Reclaiming development?
NGOs and the challenge of alternatives

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A. Introduction: the challenge of being alternative

NGOs exist as alternatives. In being "not governmental" they constitute vehicles for people to participate in development and social change in ways that would not be possible through government programmes. In being "not governmental" they constitute a "space" in which it is possible to think about development and social change in ways that would not be likely through government programmes. In being "nongovernments" (in Fisher's terms, 1998) they constitute instruments for turning these alternative thoughts, and alternative forms of participation into alternative practices and hard outcomes. This conference asks how far NGOs – of all sorts – have made real these possibilities for alternative approaches to development. Whatever our answer to this question, we will ask "why," and in what ways can this potential for releasing development alternatives be recovered, re-energized, and even expanded under a contemporary context that seems less than auspicious.[1]

The framing of NGOs in terms of 'development alternatives' has been a persistent feature of development debates (e.g. Drabek 1987, Tandon 2001). The timing of this particular conference rests to an extent on the understanding that this challenge has a particular resonance in the current context. Indeed, at first glance, the "alternative nature" of many NGOs might today seem reduced in scope. Over time many NGOs appear to have grown closer to government agencies and more distant from social movements.[2] This has not necessarily been for reasons of their own choosing: financial need or opportunity (spurred by increased competition in the giving market as well as by strategic decisions to grow

[1] We do not focus on the internal challenges facing NGOs; even where we examine funding issues, the focus is on the extent to which this shapes their engagement with development alternatives, rather than in terms of organisational capacity etc.
[2] This was a prominent theme in the second Manchester NGO conference, especially in the collection edited by Hulme and Edwards (1997).

larger) has pushed NGOs North and South towards government funding.[3] At the same time, many of the social movements with which NGOs traditionally worked have also weakened. Other movements, however, have emerged and at the same time as many NGOs seem closer to government, they seem further from these social movements, subject to greater criticism from these same movements, and in certain cases branded by them as just one more part of the elite establishment (we academics fare no better).

These apparent – not always chosen – shifts in the positioning of NGOs have had knock-on effects. With time, government funding appears to have come with increased conditionality. Northern governments are able to ask – and do ask – the Northern NGOs they support to move out of some countries and into others with obvious implications for national NGOs; they are able to – and do – ask for increased focus on poverty impact (and by effect if not design, less focus on other social change goals); and so on. NGOs lose decision making space. At the same time, bilateral and multilateral aid programmes, political parties and even corporations, have assumed languages and terminologies that were once more associated with NGOs and social movements. NGOs lose discursive space. No matter (even if it *is* the case) that the NGO means something quite different when it says "empowerment," "rights" or "citizenship" – quibbling over the "real" meaning of the term only seems to diminish the legitimacy of the NGO further.

The "boundaries of the possible" appear to have become increasingly limited in respect of economic and political choice, reducing the range of thinking and practice (for practitioners and researchers).[4] NGOs are frequently seen as complicit in this narrowing, as having become both a means by which a narrow range of new technologies, ideas and approaches are unproblematically disseminated from North to South, or (perhaps slightly more forgivingly) as mere soup ladles in the global soup kitchen (Commins, 1999). The 'agents of imperialism' critique has proven hard to shake (Townsend *et al* 2002, Kenny 2005), and has taken on new meaning under the advent of the new 'security' order in which the territorial control of states by the US and its allies is back on the geo-political agenda. This marks a very different concern for NGOs operating in conflict situation from that imagined in previous moments of reflection within and on the NGO community (e.g. Edwards *et al* 1999), and we return to this issue below.

At the same time, at least in some countries, what is uniquely NGO is now harder to identify. Democratization and avowedly pro-poor governments have blurred distinctions between NGOs and the state in a number of countries; this has been further reinforced as ex-NGO personnel have shifted to take up positions within the state. Increased state

[3] The 'North-South' labeling of NGOs has become more problematic in recent years. In particular, it has become blurred with some Northern NGOs seeking a more global identity (such as ActionAid and its SA location) and with groups such as Grameen Bank establishing a funding capacity in the North. One innovative fundraiser is Breadline Africa which now raises significant finance for South African NGO activities through direct mail campaigns in the North (initially in the UK and subsequently in Ireland and Holland). However, whilst significant such blurring remains small scale. It is the beginning of a trend but it is not clear how big the trend might be. In this paper we use the terms Northern and Southern except when referring to authors who have adopted other conventions.
[4] This is probably less true in respect of social development in which there has been a considerable investment in the last decade.

involvement in activities which subscribe to core NGO values of participation and empowerment have raised real issues of identity (distinctiveness) for NGOs, followed by (often critical) questions of effectiveness for state and NGOs alike. Privatisation and the growth of public-private partnerships as a means of delivering key services is presenting NGOs with new dilemmas regarding their closeness to the market.

Under all these pressures NGOs, on average, appear to have become instruments of public policy far more than of social movement strategy, and their language and discourse seems closer to that of public agencies than of social activists. Just as in the UK election campaign – the context in which we wrote some of this paper – where the difference between the main parties seems to be more of degree than of kind, and the bigger picture for the UK remains fixed,[5] so between NGOs and public agencies there seems little substantial difference of discourse. Attempts to be more alternative are often met with disciplining practices: from government (the security agenda looms large), but also at times from the NGO or its close allies themselves.

Furthermore, all this is happening in a world whose centres of geopolitical power (and thus development finance) have become steadily more conservative. It is also a world in which conservative (though not *necessarily* reactionary) actors have become stronger, and have begun to create and consolidate their own NGOs and nonprofit think tanks (Stone, 2000; Stone and Denham, 2004). The need for alternative visions, institutions and practices seems at least as urgent as ever: can NGOs, as they currently exist, respond to this need?

This paper aims to layout some groundwork for addressing these questions – answers will come, we hope, from the conference itself. The first part of the paper outlines concepts through which we aim to approach the relationships between NGOs and development alternatives. The second section then reconstructs, in terms of these concepts, a recent history of the place of nongovernmental organizations in development, identifying the changing contexts in which they operate and the new pressures and incentives that this has brought to bear on them. The section also discusses the extent to which these pressures and incentives appear to have affected the discourses, institutional arrangements and practices of NGOs. The third part of the paper explores ways in which NGOs have aimed or might aim to carve out spaces for alternatives, whether new ways of being an NGO lie on the horizon, and the extent to which these might create more space for change.

B. NGOs in development: a framework

[5] We were preparing this paper in the run up to the UK general election. One of the apparent hallmarks of the campaign was the relative lack of difference among the three main parties and the sense that – even where there were differences – the scope of any party to make significant changes to UK policy would be constrained by the wider structures within which the UK is inserted. Discussion of "alternatives" was limited to specific issues: how many police on the street, how many legal immigrants, marginal differences in public spending, accountability of leaders. Debate on more significant alternatives was severely curtailed – the larger "rules of the game" seemed pre-given.

In this paper we suggest that it is important to think about the role of NGOs in development in relation to at least three dimensions. The first of these concerns examining development both as process and as intervention; the second concerns the tripartite division between the three key institutional arenas of state, civil society and market; and the third relates to issues of scale, from the local to the global. Here, we discuss how NGOs relate to each of these aspects, and suggest the implications of being and doing alternatives in relation to each.

In their history of development thought – or what they called "doctrines of development" – Michael Cowen and Bob Shenton (1996; 1998) distinguish between two meanings of the term "development" that have been consistently confused: "development as an immanent and unintentional process as in, for example, the 'development of capitalism' and development as an intentional activity" (1998: 50). Others have also used this distinction to frame thinking about development theory and practices (Bebbington, 2000; Hart, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2005), though Hart (2001) amends it slightly to talk of ‘little d’ and ‘big D’ d/Development. The former involves the "geographically uneven, profoundly contradictory" set of processes underlying capitalist developments, while she uses the latter to refer to the "project of intervention in the 'third world' that emerged in a context of decolonization and the cold war" (ibid: 650). While these frameworks differ slightly in their details they share the notion that it is important to distinguish between notions of intervention and of political economic, structural change when thinking about development, without losing the sense that there are clear, if non-deterministic, relationships between these two faces of development (Bebbington, 2003).

