and transfer fundraising. In organisational workshops and retreats, NGO executives and staff now refer to both beneficiaries and donors as 'customers' and discuss what specialty or niche their organisation should focus on.<sup>40</sup> Compared with the past, many people now working for NGOs see it as just another professional career – one that requires advanced degrees and may lead to work for the government or private sector – and appear to lack the personal and long-term commitment to the NGO 'cause' that previous generations showed.<sup>41</sup> Large, successful NGOs appear to be very similar to for-profit interest groups: they have nice offices, their executive staff get paid well, their staff jet-set around the world, and when they live abroad they inhabit an expatriate 'bubble' of privilege and relative luxury.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, market competition and the pressure to continually raise large sums from the general public have also caused NGOs to adopt questionable marketing and fundraising practices that have raised ethical questions about their integrity and real intentions. In the 1980s and 1990s, the use of images of starving children and refugees by development and relief NGOs in their ads and fundraising appeals led to a series of false advertising scandals and public outcry that NGOs be more accountable and less exploitative of the poor in their marketing.<sup>43</sup> These and other questionable practices also led some critics to view NGOs as profit-driven, self-serving 'business' organisations that care more about perpetuating their own organisational existence than helping victims of poverty and conflict.<sup>44</sup>

Although these various critiques were largely directed at large service-advocacy NGOs working in the areas of development and humanitarian crises, market-related opportunism. Large and well-funded advocacy NGOs also have become more professional and 'businesslike' in their appearance and practices in the 1980s and 1990s, with well educated, middle to upper middle class professional



staff who work in pleasant offices next door to for-profit tenants.<sup>45</sup> Advocacy NGOs have adopted similar market-oriented, corporate models such as niche specialisation and logo merchandise; and their highly professional lobbying skills make them (at least in outward appearance) practically indistinguishable from high paid industry lobbyists.

As they have grown more influential, moreover, large advocacy INGOs in the West have also become powerful overseers of a global market of worthy and just causes spreading patterns of NGO 'marketisation' to the developing world. With their funding-raising skills, their ability to generate media coverage and their considerable political influence, large Western advocacy INGOs are now the gatekeepers of global activism, picking and choosing which of the many international causes are the most deserving of international attention.<sup>46</sup> To local movements and activists from developing countries, international activism is a 'Darwinian marketplace' where only the most savvy and well-packaged causes that meet the organisational needs of Western INGOs see the light of day. Movements with charismatic leaders that speak English, that espouse non-violence, and that can frame their cause in simplistic, universal terms that appeal to Western audiences are the ones most likely to get INGO support and attract global attention.<sup>47</sup> Once they get international support, local movements are usually given training in the West on how to market their cause to the media, get funding from foundations and other donors, and become a more 'professional' operation. This international marketisation and commercialisation of local movements in developing countries is not seen by critics as a positive development – to the contrary, they see these market forces as corrupting ones that divert local leadership from their original goals and potentially cause divisions within the movement as the international campaign becomes more and more removed from grassroots and local control.<sup>48</sup>

#### *Ideological and Political Backlash*

As they have become more influential and visible in world politics, NGOs have also faced ideological backlash from both the political left and right and have been depicted as a dangerous political force that threatens justice, freedom and the true will of the people. These critics have been equally harsh in their condemnation of NGOs and what they see as NGOs' 'real' political agenda, but their very different interpretations of this agenda have produced polar opposite conspiracy theories. While leftists accuse NGOs of being the agents for Western neoliberalism, capitalism and neocolonialism, right-wing critics bash NGOs for being the enemies of Western capitalism and democracy and the tools of left-wing radicals.

Ideological criticism of NGOs from the left and the developing world can be roughly divided into the two overlapping general conspiracy theories of hegemonic Western neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Both theories portray NGOs as part of a larger Western-led project of dividing the world into the haves (the West) and the have-nots (the rest).<sup>49</sup> Of the two, neoliberal conspiracy theories have been more common among Western scholars and observers and began appearing in the 1990s as official funding for NGOs working in developing countries skyrocketed.

