Let's get civil society straight: NGOs, the state, and political theory

Alan Whaites

Foreword

This chapter has been formed from two complementary articles written in response to the remarkable growth of interest in civil society issues during the 1990s. The first of these appeared in 1996 at a time when such interest was surging, albeit with little theoretical depth or study. Since then, the idea that development should be undertaken through civil society has become an industry orthodoxy. Major studies have been completed, or are in progress, by bodies such as the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). A library of books has been published, ranging from the seminal to the deeply forgettable. Civil Society departments, advisers, and units now proliferate even in the most unlikely places. But has this led to greater clarity in our thinking and practice? Perhaps inevitably, the answer is mixed.

The continuing weaknesses in this exponential growth are best summarised by John Keane, a political scientist who did much to re-popularise the concept of civil society:

> Its burgeoning popularity accelerates the accumulation of inherited ambiguities, new confusions and outright contradictions. For this reason alone the expanding talk of civil society is not immune to muddle and delirium. There are even signs that the meanings of the term 'civil society' are multiplying to the point where, like a catchy advertising slogan, it risks imploding through overuse. (Keane 1998: 36)

This chapter argues that the confusion over civil society is exemplified within international development, where ideas are largely driven by the priorities of donors. Despite the studies and specialists, NGOs have failed to address three basic questions which are inherent in any meaningful attempt to identify the role of global civil society in advancing the cause of the poor:

- How do NGOs separate beneficial from non-beneficial civil society, North or South?
- How do NGOs weave a strategy for nurturing civil society into a strategy for building the capacity of states?
- How do NGOs rescue the idea of global civil society from the priorities of donors, and develop the critical micro-macro linkages that affect the daily lives of the poor?

These questions shape the following discussion, which is also informed by the work of various individual thinkers and organisations, some of whom are mentioned below. As far as development is concerned, clarity and coherence are needed more urgently than ever. For, in the final analysis, our interest in civil society and its potential will only be of use if it brings meaningful long-term change for the poor.

Do definitions really matter?

The term 'civil society' has been an issue of debate since it gained currency in the last century. Discussion has usually focused on the perceptions of civil society expressed by de Tocqueville and Hegel, a dichotomy that offers the choice between a largely positive and a largely negative view of the concept. More recently (and usually unwittingly) NGOs have become drawn into a theoretical divide between those who hold a classical de Tocquevillian view and those taking a more inclusive position similar to the African-based thinking of Jean-François Bayart.

Does it really matter that NGOs are slipping into this divide over the meaning of civil society? Given the importance that donors and NGOs attach to the concept, it matters a great deal, particularly where societies are heterogeneous and divided. The ways in which development NGOs perceive civil society, and consequently plan projects to facilitate the work of civil associations, can have a significant effect on the evolution (or lack of it) of civil society in the countries in which they work.

At a 1995 conference on development,[1] discussion of the role of external forces in nurturing associations that strengthen civil society was notable

for the lack of one vital question: what kind of civil association strengthens civil society? That is, how do we try to ensure that strengthening resources for civil society nurtures beneficial rather than destructive and divisive groups? This strikes at the core of the split between the positions of de Tocqueville and Bayart, which has also been central to some of the best academic work done recently on the politics of Africa. NGOs have a responsibility to assess whether all civil associations act as building blocks for civil society, or only those with specific, identifiable characteristics. Sadly, this issue has been too easily overlooked by NGOs eager to embrace the perceived benefits of the revived interest in civil society.

NGOs and the grab for civil society

Since 1990, the concept of civil society has been 'grabbed' by NGOs as one relating closely to their own natural strengths. On the surface, civil society is intimately connected with the role of local community associations or groups, and with the indigenous NGO sector. For Northern NGOs, this leads to an intellectual association between civil society and local 'partner' or implementing organisations. From studies of the factors that encouraged a focus on civil society (e.g. Robinson 1995) two central trends can be discerned in donor and NGO thinking.