We can locate NGOs in this simple framework, in the sense that they are – whether as project implementers, knowledge generators or political activists – all involved in intervention, but are also *part of* the societies and political economies in which they operate: they are part of the little *d* development at the same time as they try, through big *D* Development, to intervene in and modify the nature and/or effects of the broader processes of this little *d* development. NGOs are, then, both *part of* and partially *apart from* broader processes of development. Or, in economists' terms they are *endogenous* to development even if many activists *and* donors like to think of them as *external* actors and instruments.

This distinction can helpfully be linked to another framework: the tripartite division among state, market and civil society (Wolfe, 1991). Capitalist development can be thought of as a process that involves the on-going transformation of each of these spheres and the relationships among them; and intervention can be understood as the work of actors and organizations which, as organizations of the state, commercial organizations, and civil society organizations, map more or less easily onto one or other of these spheres. Many efforts to discuss and locate NGOs have worked from exercises that attempt to apportion more or less generic characteristics to the actors that operate in these three spheres, and which them identify NGOs as one sort of civil society organization. To a greater or lesser extent these approaches recognize that the dynamics of the three spheres are structurally related. This recognition is important not only because (as many an NGO experiences) the nature of intervention changes when you work in conjunction

with governments or businesses, but more importantly because the relationships between the spheres are central to understanding what many NGOs do, and what they become. In this regard, our understanding of civil society, and of the relationship between NGOs and civil society, becomes particularly important.

Civil society – the space within which (most) NGOs emerge and operate from, even if they do not always remain embedded there within – is an essentially 'relational' concept, an institutional arena that gains meaning in terms of its relationships to both state and market. For some, the essential role for civil society is to preserve a central place for a social logic to define the life-spaces of citizens in the face of the hegemonic advances of the state (Grasmci) and unfettered market forces (Polanyi; see Burawoy 2003). If we work with this understanding, NGOs must also be always understood in terms of their relationships to the state and market, as well as by historical changes *within* civil society, such as processes of citizenship formation and new/declining forms of popular mobilization.

It can be argued that civil society has been predominantly understood within development studies in two main ways, at each of two main levels (Bebbington and Hickey, forthcoming). At the level of ideology and theory, the notion of civil society has flourished most fruitfully within either the neoliberal school of thought that advocates a reduced role for the state or a post-marxist/post-structural approach that emphasises the transformative potential of social movements within civil society. At the conceptual level, civil society is usually defined and analysed either in terms of associations (so-called civil society organizations), or as an arena within which different social projects are debated and contested. In this paper we work from a broadly Gramscian understanding of civil society as constituting "the arena within which ideas and discourse become hegemonic, serving to stabilise and naturalise capitalist systems of production and exchange" but also within which "hegemonic ideas could always be resisted, questioned and potentially destabilised" (Bebbington and Hickey, forthcoming).

These different understandings of civil society may affect how one thinks of "alternatives." If civil society is understood in a juridical and organizational sense, nongovernmental activity is alternative to state and market options both by definition, and also because it allows different patterns of participation and of resource mobilization (to the extent that both the logic and laws governing resource mobilization are different in this sphere). If civil society is understood as a terrain in which actors struggle for ideological hegemony and – in less jargonistic terms – in which debates occur regarding the organization of state, market, society and of the relationships among these, then the "bar" for being alternative appears to rise somewhat. Alternatives are those ideas (deriving from research, practice or otherwise) that differ from the existing arrangements governing little *d* development in a given society.

However, rather than privilege the institutional location of NGOs in civil society compared to the state as the key marker of being alternative, the Gramscian approach we favour here suggests that being alternative involves being positioned in relation to particular projects of development, rather than to particular institutional arenas, be they

state or market. Civil society can and does contain associations that can be either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic (think, for example of think-tanks that take quite distinct views of neoliberal economic policies in the South: Hearn 2001, Stone 2000), while certain elements of the state may be the key proponents of more progressive development projects. We return to this point of what should constitute the key locus of the alternative for NGOs towards the end of the paper.

Understanding civil society in relationship to state and market is also important for making clear the almost impossible challenge that NGOs face in being alternative over the long haul. Whether civil society is understood as alternative *in relation to*, or as a sphere for debating alternative modalities of and relationships among state, market and civil society, the success of alternatives hinges around their being assumed (or "scaled up") through the state and market. Yet this very process means that over time they lose their alternative nature both because their scaling up means that they become the new hegemony, and because the scaling up process *must* be constrained by pre-existing conditions in the state and the market, with the effect that some or their alternativeness will be lost with time.

As the micro-finance experience makes clear, neither the little d/BIG D, nor the state/market/civil society frameworks limit analysis to a national level. They refer to processes, institutions and arenas that are scaled and in which occurrences in any given place depend on actions elsewhere, and on the activities of organizations that are able to cross, or jump, scales.[6] Certainly it is not helpful to discuss NGOs solely through categories of national or local. While concepts of global civil society may have their difficulties, there can be little doubt that, as the most potent force within late modernity, globalisation has (re)shaped NGOs and how they must be thought of. One effect has been that NGOs have increasingly become a transnational community, itself overlapping with other transnational communities. These linkages and networks disperse new forms of development discourse and modes of governance as well as resources throughout the global south; and some Southern NGOs have (albeit to a lesser extent) begun to gain their own footholds in the North with their outposts in Brussels, Washington and elsewhere. Yet at the same time, such transnationalizing tendencies seem also to have excluded certain actors and groups for whom engagement in such processes is harder. Thus these moves to scale have simultaneously increased the distance between parts of the sector and led to the emergence of international civil society elites who come to dominate the discourses and flows that are channeled through this transnational community. This raises serious questions as to *whose alternatives* gain greater visibility in these processes. As just one example, in the environment sector various commentators and activists have expressed concern that a small group of well resourced groups have come to dominate these transnational circuits and the debates that they project, at the expense of other views (also alternative) regarding relationships between environment and development (see for instance, Chapin, 2004; WorldWatch, 2005; Romero and Andrade, 2004; Sanderson, 2002).

[6] On scale, and jumping scales, see for instance: Smith, 1993; Swyngedouw, 1997.

This transnationalizing of intervention (big D) in turn reflects structural transformations in the transnational workings of various national and international capitalisms. These changes make it important for any alternative project (in the Gramscian sense) to work simultaneously at different points within these chains of intervention. Yet at the same time they have also involved the increased channeling of (national and multilateral) state controlled resources through NGOs – a channeling in which resources become bundled with particular rules, ideas and implications for how they will be governed, and contribute to the governing of others. As many have commented, as Northern NGOs talk of partnership and decentering, their means of exerting influence remain powerful.

Such observations raise the question of what is alternative, and what is hegemonic – and how one would know that a set of ideas were indeed hegemonic at a particular scale. Even an apparently defensible claim – that neo-liberal ideas dominate thinking in economic and other policy realms – is complicated by recent discussions among critical commentators on neo-liberalism who struggle over whether it is necessary to talk of neo-liberalisms (in the plural) and whether (and how far) "family resemblances" can be identified among these neo-liberalisms (Peck, 2004; Larner, 2003; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Meanwhile the tussles among environmentalists show that alternatives (to broadly dominant trends in environment and development) must also be spoken of in the plural – and that they are likely to reflect different distributional commitments across society and space, and over time. And finally the apparent dilemma – that alternatives become increasingly orthodox when scaled up – suggests that the definition of "alternativeness" is also time dependent as ideas move in and out of fashion, in and out of policy. This swell of different ideas and commitments only highlights the notion that civil society is a domain of contention, that NGOs are very much part of that contention, and that one very important measure of their effectiveness is how far they help move public and political debates in the direction of the position for which they stand. A further implication is, perhaps, that in the encounter among various more or less dominant sets of ideas about development and various more or less alternative ideas, a range of hybrids are produced (c.f. Escobar, 2001) and even appropriated by NGOs and other actors. The existence of such hybrids – combining, for instance, notions of market provision and social justice, or embracing state-society synergies – once again complicate easy identification of alternatives and hegemonic ideas. Increasingly, however, they characterize the terrain in which NGOs operate.

