

# The privatization of public interest: theorizing NGO discourse in a neoliberal era\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines recent policy discussions on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their central role in the democratization of civil society. The author argues that the policy debate on NGOs exemplifies the conflict between liberalism and socialism, or more specifically between private interest and public good. The contemporary context of neoliberal economic policies and structural adjustment represents a vindication of liberal norms, and the ascendancy of NGOs is theorized in this context. An analysis of recent policy positions on NGOs and their role in promoting governance and development is illustrative of the complex ways in which NGOs, at local and international levels, are being incorporated into the neoliberal model of civil society.

## KEYWORDS

State; civil society; development NGOs; advocacy NGOs; neoliberalism; global governance; democracy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

If the twentieth century represented a 'top-down' approach to social and economic growth, then with the dawn of a new century we have entered a new era of 'bottom up' growth and social improvement. In this new model, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the primary catalysts of change rather than experts from large bureaucratic institutions (including the state). NGOs have been identified as the preeminent, if not sole, organizational forms that can implement the global commitment to 'bottom up' development. Indeed, the discourse of 'bottom up' development cannot be dismissed as a rhetorical and

superficial gesture on the part of states and international donor agencies. It has truly established itself within the policy process and plans of all official agencies of development that accord a significant and often directive role to NGOs in development projects and programmes (Chambers, 1997; Clark, 1991; Gardner and Lewis, 1996).<sup>1</sup>

NGOs have become a global phenomenon, emerging with amazing alacrity in countries merely on the threshold of establishing democratic states (Henderson, 2002; Kuropas, 1997). The globalization of NGOs is reflective of the new policy consensus that NGOs are de facto agents of democracy rather than products of a thriving democratic culture (Edwards, 2000; Holloway, 1998; Nye and Donahue, 2000). In this paper, I argue that the agentic role prescribed to NGOs is not an innocent one but one that foretells a reworking of democracy in ways that coalesce with global capitalist interests. My analysis calls attention to current efforts by global policy institutions to regulate the 'third sector' in ways that interlink with neoliberal economic reform and challenges the popular understanding that NGOs equal democratization. I review the policy discourse on NGOs to show that the restructuring of democracy within a global reform context requires the regulation of NGOs at specific sites of their operation.

Current debates on the role of NGOs point to the dangers of NGOs replacing the State as representatives of democracy. Given expanding market economies, and shrinking states, NGOs are stepping in to respond to the needs and demands of the poor and marginalized sections of society (Robinson, 1997; Wood 1997). Pointing to this emergent trend, development analysts caution that unlike governments and state bureaucracies, there are no mechanisms by which NGOs can be made accountable to the people they serve, and suggest that a balanced relationship or partnership between states and NGOs can best serve the interests of society. In a similar vein, much of the current discussion on NGOs is caught up in addressing issues of strengthening NGO accountability, autonomy and organizational effectiveness (Fowler, 1997; 2000; Korten, 1990; Lewis and Wallace, 2000).<sup>2</sup> The debate on NGOs remains trapped within an atheoretical framework of state versus civil society, in which Left democrats warn of the erosion of state power, and neoliberals herald the same as a step toward democracy.

In this paper, I highlight how NGO analysts reify state and civil society as 'totemic motifs' (White, 1999: 309) and obfuscate the ways in which NGOs are being integrated into global capitalist relations. I argue that the NGO phenomena must be theorized in relation to the global economic and political process that involves an overall restructuring of public good and private interest. At stake is not the struggle between state and civil society, but a revaluation of private interest and public good. In the first part of the paper, I briefly visit the post-war phase of development in the Third

World in which scholars and policy analysts understood state and civil society differently from to the present context. In this discussion, I clarify the two characteristic positions on state and civil society – the liberal and the social democratic – that diverge on the proper relation between private interest and public good. The end of the cold war and the triumph of market liberalism signal the vindication of the liberal position on state and civil society (Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

In the second part of the paper, I provide a general introduction to the emergence of NGOs and their uneven relations with state and international agencies.<sup>3</sup> Here, I emphasize how community-based NGOs (CBOs) and Advocacy NGOs have carved a unique space for themselves as representing the public interest that presents a problem for global capitalist institutions. I develop this argument in the third and main section of the paper with a focus on global policy actors such as the UN, the World Bank and WTO and their efforts to accommodate NGOs within current reform processes. I highlight two main strategies by which global policy actors incorporate the role of NGOs in ways that advance the economic agenda of their institutions. The two strategies entail a) *pluralizing* the public sphere and; b) *depoliticizing* the private sphere, the former operative at the global policy (inter-state) level, and the latter at the level of local communities (understood as civil society). Each of these strategies represents a trend towards the privatization of the public sphere. My analysis suggests that any discussion of the limits and potential of NGOs must take account of the emergent international economic order and its neoliberal notion of democracy.

## II. CIVIL SOCIETY IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Civil society has emerged only recently as a distinct political actor within international development discourse, and its ascendancy can be traced to the end of the cold war and the launch of the global free market. Prior to this phase, development policy and programmes in the Third World followed a largely social democratic model that prescribed a central role to the state in building democratic societies. Civil society in the Third World was seen as largely underdeveloped, and the state was entrusted with the responsibility of promoting the common good, redirecting self-interested political and economic behaviour towards broader public goals of national development and social welfare (Bardhan, 1984; Gendzier, 1985; Young, 1988). In this period, roughly from the 1950s to the 1980s, ‘the state’ was used in accordance with its social democratic meaning as the embodiment of ‘the public interest’ or general welfare. Conversely, civil society was used to refer to ‘private sectarian interests’ that were represented through religious organizations, business associations, trade unions and so forth.

