Development NGOs, civil society and social change

In order to understand development-focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it is useful to situate them in terms of their role in civil society and, more generally, in relation to the global historical context ofsocial change. The three main elements of this contribution – NGOs, civil society and social change are hard to define, dynamic and contested. NGOs are difficult to define and classify, and the lack of an agreed definitional framework poses ongoing difficulties for understanding and analysis.The term ‘NGO’ merely defines what they are not, leaving an extremely broad canvas of differing origins, motivations, organizational and funding structures. NGOs may have exogenous or endogenous origins, and are usually associated with voluntarism, ‘private’ constitution and non-profit orientation. The definitional dilemma surrounding NGOs is not merely a theoretical or conceptual problem; it also presents practical obstacles for understanding and learning. The literature defines them as private voluntary organizations (PVOs), or non-profit organizations (NPOs)(Salamon, 1994; Vakil, 1997). Development NGOs are those associated with the delivery of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and development programmes. They are typically financed through a mix of voluntary private donations and funding from donor agencies, including private and public or official governmental and intergovernmental aid. The definition of NGOs as being autonomous and independent of local, national and/or international state actors is therefore partly inaccurate. NGO work is often justified as being more altruistic, benevolent, efficient and effective in pursuing public purposesthan state agencies. However, NGOs have been increasingly influenced by and dependent upon, donor policies since the late 1990s and the predominant analysis and understanding of NGOs has tended to reflect the influence of changing macroeconomic ideologies, rather than being grounded in evidence-based research(Wallace, 2003; Wallace, 2004).

Recent histories of NGOs(Khagram, et al., 2002; Davies, 2013) point to the continuities with much earlier forms of religious and collective activism and action. Including religious organizations in ‘NGOs’ makes them eight or nine hundred years old(Davies, 2013), a far more ancient pedigree than ‘governments’. Their history potentially spans from their ‘prehistory’(Davies, 2013) through to the ‘hypercollective action’ era, which began in the latter half of the 1990s (Severino & Ray, 2009). Korten notes that ‘NGOs’ are, by definition, a much older phenomenon than states, if we consider how communities organized for mutual protection and self-help even before governments came into existence (Korten, 1991). Davies argues that older, as well as non-Western organizations, have tended to be neglected, while Barnett’s history of humanitarianism problematizes an evolutionary view of NGOs, which ‘is rooted in Western history and globalized in ways that were largely responsive to interests and ideas emanating from the West’ (Barnett, 2011, p. 16). Scholars taking a more long-term, global view tend to see NGO development not as linear expansion, but contingent, complex and possibly following cyclical, dialectical patterns of global expansion,retrenchment and fragmentation.

NGOs are often understood as synonymous with ‘civil society’, representing a ‘third sector’distinct from both the public state sector and the private marketsector. They are especially associated with ‘development’, and most of the literature tends to exclude purely business-oriented organizations, as well as some non-profit ones such astrade unions, professional groupings, recreational, cultural and exclusively religious bodies. Vakil considers‘development’ to be the central defining aspect of NGOs, but there is a lack of agreement about the definition of ‘development’, although most commentators accept that economic and social development are now core defining features of NGOs(Gorman, 1984; Salamon & Anheier, 1992). The coexistence of definite and fuzzy defining criteria makes more sense when NGOs are set within the context of neoliberal transformations of global development.This situates NGOs within the active and changing reconfiguration of the relative roles of the state, the market, and civil society – focusing on the role of states before the 1980s, promoting the role of markets in the 1980s and 1990s and pointing to market failures after the mid-1990s(Wallace, 2004). Thus the rise of NGOs reflects ideological undercurrentsconcerning global development and poverty reductionthat have come to prominence since the 1980s(Hulme, 2013).

Two major debates have emergedthrough the attempts to define NGOs:one around the extent to which NGOs can be said to act on behalf of civil society and the second concerning the relationship between the NGO sector and the state (Vakil, 1997, p. 2059). ‘Civil society’ remains an elusive concept, having gained different meanings and inflections as it emerged and evolvedthrough the nineteenth, twentieth and now twenty-first century. In the early 1820s, the philosopher G.W.F Hegel theorized ‘civil society’as the necessary precondition for state-formation. The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocquevillesaw civil society in quite a different lightin his observations of American democracy in the 1830s, - as a sphere of private, civil affairs separate from the state. Having experienced both the Terror of the French Revolution and the Bonapartism that followed(Chakrabarti, 2016), de Tocquevillewas attracted by the independentquality of American civil society and idealizedindependent civic association as a bulwark against the potential despotism of a centralized administrative state.Marx, writing in the 1840s, saw civil society as the source of power for a bourgeois state, an idea that Gramsci reworked in his Prison Notebooks of the 1920s. Gramsci saw civil society asthe space where hegemony was achieved as an alliance between the state and dominant classes(Chandoke, 2010, p. 177).Civil society included ‘private’ institutions such as trade unions, churches and the education system, which generated popular consent for political rule by the state. However, this consent was a dynamic and unfinished process and therefore civil society couldalso provide the arena in which non-dominant, or ‘subaltern’, classes could forge social alliances and begin to articulate alternativesor counter-hegemony.