These framing devices (alternatives; Big D/little d; state/market/civil society; and scale) can be used to discuss the recent history of NGOs, the ways in which they can be alternative, and their potential futures. The following sections seek to do this.

C. NGOs as development alternatives: an abridged history of possibilities and challenges

The growth of NGOs has been well reviewed and while authors differ in what aspects of this history they emphasise, they overlap considerably in their interpretations. It is not therefore our aim to offer yet another detailed history but instead to summarize much of this broadly accepted history through the lens of our organizing framework and in a way

that helps speak to our overall concern for the place of NGOs in fashioning alternative forms of development. We divide this abridged history into four main phases, without suggesting any precise dates for each phase.

The first period was characterized by small agencies seeking to respond to the needs of groups of people perceived as poor and who received very limited external professional support. These NGOs, universally small, either southern organizations or northern agencies supported by public voluntary contributions, were often linked to a further organization in order to provide them with some institutional base and source of funds. In many cases these supporting organizations were religious though sometimes wealthy family foundations also provided such support. This early nongovernmental activity was alternative in various senses – it was voluntary and normatively motivated, and operated according to principles that differed from those governing organized behavior in much of the state and commercial sectors. It was not, though, independent of these sectors: religious institutions maintained real, if complex, relationships with government, and as just noted some resourcing derived from commercially generated profits transformed and transferred through foundations (a model that of course continues through to today, on a far more massive scale).[7] From the North, at least some such interventions were linked into conceptions that were a legacy of colonialism such as volunteer programmes sending experts to “under-capacitated” countries. While some interventions were of organizations whose mission and/or staff recognised the need for structural and systemic reform (Hirschman, 1984), most such work was not alternative in any Gramscian sense of civil society. Mostly it was conducted as charity and philanthropy within the existing contours of social organization: this work did not generally question the broader organization of society.

Such organizations continued their work (some closed down, others were created) during the 1960s and 1970s (broadly our second phase). Although they remained relatively small scale – both individually and as a sector - in some countries and some sectors this period marked early stages in the formation of a critical mass. Reflecting both the national and international politics of the period, this was also an increasingly critical sector, engaging more fully with the notion that it was imperative that NGOs elaborate – and that they would contribute to – alternative arrangements among state, market and civil society (generally on a national rather than a transnational scale), and alternatives both within, and to, capitalism. In this period little *d* development was increasingly scrutinized. This of course reflected the intersection between these NGOs and political struggles around independence and various socialisms, as well as between these political projects and intellectual debates around dependency, structuralist and broadly Marxian interpretations of the development process (Lehmann, 1990; Watts, 2001).

Such debates – and the student, political and other protest movements to which they were linked – happened both North and South of course, and one artifact of this in the North was the creation of, and/or growing penetration of existing NGOs, by people steeped in such debates. It was also – not uncoincidently – a period in which these nongovernmental vehicles for “alternative” development discourses developed increasing

[7] Think for instance of the Gates Foundation, the Gordon Moore Foundation and the Soros Foundation.

links to the more formal world of development finance as evidenced by the initiation and then growth of co-financing programmes from the mid-1960s onwards (OECD, 1988; Bebbington, 2004). While the sector remained small, it was increasingly conscious of itself as a sector and of the need to build collaborations with other nongovernmental actors, particularly across North-South boundaries. Numerous forces but notably the awareness of local institutional development, the reduction in the formal colonial presence and the contradictions inherent in the NGO message with a Northern NGO presence resulted in a switch from operational to funding roles for Northern NGOs and the growth of a Southern NGO sector.

This was a period in which NGOs consciously sought to shift state-market-civil society arrangements primarily through seeking influence over government policy (for instance, the Orangi Pilot Project(OPP), and Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento AC (Operational Centre for Housing and Human Settlement or COVEPI).[8] Perhaps the dominant conception was one in which NGOs developed new strategies and then lobbied for their incorporation into government either directly or – particularly under oppressive states where different rules applied - indirectly. Indeed, this was a period in which very many NGOs negotiated space alongside other political and social movements. This process was one of collaboration between these actors which recognised both their necessarily separated strategies and longer-term synergies whilst they fought hegemonic structures that were manifested through the state (e.g. Philippines, South Africa, El Salvador). On the part of such NGOs there was a recognised need for political change, whilst on the part of the political movements (or at least some parts of them) the contribution of (some) NGOs was recognized as important –as a means of accessing funding as well as other less tangible resources. In some cases the relationships between these actors ran far more deeply with NGO staff being simultaneously active in political parties and movements (such as, for example, Planact and ANC in South Africa).

These were the periods when certain co-financing resources of European donors were given without too many questions being asked, and deliberately so, in order to channel resources to oppositional movements via NGOs but without any explicit, traceable government knowledge. These were also the years where other governments and conservative forces – most notably the US – used a not dissimilar tactic to support elements of the hegemonic forces and ideas against which these NGOs and political movements were struggling. Some of these resources were also channeled through NGOs, and continue to be so through to the present. Such phenomena led to many manifestations – such as the co-existence of competing NGO networks, some US funded others supported from Europe – that symptomized the extent to which the nongovernmental sector was one of the more important terrains in which civil society was being contested (c.f. MacDonald, 19964; Howell and Pearce, 2001) and in which the alternatives at stake were systemic as much as sectoral.

[8] The Orangi Pilot Project works in Karachi (Pakistan) and seeks to improve levels of infrastructure and services in low-income settlements. Over time, as elaborated below, their strategy has changed but during the 1980s they very deliberately set out to provide alternatives to the state. COPEVI is a Mexican NGO whose ideas for improving low-income urban settlements were later taken up in the government programme FONHAPO (Connolly 2004).

Our third phase is defined by the growth in recognition for NGOs and their work and the increasing interest in funding such activities, often in (sometimes contrived) relationships with the state and development agencies. This is the period of the NGO "boom," a boom that can only be understood in terms of its own relationship to transformations in the structures of capitalisms North, South and globally in this period – a reminder that NGOs have to be understood endogenously. We would draw attention to three particular shifts in the broader relationships among state, market and civil society as being important in this regard: macro-economic instability and crisis in a significant number of countries; political democratization, from both dictatorships and "enlightened authoritarian" regimes towards more formally liberal democracies; and a shift in dominant development discourse, with concepts and practices such as "civil society" and participation assuming great (discursive) centrality.

The 1980s were dominated by structural adjustment programmes and the attendant reduction in the role of governments (in their already weak capacity to manage markets and public services) and increasing levels of poverty. Adjustment led to a series of demands – across the political spectrum – for NGO intervention: as programme implementers, knowledge generators and activists, depending somewhat on where (politically) the demands originated. Those interests who more or less endorsed structural adjustment needed NGOs to help deal with the limitations of a strategy that increased reliance on the market to allocate societal resources and which, in some cases, generated political protest to such a degree that it challenged the very viability of the reform process. The family of social emergency, investment and other compensation and social protection funds that were created in this period and subsequently in order to deal with these inadequacies were (consistent with the model) increasingly implemented by non-state agencies among which NGOs figured in important ways. This demand – and the increased opportunities – for NGO intervention derived from a particular vision in which the place of the state in little d development had been reduced, while that of market and civil society had grown. Yet the viability of this larger model required alternatives at the margin of the model that would help sustain during (what was perceived by some as) a transitional period in which the negative effects of adjustment were a sort of internal contradiction to this new model and which would build in a measure of social redistribution to market-based policies. The model itself was not in question and certainly this source of support for NGOs did not help them contest the model.

Those who opposed structural adjustment looked to NGOs to document the scale of suffering caused and to demonstrate the feasibility of coherent alternatives that also took account of the previous failure of government to deliver to the poor. Arguably NGOs were far more effective at the documentation of failure than the elaboration of alternatives – though it can be quite reasonably argued that the very context of the adjustment years made it that much more difficult to identify alternatives - while NGOs were being called upon to conduct experiments that could be presented as viable alternatives, the problem was that the atmosphere in the laboratory was so polluted that the experiments were corrupted from the outset. Much was expected of NGOs in this

period but in reality expectations were unfair and unrealistic. While there was some "discourse space" and there were financial resources for collaborative projects, there was little to no space in which to pursue actual large-scale alternative projects. Again the broader context of little d development constrained the possibility that big D interventions – through research, activism, advocacy or experimentation – would achieve very much.