In a curious flip-flop of what served as a universal conceptual frame for development planning, the state, today, is represented as fragmented by private interests (otherwise referred to as corruption), and hence inept at representing the will of the people, whereas civil society is seen as the honest broker of 'the people's interests'. In advancing this proposition, the role of NGOs is provided as evidence of the new capacities of civil society, mediating the excesses of the state. The dynamic rise of the NGO sector is seen as clear evidence of the evolution of civil society to be able to self-regulate and self-manage its own interests. Thus, in this new discourse, civil society, and NGOs in particular, are seen as fully cognizant rational actors capable of going beyond sectarian interests and acting upon matters of general welfare. In the literature on state-civil society and NGOs, a question rarely asked is, what enables civil society to be rid of its putative elements and commit itself to the common good? The transfer of loyalties of the international development 'community' from state to civil society, which has been rather dramatic to say the least, requires a theoretical explanation.

More importantly, this new conception of civil society does not fit neatly with neoliberal conceptions of state and civil society either. Liberal democratic theory understands civil society as constituted by competing private interests and individual desires that are stabilized by free interactions in the market place. Given the neoliberal economic consensus within development institutions, how is the avowedly public mandate of NGOs situated within a framework that idealizes the pursuit of private interest? The expansion of NGOs is therefore a challenge not only for advocates of the state but also for advocates of liberal individualism and an autonomous private sphere. The question that I seek to address here is, how is the public commitment of NGOs accommodated within the liberal democratic framework? In what ways are the contradictions between NGOs as guardians of public interest and 'free market' policies of neoliberalism mediated by global policy institutions? The fusion of contradictory discourses of public and private within civil society suggests that it is not as much an inversion of state-civil society relations, but a new equation between public and private interests that is being formulated.

A related issue is the articulation between NGOs and the market economy. In equating NGOs with civil society, NGO analysts sidestep the determinative constituents of civil society, namely, private property relations and the capitalist market (Wood, 1990). The NGO debate remains focused on the State, and is largely silent on the issue of NGOs and the capitalist economy. The tendency among NGO analysts is to disengage from the structural reality of civil society, and locate NGOs/civil society as the 'third sector', separate from the market and the state. I argue that this theoretical disengagement can prove illusory in a rapidly expanding capitalist economy. Its utility is limited to allowing NGOs to make a moral

claim to democracy and justice that is disconnected from political economic relations of capitalist expansion (Mercer, 2002). In the remainder of this paper, I explore these questions more fully drawing upon contemporary development policy discourse on state–civil society relations, with specific reference to NGOs.

### III. NGOS NEGOTIATING THE STATE

Even a cursory review of the literature on development reveals that NGOs are the new patrons of public interest, posing a serious challenge to the legitimate function of the state. That is, among the range of organized forces and institutions of civil society, NGOs are regarded as representing the interests of the people, to the greatest extent possible. In other words, NGOs have come to replace other well-established political organizations such as trade unions, welfare associations, religious organizations and trade associations that traditionally represent the interests of various constituencies of society. In relation to these organizations, it is argued that NGOs represent the interests of the broadest swath of people, the poor and the underprivileged of society, who tend to have no structures of representation in public affairs, except perhaps the right to vote during election time.

NGOs are not representative organizations in the strict sense of the term, that is, the personnel managing an NGO are not elected and are most likely to be self-appointed. Nevertheless, they are seen to be genuine representatives of the people's will because the success of their work depends upon the involvement of their specific constituency (whether urban street children, landless agricultural labour, rural women, or indigenous communities) often within a limited geographical region (sometimes a few villages to a few districts). Locally based NGOs are the more typical model of NGOs in the South, and are known as CBOs (Community Based Organizations) or Grassroots Organizations (GROs) to distinguish them from other models of NGOs that have emerged within less than a decade.<sup>4</sup> Below, I clarify in greater detail the role of CBOs and Advocacy NGOs and the changing context in which they operate.

#### **Community-based NGOs**

Justifiably, the legitimacy of CBOs derives from the fact that their work in a local context requires them to develop a membership base – known as the 'target' or 'beneficiary' group in development language – which actively participates in the various social and economic projects managed by the CBO. It requires CBOs to interact with their membership base on a daily basis, to build relations of cooperation and trust with them, to understand their needs and plan projects that respond to these needs.

Consequently, CBOs tend to have close and intimate working relations with men and women of the community and local leaders, some of whom may also work as paid staff for the NGO.<sup>5</sup>

CBOs emerged in the post-war period between 1950s and 1980s in response to the failure of post-colonial states to ensure the basic needs of the poor. For the most part, the leaders of CBOs were socially conscious, middle-class citizens, many of whom had been active in women's movements or radical left movements of the post-independence period. These NGOs promoted a 'development with social justice' approach, and developed political rights awareness campaigns alongside health and economic projects (Garain, 1994). Donor NGOs such as OXFAM in England and SIDA in Sweden, which have strong liberal traditions, were eager to directly fund CBOs since they were more committed and effective in reaching the poor than were the governments of these countries.

