Introduction to the debate

This paper aims to explore the potential dynamics and tensions bound up in the engagement of Northern NGOs with Southern social movements. While there appears to be a general assumption amongst the Northern NGO community that these movements are the natural allies of development agencies working on issues of poverty, exclusion and sustainable development in the South, there is a considerable lack of clarity surrounding the definition of the term ‘social movement’. This has obvious implications for the way in which a Northern donor or NGO might conceptualise its potential relationship with these Southern actors. This paper will therefore begin with a clarification of what the author understands by the term ‘social movement’, and will include examples from empirical case studies retrieved from the available literature. Although this paper was originally conceived as a literature review that would lay out the state of debate around interaction between Northern NGOs and social movements, there is a surprising paucity of analytical material on the subject. As such this paper will, in the main, centre on the analysis available in the extensive academic literature available on social movements and draw inferences from this for the work of International NGOs (INGOs).

A large amount of material has been produced by social scientists on social movement theory, particularly since the 1960s. Debates have raged about how and why movements appear and the reasons individuals join them. Generally speaking, however, the movements analysed in the literature are those that have emerged in Western Europe and North America and, naturally, the resultant theory is very much centred on experiences in these contexts. The fact that Southern social movements have received relatively little attention goes some way to explain the lack of analysis of INGO interaction with these Southern actors. However, theorists in North America and Europe have struggled with the definitional aspects of different forms of collective action and some of their conclusions will be a useful starting point for the issue under discussion here.

Defining social movements

One reason why it has proved difficult to provide a clear definition of a social movement, is because they are by nature, shifting entities. The essence, however, of a social movement is resistance. This could be resistance against the status quo, in which movement members demand basic human rights such as shelter, land and access to services, or resistance against the future violation of their rights as they oppose government initiatives, commonly for large-scale dam building, commercial fisheries or the establishment of protected environmental zones in areas crucial for local livelihoods. The focus on rights is one of the factors that sets Southern social movements apart from their contemporary movements in Western and Northern contexts. The latter, functioning in democratic countries with well developed civil societies, have been described as ‘post-material’ (Miller 1997) and tend to demand recognition for certain identities i.e., black, gay; or protesting against government policy i.e. the war on Iraq, animal experimentation etc.
become generalised, as they take on extra agendas and lose their specificity to the local reality. This is not to deny the achievements of these entities, with whom INGO involvement is already well established. Indeed, INGOs often play an important role in international and national advocacy campaigns, bringing together different actors from across the globe into diverse networks. The larger UK charities, such as Oxfam, Save the Children and ActionAid, have departments devoted to these campaigns, on for example Fair Trade, GM crops and child prostitution.

Another set of collective actors sometimes referred to in the literature as 'social movements’, are groups of individuals, very often women, who join forces to ensure livelihoods for their families. A famous example are the soup kitchens established in Lima in the 1980s (Lind and Farmelo 1996). However, a more appropriate term for these type of mobilization would be ‘consumption based organization’ (Craske 1996: 64). Whilst these groups are reacting against a status quo they regard as unacceptable, their activities centre around service provision, rather than challenging government to fulfil responsibilities to its citizens. Surely, the status of the soup-kitchen mobilizations as a non-movement was confirmed when the corrupt and crisis-ridden Peruvian government institutionalised them in 1988 (Ibid: 65). As Foweraker (1995) has noted, not everything that moves is a social movement. For Cohn, the stamp of a social movement is precisely its refusal to provide services and resolution that this should be the role of the state. Writing about groups that call for improved health care in Sao Paulo, she notes that while NGOs occasionally provide health services, social movements 'reject the role of service provider in place of the state and instead assume the role of identifiers and articulators of society's health needs’ (Cohn 1995: 97).

On the other hand, entities that carry clear hallmarks of a social movement can also call themselves NGOs (Masden 1997, Igoe 2003). In some cases this has been a way to get recognition in dealings with local authorities, or even, in more repressive country contexts, to have the right to organize at all.

- Comparing social movements to NGOs

Returning to what a social movement is, rather than what it is not, perceiving movements in terms of grassroots protest, resistance and challenge goes some way to help us understand how they differ from NGOs. Whilst it could be argued that the development project per se is political, with its goals of fundamental social change and demands for equity, the author would argue that social movements distinguish themselves from NGOs in the overt politicisation of their aims. They 'struggle to integrate previously excluded groups and issues into local or national politics' (Foweraker 1995: 63). Schlaepfer et al (1994) also define a social movement as community mobilization around the political implications of a local problem. Social movement challenges to the status quo are generally highly vocal, and members very often posit themselves in clear opposition to government or other elites and their policies. However, the relationship between social movements and the organs of the state is a complicated one. Movements may very often oppose government, but they are equally dependent upon it to redress certain wrongs or bestow rights. Their strategic interaction with the state brings movements clearly into the realm of the political. Foweraker concludes, ‘all social movements must be defined in some degree by their political projects, or their attempts to influence institutional and political change’ (1995: 69).