That said, the 80s were not necessarily a lost decade everywhere and in every sense. In some countries they witnessed a resurgence of new social movements (Slater, 1985; Alvarez et al., 1998). In Ecuador, some commentators even suggested that – at least when seen from the perspective of indigenous movements – the 1980s were a decade that was "won" rather than lost (Bebbington, Ramón et al., 1992). Even if such patterns of resurgence might be viewed by skeptics as exceptions that proved the rule, they suggested other pathways through which alternatives might be built, more slowly and systematically – around concepts of citizenship, identity and organization (c.f. Escobar, 2001, 1995 also).

Even if such sustained (as opposed to momentary) popular resurgence was relatively exceptional, what was more frequent was the accompaniment of adjustment by political democratization. This process - perhaps not accidentally – brought further complications to NGOs, ironically given that many had long struggled for it across the South (and North) (see for instance, Clarke 1998 on South Asia, Bratton 1989 on Africa; essays in Alvarez et al., 1998 on Latin America). The task of shifting from a position of contesting authoritarian governments to engaging with and promoting new, and often partial democracies, has been a defining challenge for NGOs since the mid-late 1980s in parts of Latin America and South and East Asia, and from the early-mid 1990s in sub-Saharan Africa. In some regard, this is the dilemma of successful alternatives alluded to earlier on, where state institutions take up alternatives that NGOs had pushed for, leaving NGOs with the uncertainty of what to do next other than help the state make a success of these new orthodoxies. Indeed, many NGO staff (and movement activists) did move into government precisely to try and help foster such success – a process sometimes viewed as co-optation rather than success (showing that, in politics also, beauty depends on the eye of the beholder). Examples here range from NGO leaders gaining seats in national cabinets (e.g. the Philippines) and ministries (e.g. Chile), the women's movement moving into parliament in South Africa and Uganda (Goetz 2003, Giesler 2000), and lower-level but arguably more pervasive and important shifts of NGO activists into local government.

This growing closeness of NGOs to the Big D interventions molded by national and multilateral governmental institutions thus brought its own peculiar set of challenges, captured for instance in Hulme and Edwards (1997) book title: "Too close for comfort?" Had, in this period, NGOs become too close to a range of other actors in a way that compromised their innovativeness, autonomy, legitimacy, accountability and alternativeness? Edwards and Hulme (1996) were not alone in these concerns. Others noted the narrowing field of interventions considered by NGOs and the adoption of ways of working that restricted their effectiveness (Wallace et al 1997), while Tandon (2001) worried that the political economy of aid restricted the building of horizontal

relationships with other actors in civil and political society. Many authors and practitioners worried that becoming public service contractors (Robinson, 1997) was tying NGOs into mainstream approaches to a greater extent than ever before.

These general concerns were mirrored in regionally specific reflections. In Latin America, some argued that it had become increasingly difficult for NGOs to offer development alternatives in any little d sense of the term (Bebbington, 1996; Ballón, 1997; Chiriboga, 2000; Aldaba et al., 2000). In this post-adjustment era, the state had increasingly taking on the social and participatory language and (to a lesser extent) roles that NGOs had previously considered their own. Social funds, democratization, and the newly decentralized state all threatened to co-opt what had essentially been NGO/civil society projects. Meanwhile the pressures that Latin American NGOs have had to face had meant that some engaged in these dominant projects in order to access resources, even knowing that this would compromise their mission and coherence as organizations.

Of course not all shared this view of pending institutional crisis – some NGO leaders questioned the tendency of Northern commentators to impute crises where they didn't exist. Indeed, a decade later it seems that stories of their "coming" demise had been greatly exaggerated. Yet, NGOs have hardly become more robust, and pressures over the last decade - our fourth period - present an additional set of health threats some more obvious, others less intuitive. We draw attention to three apparent trends in this period that impinge directly on NGOs and the scope for building both big D and little d alternatives: the continued deepening of the democratization-neo-liberalization agenda; the hegemony of a poverty agenda in international aid; and the relatively more recent, but hugely pernicious, security agenda itself coupled in strange ways with the poverty agenda. We also note a series of more specific trends relevant to our topic.

With the creation of the WTO, the neo-liberalization of social democracy, and the increasing tendency towards military enforcement of liberal democratic process the joint project of liberal democracy and free trade seems to have become increasingly clear and consolidated in this latter period making it ever more difficult for NGOs or other actors to think outside of this neo-liberal box[9] – in particular because the box has also been adept at incorporating much core terminology of NGOs around democracy, rights, empowerment, particicipation, poverty and livelihood. At the same time there are incentives to engage with – indeed, become *part of* – this little d project. Market-based development has been seen to move down to poorer groups with the extension of micro-finance services. The shift towards democratization, for instance, has been accompanied by the scaling up of the participatory turn within big D Development, the high-point of which has been the participatory poverty assessments and consultative processes around poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs). This has offered some NGOs unprecedented levels of access to policy processes but also brings challenges, particularly concerning: the capacity and legitimacy of NGOs to act as pseudo-democratic representatives of 'the poor'; and the risks of being associated with processes that may in themselves be undermining of broader democratic norms. As has been argued elsewhere, there are real dangers that the participatory turn can and does obscure more legitimate and effective

[9] Though note our earlier comments about difficulties in defining neo-liberalism in the singular.

forms of democratic representation (Barczak 2001, Brown 2004; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hickey and Bracking, 2005; Houtzager, 2003). Some NGOs, keen to secure their seat at the new range of tables open to them within 'inclusive' policy processes, have been perhaps too keen to grasp and extend these channels, without thinking through the longer term problems what this raises for public accountability through parliamentary processes etc. At the same time, other NGOs have been excluded, and yet others have excluded themselves, in some cases going to the extent of producing their own alternative PRSPs, and in others simply standing back from a process that is perceived as donor-led and peripheral to embedded political trends.

Closely related – integrally so in the case of the PRSPs – has been the new-found hegemony for 'poverty reduction' within international development in particular since the Wolfensohn presidency at the World Bank and above all the two year process surrounding the 2000/2001 World Development Report. Notwithstanding the efforts of many to use poverty as a means of discussing politics, the tendency is still toward a narrow definition and reducing income poverty still remains the central goal – reflected in its position as the first MDG. The (very considerable) resources flowing from bilateral and some multilateral agencies to NGOs are increasingly bundled with the poverty reduction agenda (a bundling only deepened by the MDGs), placing increasing demands on these NGOs to deliver on poverty reduction.[10] While it is hard to contest the worthiness of such goals, this emphasis has the potential not only to rein in but also depoliticize the range of strategies open to NGOs in promoting development. There is at least some evidence that the demands for poverty reduction are affecting: the types of social organizations that NGOs work with (with shifts to production and credit groups and away from representative social movements); the types of intervention such NGOs engage in and support, with a tendency to seek poverty reduction impacts rather than redistributing effects; the regions of the world for which NGOs can mobilize funding (with reductions in funds for Latin America organizations in particular); and the languages and discourses within which development debates can be couched.

These trends – the deepening of both democratization and the neo-liberal economic agenda in developing countries, and the onset of the poverty agenda – have arguably begun to shift the political economy of development funding in ways that create new dilemmas for NGOs. Both the desire by donors to have more of international development work focused on large scale poverty reduction, and the advance of national government funding in Asia, Latin America and South Africa, have reinforced a shift back towards the state. There appears to be less funding for NGO programme development and innovation – and more for the management and administration of state programmes. In some cases, there is competition from the private sector for these funds although there is some awareness of mixed results (eg. the experiences with subsidised housing and shelter improvements in Latin America: Ferguson 2002 and Stein 2005).[11] Some would argue that voluntary sector organizations in North and South have suffered from greater emphasis on cost recovery, charging for services, professionalised staff

[10] Demands also originate from elsewhere, not least private donors.
[11] Examples here include those housing programmes that offer a subsidy and a role for intermediaries in using state finance for housing improvements and new build.

relationships, the dominance of competition and the rise of tenders. Under wider shifts towards solving social problems through 'public-private partnerships', there has been an increasing tendency to link commercial enterprise (profit, efficiency) and not-for-profits (community moblisation) (Fowler 2004: 19). While this blurring between civil and market logics holds the potential to inject a stronger sense of the social within the corporate logic of the private sector and to provide greater resources for social programmes, there is perhaps greater potential for the reverse to predominate. As some NGOs in some contexts become too close to the market for comfort, the role advocated for civil society by Polanyi in maintaining a sense of the social in the face of unfettered market forces diminishes. As such, the "pro-market diversification of (NGO) relationships…is an erosion of their potential as agents of systemic social and political change" (Fowler 2004: 1).