Since then, international development agencies have come to rely upon CBOs a great deal because they are seen as efficient and effective implementers of social and economic programs such as maternal health care, literacy and small scale income generation projects (Clark, 1997). In the development literature, CBOs or GROs have the greatest support from all segments of the international development community for they are seen as the main catalysts for 'bottom up' development, i.e. working with actual 'communities'<sup>6</sup> and implementing development projects at the local level (Bebbington and Farrington, 1992; World Bank, 1998). These NGOs are seen to be accountable to the people, although their dependence on external funding and compliance with funding agency targets has raised questions about whether their accountability lies with the people or the funding agencies (Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

This early history of CBOs that signified the birth of pluralist democratic cultures in many postcolonial countries stands largely compromised today in the current policy environment of free market reform and the dismantling of social democratic states. The imposition of structural adjustment policies in the South with decreased state spending has led to an exponential increase in community development NGOs, leading critics to argue that this phenomenon is analogous to 'franchising the state' (Wood, 1997). Financial institutions that, on the one hand, recommend the withdrawal of state support from the social sector allocate aid to community-based NGOs for those very same social services, an indication that the expansion of the NGO sector has been externally induced by foreign policy decisions (Robinson, 1997; Wood, 1997).<sup>7</sup> This dual policy of aid institutions undercuts the early history of NGOs as symbolic of a thriving political culture, independent of patronage from state and international institutions.

### Advocacy NGOs

Advocacy NGOs are a more recent phenomenon in the Third World and have complicated the norms by which to judge the representative character of NGOs. Advocacy NGOs do not operate locally, that is, they do not represent a particular geographically defined community. Rather they tend to be issue based and the constituency they represent may encompass different regions and countries. Advocacy NGOs organize national and international campaigns for particular kinds of policy or legislative changes, and in this way function more as a lobby group, entirely different from CBOs that seek to organize a mass base. Also, in comparison to CBOs, advocacy NGOs are better funded, professionally staffed and are housed in metropolitan centres such as Washington DC or New Delhi.

Advocacy NGOs have gained considerable visibility and influence within international development policy circles, causing concern among states and international lending agencies on how to verify the credibility and legitimacy of NGOs as people's representatives. While concerns about accountability of NGOs in general, and of advocacy NGOs in particular, are pertinent, it is important to note that these concerns are being raised by international agencies at a time when advocacy NGOs have mobilized highly successful international campaigns against trade agreements that challenge the autonomy of Third World governments.<sup>8</sup> The advocacy campaigns of NGOs have redefined narrow policy issues such as violence against women to include war crimes against women and the economic rights of women in the global economy (Sparr, 1994). Given their success in raising public awareness around global policy issues and influencing transnational reforms on a range of important political and economic issues, the question of how to assess their accountability remains fuzzy and unresolved. Although such NGOs do not have a specific membership body, their record shows that they may be equally capable of representing the general public interest, no more and no less than do CBOs.

Ironically, the success of advocacy NGOs has been accompanied by increased scepticism on the part of international policy actors as to whether advocacy NGOs should be considered legitimate participants within global policy forums (Fox and Brown, 1998; Paul, 1999). The influence that advocacy NGOs wield in international policy forums is seen to undermine the sovereignty of state and international institutions. On occasion, advocacy NGOs have come into direct conflict with their own governments on a particular policy, and has raised questions about who legitimately represents the national interest (Fox and Brown, 1998).<sup>9</sup> This is a crucial concern that is at the crux of the state-civil society debate, though, as we shall see, the manner in which the international policy community addresses the issue has less to do with democratic governance and more to do with the interests of transnational capital.

### **Implications of the new policy environment on NGOs**

Quite clearly, in the new policy context of privatization and a shrinking state, governments and international agencies depend on CBOs to a significant extent for their technical expertise and knowledge of local communities. It is not unreasonable to surmise that this dependence on the part of states and international agencies has led to greater support for CBOs over advocacy NGOs. Advocacy NGOs, on the other hand, compete with state and supra-state agencies to determine public policy at the national and global level. In the following section, I expand this general discussion of the emergent political-economic context of NGO activity to a more detailed analysis of how NGOs are being located within the global reform process. The differences between these NGOs cannot be mediated by a uniform set of regulatory practices, but call for a differentiated response from states and global policy actors. I highlight the specific processes of depoliticization and pluralization, and show how the former relates to the workings of community-based NGOs while the latter functions in relation to advocacy NGOs. The pluralization of the public sphere operates more visibly at the policy making level, and therefore impacts advocacy NGOs most directly. The process of depoliticization operates in relation to local development projects, therefore visibly impacting the political process at the local level. I draw upon recent policy documents of the United Nations and the World Bank, as well as independent research on NGOs to illustrate how these regulatory practices are being embedded within the dynamic process of global reform.