What we see today, a century and a half after de Tocqueville is a largely Tocquevillian view of civil society, but in a very different context. The contemporary understanding of civil society has its recent history in the breakdown of the totalitarian state in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Civil societycame to be equated with the rejection of dominating, state-oriented andsingle party-based mass politics, in favour of individualism and a more liberal orientation based on democratization and civil and political freedoms, along with an implicit welcome for the arrival of market forces. The concept of civil society that was reborn in 1980s Eastern Europe was translated into a welcome for civil society as a good thing in and of itself, particularly in the context of African development in the 1990s(Ilal, et al., 2014). Proponents of global civil society tend to see NGOs as expressions of it, even to the extent of being synonymous with it (Anheier, et al., 2001, pp. 4, 15).

The third element for discussion here, social change, may involve two kinds of processes, *adaptation* or *transformation*. It can involve different ‘units’ of change and we need to be able to think in quite a flexible way about how different actors (persons, movements or organizations) exercise agency in bringing about change(Dwyer & Minnegal, 2010).

Kaldor distinguishes the activist ‘Post-Marxist’ perspective on civil society that emerged from oppositional forces in Central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s from a neoliberal version of it. The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 offered a watershed for redefining ‘associational life’ as the non-profit, voluntary ‘third’ sector. Kaldor further identifies a ‘postmodern’ civil society, an arena of contestation and pluralism that may be characterized by incivility as well as civility(Kaldor, 2003, pp. 6-12). The next section looks at NGOs rise to influence in international and national political processes in decades leading up to the 1990s, and reflecting a shift in political thinking awayfrom ‘government’ and towards ‘governance’ in a market-dominated global system.

# 2. Themes and tensions in NGO activism

The long-run history of NGOs highlights two intertwined themes: the universalizing push towards a global spread of humanitarianism and internationalism, and a contradictory push-and-pull of politicization and depoliticization.

Davies’ new history identifies three main phases of NGO development since ancient times, with the early 1930s and late 1990s marking exceptional peaks in transnational NGO activism. ‘Modern’ NGOs emerged in the age of political enlightenment and revolution after the 1760s, and from then on NGOs underwent processes of internationalization, diversification,and specialization. The early twentieth century saw asecond period of major international NGO (INGO) expansion. Notable NGOs of this period included the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations which sought to solve international problems using universalistic scientific approaches. However, many transnational actors of the early twentieth century were ‘uncivil’ in the sense of promoting aggressive nationalism and imperialism, and contributing to the deterioration of peaceful international relations(Davies, 2013, p. 76).Many organizations ‘became increasingly exploited by governments, and fragmented along the geopolitical divisions of the period’ (Davies, 2013, p. 107). Internationalism expanded as a cause during the early decades of the twentieth century, largely in response to growing nationalism and political ideological competition, world war and the need for economic and social renewal wrought by the Great Depression.

Political-ideological rivalry declined with the end of the Cold War in 1989, leading to a new boom for NGOs.The closing decades of the twentieth century are sometimes described as a period of ‘associational revolution’(Salamon, 1994). This period saw the growth of humanitarian assistance, the rapid rise of voluntary, non-profit organisations and their coalescence as a ‘sector’. Development NGOs emerged in this context of broad-based expansion of voluntary, non-profit organizations ‘pursuing public purposes outside the formal apparatus of the state’ (Salamon, 1994, p. 109). Thecollapse of authoritarian regimes, the re-emergence of ‘civil society’ and a major shift in conceptualizing ‘development’ came together, according NGOs greater prominence as development’s key actor. Civil society gained a renewed significance in a world of ‘transition’, where capitalism no longer had to contend with a rival political ideology. Yetit still retained a subversive connotationas it was identified with popular mobilization challenging state authoritarianism and claiming civil and political rights (Chandoke, 2010).

However, the spread of neoliberalism meant that it was no longer subversive to subvert the state, since the rollback of state power was implied in neoliberal policies of deregulation, structural adjustment, privatization and market expansion. NGOs supplement the reduced and transformed role of the state under neoliberalism, as enabler and regulator of private sector-led development, rather than acting as provider and producer of public goods(Wallace, 1997).

The expanded role for NGOs in the 1990s saw them becoming the key actors, supporting a largely unchallenged consensus in the global development sector or ‘industry’(Lewis, 2008). This putNGOs in a contradictory position. Banks and others (Banks, et al., 2015) point out that the rise of development NGOs as a whole ‘sector’ was based on the premise that they provide means to achieve alternative development, including transformative missions of empowerment and social justice. The NGO sector was brought in to widen the real participation of civil society in development, increasing the inputs of poor people into, and their responsibility for, planning and implementing development. Yet this expansion sucked NGOs into managerialist, top-down approaches and enhanced the advantages of larger more ‘corporatized’ NGO players over smaller organizations that might have held stronger pro-poor and participatory values(Wallace, 2003).