A further trend in funding has been the switch to direct funding of NGOs in the South. However, this appears to have had mixed effects. Regardless of original intent, it has often not been a switch towards funding southern NGOs but rather towards NGO operations in the South. While larger Northern NGOs (and often larger southern NGOs) have been successful in raising funds from these sources, smaller Northern and Southern NGOs have less capacity to do this because of the bureaucracy associated with bilateral agencies, suggesting that over time there will be more concentration in both the Northern and Southern NGO sector. At the same time, new conditionalities on bilateral funds offered to Northern NGOs and placed additional constraints even on these more traditional sources of money. Some Southern NGOs complain that Northern NGOs are becoming more like bilateral agencies than nongovernmental partners.

NGOs have struggled to adapt to this funding climate. Many spend considerable time chasing money that is not very useful to them. There is not much interest by national governments in funding more innovative activities. NGOs need considerable financial skills to manipulate this situation to their advantage, pursue an alternative agenda and still to be seen as competent. They also need to be a certain size to be able to do enough to raise money (across other activities) to really make a difference. This is not to portray NGOs – even those southern NGOs who have not benefited from direct funding – as victims. In many cases, NGOs are not victims, they are agents facing a constrained set of choices. These choices have become somewhat harder, but constraints are part of life. While some NGOs collapse and some are compromised, others make choices driven by the exigencies of institutional sustainability. The suggestion is that any viable strategy for NGO sustainability must not place financial questions foremost (Aldaba et a.l, 2000) though securing a coherent "alternative" strategy can seem a luxury in the face of looming unpaid payrolls.

The third trend marking the most recent years has been the rise of the security agenda. (Duffield 2001, Fowler 2004, Lister 2004). Of course NGOs have long operated in the context of global conflicts not only as humanitarian actors but also as active promoters of little d alternatives: think, for instance, of the conflicts in Central America. However, the issues raised by conflict have changed significantly since Edwards et als' (1999) comments concerning the roles that NGOs can and should play within conflict zones. In

particular the shift from conflicts organized *very broadly* around left/right splits to conflicts that include those framed by key actors in terms of Islamic/non Islamic divisions leave some NGOs (in particular Northern and international ones) in far more ideologically complex positions in which their existence as western organizations funded by powers viewed by others to be hostile to Islam can complicate their relationships with groups and movements with whom they might usually have presumed to identify. At least in cold war Central America (to continue the example) NGOs knew that their enemies really were their enemies. Today – to go back to our introduction – precisely because NGOs *are* part of little d, and *are perceived to be* part of it, they can end up being more alone and apparently more politically if not ethically compromised.

The security agenda has never been entirely separable from either little d or big D. In terms of the former, contemporary violence and conflicts have emerged in direct relation to uneven unfoldings of modernity, involving contested processes of state formation and the tensions wrought by social change (e.g. Apter 1987). The links between little d and the current threat of terror from some Islamic movements has also been made by those observers who stress the importance of linking such movements to this specific phase of the modern project (e.g. Watts, 2003). Meanwhile, the big D aid project has frequently been subsumed within the wider geopolitics of western foreign policy, most notably within the Cold War period, with NGOs hardly exempt from the dilemmas that this threw up. Even prior to this, World Ban President Robert McNamara had stated that "In a modernizing society security means development…Security is development, and without development there can be no security". In several senses, then, the current 'war on terror' has not fundamentally re-shaped the problematic of how development and security are linked. Rather, it constitutes a new phase of historical efforts to re-engineer modernity in the periphery – particularly in terms of the new imperialism's efforts to shape the political economy and state formation processes of designated failed states and rogue regimes.

But we should not push this argument too far: some differences are of course apparent, although these differ according to geographical context, as illustrated by the well-publicised argument between the US and UK branches of Save the Children concerning the extent to which it was permissible for SCF to criticize the bombing of Iraq (The Guardian 28 November 2003). Given USAID's insistence that its recipients commit to ensuring that no USAID money is associated with potential terror groups, Fowler (2004: 16) points out that those NGOs that accept funding from USAID effectively become agents of the US government, responsible for the compliance of their partners with US foreign policy. While again this was probably always the case – and is in large measure why some US NGOs consistently refused USAID support – the significance is now particularly pressing – and indeed, even those US NGOs categorically refusing any USAID support must follow IRS and other legal guidelines that require them to be sure they are not supporting groups antithetical to particular elements of US foreign policy.

What is perhaps most relevant here is the different positions that Northern NGOs have taken on this issue. Where some have either refused to work in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, or to accept bilateral funding from aggressor states to work therein, others

have either applied a peg to their nose and followed what they perceive to be their mission despite opposing the war on terror, or taken the more supportive view that their humanitarian aims are compatible with the new imperialism (Lister 2004: 8). This range of positioning reveals not only the extent to which the political economy of aid, and NGO dependency on official flows, limits their room for manoeuvre, but also the immense differences among NGOs in how they understand and approach the notion of pursuing "alternatives." For those unable or unwilling to extract themselves from the vagaries of big D, the character of the latest nexus between security and development means that the result is complicity in a wider form of little d that has little discernible link to a project of equity, social justice and political inclusion.

It also merits note that while academic and journalistic pundits worry mostly about the "big" security agenda, there is also a (relatively) more silent one that frames much localized NGO activity: the increasing violence of everyday life in both rural but especially the increasingly urbanized spaces in which NGOs operate. In cities, the intersection between the relatively ungoverned (in a formal if not *de facto* sense) nature of much urban space, the easy availability of heavy weaponry, the consolidation of the (decidedly not neo-liberal) drug economy, the rise of transnational gangs (eg. Kruijt et al., 2002; Moser and McIlwaine, 2004) and much more presents NGOs (in at least some places) with complex contexts in which to work. This context includes the violence of community leaders who use physical coercion to manage land and services and exact payment for squatting (Garrett and Ahmed 2004). Rural violence – organized through para-military, military and guerrilla movements as well as political patronage networks mapping onto both market and state elites - is equally complex to negotiate. In both violent city and violent countryside the scope for building alternatives is severely reduced. As one community leader in Rio said in 1995, democracy and drugs have killed the strong community movement as allies become harder to identify and violence permeates everyday life (Personal communication to one of authors).

In the very broadest sense these trends fall under the rubric of modern neo-liberal globalization. While economies and geo-politics were always global in reach and exercise, some authors suggest that in more recent times the tendency towards globalizing governance of both national and everyday processes, and even of life and death, has become more marked – and that NGOs are both part of and complicit in these practices (Duffield, 2001; Ferguson and Gupta, 2002). At the same time, as we have noted, these trends present NGOs with new challenges and opportunities. One apparent manifestation of this is the increased weight given to advocacy by NGOs. This reflects a recognition that in the face of such powerful forces, local level project interventions cannot constitute alternatives of any significance or durability, and that changes to policy and wider norms are required if viable alternatives are to be built. Following the globalised character of development (and considerable faith in international institutions), such NGO advocacy itself has often been transnational in character, with pressure placed at various points along commodity, policy and other chains – from the point of production, up to the arenas in which loans are agreed and shareholders meet annually.[12] Although welcome as an example of how NGOs read and engage with the globalised

[12] See for instance advocacy strategies around mining by Oxfam America.

character of both bid and little d development, there remains a risk here that the local will become lost. Chasing policy upstream overlooks the extent to which in a number of countries (Latin America and Asia), mayors and city level democracy seem to have become more rather than less important under globalisation. Furthermore, managing local, national and international advocacy strategies places considerable demands on NGO resources and can weaken other dimensions of NGO operations.