#### **IV. NGOS AND THE NEW POLICY CONTEXT: THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

A review of the historical record on NGOs shows that the United Nations and its related bodies such as the UNDP and UNIFEM have been the most open supporters and friendly collaborators of NGOs, both in their development and advocacy roles. The UN officially established the term NGO to describe 'a specific relationship between civil organizations and the intergovernmental process' (UNRISD, 1999: 10). During the eighties and much of the nineties, the United Nations was highly responsive to NGO demands for participation and created important institutional space for NGOs to participate in international policy forums on population, human rights, the status of women, and the environment. UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's provocative statement in 1995 speaks to the prevailing sentiment within the UN on the role of NGOs:

Non-governmental organizations are a basic form of popular representation in the present-day world. Their participation in international relations is, in a way, a guarantee of the political legitimacy

of those international organizations. It is therefore not surprising that in a short space of time we have witnessed the emergence of many new non-governmental organizations.

(Cited in UNRISD, 1999: 16)

The radical democratic stance of the United Nations signifies the progressive history of the UN with leadership from countries of the South.<sup>10</sup> This legacy distinguishes the UN from the Bretton Woods institutions and other international aid agencies whose primary mandate is to stimulate economic growth and investments rather than democracy and human rights, and whose leadership has been restricted to Western industrialized countries, primarily the US, France, the UK and Germany. Another crucial difference that separates the UN from the Bretton Woods institutions is that the former represents member states while the latter represents states as well as multinational corporations and banks. Each is therefore accountable to a different constituency with different interests and priorities that explains their different stance towards NGOs. Notwithstanding the progressive political history of the UN, an equally compelling reason for their support of NGOs is the decline in financial and administrative capacities of the UN to the extent that it is unable to even minimally meet its official mandate. UN officials acknowledge that they simply do not have the resources to fulfil their mandate of providing relief and humanitarian services, and depend upon the assistance of the NGO sector (Anan, 2000).<sup>11</sup> Today, NGOs are involved in UN overseas operations that range from conflict management, refugee settlement, post-conflict reconstruction, drought and famine relief, to addressing the AIDS epidemic.

The declining power and influence of the UN is not fortuitous and needs to be understood in relation to global capitalism and the related shifts in world leadership. While in the post-war phase of development, the United Nations was considered the most legitimate institution of global governance, in the present context of global reforms, it competes with a range of new organizations that wield more power in the international policy arena. Within the UN these changes are clearly acknowledged:

The political authority of the UN is clearly in a period of nemesis. Limping along in the face of crippling financial and moral abuse from the United States, an almost financially bankrupt UN sees its status and role in international governance usurped by the new and ascending nexus of multilateral economic institutions.

(UNRISD, 1997: 9)

The new institutions referenced here are the Bretton Woods institutions, namely, the World Bank and IMF which have risen to new levels of power and prominence, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the new apex body of governments and experts that will determine global policy on

trade and investments. Unlike the UN, these new economic institutions are not representative bodies, and instead are dominated by a small group of Northern ministers, academics and consultants.<sup>12</sup> A central mandate of these institutions is to enable 'free market' conditions, in other words, policies that strengthen trade liberalization and the private sector globally. Therefore, a prime objective of the institutions of economic governance is to ensure a 'good investment climate' for transnational corporations, in other words, an efficient bureaucracy and a stable and peaceful society. As we shall see, this new policy consensus of the ruling economic institutions has profound implications for CBOs and advocacy NGOs.

An effective policy for trade liberalization and privatization requires a minimalist state and a dynamic civil society. It follows that in order to stimulate private capital investments and establish transnational market relations, it is necessary to divest from the state as well as minimize state regulation of the private sector. In most countries of the Third World, this policy change involves a massive shift from a state managed and state protected economy to a 'free enterprise' economy with minimal state subsidies.<sup>13</sup> However, the work of the state still needs to be done, particularly in sectors that are not profitable for private investors. NGOs are encouraged to step in here to manage literacy and health programmes, respond to the AIDS crisis and create employment programmes for the poor. In post-communist regions of Central Asia, as well as in China, development analysts make an unambiguous case for the role of NGOs in hastening the formation of an entrepreneurial civil society (Cernea and Kudat, 1997; Jude, 1998; Moore, 2001).

The shift in economic policy involves important cultural changes within the body politic. A fundamental cultural transformation involved in the transition from state-led development to a deregulated market economy is that citizens have to forego their sense of entitlement and have to acquire an entrepreneurial citizen identity that derives from liberal values of independence and autonomy.<sup>14</sup> The new economic institutions are engaged in this process of advancing a new citizen culture, aiding in the development of an active and dynamic civil society in which all citizens, including the poor, are encouraged to be enterprising and seize the opportunities of the global economy. Not surprisingly therefore, the promotion of liberal democracy goes hand in hand with the institution of market economies in the current policy context. However, as I elaborate below, within the framework of neoliberalism, the contradictions between liberalism and democracy are blatantly exposed. Liberalism promotes self-determination for the individual, protecting the individual from state and societal regulation whereas democracy involves state and its people actively constructing public institutions and a public sphere that guarantees the welfare of the majority (Held, 1996). Pulled apart in their meanings, we must conclude that an active civil society based on liberalism

does not equal a democratic civil society, although the two meanings are often conflated in NGO analysis (Mercer, 2002). The disjuncture between the two agendas of neoliberalism and democratization is best revealed by the ways in which CBOs and advocacy NGOs are positioned within the new policy agenda.