These trends may actually undermine local and national movements for structural change and benefits to the poor, while serving, and remaining complicit with, state and private sector interests(Lang, 2013). This underpins the radical argument that the dramatic expansion of the NGO sector over the past three decades has failed to produce a stronger, more vibrant civil society capable of tackling issues of power and inequality head-on, thus generating real transformative change. This critique is valid, but it should be seen in the context of new dilemmas of funding, accountability and influence, which significantly relate to questions of scale but also to the connection between development and politicization or depoliticization.

# 3. NGOs, the UN and global civil society

The post-1945 period saw NGOs becoming involved in emerging structures of global governance and starting to become identified as the agents of ‘global civil society’. Over the following decades, NGOs were able to attain influence within the UN structure of global governance, by gaining official status and inclusion in the work of the UN Economic and Social Council, (ECOSOC) the UN organ responsible for coordinating the work of the UN Specialized Agencies and commissions. ECOSOC designation resulted in the emergence of different categories of NGOs with differing opportunities to participate, as NGOs continued to expand, proliferate, specialize, professionalize and represent the emerging demands ofnew and different actors.

NGOs identity and position in international law and global governance is broadly accepted, but remains rather flexible, as there is no single agreed international legal definition. Article 71 of the UN Charter defines NGOs as organizations that are independent from government influence and not-for-profit, and in 1950UN ECOSOC defined NGOs,for the purposes of establishing consultative arrangements, as ‘any international organization which is not created by an intergovernmental agreement’.In practice, a wide range of organizationshave used various UN meetings both to further international causes and to make their views known to government representatives(Seary, 1996, p. 27).The position ofNGOs within the international system ranges from one of formal consultative status with intergovernmental bodies and instruments, to purely informal bilateral contacts. New developments point to increasing NGO involvement as recently introduced measures include NGO membership of regional bodies such as the African Union and more participation by NGOs in UN organs; streamlined and depoliticized accreditation procedures within the UN; renewed self-regulation and self-organization of NGOs in their relations with the UN; innovative participatory status for NGOs in the Council of Europe;and informal participation and administrative facilitation of NGOs in various EU meetings. These measures reflect the assumption that NGOs constitute ‘civil society participation’, which is increasingly perceived as a parameter for international organizations’ own efforts to do ‘good governance’ (Dupuy & Vierucci, 2008, p. 9).

The Cold War both politicized and depoliticized NGOs, as organizations were drawn into complex East-West and inter-state rivalries, leading to controversies over their purpose and status (de Frouville, 2008). These controversies persist to an extent today, complicating the difficulties of meaning and interpretation accompanying the term ‘NGO’.The question of NGO inclusion and regulation in the international order reflects a tension between an idealist view of NGOs as normative, advocacy-focused organizations and theinstrumental, pragmatic view of NGOs as efficient service deliverers. International law, regulation and voluntary standards for self-regulation may be seen as self-evident, value-neutral and objective. Alternatively,we can see emerging international standards as the result of a mix of problem solving and contestation, with a variety ofactors trying to maximise different and, possibly competing, values(Higgins, 1994). The politicisation of NGO participation and acceptance of their role could lead to what de Frouville criticises as a ‘servile society’, where NGOs serve narrow state interests and domesticate the public, rather than constituting and robustly contesting the broader ‘public interest’(de Frouville, 2008). While the World Bank has embraced ‘participation’ and NGOs since the 1990s, critics argue that this has not led to sufficient NGOinfluence on the World Bankto change itsmodel of development. In practice, despite NGO involvement, development policies remained basically at variance with the values and advocacy messages thatthey claimed to embody(Wallace, 2004; Nelson, 1995).

UN-NGO relations have evolved in three phases(Hill, 2004). In the first phase, up to the end of the Cold War, they tended to be at arm’s length and largely formal and ceremonial. Key exceptions to this were the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, and the International Coalition for Development Action’s (ICDA) work under the auspices of UNCTAD on the North-South Dialogue for a New International Economic Orderfrom the 1970s to the early 1980s. The second phase, in the 1990s, saw the fuller emergence of ‘global civil society’ and the consolidation of global governance, incorporating new ideas and practices of democratic governance. In this phase, greater emphasis was placed on the need for on-going participation by citizens and citizen organizations in governance processes. This phase focused on a number of World Conferences and Summits where NGOs sought to engage more directly in intergovernmental deliberations. NGOs developed more sophisticated advocacy and mobilization work to influence the outcomes of these meetings and global NGO alliances and coalitions became more prominent. Examining a mixture of reports and resolutions on the consultative relationship between NGOs and Intergovernmental organizations (Rebasti, 2008, pp. 23-37), Rebasti finds that NGO consultative status is inadequate to control and facilitate participation, as there is a 'gap between the factual and legal dimensions' of NGOs role. The trend is towards the institutionalisation of arrangements, via ECOSOC, the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the Joint United Nations Programme, for example. Rebasti notes significantly, that the prevalence of informality is likely to work against, rather than in favour of, the smallest and least well-resourced organizations. At the same time, the 1990s also saw the increasing presence and influence of the private sector at the UN(Hill, 2004).