As well as politicised, social movements are often highly radical and innovative in their demands and their activities. Movement members search for new ways to make their views known and articulate their demands, and can at times break the law to achieve this.

Social movements derive [...] from a shared antagonism towards ‘others’ and so have been defined as a ‘continuing overt relationship of conflict between collective actors and authorities’. In particular, 'it is typically by rebelling against the rules and authorities associated with their everyday activities that people protest' (Tarrow and Piven & Cloward quoted in Foweraker 1995: 67).
Obviously, some NGOs can be radical, innovative and politically combative, but there are also clear institutional differences between social movements and NGOs. The latter tend to be recognisable by their structure. Indeed, huge resources are expended by Northern development agencies in organizational capacity building for Southern NGOs, so that efficient working structures and accountability mechanisms are in place. By contrast, social movements tend to be more ad hoc and evolutionary by nature. Alvarez, in her examination of the ‘NGOization’ of the Latin American feminist movements, provides a useful distinction:

[NGOs] characteristically have functionally specialized, paid, professional staff and, sometimes, a limited group of volunteers; receive funding from bilateral and multilateral agencies and (usually foreign) private foundations; and engage in pragmatic strategic planning to develop ‘reports’ or ‘projects’ aimed at influencing public policies and providing advice to the [women’s movement] and varied services to low-income women (Alvarez 1997: 307)

Whilst the women’s movement also undertakes activities oriented towards policy and provision of advice,

The feminist movement is commonly understood to be made up of militant groups or collectives […] They have largely volunteer and often sporadic participants (rather than ‘staff’), more informal organizational structures, and significantly smaller operating budgets; their actions (rather than ‘projects’) are guided by more loosely defined, conjunctural goals and objectives (Ibid: 308).

NGOs also are more likely to have a set of fixed priorities, whereas social movements can often be much more fluid, and above all reactive, as their actions and goals respond to the vagaries of local and national politics, or the flexibility of global capital.

Perhaps most crucial for a definition of social movements, however, is the issue of membership. Social movements are their members. In contrast, theoretically (and sometimes in practice) NGOs can consist of just one person. It would be hard to imagine a social movement composed of a single individual. Social movements are highly dependent on their members who they must keep mobilized and committed. In this sense, movements must elicit a high level of loyalty from their individual members who in turn bestow the movement with legitimacy. NGOs, whilst they may seek to represent a certain constituency, very often do not. Critics of the sector note that often the only groups Southern NGOs are accountable to are their foreign donors (Fisher 1997). In this way, NGOs are more likely to define their work by their official mission and organizational goals than by their membership, if they have one.

It could be argued that three of the defining factors that set southern social movements apart from local NGOs are precisely what makes them attractive potential partners for international NGOs. These are (i) the importance of their membership – very often the most marginal sectors of society who are, furthermore, already mobilised (ii) their radical nature which makes them responsive, reactive and often highly innovative and (iii) their perceived ‘authenticity’ and closeness to the grassroots. In the current audit climate of North America and Western Europe, as INGOs struggle to prove their impact, much blame has been laid at the door of Southern NGO partners, once perceived as ‘close to the grassroots’ but increasingly identified with the professional, urban middle-classes. In contrast, social movements are seen to be directly located at community level, democratic, with a large female constituency and, very often employing the discourse of rights. All these factors correspond with

---

2 It has been noted that women are often in the majority in social movements. Explanations for this reflect the fact that movement demands often centre around domestic concerns such as food, housing and health, which are typically in the female sphere. Also, access to traditional channels through which grievances can be articulated, such as trade unions and political parties can be constrained for women (Corcoran-Nantes 1990). However, feminist critics have voiced concern that development actors can place too great a reliance on
current global development priorities. Furthermore, their radical agenda can reflect well on the profile of a Northern NGO, particularly if the movement’s agenda fits with the development ‘fad’ of the time: for example an indigenous movement contesting the incursions of a multinational into traditional territories, or the ‘salt of the earth’ peasants who demand the right to farm land to provide for their families.

However, there is a fourth general characteristic of social movements that can be a sticking point for INGOs: their organizational fluidity. It is in attempts by INGOs to professionalise and institutionalise social movements that the principal dangers for engagement between these two types of actors are to be found.