### **The pluralization of the public sphere**

The events of Seattle, Genoa and D.C. demonstrate that advocacy NGOs, supported by social movements and trade unions, are in a position to disrupt and stall the formation of the global capitalist market, a task that new economic institutions take as their primary goal. Given that NGOs are here to stay, and are seen as legitimate participants in global policy forums, how is their role accommodated in these forums? The new economic actors draw upon the liberal notion of democracy with its moral claim to pluralism and autonomy (Kumar, 1998; Cohen and Arato, 1994). The report of the UN Commission on Global Governance (CGG) indicates this emergent construction:

At the global level, governance has been viewed primarily as inter-governmental relationships, but it must now be understood as also involving non-governmental organizations (NGOs), citizen's movements, multinational corporations, and the global capital market. Interacting with these are global mass media of dramatically enlarged influence.

(1995: 2-3)

In the above quote, no distinction is made between profit-seeking corporations and citizen's movements representing vulnerable populations. Each is afforded an equal opportunity to participate in the global governance process. Civil society here is used in accordance with the liberal roots of the term, quite different from the usage popularized by NGO advocates. In a manner of speaking, the new economic institutions are taking back a term that had been appropriated by NGO advocates, but this time restoring to it its original meaning, namely economic and social relations outside the state. Taking the above quote as an example, civil society includes the global capital market as well as citizen movements. Further, the lack of distinction between the market, NGOs and citizen's movements implies that the role of each is equally legitimate and important for global governance. As may be apparent, such an all-encompassing definition of civil society seriously limits the power and influence of advocacy NGOs within global governance forums.

Second, the new economic actors are adopting a formal definition for NGOs that does not differentiate between people-oriented NGOs, government NGOs and corporate NGOs. As a result, business and industry

associations are now equally a part of 'NGO representation' in international policy forums, making it impossible for progressive NGOs to build a common alliance against corporate interests. The business and industry associations (also referred to as BINGOs) are technically NGOs but represent powerful corporate interests linked to pesticide, pharmaceutical, tobacco companies and other such interests. Though the participation of BINGOs is challenged by a lobby of Public Interest NGOs (PINGOs), the latter group is clearly at a disadvantage. Not only are business NGOs part of the ideological consensus on trade and economic reform, but they also have greater access to the forums in terms of the financial resources at their disposal. More importantly, international agencies, including the UN, are committed to promoting the role of BINGOs in international policy deliberations. This is made apparent in the Commission's report that lauds the efforts of the Secretary General of the UN in 'repairing its ties with the private sector' by opening up to business NGOs such as the International Chamber of Commerce and embracing the role of private firms in UN programmes and projects.<sup>15</sup> The World Bank, an important player in the global reform process, advances a similar pluralist approach to the global policy making:

[O]ur partnerships must be inclusive – involving bilaterals and multilaterals, the United Nations, the European Union, regional organizations, the World Trade Organization, labor organizations, NGOs, foundations and the private sector. With each of us playing to our respective strengths, we can leverage up the entire development effort.

(Speech by Wolfensohn, 1997: 5)

The above quotes clearly indicate that each of the member-participants in these forums are seen as equal stakeholders in the global restructuring process, each representing a legitimate 'interest group' to be included in the 'dialogue' to guarantee a 'democratic' governance process.<sup>16</sup> Advocacy NGOs are located within this pluralist liberal democratic space in which they, like their private counterparts, represent a specialized constituency in the global forum. The notion of a 'common partnership' constitutes a central discursive device through which the multiple and disparate entities of civil society are integrated into a unified whole in which each representational body has different, albeit complementary responsibilities. Issues of conflict and contestation between different civil society groups are at best marginally referenced as tensions and awkwardness that are a normal aspect of new partnerships (Annan, 2000). There is little, if any, consideration given to the unequal power relations between different representational bodies or to the fundamentally different interpretations among them about the constitution of public welfare.

The pluralization of the global policy forum by multiple particular interests constitutes a privatization of the public sphere, and delegitimizes any notion of the public interest. Thus, not only is the state decentred as the legitimate representative of the public interest, but equally, the multiple divergent private interests of civil society are accorded legitimacy and prominence. Far from being radical democratic, this conception of civil society harks back to the classical liberal notion of democracy in which common interest is nothing but the sum of private interests (Held, 1996).

The pro-poor and anti-capitalist agenda of advocacy NGOs is effectively marginalized by such a pluralist and non-discriminatory approach to global governance.<sup>17</sup> In response, advocacy NGOs lobby to improve access to important international forums.<sup>18</sup> However, negotiating better access within a pluralist, liberal democratic framework may do little to challenge the terms of the debate on the goals and objectives of global policy. It is equally necessary to problematize the dissolution of the meanings of public and private that are embedded within the global governance discourse.

### **The depoliticization of local development**

Diversifying global policy forums with many special interest groups is a partial, albeit important, mode by which the public sphere is reclaimed by the private sector. The presence of numerous NGOs at the grassroots that provide services to underprivileged populations, and at the same time mobilize them for their rights also presents a threat to the neoliberal agenda of privatization. Grassroots NGOs (or CBOs) work with marginalized sections of society such as poor women, landless peasants, and urban street children, and serve as intimate witnesses to the devastation wrought by privatization and marketization of the social and economic sectors. In certain countries, grassroots NGOs have allied with Left parties and radical movements to challenge the policies of international institutions (Hammami, 1995). In countries of the South, the Leftist origins of CBOs are reflected in their opposition to structural adjustment policies, which may not translate into an organized movement, but it nevertheless poses a problem for economic reform.