The 1992 Rio Conference proved to be a watershed as concerted attempts by NGOs to participate in the Rio process led to ECOSOC’s adoption of Resolution 1996/31 as a formal, legal framework for UN-NGO relations. Resolution 1996/31 explicitly opened UN consultative status to national NGOs. These efforts were opposed by an alliance of established ‘first generation’ INGOs and reluctant Member States who wanted to prevent the opening of governance spaces to include national and regional NGOs. Despite these efforts at blocking, a ‘second generation’ of UN-NGO relations emerged, incorporating larger-scale NGO presence across the UN system. This involved more diverse organizations including national, regional and international NGOs, networks, coalitions and alliances, to bring a greater diversity of issues and positions to the table. The ‘second generation’ of UN-NGO relations was more political, since NGOs were better integrated into the institutional architecture of global governance. Greater politicization expanded the ideological spectrum within the UN system, and conservative and largely UN-sceptical national NGOs crowded in as a means to curtail the reach of UN agreements, especially in the areas of women's reproductive rights, arms control, pre-emptive military action and climate change.

Since the 1990s the ‘second generation’ of UN-NGO relations have seen a significant increase in operational cooperation between the UN Secretariats and agencies and NGOs, to collectively fund non-governmental projects and activities, both development focused and humanitarian in scope, in the global South. In addition to contractual cooperation, many forms of voluntary and consultative joint action have emerged between NGOs and UN secretariats.For example there have been hearings in the run-up to UNCTAD meetings, and the International Planning Committee, constituted by NGOs and allied groups and movements such as Via Campesina, haveengaged with following-up UN summits. There have also been more efforts at cooperation and coordination between UN field offices and information centres in developing countries and the local and regional NGOs.

Hill speculated that a third generation of UN-Civil Society relationshad begun to emerge by the early 2000s. This third generation had two forms: like-minded coalitions of governments and civil society(for example the International Criminal Court and Landmine Convention); and multi-stakeholder, public-private, public policy networks and partnerships, such as the Global Compact and GAVI, plus the literally hundreds of "Track II" partnership agreements that emerged after the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. These new forms of partnership relations embody both continuities and tensions with the second generation advocacy, which was largely political in nature. The second generation saw a change in the UN, from an organization in which only governments spoke to other governments, to one that, in the third generation, brings the political power of governments together with the economic power of the corporate sector, the 'public opinion' power of civil society, and the influence of (also corporate and highly monopolistic) global communication and information media(Hill, 2004). By the end of the 1990s, it had become possible to surmise that the NGOs were now part of a world of ‘hypercollective action,’, ‘a whole new ball game’ - of donor and organisational proliferation and fragmentation, “… a phase of international policies where thousands of actors are playing different ball games in the same field – with no referee!” (Severino & Ray, 2009, p. 11).

In a recent debate at the London School of Tropical Medicine, the editor of the Lancet journal, Richard Horton, suggested that a myth of pure virtue veils NGO action in the area of global health (Horton, 2016). Horton’s critique provokeda powerful rejoinder from NGO advocates, who argued that criticisms should be levelled at government and market, rather than ‘stigmatising’ NGOs (Sarriot, et al., 2016). However, some NGOs have become powerful political actors who can fight back. There are now estimated to be some ten million NGOs and it is suggested that if all NGOs were one economy, they would be the fifth largest economy in the world (OnGood, 2016). Horton argues that NGOs’ power begs critical questions about whose interests they serve and who really benefits from their interventions. Frequently, they may fragment services, promote unsustainable projects and remain unaccountable. To be fair, the same criticisms could be levelled at both government and private sector actors who don't want a vigorous NGO sector that can challenge their authority.

# 4. Trends of managerialism and ‘NGO-ization’

The increasing role of institutional donors from the end of the 1980s coincided with the significant increase in the establishment and support of NGOs to channel increasing official aid budgets. At the same time, new priorities and methods and cycles of growth and decline in aid flows resulted in larger NGOs expanding and relying more on institutional funding from official aid donor programmes, and then innovating to stay competitive in a now increasingly competitive development industry. Growing budgets and stringent donor demands led NGOs to embrace managerial concepts and tools commonly used in the private sector, ushering in an era of managerialism(Wallace, 1997, p. 35; Lewis, 2008) and ‘NGO-ization’(Lang, 2013). The growth in aid budgets in the late 1980s and early 1990s meant that donor agencies responded to growing demands for public accountability by imposing logical frameworks, and frameworks for evaluation and performance management, in order to demonstrate the legitimacy and impact of their work. The private sector gained greater cultural, as well as material, influence within national and international governance and this influenced language and ways of working:

‘Contract' is the modus operandi, with a focus on 'deliverables', measurable performance indicators and the achievement of targets against which people can potentially be called to account. The assumption is usually that the process is at least partly under control.Financiers look for value defined in financial terms and in terms of efficiency. The perspective is often short term. Rational and deductive project models and quantitative planning tools fit best in this sort of framework: logical framework analysis (LFA) and cost-benefit analysis (CBA) are increasingly common. (Wallace, 1997, p. 37; see also Riddell, 1996).