Edwards and Hulme were the first to note the neoliberal market models underlying the new approach to aid and support of NGOs in the 1990s and warned that NGOs were at risk of becoming tools of an anti-state, pro-market 'New Policy Agenda'.<sup>50</sup> Others have similarly described how NGOs are part of a new Western approach to bilateral and multilateral aid that systematically weakens and 'decapitates' states by channeling funds to the private sector and by robbing states of policy autonomy through structural adjustment programs (SAPs).<sup>51</sup> NGOs have been important components of this neoliberal model, as the new privatized social welfare provider that both replaces state services and provides a social safety net and 'bottom-up' pressure valve, thereby allowing market forces to work their magic without causing excessive social disruption or resistance.<sup>52</sup>

The neocolonial conspiracy theories of NGOs build on and take these criticisms of the spread of neoliberal models even further and argue that NGOs are the 'advanced guard' of a new era of Western economic and political imperialism.<sup>53</sup> According to James Petras' leftist version of this argument, NGOs are the grassroots poster children for imperialist neoliberal (=global capitalist) forces that have appropriated the progressive rhetoric of 'civil society', 'sustainable development', 'empowerment', and 'bottom-up leadership'. Despite such noble-sounding phrases and goals, in practice NGOs usually disempower the poor and prevent them from effectively organising a united front against global capitalism. The proliferation of NGOs in developing countries in response to international funding opportunities, for example, has led to numerous, sometimes competing, small local projects that fragment poor communities into sectoral groupings and undermine their ability to see the larger, more systemic causes of their poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>54</sup> Unlike social movements which aim to mobilize mass populations for political and social empowerment, most Western-funded NGOs are apolitical and if anything have helped bring about the depoliticisation and demobilisation of the poor by discouraging mass-organized and class-based confrontational activities, by coopting potential movement leaders with the material promise of funding opportunities and by promoting 'self-help' projects that place the burden and responsibility of development not on the state or wealthy classes but on the poor themselves.<sup>55</sup> NGOs, thus, have proved to be ideal partners for global capitalist forces – NGOs have effectively helped contain potential bottom-up popular resistance to the neoliberal program and have promoted a privatized 'self-help' approach to development in which the poor are asked to exploit themselves.

These alarmist left-of-center interpretations of NGOs stand in sharp contrast to the equally alarmist views of political conservative and right-of-center NGO critics in America and other advanced industrialized countries. Instead of viewing NGOs as agents promoting the global spread of capitalism and neoliberalism, conspiracy theories from the political right interpret NGOs as a hegemonic leftist movement that undermines capitalism, democracy and the sovereign rights of states. This right-of-center set of critics emerged as an organized and coherent public voice in 2003 with the convening of a conference on NGOs by conservative think tanks in Washington, D.C., and the establishment of a web page called NGO Watch devoted to monitoring and exposing the dangerous growing power of

NGOs.<sup>56</sup> With the strong support of conservative think tanks such as American Enterprise Institute and the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy, this new set of NGO critics worries that NGOs, in cahoots with the UN, are 'hijacking' democracy and seeking to impose their progressive, anti-corporate values on the entire world.<sup>57</sup> According to these critics, NGOs and their rising influence in national and international politics threaten democracy, capitalism and sovereignty of the nation-state.