The move towards advocacy (whose effects remain yet to be determined) is bound up with another challenge for NGOs, one that is not new but perhaps increasingly acute: the challenge of representation (Jordan and van Tuijl, 2001). Advocacy presumes representation, but how do NGOs assume such representativeness and legitimate the positions taken in advocacy (Riles, 2001)? This dilemma is perhaps particularly acute for NGOs registered in the North, but is also serious for those in the South facing social movements who question the right of NGOs to assume such positions, and occupy such slots in political debate. With the increasingly international mobility and articulateness of some movement activists, and yet even more so of southern NGO activists, plus the greater availability of information across borders (also elements of what passes as globalization), the roles of NGOs in advocating on responses to globalization are very much in question.[13] This questioning too impinges on their scope for elaborating alternatives.

A final feature of these more recent times – far less remarked upon yet possibly the most significant to think through – is that following the earlier movements of NGO activists into government, many such activists have since moved back into the NGO sector. This, arguably, ought to have led to far stronger, more effective and more strategic NGOs, yet it seems that there is little evidence of this (though there are examples, see below). This begs the question as to why. Furthermore, when combined with the observation that other activists after their time in government chose *not* to return to NGOs, and not in all cases for reasons of personal livelihood, then very real questions emerge about the extent to which the NGO sector will ever be able to reclaim development – big D and little d – as an alternative project.

D. On being alternative? New modes and metaphors for being an NGO

In a review of the relationships between NGOs and enquiries into social development, David Hulme noted that NGO staff working in the 1970-80s were well-versed in the radical writings of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich (Hulme 1994), both of whom tried to uncover underlying structures of oppression within the current dominant order. Today, the bookshelves in NGO offices are arguably more likely to display more sector-specific, less politicised and essentially more technocratic texts (e.g. Fowler 1997 and 2000b). The character of NGOs, and of the intellectual world around them, has changed – and some some academic commentators go as far as to suggest that the range of available development alternatives has become closely circumscribed to a simple dichotomy

[13] This said, both constituencies within movement bases and researchers have also raised probing questions about the representativeness and legitimacy of those movement activists who spend increasing time debating policy and alternatives on the international stage. See for instance Edelman, 2002, 2003.

between the economistic neo-liberalism of the IMF on the one hand, and the social development approach of UNDP on the other (Pieterse 1998).[14]

However, this attempt to reduce the discussion on development alternatives to the current agendas of certain, albeit powerful, actors within international development, is to understate the often quite nuanced ways in which many NGOs have tried to elaborate new ways of being an NGO, and new ways of crafting alternatives (incremental though they may be) within the current context. Some have gone the way of the consultant and public service contractor envisaged in earlier interventions (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Robinson, 1997) but others have experimented with new ways of engaging with market processes, with state agencies (at national and local levels) and social organizations (c.f. Bebbington, 1997; Chiriboga, 1999). Some NGOs have shifted to increasingly sophisticated strategies towards government which recognized that political interests were more likely to respond to mass movements than NGO dialogue. The challenge was one of working with the profound shifts that were taking place in citizens' expectations of themselves and their governments. Returning to the experience of the Orangi Pilot Project, staff invested time in supporting the growth of another NGO, the Urban Resource Centre, to act as a node for a large number of community organizations and professional groups that are anxious to support forms and processes of urban development which are pro-poor (Urban Resource Centre 1994). The staff of the Orangi Pilot Project believed this to be a necessary complement to their own work as it facilitated the mobilization of citizens and efforts to secure a state responsive to the needs and interests of the poor. NGO staff now cycle in and out of government and mayor's offices, NGOs create non-profit companies within the broader structure of the NGO, long term relationships with particular, pro-poor state authorities have been developed, and in some instances, close working relationships have been developed with political parties (but ones oriented to devising social development initiatives rather than consciousness raising and vote catching ones). Indeed, many NGOs would now argue that the business of alternatives – of seeking to secure social justice, equity and inclusion – is simply too large and too important a task to be left to NGOs alone, and must necessarily involve other institutional arenas, particularly the state.[15] They too – on the basis of their experience both of themselves and in many cases of having worked inside government - would argue that it is not acceptable to argue that NGOs have the potential to offer alternative approaches to and forms of development simply because of institutional differences to either state or market actors.

[14] Pieterse positioned the World Bank as closer to the IMF on this continuum, but as moving towards UNDP, an adroit reading of the Bank's then incipient shift away from the Washington consensus in the aftermath of the Asian Crisis. However, one of several flaws with this approach is that it positioned social development as a genuine alternative to the mainstream neo-liberal orthodoxy. However, as Midegely's (2004) historical review of social development suggests, social development (as commonly conceived in the North) shares many of the same pre-suppositions as both the neo-liberal agenda (e.g. individualism) and the interventionist development agenda (e.g. the belief in planning and social engineering), and so does little to challenge the basic tenets of mainstream agenda. A more worthy opponent here might be the neo-structuralism and developmental statism of the ECLA/South Asian school, which can claim the most significant development transformations in the global south over the past thirty years (Gore 2000). Importantly, this latter approach that would seem to have little role for NGOs.

[15] See Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2004) for some recent examples of such collaboration in addressing urban poverty

Indeed, to take one of the most talked of examples of 'alternative development' successes of recent years – the participatory budgeting experiment in Brazil – while NGOs have been present in the process, most of the key actors have been reformist, leftist political parties, civil society activists, social movements and church-related organisations (Abers 1998 and Cabannes 2004 for a summary of 25 such schemes). Likewise a historical read of the sources of significant societal change would suggest that governments and broader based social movements have been far more at the vanguard of transformative projects (whether towards greater equity, social justice and political inclusion, or towards [neo]liberalization and privatization) than have NGOs, think tanks or charities. There must be lessons here for NGOs as they look to their future roles in fashioning and contributing to alternatives, lessons that may well imply that the ways of *being* an NGO merit rethinking. This was a message that Zadek and Gatwood (1995) conveyed to the transnational NGOs in the mid 1990s, but is arguably equally as relevant to national NGOs registered in the South (Aldaba et al., 2000). Such changes in being appear to apply changes in: mode of self-organization; relationships with other actors; and mode of self-perception. The conceptual and strategic implications of this argument against an exclusive focus on alternatives in an institutional sense are returned to below.

NGOs and alternative interventions in Development

To what extent does the future of NGOs in promoting development alternatives be centred on their capacity to alter the arena of big D interventions? Here the challenge is in terms of *thinking, acting* and *interacting* in ways that other development agencies, particularly within the state, are unlikely to do. Here, we focus on the role of NGOs in direct service delivery; their role as advocates, within PRSP processes and beyond; and efforts to promote rights-based approaches to development.

In terms of public policy, the consensus position appears to be that NGOs should help the state to design innovative approaches (small scale, sectoral) and to implement them where they offer advantages (in competition with public and private enterprises). The work of BRAC on primary education in Bangladesh constitute an example of professional development NGOs offering genuine alternatives to the state in terms of public service provision, the paucity of such examples suggest that these constitute the exceptions rather than the rule. But this does not offer space for a challenge to structure and system – ie. it does not offer space for a significant and substantive alterative – rather for a marginal alternative. However, such programmes are being developed from within. As noted above in the case of the Orangi Pilot Project, strategies have changed from being primarily focused on improved services with professional expertise to building a relationship with a large number of community organizations (through the Urban Resource Centre) that can have a direct influence on the political process. Other NGOs have responded in a similar way by trying to build mass movements with the understanding that politics responds to mass mobilization (electoral) rather than to professional voice (expertise). There appears to be a growing interest in alliances between mass movements that can influence candidates/politicians whilst NGOs deal with the professionals and bureaucracy. In this case, rather than the participatory

budgeting approach of the local government providing greater political space for decision making by local communities, this strategy resources communities to secure space for themselves. However, even more narrowly based services providers may be drawn into radical roles as a result of current development processes. Hence, returning to Bangladesh, WaterAid are currently in the process of significantly expanding their programme of water provision in urban areas (Hanchett *et al*. 2003) to implement community management models and, it is hoped, influence state policy. However, the globalization of rules for service delivery means that such a policy may, hypothetically, challenge the WTO GATS if Bangladesh, currently one of a large number of EU target countries, signs up water services to the WTO's form of liberalization.