Successful NGOs began to grow considerably and their increasing size, complexity and desire for further growth resulted in their embracingstandardized and bureaucratic systems of financial and management performance and quality control. Some donors introduced new competing actors in the landscape, for example DFID ‘groomed’ several selected UK organisations to enter the sector that had not previously been part of it, including the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the General Medical Council (GMC). Donor funding volatility, short timelines and complex bid processes tended to favour big NGOs, or coalitions of big NGOs, and many smaller and medium-sized NGOs found themselves excluded or overstretched in applying for new bids that required intensive inputs of staff time, capacity and expertise (Wallace, 2003, p. 565).The growing size and complexity of ‘winning’ big NGOs (BINGOs) and the competitiveness of the development market, especially when donor funding changed or targeted new priorities, were key factors pushing NGOs towards managerialism and ‘NGO-ization’.NGO-ization’ is:

a…‘process by which social movements professionalize, institutionalize and bureaucratize in vertically structured, policy outcome-oriented organizations that focus on generating issue-specific and, to some degree, marketable expert knowledge or services. Emphasis is placed on organizational reproduction and in the cultivation of funding sources. It frequently results in increased recognition and insider status in NGO’s issue-specific policy circles. One effect might be the containmentand reframing of more radical messages; another effect might be an orientation toward institutional advocacy and away from public displays of dissent’(Lang, 2013, pp. 63-64).

NGO-ization has some clear advantages. The focus on professional expertise and getting more resources can result in more stable organizations that are able to support their moral claims with research, evidence and facts. Being seen as expert and competent may increase an organization’s access to institutional settings and help to inform and improve NGO strategies and success. However, the downside might be a narrowing of NGOs’ constituencies as they become more donor facing and less focused on the constituencies that they are supposed to stand for, and benefit(Lang, 2013, pp. 86-96). Larger NGOs increasingly use the services of commercial marketing and public relations firms to ‘sell’ their messages to donors and the public.The concern is that this leads to a ‘flattened-out’ version of civil society (Chandoke, 2003, p. 9), susceptible to publicity takeovers and ‘greenwashing’(Lang, 2013, p. 89). While the introduction of corporate methods has enabled slicker, appealing and arguably ‘effective’ publicity campaigns, for example recruiting celebrities to further development causes, it signals the tendency to practice ‘*speaking for*’ instead of ‘*engagingwith*’(Lang, 2013, p. 91).

# 5. Critiques of Eurocentrism and the search for alternative approaches

The critical analyses of NGOs coming from NGO voices themselves are joined by loud and distinct critiques of the ‘western-centred orientation’ of the study of NGOs and civil society. Some critics point to the restrictive reading of ‘civil society’ in the Southern context, which downplays much of the grassroots social interaction because they are deemed ‘uncivil’ *a priori*, and thus excluded from understandings of civil society(Ilal, et al., 2014). Viewed from a Southernperspective,a Eurocentric or Northern reading of civil society and NGOsbecomes empirically dubious and difficult to justify., The fact is that the majority of NGOs are located in the majority world, but Southern based NGOs and networks are far less frequently studied.In India alone, one 2008 study estimated that there were as many as 3.3 million NGO’s, a figure outnumberingthe primary schools and primary health centres in that country(Shukla, 2010). The same study also noted that the Indian government provided the largest proportion of the funding for these ‘social sector’ NGOs, almost double the amount contributed by foreign sources.

From an African perspective, there are critiques of the underrepresentation and ‘underweighting’ of the distinctive features of African civil society in the literature analysing global civil society(Fowler, 2012). Some complain about the quest for civil society unfolding amid a widespread disillusionment with both idea and reality, noting that social citizenship is being eroded everywhere. Meanwhile, Obadare argues that the dilemma of African civil society is straightforwardly political - a question of howto reinvent the postcolonial state as part of new economic development and political accountability strategies(Obadare, 2011, p. 434), or from a South African perspective through democratizing development through a democratic politics of socioeconomic rights(Jones & Stokke, 2005). What Africa needed was the kind of civil society that acts as a civil sphere(Alexander, 2006), imposing limits on the ability of both the state and the economy to colonize the lifeworldand foster individual and collective self-determination (Young, 2000, p.167).What it got instead was civil society organizations, especially NGOs. Following the scathing decolonial-critical analysis of Issa Shivji, NGOs could be seen as ‘inextricably imbricated in the neoliberal offensive, which follows on the heels of the crisis of the national project’ and acting as ‘the ideological footsoldiers of imperialism’ (Obadare, 2011, pp. 434-5). In that context, the quest by donors and NGOs to measure, assess and evaluate the efficacy of civil society in Africa is, in Obadare’s view, a quixotic venture. As an alternative, Fowler argues for the adoption of an Afrocentric epistemology to civil society, which would inform African self-understanding, draw on endogenous research, address the context and substance and take a practical and citizen-centred perspective on power relations(Fowler, 2012, pp. 21-22).