- The evolution of social movements
Social movements are evolutionary by nature and can rise, fall and disappear in response to changing political circumstances and levels of success or failure. Geared as they generally are to specific, quantifiable goals, membership will drop off both if these are achieved, or if success comes to be seen as highly unlikely. The death of a social movement should not necessarily be mourned, for as Jaquette (quoted in Foweraker 2001: 9) has noted, ‘Successful social movements inevitably lose their reason for being’. Both Foweraker (2001) and Craske (2003) have noted that the transitions to democracy across Latin America spelt the end for many social movements, whose agendas had so often incorporated resistance to military rule. While not all their demands were met by formal elections, NGOs and political parties were seen as the new valid articulators of society’s needs. Although NGOs have taken up issues similar to those of social movements, critics have noted a decrease in radicalism (Taylor 1997, Foweraker 2001). However, not all social movements will disappear after success or failure. In some cases an organizational form that started life as a social movement can emerge as an NGO, or an NGO-like entity, the SMO (Social Movement Organization). This is the case, for example, of a group of grassroots movements in the Philippines who were opposed to a World Bank scheme to dam the Chico river. Having successfully opposed the plans, the local level groups coalesced into an organization with a much broader support base, encompassing a wide variety of interest groups and further reaching aims (Hilhorst 2003). In this example, the availability of external funding was not the motivation for these organizational transformations. Rather, these fluid movements reoriented themselves with changing policy and political circumstances. Foweraker (2001) sees the institutionalisation of Latin American social movements as an almost inevitable part of the democratisation process. Other commentators note the frequency of cooptation and/or institutionalisation with the general cycle of movement mobilization and demobilization (Meyer and Tarrow 1998).

- The risk of cooption
The transition to NGO status can, however, be problematic if it occurs as an unintended consequence of donor support for a radical movement, or without the prior knowledge or consent of its members. McAdam notes the dangers involved:

  The establishment of formal organizations […] sets in motion […] the destructive forces of oligarchization, cooption, and the dissolution of indigenous support [all of which] tames the movement by encouraging insurgents to pursue only those goals acceptable to external sponsors. […] The long list of movements that have failed to negotiate these obstacles attests to the difficulties inherent in the effort (quoted in Piven & Cloward 1995: 159-160)

One example of this is provided by Igoe in his account of the professionalization of Tanzanian pastoralist land-rights movements. In this case, local movements that had registered as NGOs began to lose touch with their constituents as their leaders bowed to donor interests and agendas. He argues women’s ‘voluntary’ involvement in collective action, and even exploit it, by failing to give due consideration to trade-offs in terms of their well-being and the foregoing of income generating opportunities (Molyneux 2002).
that the fundamental flaw on the part of the external donors was ‘to mistake the institution for the process’.

Pastoralist NGOs never embodied grassroots social movements; they were a product of them. It is facile to believe that an institution can contain the complex dynamics of a rural social movement and carry them away to the city or even overseas. An NGO at its crudest level is nothing more than an office and a piece of paper [...] A grassroots social movement is something else entirely. So while NGOs under certain conditions might support the growth of civil society, they can never become a substitute for dynamic community initiatives (Igoe 2003: 866-7).

The desire of the external donors to scale-up the movement meant that it lost relevance for its original grassroots members. The NGO leaders themselves became obsessed with writing proposals for programmes that would bring in donor funding. External donors provided resources under the mistaken illusion that ‘pastoralist NGOs would be a vanguard for grassroots democracy’ while at the same time implementing ‘discrete and quantifiable projects within a specified period of time’ (Ibid: 871). As such, ‘communities became commodities of an international NGO industry, rather than active participants in Tanzanian civil society’ (Ibid: 881).

A second example, this time from the Latin American women’s movements, is a little different. Here Alvarez (1997) notes the growth of feminist NGOs that operate in the national and international policy arenas. Coalescing around UN conferences and entering into debates on the drawing up of global conventions, she argues that their aims and activities are far removed from the women they supposedly represent. In these forums, moreover, NGOs as professional and organized entities are more able to make space for themselves. Alvarez notes that

Even when feminist NGOs explicitly deny that they represent the women’s movement, they are too often conveniently viewed as doing so by elected officials and policymakers who can thereby claim to have ‘consulted civil society’ by virtue of involving a handful of NGOs in a particular policy discussion (Alvarez 1997: 313).

Whilst fighting for the establishment of conventions and agreements on women’s issues at global level, she argues that these NGOs lose sight of the fight to transform representations of gender, and changes in consciousness at the grassroots level.

In both these cases, struggles for change at the local level become abstracted, as donors, co-opted leaders or distant NGOs pick and choose movement issues that fit foreign agendas. Subir Sinha also notes this tendency in relation to social movements in India, whose radical nature can be watered down as their demands are ‘translated’ by international NGOs into the discourse of offici almonds. The same pattern can also be seen in relation to the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brazil, where UK NGOs fund education or health projects within the workers’ temporary settlements, in an attempt to avoid the charge that they are directly funding politically motivated and often illegal occupations of land.