At the same time, there are also more intentional NGO advocacy which can be understood as being (mostly) an effort to challenge current ways of thinking and doing intentional development. Calls for NGOs to stop trying to solve poverty and move towards making the point that poverty can be solved (Pearce 1997) appear to finally have been taken in, as with the 'Make Poverty History campaign'. Again, such re-inventions cannot be entirely delinked from issues of legitimacy, and UK NGOs have become increasingly aware of their need to reach out to new constituencies, constituencies who do not necessarily equate NGO activity with the broader and fundamentally political goals of achieving global social justice (Lister 2004). Nor can they be de-linked from broader structural issues. The Make Poverty History campaign is as much tied up with Labour Party politics, the need for Gordon Brown to make an impact, the need for pro-poor credibility as it is with changes in the NGO sector. There remains a very strong argument within NGOs that development assistance funds are not the answer – see, for example, the recent ActionAid report. NGOs are continuing to place an increasingly emphasis on the policy agenda and advocacy (see, for example, the current work of ODI),[16] although it has to be recognized that the effectiveness of specific strategies is not easily tied down.

The ways in which NGOs are included within imminent forms of development interventions have arguably been further changed by the PRSP process – the pre-eminent form of imminent development in the current era of international development. In addition to the problems of representation noted above, this raises dilemmas of legitimacy for NGOs. Here, some civil society actors have chose to disengage, and offer alternative visions of development, as in the case of Nicaragua and Zambia, although these were research institutes or movements closely associated with the Catholic Church, and thus with a more autonomous and (in these cases) politicised civil society actor than most development NGOs. As such, innovations within the world of big-D development can offer NGOs and their (potential) partners in civil society the opportunity to re-position themselves and suggest alternative proposals. However, given that, in Zambia, the official PRSP document actually accepted three-quarters of the recommendations of the 'alternative' civil society plan (Bwalya et al 2004), there are doubts as to how 'alternative' such alternatives might be. Moreover, there is a clear tendency amongst NGOs to grab, fill (and sometimes depoliticise) the available political spaces for engagement with little thought as to whether they are necessarily the most legitimate or

[16] http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/index.html

effective agents to take this representative role, or catalysts of underlying development processes around democratisation and citizenship. A more fundamental challenge is the rejection of such abstract professional planning processes that will, it is surmised, end the way of other "master plans." NGOs may choose to engage around more local and less ambitious programmes that are more embedded within the local context and the political and economic interests that are determining outcomes.

The pro-rights discourse has been supported by the rise of liberal democracy with its associated vision of competing (and relatively equal) interest groups being at the heart of pro-poor democracy. But is it really this simple? The pro-poor nature of this discourse is compromised (Gledhill, 2005) by an assumption of atomised active individuals able to compete relatively equally within a legal framework. There are examples to show this is far from what is possible for the poor (see, for example, Igoe 2003 and Mitlin and Patel 2005). One question is why has this discourse received support from NGOs CHECK In part, as with the increased emphasis on poverty reduction, NGOs may find it attractive because it emphasizes values to which they subscribe and which they wish to further. In a world in which pro-poor values may be under threat, there is an eagerness to be associated with what appears to be supportive in order to build a critical mass for change. A nuanced and complex argument is hard to build and may not be attractive to a world that is arguably increased attuned to "sound bites". As described by Patel (2005), faced with large-scale evictions, is it strategic for slum dwellers to oppose or to negotiate? When one people's movement chose to negotiate, they were harshly criticized but they continue to believe that they should act to further their long term interest.

There appear, then, to be more general limitations on the extent to which the arena of imminent development, as currently constructed, can offer a realm within which projects of social justice, equity and inclusion can be pursued. Where NGOs have been at the forefront of promoting and practising development alternatives within the remit of development interventions – as with the participation agenda – the tendency has been for the agenda to move away from any radical/alternative roots that it may have had, and towards becoming a depoliticised, technocratic and instrumental approach (e.g. White 1996).

From Development to development

None of this is to imply an absence of strategic options available for NGOs seeking to offer alternative ways of thinking and acting on and around international development. In contrast to positioning alternatives in relation to institutions and imminent development, arguably the best NGO interventions come from recognising key moments within underlying development processes – such as citizenship formation amongst marginal groups – and framing their interventions in supportive relation to such progressive moves. The role that NGOs played in promoting democratisation during the 1980s and 1990s – as part of broader civil society movements – constituted an effort to promote a genuine alternative form of politics for citizens in developing countries. Current work to change trade rules in favour of poor and marginal countries and groups similarly constitutes efforts to alter the underlying processes of capitalist development towards

more equitable and just outcomes. In terms of participatory approaches, there is an argument that such efforts have only been transformative where they have engaged with development as an underlying process, rather than a more limited intervention (Hickey and Mohan 2005). Where NGOs engage with and support social movements and popular organisations that are demanding the extension of citizenship status and rights to marginal peoples – and doing so in ways that are broadly democratic as opposed to exclusive efforts to secure privileges – they could claim to be engaging with underlying processes of citizenship formation. Appadurai (2001) offers examples of the kinds of processes that are emerging through such innovative relationships in the South.

In each of these instances, NGOs are of course still engaged in interventions – this is still the stuff of Development. But the interventions in question are clearly framed in terms of, and in conjunction with, a reflection on how intervention might contribute to more structural changes in the underlying processes of development. In this sense – to go back to Hulme's (1994) observation on the reading materials of NGOs – such interventions have certain commonalities with those NGO and other activist initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s in which concepts of education for critical consciousness linked interventions with larger projects of social change.[17] While the nature of the social change sought now seems more complex, nuanced, even murky, and the link between intervention and structural change is recognized by NGOs themselves as far less direct, such initiatives linking D and d would appear to hold much potential. Yet such cases remain the exception rather than the norm and all to often it seems unclear whether NGOs – or many academics within development for that matter –are capable of recognizing, reading and engaging constructively with underlying processes of development. Although the South African NGO activist Allan Kaplan lists ‘development knowledge’ as the foremost amongst an NGO’s organizational capacities, this capacity is rarely highly developed (Kaplan 2001).

One conclusion, then, is that if NGOs are in the business of offering development alternatives, then a central strategy is likely to involve building relationships with actors in civil and political society, including the state, which adhere to progressive agendas with regards the trajectory of little ‘d’ development. The relationships that NGOs develop with particular actors will largely define their capacity and legitimacy in offering alternative routes forward for poor and marginal groups. The context for this is not favourable in some respects. In addressing the issue of NGOs as alternatives, Rajesh Tandon (2001) notes how the political economy of aid makes it difficult for NGOs to expand their circles of conversation with other actors in civil and political society. However, it is also the case that, in the new phase of democratisation – and particularly the presence of reformist position the political parties with shared concerns over social justice – the danger of co-optation has been, if not replaced then certainly joined, by the possibility of more fruitful engagements. As Lavalle et al‘s (2005) study of NGO influence in Brazil, it was those NGOs with the closest links to political parties that were best able to represent marginal communities. As such, the suggestion that “the coming

[17] In a similar vein Watts notes continuities (real, not just analogical – between the actors of "1968 and all that" and the people whose initiatives underlie more recent experiments in deliberative democracy (Watts, 2001).

years are likely to see a greater focus on the complicated interface between civil society and political society, such as political parties and elective and legislative processes" (Fowler 2004: 7), marks a somewhat belated realization within the NGO literature that a stronger engagement with politics rather than civil society per se is required (Houtzager 2003).