Studies of Chinese civil society point to a divergence from the Tocquevillian assumption about civil society and empirical alignment between Chinese statism and the realities of NGO-ization. While‘the typical Western concept of a civil society [implies] opposing state power…the purpose of early Chinese civil society was not to confront the government, but rather to harmonize the relations between society and the government, providing autonomy to assist government. This point was mutually accepted by both the government and society’ (Ma, 1995, p. 287).ThoughChina’s single party–state system and its long tradition of government control of all social organizations have caused commentators to see Chinese NGOs as lacking autonomy, that merely mirrors the trends for Northern donors to turn to NGOs to disburse development aid and implement development. Chinese NGOs have less autonomy thanNGOs in democratic countries, but the practice of government influence through funding occurs in many Western countries.Thus Ma asks whether the Chinese government’s influence is more questionable than that of others.(Ma, 2002, p. 122) In fact the ‘Chinese’ model for autonomous, but state-assisting, NGOs is structurally similar to that of ‘Western’ NGDOs particularly after the mid-1990s, when structural adjustment policies were replaced with the return of the state’s role to the centre of development.This time it was with an explicit focus on ‘good governance’ (Banks, et al., 2015, p. 708) that incorporated NGO expertise and values to speak for civil society while also delivering necessary goods and services to those denied them by market failures.

Despite this reality on the ground, the development sector industry takes a narrow, depoliticized and top-down definition of civil society, conflating it with a professionalized, elite cohort of NGOs who can connect with, and satisfy strict accountability processes to, governments, Northern NGOs, philanthropists, and other donors. The main distinction that should be made is between ‘intermediary NGOs’ and membership-based organizations. Many NGOs lack the attributes of membership-based organizations, and this limits theirpotential to act as countervailing powers against dominant state and market interests.

This explains why development NGOs have made less transformative progress and social change than might be expected. The argument is that, on the whole, the majority of development NGOs have weak roots in civil society, in the countries where theywork in and in which they generate resources. This weakness limits how much they can drive social change. Secondly, over the past decade, the NGO world has become permeated with technocratic reform and this has narrowed its work to focus on more limited, donor-oriented service-delivery,or mere astroturfed ‘democracy promotion’,rather than authentic, deep-rooted transformation(Kamstra, et al., 2013; Bebbington, 1997). In fact, this astroturfing threatens to erode the kind of vibrant civil society that is necessaryfor structural change. Trends in national and international political environments continue to constrain NGO activities, through defunding, repression and selectivity.

# 6. The possibilities and disappointments of human rights

This complexity and fragmentation of development governance has led some international development research, policy and practice actors to voluntarily seek to re-ground their development practice within a human rights agenda. Since the rise of ethical approaches to development (Goulet, 1971; Gasper, 2004), and the critique of development’s failures in light of the Rwanda genocide (Uvin, 1998), numerous attempts have been made to inform development with human rights concerns, align development agendas with human rights frameworks and integrate human rights in practice via the adoption of ‘rights based approaches’ to development(United Nations Development Programme , 2000). Yet, recent research suggests that human rights have actually lost traction since the formulation of the post-2015 development consensus of ‘sustainable development goals’ (Brolan, et al., 2015). These findings examined the global agenda-setting process for global health, arguably the most advanced domain of rights in practice, and a fundamental underpinning for global struggles for development and justice. A rights based approach, grounded in the Right to Development, foregrounds the importance of ‘meaningful participation’ and benefit in development practice(Sengupta, 2002). This aligns with NGO work and a conception of civil society that is actively participatory and ‘engaging with’, rather than ‘speaking for’. Noting that the development process is prone to the contradictory push-pull of politicization and depoliticization, a rights based approach looks to enact processes of democratizing development through a democratic politics of socioeconomic rights (Jones & Stokke, 2005, p. 2).

Human rights offers a serious alternative possibility of de-commodified approaches to development in an increasingly market-dominated world. It offers a normatively grounded understanding of what development is about, how it might be practiced and, ultimately, what it is for. The global, managerial and marketized version of NGO action risks becoming a Trojan horse for processes of commodification, accumulation and inequality, fought on the terrain of ‘development’. A contending global vision of development can be constructed, based on de-commodified visions of social and economic rights that prohibit inequality and discrimination. However, it is disappointing, but unsurprising, that many critical assessments of NGO-ization and managerialism list human rights based approaches as examples of the problem, rather than the solution. The concept of development based on human rights principles seems to have receded from the forefront of donor funding and NGO priorities in recent years, while funding, and the agenda, for humanitarian relief has grown.This is largely due to the expanded and protracted nature of conflict, frequency of natural disasters, the increased targeting of humanitarian facilities in contravention of international law, and the blending of humanitarian relief with developmental goals, as humanitarian activities move towards longer-term disaster preparedness, prevention and resilience. Some of this expansion may help to meet immediate human needs where development has failed. However, the questions remain: has the development community left human rights behind as a project and a principle, as it moves to embrace new pragmatic interests? Can human rights advocates and practitioners re-engage with development in practice, or do human rights and development remain as ‘ships passing in the night’, destined to pass each other in conditions of mutual unfamiliarity and incomprehension?(Alston, 2005)