Among donors, interest in civil society has been associated with the evolution of the conditionality of aid. Conditionality, which rose to prominence in the 1980s, allowed donors to think more creatively about the large-scale impacts of their bilateral programmes. From 1990, conditionality took on a political dimension when some donors became preoccupied with 'good governance'. This tendency acquired an economic as well as moral rationale with the 1991 *World Development Report* (World Bank 1991), in which democracy was projected as not only ethically desirable but also more efficient. Donors began to re-appraise the role of civil society in providing a foundation for sustainable democracy. The work of political scientists such as Stepan (1998), Stocpol (1992), and Keane (1998) variously pointed to civil society as the key to making good governance work.

Thus, the democratising function of civil society assumed a higher profile among multilateral agencies, and NGOs were identified as a possible point of contact with its building blocks, namely civil associations. Coupled with these changes was an increasing awareness among NGOs of their own potential role in the wider development picture.

Contemporary with the rise of Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) and its methodologies — a new orthodoxy for promoting community-based design of, and control over, development projects — was a converse trend. This was the idea that NGO-supported projects can legitimately have wider and much larger economic, social, and political objectives. As NGOs acquired new ways of thinking about 'partnership' and the implementation of projects by local organisations, so they were also considering the wider ramifications of such activities. A 1992 conference on 'scaling up' the impact of NGOs[2] marked a breakthrough in addressing the potential macro-impact and macro-application of grassroots development activities (Edwards and Hulme 1992).

The process was spurred on by the UN, which moved to the fore in promoting civil society as a development issue. UNDP, UNICEF, and ECOSOC introduced procedures to provide voluntary associations with greater access to their systems; and ECOSOC's review of NGOs has discussed the possibility of funding Southern NGO participation at ordinary UN business meetings (UN NGLS 1995a: 7). However, assumptions about the nature of NGOs have allowed the issue of 'access' by the voluntary sector to dominate discussions about civil society within the UN. Indeed, the UN NGO Liaison Service has produced an impressive paper emphasising the expanding place for NGOs around UN tables (UN NGLS 1995b).

The combination of donor, NGO, and UN interest provides the background to the civil society 'grab'. But few NGOs have explored the full theoretical implications of civil society, or clearly articulated their own interpretations of its nuances. The problem is the belief that NGOs are inherently bound to strengthen civil society, an assumption which, if acted upon, might in fact weaken the evolution of civil society in certain contexts.

The theoretical division

Civil society is usually held to be the collective intermediary between the individual and the state. For de Tocqueville, civil society (in contrast to traditional society) is a defensive counterbalance to the increased capabilities of the modern state.[3] It provides a realm in which society interacts constructively with the state, not to subvert and destroy it, but to refine its actions and improve its efficiency. Thus, civil society tends to be associated not with the selfish drive of Hegelian theory, but with the constructive actions of altruistic concern.

Hence, civil society groups coalesce not on the basis of primordial attachments (ethnicity, language, religion), but rather on 'small issues' that cut across such boundaries and bring people together in new coalitions. For de Tocqueville, a key example was the nineteenth-century temperance movement in the USA, which brought together thousands of disparate people under a common banner. The anti-slavery movement or anti-Corn Law League played similar roles in Britain.

The implications for development practitioners relate to these 'small issue' coalitions or 'civil associations'. Stepan's study of Brazil (Stepan 1988) gives grounds for ruling politically motivated groups out of the equation, and for focusing on those local NGOs, human rights groups, and leisure associations which conform with de Tocqueville's precepts.

Small issues

The reasons why an association forms are critical for its long-term role. Associations which bring people together, regardless of old identities, to work together for development — to form credit schemes or health clubs, for example — may play empowering roles. In the short term, so will those associations which undertake the same functions in primordially homogeneous groups. But in the latter case, their aim may move from the 'small issue' (sadly, in this context community development is a 'small issue') to strengthening the primordial group's comparative position within a wider context of clientelism and patronage.

Thus, classical de Tocquevillian thinking offers a crucial challenge to NGOs working to strengthen local civil associations or community groups. Most NGOs, however, lose sight of these crucial caveats about the quality of associative forms. They adopt the view that all civil associations — that is, all community or development groups — naturally build civil society. Take, for example, the definition of civil society underpinning UNDP's policy on the links between its own programmes and civil society (UNDP 1993). This has become something of a mainstay within the NGO sector, and it rests on the intermediary role of civil society and the state, viewing social movements as civil society groups. Thus, all associations, no matter how primordially-rooted or patronage-based, are seen as civil society organisations (CSOs).