Scholarship on community-based NGOs points to a process of professionalization and depoliticization of NGOs at the grassroots (Alvares, 1998; Hammami, 1995; Kamat, 2002; Miraftab, 1997; Schild, 1998). Based upon fieldwork in different countries, the studies reach a common conclusion about the shift in the organizational character of NGOs and the nature of their work. For instance, Miraftab traces the evolution of Mexican NGOs 'from organizations that aimed deep social change through raising consciousness, demand making and opposition with the government, to

organizations that aim incremental improvement of the poor's living conditions through community self-reliance and formulation of workable solutions' (1997: 362). In each case, the authors show that community based NGOs have moved away from education and empowerment programmes that involve structural analysis of power and inequality and instead adopt a technical managerial solution to social issues of poverty and oppression. Although each study presents a unique narrative of NGO history, the authors conclusively establish the shift from broad-based political education and organization of the poor to providing social and economic inputs based on a technical assessment of capacities and needs of the community. This phenomenon represents a marked shift from the Freirean model of consciousness-raising and popular organizing for social change that was typical of CBOs from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The changes in the focus of NGO activity have had a deep impact on the organizational character of NGOs. As described earlier, the leadership of community-based NGOs typically constituted middle-class Leftists who identified closely with the poor and were committed to social justice work at the grassroots. In many cases, activists were conscious of the need to 'deprofessionalize' in order to build relations with the poor (Kamat, 2002; Miraftab, 1997). The shift to a managerial and functional approach to social change has led to a more professionally oriented approach to an extent that professionally trained staff constitute a significant component of the leadership in CBOs.

The scholarship points to the neoliberal policy context as an important cause of the trend toward professionalization and depoliticization of CBOs. The decline in state entitlements to the poor has led donor agencies to channel greater amounts of aid to grassroots NGOs. The influx of money and pressure to lead where the state is absent has had a significant impact on local NGOs. Donor monitoring and accounting systems require NGOs to implement social and economic projects in an efficient and effective manner. Although other factors may play a role, the authors agree that the new economic regime has led to a culture of professionalization and depoliticization of NGOs.

The World Bank's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of CBOs makes it clear that CBOs make viable partners for donor agencies only if they diminish their political character and enhance their managerial and technical capabilities:

NGOs are important to the Bank because of the experience and resources they bring to emergency relief and development activities. The Bank's 1989 Operational Directive 14.70 (OD) describes the perceived strengths and weaknesses of NGOs and CBOs and encourages Bank staff to involve those organizations in Bank-supported activities within the framework of the borrower government's

policies. The OD identifies NGOs' potential strengths as their ability to reach poor communities and remote areas, promote local participation, operate at low cost, identify local needs, build on local resources and introduce new technologies. The directive refers to NGO weaknesses such as their limited replicability, self-sustainability, and managerial and technical capacity, a narrow context for programming, and politicisation.

(World Bank, 1998: 3)

Not only is the activity and identity of NGOs increasingly professionalized and depoliticized but they also have to compete with a growing number of non-membership NGOs that have sprung up to respond to donor enthusiasm for community-based development. 'Operational NGOs', a relatively recent term adopted by the World Bank, describes the character of these NGOs. The term 'operational NGOs' defines NGOs that are 'engaged primarily in design, facilitation and implementation of developmental sub projects' (World Bank, 1998).<sup>19</sup> The apolitical and managerial approach to community development draws upon the liberal notion of empowerment wherein the poor are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and find solutions to their livelihood needs. The entrepreneurial notion of empowerment (not unlike the American motto of 'pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps') is altogether different from the understanding of empowerment for social justice that characterized the work of CBOs in the post-war development period. The latter involves political sensitization and organizing the poor for their social and economic rights from the state and economic elites.

The neoliberal notion of empowerment implies a focus on individual capacities and needs of the poor, and consequently minimizing the social and political causes of poverty. The individual is posited as both the problem and the solution to poverty rather than as an issue of the state's redistribution policies or global trade policies. The popularity of micro-credit programmes among donor agencies can be understood within this context where the state is no longer responsible for creating employment, and the poor are expected to strengthen their own capacities toward livelihood security. Livelihood security becomes a matter of optimal utilization of the abilities and resources that one possesses. In the absence of critical education and awareness building, alternatives to the dominant economic regime are less likely to emerge, as are new understandings of collective good. *The World Bank Participation Sourcebook* (1995) provides insight into the implications of the neoliberal approach to empowerment:

As the capacity of poor people are strengthened and their voices begin to be heard, they become 'clients' who are capable of demanding and paying for goods and services from government and private sector agencies. . . . We reach the far end of the continuum

when these clients ultimately become the owners and managers of their assets and activities.

(p. 7)

The neoliberal notion of empowerment leads unmistakably to the marketization of social identities and relations. The idea of public goods and services is all but non-existent in this version of empowerment and participation. Individualizing the process of empowerment where each has to build his/her capacities to access the marketplace reduces the concept of public welfare to private interest. In this discourse, public welfare is reduced to an aggregate of individual gains, and the social democratic notion that public welfare is something that must prevail over and above private gain ceases to exist. Operating within the neoliberal framework of development, democracy is rendered an unviable and impossible project. My analysis of depoliticization and professionalization of community-based NGOs when located within the broader structural context of neoliberal economics suggests that here too we see the privatization of public good, similar to the privatization of the public sphere in the global policy arena.