# 7. Conclusions –NGO accountability in a world of narrowing public spaces

Even as we survey the critical challenges for NGOs detailed herein, it is already becoming apparent that NGOs are entering a new era. Arguably, they faceeven deeper challenges today than they have faced since they began their latest wave of expansion three decades ago.So perhaps a new era of retrenchment and fragmentation has begun, as predicted by the long-run analysis.Regular reports by NGOs documenttightening political restrictions on the way they work, while the OECD’s Busan partnership principles for development cooperation accorded official parity of esteem to private, for-profit actors in development assistance(OECD Development Assistance Committee, 2012). At the same time, the space for human rights, arguably the most hopeful and coherent alternative discourse and underpinningset of values for NGO work, is shrinking. *“This global wave of restrictions has a rapidity and breadth to its spread we’ve not seen before, that arguably represents a seismic shift and closing down of human rights space not seen in a generation.”*(James Savage, Amnesty International, cited in Houghton, 2016). Political elites across the world are increasingly seeking to control, command and restrict NGOs.Over sixty governments have enacted new and more restrictive legislation to control the operations of international and national NGOs and in ninety-six countries, NGO staff have reported experiencing vilification, funding restrictions, administrative harassment, closure and expulsion (Houghton, 2016).

Historically, INGOs maintained primary accountability in the countries where they were headquartered and had secondary accountability in the countries in which they operated. In the former, they had significant freedom to publicly advocate, and even challenge, their governments to advance their interests overseas. In the countries where INGOs work, large variations in freedom or restriction applied to local civil society organizations (CSOs). But major shifts in power and discourse have taken place and these variationsin freedom is becoming the default experience, even for large INGOs. Today, most African, Asian and Latin American governments no longer look exclusively to European and North American donorsand push back vocally against donor demands and conditionalities. Governments are becoming more openly confrontational and frank about potential conflicts of interest and there has been a turn away from internationalism and liberal cooperation across many countries regardless of ‘Global North’ or ‘Global South’ provenance.

Donor governments in Europe and North America are themselves turning to modes of engagement that are less idealized or normatively internationalist and more instrumental and ‘realist’. Governments are increasingly reframing development assistance within the envelope of trade facilitation, and are more unambiguous about geo-political and commercial interests, even if old discourses of assistance and cooperation have not entirely disappeared. Overseas development assistance has become more complex, multi-modal and unpredictable. NGOs may have to change in order to be empowered to challenge the shrinking political space for their work, while inequalities continue to widen and market failures continue. Houghton points to five specific areas that must be addressed if NGOs are to adapt to these new conditions. Firstly, the pattern of resource concentration must change. Most of the development resources are currently retained in the global north. Less than 2% of the US$150 billion of development funds spent by INGOs are directed to local CSOs in-country.Such inequity shows the bureaucratic and professional practices of the organizations to be self-serving and not disinterested. It is unfair to concentrate power in the head office, while withholding resources and influence from local development actors.

Secondly, the tendency toward elitism encourages conservatism and a culture of risk aversion. Neither expatriate nor in-country elites have the legitimacy needed to challenge local elites when the latter start to close down democratic spaces. This leads to Houghton’s third point,that NGOS should shift the emphasis towardsbuilding solidarity with local interests and communities and support them to become empowered to undertake their own governance oversight and self-regulation., Fourthly, INGOs must themselves implement more visiblyrepresentative forms of governance. 64% of those in positions of governance and 63% of the Chief Executive Officers of the top500 NGOs are drawn from the western world, according to https://www.ngoadvisor.net. Only 4% of CEOs are of African origin. Where they are African, the likelihood is that they have been recruited from the most privileged domestic top ‘1percent’. Houghton’s fifth, and final, point is that the supposition that NGOs can fully control, plan, measure and evaluate the world must be challenged. Development is an emergent and contested concept and openness, unpredictability and messiness are essential aspects of the work. The critique of the coloniality of NGOs and aid as largely Western, Eurocentric and focused on the desires or needs of those in wealthy countries cannot be dismissed. The critique points to a continuity between the colonial roots of ‘development’ as resource exploitation and the self-interested nature of contemporary international aid. Most accounts of NGOs continue to express an overly elitist, ethnocentric and narrow view. Western NGOs, and scholars alike, who are seeking to become more ‘global’ in their governance and identities, still exhibit a lack of awareness about the diversity of organizations that already exist around the world.They must learn from, and even link up with, these historical organizations and movements(Gaventa, 2015) if they really wishto be more global and cosmopolitan in a connected, rather than an imperialistic, manner.