Furthermore, if movements do become co-opted and deradicalised in this way, they are open to criticism within country of having sold out to agendas that are alien to their own members; they are no longer legitimate and have lost their defining authentic characteristic (Fisher 1997). It is possible that these accusations could prevent movements from interacting in the local or national policy arenas.

- Potential for INGO involvement with social movements

---

3 Presentation to INTRAC NGO Forum, November 28th 2003, Oxford.
Understanding how it is that social movements emerge has been perhaps the principal focus for social movement research over the past forty years. There are many conflicting theories about levels of grievance, political repression, opportunity for organization and potential resource mobilization. The one factor that theorists are slowly coming to agree upon, however, is the need for horizontal linkages amongst members of a community or constituency (Piven & Cloward 1995). Levels of awareness and conscientization do certainly play a role in the mobilization of individuals within a movement, even though there are many other variables at play. This is an area where there is perhaps a role for international NGOs or local partner NGOs, in encouraging the right type of atmosphere for mobilization around pressing issues.

However, considering the potential risks of INGO engagement with radical, southern social movements, should Northern NGOs avoid all but the most low–intensity contact with these groups, focussing instead on traditional projects with partner local NGOs, or national and international level advocacy campaigns? This risks turning a blind eye to some of the developing world’s most pressing issues and most innovative actors. Criticism of the development sector has often been channelled at INGOs’ unwillingness to take risks and find new ways of alleviating poverty and exclusion, for fear of upsetting their own governments and supporters. However, the marginalized and threatened landless, homeless, fishworkers and peasant farmers, in the very act of coalescing into movements, give some indication of how desperate their situation has become. It is important for Northern NGOs to address whether there are ways of partnering grassroots social movements without a subsequent diminution of their radical nature and potential challenge to the status quo, rather than simply ignoring the issue.

Gaps in the literature and possible areas for research

As Hilhorst has noted, writing in 2003,

NGO documents rarely refer to publications on social movements, and vice versa, and that is a pity. […] Several decades ago, organizational interest in developing countries often focused on political or social movements, from revolutionary groups and Third World activists to struggles for land reform and squat movements of the urban poor. From the 1980s onwards, this interest was slowly overtaken by studies of NGOs, often without asking how the two kinds of phenomena were related (Hilhorst 2003: 28).

She contests this separation and the assertion that NGOs are somehow more value-driven and development-oriented. Although NGOs may have risen to prominence at the expense of social movements, her own work shows how NGOs can emerge out of social movements. She points out that this symbiotic relationship deserves greater attention from scholars of social movements and NGOs alike. Fisher also notes the opportunities for further research in this area

Unfortunately, the important and dynamic relationships between NGOs and social movements at the local and national levels have often been overlooked. […] Uniting the separate literatures that have developed around social movements on the one hand and NGOs on the other would help illuminate their complex interrelationships and also encourage us to see how these processes of association change over time (Fisher 1997: 450-51).

He goes onto state that the stereotyping of all NGOs as bureaucratic institutions ignores the way in which NGOs have initiated or sustained social movements. However, there is very little empirical data available with which to examine the potential pitfalls and benefits of this type of relationship. Uncovering instances of the creation of radical protest movements by a Northern NGO could provide useful insight into the dynamics of this type of relationship. Case studies, such as that by Igoe (2003), that provide serious analysis and critique of donor engagement with social movements are few and far between. Unfortunately, Madsen’s (1997) blithe description of a happy and trouble free interaction are more common in the literature.
Finally, Lebon (1997) points to the dearth of study on the professionalization of social movements, noting that what little research has been done, (most of it in the US) has reached conflicting conclusions as to the impact of professionalization on levels of volunteer activism and the life of social movements. She also calls for further research in this area.

This preliminary review of the relationships between social movements and international NGOs has shown that there are serious omissions in the available literature. Whilst it is clear that Northern NGOs have interacted with radical Southern movements in the past, and continue to do so, these experiences have either not been documented, or these texts have failed to reach the public domain. As such there appears to be general confusion about the nature of a social movement, how it differs from an NGO and, as a consequence, how and whether Northern donor organizations should engage with these groups. The author would argue that this lack of clarity and information is of the utmost concern, and should be addressed by the International NGO community. Donors continue to state their aim to end poverty and exclusion, and their commitment to a rights-based approach. It is crucial that they are more aware of their potential allies in these areas at the grassroots, and the way in which to achieve these shared objectives.

Furthermore, research in this area could help to unpack some of the stereotypes and assumptions we have imposed on both NGOs and social movements -- about their level of politicisation, radicalness, authenticity and democracy. Understanding where synergies lie and where certain positive characteristics are missing could also help find avenues for mutually beneficial cooperation.

Bibliography