## V. CONCLUSION: THE QUESTION OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Privatizing the notion of public interest corresponds to the privatization of public industries that is an integral part of the New Policy Agenda currently in force in most countries of the world. The New Policy Agenda is seen to comprise two principle strategies – marketization/privatization of economic and social sectors (such as health and education) and democratization of civil society (Hulme and Edwards, 1997). To the extent that privatization concentrates power and resources rather than diffuses it, and democratization implies the diffusion of political power, the paradoxical juxtaposition of these two agendas has, in my view, made it difficult for progressive scholars to critique the New Policy Agenda for its fundamentally undemocratic frame. For the most part, these contradictory propositions remain insufficiently interrogated, and have been explained away as part of the duality or paradox of globalization (Appadurai, 1996).

However, an analysis of how the discourse of global governance constitutes civil society as a discrete set of private interests suggests the re-invention of the term ‘democracy’ in ways that cohere with the imperatives of marketization and privatization. Within the neoliberal framework, democracy is re-defined as the free and full expression of each specific constituency, with little regard for the uneven relations of power that characterize the different interest groups. Further, my analysis suggests that democracy is being redefined in very different ways at the global and local level, articulating to produce a common effect. At the global level,

the space is opened up for many different interests to be represented with partnership and co-operation as the directive principles of interaction in global policy forums. Market imperatives of privatization and deregulation are assumed to be more or less non-negotiable, and corporations, advocacy NGOs and governments are expected to negotiate the interests of their particular constituency to the extent possible.

At the local level, the reverse is at play: instead of a pluralization of forces (stakeholders, in the policy discourse), the scope of NGO activity is restricted to managerial and administrative tasks directed at improving the capacity of the poor to compete in the marketplace. An effect, operative at both levels, is privileging the interests of the particular (individual or specific group) over the well-being of the general. In reclaiming the public space as a negotiation between different private interests, the concept of the public good is impossible to identify, let alone defend. Thus, rather than deepening the gains made on the basis of popular democratic struggles, NGOs are being re-inscribed in the current policy discourse in ways that strengthen liberalism and undermine democracy. Given this trend, it is unlikely that NGOs can be the honest brokers of people's interests. Further, it raises the disquieting question that if neither the state nor NGOs represent the public good, then who does?

Finally, my analysis also shows that constructing the NGO debate as 'state versus civil society' creates a false position that may be analytically misleading. In this paper, I show how NGOs, conventionally understood to be part of civil society, are part of the remaking of state institutions and state processes, as much as they are part of reconfiguring civil society. The reification of state and civil society as actual sites with marked boundaries obscures their function as signifiers of public and private will, as representing a mode of relating the private interests with public good. In other words, state and civil society serve as 'totemic motifs' in the struggle to define relations between the individual and the collective, between the private and the public. These relations between private and public are being reconstituted through a myriad of social, political and economic institutions. NGOs are one among a range of institutional forms through which these relations are being reconstituted in the global context. The study of NGOs at the local and global level can reveal much about how these relations, and the very meaning of the private and public are being re-articulated at the level of localized political practice as well as at the level of global institutional practice.

## NOTES

- \* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Anthropological Society Meeting, Washington D.C. November 2001. Panel title: NGO-graphy: The Critical Anthropology of NGOs and Civil Society.

- 1 By the mid-1990s, enthusiasm about NGOs led the American Vice President to commit 40 percent of Overseas Development Assistance to NGOs (Van Rooy, 1998).
- 2 The World Development Special Issue 'Development Alternatives: The Challenge of NGOs' is one of the first systematic reviews of the NGO phenomenon (Drabek, 1987). Much current scholarship reiterates the issues discussed in this special issue.
- 3 Although, there are unique aspects to the NGO history of each country, there are sufficient common features to this history by virtue of a fairly standard policy approach toward NGOs by international donors and multilateral agencies.
- 4 Today, the term NGO describes a wide range of organizations including Community-based Organizations (CBOs), International NGOs (INGOs), Government-run NGOs (GONGOs), Donor-organized NGOs (DONGOs), Advocacy NGOs (ANGOs), National NGOs (NNGOs), Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), and most broadly, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Each differs from the other with respect to scale, size, purpose, staffing, funding, and operations. Equally important, they differ in the extent to which they are regarded as legitimate representatives of poor communities in the South. For example, donor and advocacy NGOs are seen more as support organizations, supporting the activity of NGOs that have a popular base.
- 5 Although paid staff in CBOs are often drawn from the community being served by the CBO, the senior managerial staff tends to be urban educated middle class upper caste persons who are 'not of the community'. The two-tiered employee structure in CBOs has led to criticisms against NGOs in India of reproducing an unequal work structure and work culture despite its rhetoric of egalitarianism and participation (Bijoy *et al.*, 1994).
- 6 'Communities' are themselves artificially constructed through the very process of NGO and State intervention. In order to meet limited and clearly identified project goals, a development project requires the construction of a unified bounded local community of beneficiaries-participants, excluding how 'the community' is sustained through extra-local relations. See Maia Green (2000) for an excellent exposition of the construction of community via a Tanzanian development project.
- 7 In this instance, I refer to the World Bank which, along with its sister institution, the IMF has imposed structural adjustment on the social sector of many Third World countries, and is directly funding NGOs for education and health programmes.
- 8 For example, the Canadian based advocacy NGO, Rural Advancement Fund International along with other NGOs has run successful campaigns against multinational agro-business corporations and the U.S. government for patenting of seeds and human cell tissue. See <[www.rafi.org](http://www.rafi.org)> for details. Advocacy NGOs along with social movements have carried out highly effective public campaigns against the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) and other such trade policies that reproduce North-South inequities.
- 9 A highly publicized case of NGO opposition to governments occurred at the 1992 UN Earth Summit at Rio where NGOs proposed alternative environmental treaties for governments to sign. See <[www.igc.apc.org/habitat/treaties/ngoatgf.html](http://www.igc.apc.org/habitat/treaties/ngoatgf.html)> for details of the NGO alternative proposals.
- 10 In the early phase, many administrators and directors of programmes at the UN were intellectuals of anti-colonial struggles in their countries.
- 11 The UN's budget deficit has worsened in the past decade mainly due to the