The dilemmas of NGO and civil society action reflect the dilemmas of globalization itself. Globalization processes have intensified questions about the limitations of state power, the definitive form of political power in the international realm since the birth of modern international politics(Mann, 1997). States no longer hold the monopoly where global power is concerned. In terms of economic power, only 37 of the 100 world’s largest economies are countries, the majority, 63, are corporations, a fact which tips the balance of global power away from the political and toward economic forms of power. While there are elements of a global architecture in place, in the form of the UN and customary international law, this falls far short of comprising a world government. In the absence of a world state, it remains unclear what actors ought to represent ‘public power’ on the global scale(Buckinx, 2012). Cosmopolitan global optimists (Kaldor, 2003; Archibugi, 2008) see the rise of global civil society organizations as a democratizing force for global governance. However, in truth these organizations represent a variety ofdifferent values, rationales and worldviews: from secular to religious; egalitarian to paternalistic. CSOs or NGOs may work through, with or against markets; and they may regard people as active participants to be engaged or as passive beneficiaries to be spoken for. While many NGOs are generally benevolent and their actions beneficial, Buckinx argues that they are not ‘properly public’ and therefore should not seek to replace public authorities in performing certain key tasks, such as protecting liberties, or carrying out global distribution, regulation or administration. She observes that global actors of all kinds are frequently oppressive and cause harm to the individual with whom they interact - transnational corporations may pollute the environment, governments may attack their own populations, international financial bodies may dictate financial and economic policies that depress growth and reduce welfare provision. NGOs, when compared to this, may be rather benign and possibly quite effective global actors, but that does not mean that they should be pushed to the forefront of global governance(Buckinx, 2012, p. 536). They still lack the properties needed to be fully‘public’ actors. NGOs are private actors and are expected to behave, and be constituted, differently from public actors. This is why NGOs should not be asked to take on public tasks directly, tasks such as administering public programs or regulation of other actors’ behaviour in society. By their very nature, the scope of NGOs does not extend to all of the polity. Nor are NGOs subject to the kind of scrutiny and democratic accountability that we can expect from state-based politics. There are few tools currently available to exert control over them, beyond self-regulation and the normative pull of collective voluntary agreements. Thus they are not in a position to serve, speak for, or represent the public as a whole.Instead, they should be recognized as acting on behalf of the specific interests that they represent.

The transformative ambitions of development cannot be understood througha limited analysis of how well civil society ‘works’, but rather requires anunderstanding and ethicalresponse to the changing ideology oflargely Northern-based organisations and institutions. Pragmatism and opportunism have played a large role in determining NGOs’choices and will likely continue to do so. It is almost two decades since Wallace and her co-researchers began setting out a research agenda for the study ofNGOs(Wallace, 1997). Their research findings keep pointing to questions of power and values. Will NGOs retain their historic capacities to do work based on values beyond that of cost-efficiency, to do what is right rather than what is cheapest? Can smaller and medium sized NGOs remain more flexible, and less ‘corporate’ than their larger BINGO counterparts? Must the latter inevitably succumb to problems of bureaucracy and managerialist and market-based solutions as they increase in size? What kind of NGOs actually use resources most prudently? Do smaller and medium-sized NGOs work more equally or more effectively with partners? Does the combination of donor dependence and need for marketing appeal mean that NGOs have essentiallylost their independence?

An important emerging conundrum is the systemic trend towards donor bias favouring fewer, large NGOs as a result of the neoliberal ethos of competition that forces NGOs to compete against each other for not only funds, but also influence and ‘a seat at the table’. The preference for 'policy focused advocacy' means that NGOs may make donors their primary constituency and development ‘beneficiaries’ needs and aspirations may take second place, as, ironically, NGOs ‘succeed’ in representing them. The trend is towards a ‘winner takes all’ logic that has been marginalizing small and medium sized NGOs, which have to turn to charity and direct fundraising such as Comic Relief in the UK(Wallace, 2003).These large NGOs then operate very much in the mode of ‘speaking for’ rather than ‘engaging with’. It seems clear that the market-influenced competition impedes the learning of harder and more critical lessons, as the fear of losing funding, influence and position leads to the erosion of openness and trust between funders and the funded, at all levels. The accountability sought through reporting and evaluationare increasingly self-censoring and self-fulfilling, reduced to proving that donor conditions, with their myriad demands for transparency and effectiveness, are met. A very different notion of accountability is required that can engage with the more difficultethical questions.. The political philosopher Judith Butler, in ‘*Giving an Account of Oneself*’ argues that the failure to give a coherent and final account of oneself does not mean that ethical responsibility has evaporated. We have to live in a complex and contradictory world full of competing ethical claims and demands. Ultimately, NGOs must make themselves intelligible to themselves and to the public, but not on terms of their ownmaking. They must respond to the ethical questions of others, and broader understandings and language that exist in the world(Butler, 2005). In Butler’s ethical philosophy, ethical failures are unavoidable but also hopeful. Failures of accountability have ethical value as it is such failures in the act of accountability to others that point us toward the possibilities of a more just political reality.

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