UNDP's position has been seminal for many development groups, and the focus on interacting with civil society rather than analysing its composite parts has had major impact. The concentration on NGOs' access to the UN system, mentioned above, has muted discussion of the

long-term impact of different types of NGOs. UNDP's 1995 paper, prepared for the UN's fiftieth anniversary, picked up its earlier work on civil society (UNDP 1995). Its focus is primarily on collaborative mechanisms, and its definitions refer to civil society collectively, rather than to individual elements within it.

The adoption of such a limited definition may be crucial. For example, a village-level project in a highly heterogeneous area may unwittingly undermine the future growth of civil society. If the village is primordially homogeneous, and the project develops strong local organisations without setting up umbrella bodies to promote co-operation with other villages, what has it achieved? In some instances, it will have increased the village's capacity to play the patron/client game, and strengthened its internal identities, without forging the mechanisms to build civil society.[4]

NGOs and Bayart

Some argue that all associations and community groups are indeed components of civil society, a view associated with Jean-François Bayart, whose work explores societies' attempts to subvert and control the state (Bayart 1986; 1993). In this view, projects that simply strengthen groups associating on primordial grounds are facilitating a natural, competitive process arising from the specific characteristics of African civil society. This suggests that it is largely inappropriate to apply Western concepts of civil society to contexts in which primordial attachments are unlikely to decline in the near future.

Both arguments have their strengths and weaknesses. However, evidence is emerging to suggest that primordial attachments *do* change with the process of societal change, and this may have important implications. There is a school of thought centred on 'bringing the state back in', and exemplified by Laitin's work on Nigeria, that suggests the state can hugely affect primordial identities through its own changing policies (Laitin 1992). The example of Pakistan suggests that the development of a local bourgeoisie may foster integrative groups based on 'small issues', even in the face of entrenched ethnic or religious divisions (Whaites 1995). World Vision UK, in perhaps the first NGO research into the relationship between identities and nascent civil society, found that even apparently destructive political acts, such as displacement and conflict, may provoke conditions conducive to the growth of civil society (Westwood 1996).

Such examples suggest that we should not yet give up on traditional, evolutionary ideas of civil society. The interaction of social change with an active state structure may foster the integrative type of civil association envisaged by de Tocqueville, nurturing the future growth of civil society within developing states.

The role of the state

A second crucial area, which has been overlooked in the ways development has adopted civil society, is the question of integrating civil society strategies with those for strengthening the state. The traditional view, argued for instance by Richard Jefferies (1993), is that a strong state is a prerequisite for civil society. But this model causes immense conceptual problems for development political scientists, and by extension for international NGOs which operate in contexts where civil society — in the form of Southern NGOs — is strong, and yet the state is weak; a fact which NGOs have been reluctant to see as necessarily a bad thing. Many would agree with James Midgley (1986):

> Since the least organised and marginalised sections of society have little opportunity to influence government, their interests are not likely to be served by state involvement in community participation. Non-governmental organisations are not only more likely to serve the interests of the poor but they are capable of initiating schemes that increase the organisational power and consequently the political pressures that can be exerted by poor people. (p.154)

This chapter has argued that adopting an entirely uncritical approach to civil society can do more harm than good, particularly in heterogeneous social contexts. Equally, a failure within political theory to read the warnings of an imbalance between weak states and strong civil society would be to compound past errors. These have included an over-eagerness to fill gaps in service provision, further undermining the ability of a weak state to benefit its people. Where states are weak but civil society is strong, development practitioners have good reason to heed warnings which serve, in this instance, to underscore the thinking of development academics and the best practice of a number of NGOs.

NGO, civil society, and state linkages

The major architects of modern civil society theory, Hegel, de Tocqueville, and Gramsci, all sought to address dilemmas regarding the

relationship between the state and civil society. The presence of a definable state was common to the thinking of all three, and it was something the latter two viewed with suspicion and unease. The work of de Tocqueville, which has underpinned much subsequent writing, was firmly rooted in the US and European contexts of rapid industrialisation and the establishment of modern, effective governmental structures.[5] Indeed, the capabilities of the 'modern state' in an era without developed democratic systems made necessary some form of social counter-weight, which civil associations helped to provide.