- US refusal to pay its outstanding dues of \$1.4 billion. To a large extent, the UN financial crisis has been offset by extensive partnership with NGOs in UN operations.
- 12 The WTO is only formally a representative body and has 141 member countries (as of May 2001). Although many developing countries have member status in the WTO, the decision making process is exclusionary and undemocratic. It is headquartered in Geneva, and developing countries cannot afford to maintain staff in Geneva or at the most have one official posted in Geneva to participate in the several dozens of committee meetings held daily at the headquarters. Developed countries on the other hand have several staff members and can also afford to fly in representatives as and when needed. Further, poor countries cannot afford the legal fees involved to contest an unfavourable trade ruling made by the WTO. (Clarke, 1999, *Independent*. Retrieved at <[www.igc.org/globalpolicy/soecon/bwi-wto/wto99-11.htm](http://www.igc.org/globalpolicy/soecon/bwi-wto/wto99-11.htm)> Decision making in the World Bank and IMF is explicitly in favour of developed countries, since votes are weighted in terms of the financial investments of a country in these organizations (that is, one dollar, one vote). The five countries that have the largest shares of capital stock (the US, Japan, France, Germany and the UK) have the greatest powers in the two organizations.
  - 13 In reality, heavy state subsidies are given to multinationals that invest in Third World countries. A recent case in India is the subsidies provided to the energy giant Enron (Mehta, 2000).
  - 14 To what extent such a cultural transition is realistic given the well-entrenched culture of the state in postcolonial societies is anybody's guess.
  - 15 The follow-up millenium report by the Commission on Global Governance (CCG) is clear that 'the private sector has more to offer besides capital, notably expertise and experience on many functional, financial and managerial questions' (CGG, 2000: 7).
  - 16 The Commission on Global Governance similarly emphasizes partnerships between all members of civil society and reproaches NGOs for their 'harsh stance towards the private sector' and encourages them to 'reconsider their attitudes in the light of changing circumstances' (United Nations, 2000: 22).
  - 17 The UNRISD confirms that '[g]iven the enormous economic disparities between big business and the global poor, the lack of distinction between groups associated for profit (BINGOs) and those associated for public interest (PINGOs) rankles NGOs struggling to put development issues on the international agenda . . . The women's health organizations from the public interest sector adopted a resolution banning the participation of transnational corporations from their caucus meetings . . . in order to ensure that public interest NGOs were free to meet, reach consensus, set policy, plan and strategize without the presence and influence of organizations formed to protect the financial and business interests of their members. One NGO stated 'it is unconscionable that people-centered groups should have to share their one channel to policy makers with profit-making concerns' (UNRISD, 1997).
  - 18 The question of access to NGOs has reached a critical point since 1997. Two new regulations at the UN signal the disciplining of NGOs at the global policy level. One is to charge user fees to NGOs for the digitally stored UN documents which will specially impact Southern-based NGOs who are not as well-funded as the Northern-based NGOs. Second, is the new agreement initiated by the US that in the interests of efficiency the UN will not sponsor any more global conferences. The global conferences sponsored by the UN over the last two

decades have served as prime sites for NGO advocacy work. Both sets of reforms reflect the UN's adaptation to market-based principles of governance (Paul, 1998).

- 19 The World Bank also identifies the same two categories of NGOs: operational NGOs and advocacy NGOs. The latter are defined as NGOs 'whose primary purpose is to defend or promote a specific cause and who seek to influence the policies and practices of the Bank'. The Bank's activity and guidelines pertain only to operational NGOs which are further classified into three main groups: 'community-based organizations (CBOs) which serve a specific population in a narrow geographic area; national organizations which operate in individual developing countries, and; international organizations which are typically headquartered in developed countries and carry out operations in more than one developing country. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, most examples of World Bank-NGO collaboration involved international NGOs. In recent years, however, this trend has been reversed. Among projects involving NGO collaboration recorded in FY94, 40% involved CBOs, 70% involved national organizations and 10% involved international organizations' (World Bank, [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

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