The rise of the Global New Left NGOs threatens not only democracy, it also threatens national sovereignty. Since many politically conservative critics of NGOs are also critics of the United Nation and international treaties that constrain sovereignty in general, they often view relations and links between the UN and NGOs as a conspiracy to promote liberal internationalism and a quasi-world government. According to this analysis, NGOs have been able to advance their Global New Left cause by cooperating with the United Nations and other intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) under the banner of 'global governance'.<sup>58</sup> By channeling their efforts through IGOs and working with IGOs on the numerous issues that fall under the catchall category of global governance, NGOs have been able to influence international relations and set up international standards that potentially erode the sovereign rights of nations and put international pressure on states to fall in line with leftist NGO agendas in the areas of human rights, the environment, development, population policy, arms and security policies, health policy and many other issue areas.<sup>59</sup> Critics from the right are particularly alarmed by these developments since they believe that NGOs are often wrong in their policy prescriptions and that NGOs tend to advocate anti-market, anti-scientific and anti-democratic solutions that leave countries worse off. Bate and Tren, for example, have argued that the unbalanced and unscientific approach of NGOs calling for international bans of pesticides and genetically modified food products has led to 'international standards' and policies that have exacerbated malaria and food shortages in Africa.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, right wing critics of NGOs also claim that the New Global Left NGOs are enemies of corporations and have an anti-market orientation that seeks to undermine capitalism and free markets. As the major promoters of the concept of corporate social responsibility, for example, advocacy NGOs are trying to set standards for business behavior that conservative critics find unreasonable and detrimental to the normal functioning of businesses and free markets.<sup>61</sup> In addition to the NGO-led social investment movement and attempts to influence corporate policy through shareholder resolutions, NGOs have waged various all-out campaigns to hold corporations responsible for the many social and economic injustices of the world ranging from environmental degradation to human rights abuses and health-related problems.<sup>62</sup> In addition to causing reputational damage to corporations, these NGO campaigns have hampered capitalism by creating unrealistic expectations for what corporations are responsible for and by misinforming the public of the various misdeeds committed by corporations. In the latter case, the 'anti-science' view of NGOs that sees only danger in scientific and technological advancements (e.g. biotechnology, nuclear power, toxic but useful

chemicals, etc.) has slowed down economic development and prevented capitalism from spreading gains from science to the market.<sup>63</sup>

### III. Conclusion: Assessing NGOs and their Critics

Given their much larger presence and role in international politics in recent years, it should not be surprising that NGOs have come under increasing levels of scrutiny and criticism. In a sense, criticisms are natural and to be expected as part of a coming of age process; if NGOs were still minor players with absolutely no influence in international politics, they would not be attracting attention or criticism in the first place. As is the case with other important international actors – e.g., states, IGOs, and multinational corporations – NGOs are not infallible and bring with them their own set of organisational dysfunctions and pathologies. Criticisms are both inevitable and good since they force NGOs to grapple with the multitude of problems and issues that face *any* organisation that commands resources and power.

While these criticisms are sometimes exaggerations, most of them have more than a grain of truth to them and involve problems that many NGOs are well aware of. Larger international NGOs in particular have struggled with many of the issues described in this chapter and since the mid-1990s have made numerous attempts to address criticisms related to performance, accountability and marketing practices. Humanitarian and development NGOs were the first to devise self-imposed 'codes of conduct' in 1995 in response to NGO failures in Rwanda in 1994 and there are currently several initiatives now underway for monitoring and implementing so-called 'best' and 'good' practices. These include People in Aid's Code of Good Practice, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International and the Sphere Project.<sup>64</sup> Advocacy NGOs have been slower to respond, although there is now an active debate taking place among certain NGOs, with new projects appearing in recent years such as the International Council on Human Rights Policy's project on NGO accountability.<sup>65</sup>

Despite these efforts, however, there are reasons to believe that many of the problems NGOs face in the five areas mentioned in this chapter will not be easily solved and will require more than just efforts and changes on the part of NGOs. Problems that NGOs face are often embedded in larger structural problems and realities that are beyond their control. Additionally, some of the criticisms place contradictory and conflicting pressures on NGOs that are hard to respond to simultaneously. For NGOs to address many of the critiques found in the literature and media, it will also be necessary for states, IGOs and other actors to examine their roles and contributions to the problems. To conclude, the debate on NGOs is a complex one that will continue for some time to come. Now considered mainstream players in many areas of international relations, NGOs are finding themselves targets of many of the same criticisms that they themselves made of other influential actors. This is a healthy and a necessary stage in the historical development of the NGO sector, but one that should also be tempered with a



deeper discussion of the larger set of structural challenges facing NGOs. Although NGOs are not the 'magic bullet' that will solve all problems and NGOs have earned many of the criticisms mentioned in this chapter, they have also provided relief and 'voice' to millions of people in practically all corners of the globe. To move from de-constructive criticism to constructive criticism, the debate on NGOs needs to be both broadened to present the bigger, structural challenges they face as well as fine-tuned to delineate when and how they can contribute to positive change.

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