This (again) links to our Gramscian understanding of civil society as a realm within which hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic projects are projected and fought over. Here, the same types of actors can either re-enforce or perpetuate hegemonic approaches to development, as witnessed in struggles between different media outlets, different research institutions etc). Some civil society actors, including NGOs, may actually undermine both the state and popular forms of agency in ways that reduces the potential for projects of social justice to emerge. Others may support social movements against a state that claims to act for the poor but which is challenged by the poor themselves. On such an understanding, it makes little sense to maintain a simple divide between states and civil society in relation to development alternatives. This position elides issues of which institutional arena is inherently the best positioned to offer development alternatives, and suggests within our schema, the generation of alternatives in relation to d/D development is necessarily more important than any question as to how NGOs are positioned vis-à-vis other institutional arenas (e.g. Fowler 2000a).[18]

New metaphors for NGOs

The implication of much of the foregoing is that how far, and in what way, NGOs are able to contribute to the reclaiming of development as an alternative project will depend very much on their ability to build relationships with progressive actors operating in the state, in political parties, in social movements and in other domains. That is the management of relationships is a central development challenge as much as a management challenge for NGOs (Lewis, 2001). Depending on the types of relationships at stake, this has various implications for NGOs regarding the shape, form and self-perception they may assume. Here we distinguish between just two of the different modes of being an NGO that might be implied – and we expect the conference to throw up a range of others. Somewhat tongue in cheek, and in the spirit of finding memorable analogies, we refer to these two modes as "the NGO as jelly" and "the NGO as microchip." Both involve giving up the idea of NGOs as innovative think tanks or pilot projects with brilliant insights capable of articulating alternatives that are so convincing that politicians lay down the red carpet and capitalism abandons the profit motive. Both involve groups that accept they are in a long-term battle for ideas against very powerful forces that will reorganize to ensure that elites continue to preferential access to resources. What are NGOs left with?

[18] Although Alan Fowler's recent discussion of NGO futures (2000a) suggests that NGOs might organise themselves around a rights-based discourse that, for him, originates within the arena of civil society, there is little mileage in rights-based approaches that do not centrally involve the state and even supra-national political institutions. The justice (as distinct from freedom) that is called for within pleas for rights to be taken seriously can only be realised through the nation state and (to an extent) international justice institutions.

The NGO as jelly – In this model the NGO accepts that they have little power except that which is generated as a convenor. The NGO allies with more powerful groups, social movements, political parties, rich donors and they seek to respond to opportunities that emerge within these sets of relationships. They put emphasis on a process that draws in pro-poor individuals and groups, and they are essentially responsive to that process – obviously within that they specialise as their mission suggests. They have to be a jelly because they are dealing with very powerful entities who don't hesitate to contest the process. The NGO gets pushed and pulled but also being a jelly manages to hold something together. NGOs that do this well get acknowledged for this role. The others know that it is important and that they are all too interested in contesting for power to manage the equalising process. In such a model, NGOs make a significant contribution in terms of a governance role and government (local/national) may find itself to be primarily a party political power.

The NGO as microchip – The second model is one in which NGOs seek to be a bit more proactive around content. They are still concerned with process – and arguably they have to be as neither social movements nor political processes may rate the intellectual leadership of NGOs. But the NGO is less willing to relinquish leadership to others than the first model – so they have to be subtle and persuasive, slipping their ideas into the plotting. Some of these NGOs find that their convening legitimacy depends on them having a microchip rather than a jelly contribution. In this case, the intellectual contribution enables them to bring every one together with some legitimacy but it is not in itself important. In some cases, NGOs do add real insight to local grassroots and political strategies - why? They broaden horizons and help people learn, see things differently. It is for this reason that research-based NGOs in particular are able to take on a convening role, sometimes taking intellectual leadership, at other times simply offering a space within which broader alternatives an be discussed.

Both these kinds of NGOs are small – both essentially intermediate – turning nouns into verbs again. Sometimes they need to do but they are not essentially doers (although they may work with other NGOs who are doers). The more successful alternative models avoid getting drawn into operational roles because this means they tend to have organizational agendas around the staff they employ and the operational capacity that they need to secure. Rather they choose to employ limited numbers of high-quality versatile people and invest in their skills and capacities – this is a vocation rather than a job – these networks are for long periods, certainly decades. They walk alongside political changes and are able to exploit opportunities with wisdom rather than opportunism.[19]

[19] We asked ourselves whether we would have said anything different ten years ago? Our sense is yes, for one of our own lessons since the first NGO conference is that NGOs scale up at their peril. Scaling up and changing the world do not go together and may at times even enter into conflict with each other. "Changing the world" roles cannot easily be scaled up unless the intervention is very specific and not contested – all that happens is the commitment, wisdom and momentum are lost. But processes can be scaled up the process based on strong, and appropriate, relationships. In this latter option, the NGO remains small but it spawns other actors and initiatives and then links to them. This model is essential non-

Of course, in the end the key issue remains the extent to which the political economy of NGOs will persuade them of the need to reclaim a role for themselves as agents of alternative approaches to development. The extent to which NGOs have managed to maintain a steady slice of the overall cake of development finance suggests that they are a long way from feeling the pinch.

Conclusions

The contexts in which NGOs operated and sought to deliver more people centred, pro-poor forms of development were already complex at the time of the previous Manchester conferences on NGOs in 1992, 1994 and 1999.[20] In 2005 they seem yet more complex: by now, generations of NGO leaders have moved from NGOs into government and other international organizations;, and out again. Also by now some of the more ideologically informed positions of NGOs vis-à-vis both state and market have been tempered by a combination of experience, resignation (to broadly neo-liberal trends), and paradigmatic uncertainties about development and development theory (c.f. Aldaba et al., 2000). As a result, what is unique about NGOs has become even harder to identify and NGOs occupy a world characterized by shades of grey in which alternatives are difficult to define (as the once easily drawn state/market/civil society divisions become harder to sustain) and to defend (as alternatives are phrased more by degrees rather than in black-and-whites). At a time when poverty reduction and participation predominate in big D interventions, and deepening (although uneven and certainly not teleological) processes of democratisation appear to characterise the political dimension of little d, the scope for development alternatives appears to have become particularly constrained.

That said, this is no "end of history" – this is clear both from the arguments surrounding the 2005 G8 Summit at Gleneagles and from the large scale street protests surrounding Bolivia's constitution and the use of the countries' natural gas (two other processes accompanying the writing of the paper). The search for alternatives is alive and, if not well, certainly kicking. Some of this search – certainly that of Bolivian protesters as well as that of movements within political Islam – is asking questions about little d development: these are searches for alternative ways of organizing national society and international relations. But perhaps more of the search – and, we would contend, much of it emanating from many NGOs – continues to be about big D alternatives: alternative ways of designing service delivery, microfinance, modes of supporting people's organizations, low income housing provision, support for AIDS sufferers and orphans etc. In this sphere, alternatives seem far more hybrid, far less clearcut - and the viability of these alternatives depends very much on broader political economic and geopolitical trends, on little d development.

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centrist. We suspect that the strongest NGOs are in fact, and ironically, those that give up on any effort to to control processes.

[20] This final event being, actually, in Birmingham.

We have worked with the big D/little d distinction in this paper not to imply any denigration of development intervention. Indeed, *all* organizations intervene: we are all in the business of big D development. Big D development is the domain of organized action, of human agency. The point is to suggest, rather, that such interventions are far more likely to yield fruits when conceived of in conjunction with a simultaneous awareness and analysis of the structures of development within which one is intervening, and of the types of contextual challenge and change that such structures are likely to present around the corner. And going a step further, it is to suggest that the particularly significant alternatives are those which translate into structural changes, changes in the underlying processes of societies (at whatever scale).

This is akin to John Clark's arguments made in 1991 that the most significant change NGOs might work towards is to change policies – an argument that had significant influence on the tone of Manchester's first NGO conference that discussed how NGOs might "make a difference" by scaling up their impact (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). But it goes somewhat further in that it takes us back to the notion civil society as a field of contention over ideas, and the claim that it matters greatly which ideas are dominant – or hegemonic - in society, because they have great influence in regulating and naturalizing the rules (structures) through which the economy and politics operate. The implication is that the struggle over these ideas is yet more important than the struggle to influence policy.

It is in this sense that NGOs, perhaps, have much to learn from social movements for whom challenging taken for granted ideas about "the order of things" is a raison d'être (Alvarez et al., 1998). Perhaps also for this reason, the gaps that have emerged – as NGOs have become closer to donors, states and markets – between NGOs and social movements merit re-examining, and narrowing. If the nature of alternatives really is that they will be hybrids of different ideas, then perhaps closing some of the distance between NGOs and social movements will create opportunities for hybridizations of the big, broad brush, angry but hopeful alternatives of social movements, and the nuanced, more specific and increasingly carefully strategized alternatives of NGOs.

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