This model has much historical validity in the West, and the premise that an effective state acts as a catalyst for civil associations can legitimately be applied to some developing contexts, as for instance in Pakistan (Whaites 1995). The validity of this argument in the developing states of the 1990s is, however, not exclusive or unique. The effective state gives rise to civil associations, but then so do many other factors, including donor priorities and the process of local development — such as the forming of a women's health club, a revolving loans scheme, or a youth association. It is here that the purist theory of civil society may depart from reality. In some countries, for instance, it is the very weakness of the state, its failure to provide services or to engage in the local development process, which has stimulated a thriving voluntary sector and, with it, a strong and vocal civil society.

Strong civil society and weak state: does it matter?

The reality of strong civil societies and weak states is a useful area for theoretical writing, of which it has generated a considerable amount. But, does this reversal of classical theory have any practical relevance for organisations actually seeking to engage in partnership with local civil society? This chapter argues that the idea that civil society and the state should counter-balance each other is still highly relevant to international NGOs because of the dangers posed by nurturing a strong civil society while ignoring the weakness of an ineffective state.

Personally, in common with many on the left, I am caught in the paradox of seeing the state as part saviour, a vehicle for social change and equality, and part villain, an intrusive monolith with a propensity to lose sight of the common good in pursuit of its own bureaucratic agenda. However, on whichever side one ultimately stands, there is no escaping the need for some form of effective governmental structure. An underlying relationship exists between the effectiveness of state functions and of political stability, and sustainable democracy. Although

NGOs may be able to imitate the state as a vehicle for local development and change (although with deficiencies, outlined below), they can rarely arbitrate between competing social groups or administer a process of popular choice in the selection of government.

Migdal's model of the weak state can be criticised, but his account of its vulnerability to being held ransom by powerful social groups is borne out by experience in countries including Nigeria, Brazil, the Philippines, and Thailand (Migdal 1988, esp. p.9 and pp. 34–41). The logical extension of de Tocqueville's view of civil society as a buffer against the state is that the latter must be capable of performing the more Hegelian role of acting as a safeguard against competing social groups. For political scientists, the weak state, unable to perform this refereeing function, has often been seen as an especially African phenomenon, giving rise to the famous observation:

> Between the ambitions of the elite and the survival stratagems of the masses, the state often appears to survive essentially as a show, a political drama with an audience more or less willing to suspend its disbelief. (O'Brien 1991)

Weak states as a development problem

A weak state leaves vacuums of power that elites are usually more than happy to fill. This brings the potential for a series of scenarios which have, experience shows, placed substantial new obstacles in the way of development. Claude Aké (1995) provides a salutary outline of the impact of the weak and suborned state on development in Africa. The state may be relatively large, with numerous ministries and offices right down to district level, but its very size, and the often bloated nature of the bureaucracy, can only serve to fuel corruption and external influence. These are factors which dominate the weak state, making it powerful without being capable of governing effectively.

Aké (1995: 74) believes that statism and the existence of large 'parastatals' are inherent brakes on economic development. These criticisms would find favour with many of those donors that are driven by a liberalisation agenda. But they apply primarily to weak, suborned states; there is no fundamental law of the universe to say that the large state *must* be ineffective. Weakness or strength is not determined by the size of the state but by its relative autonomy. Unless the state enjoys some degree of autonomy from elite social groups, and also adheres to a goal (no matter how ill-defined) of serving the overall interests of the country,

it will usually be seen as a potential source of personal profit. The result is a competition, devoid of democratic niceties, for domination and control, a phenomenon analysed in many of the classics of development politics, such as Huntington (1968), Clapham (1985), and Kohli (1990). It is a phenomenon which, despite being well described in relation to Africa, has affected countries throughout the developing world.[6]

But what if a neo-liberal paradise came to pass, with the state removed from most aspects of community and individual life? Such a paradise would almost certainly worsen the long-term prospects of the poor. The neo-liberal scenario is normally taken to assume a strong state, but only as a regulatory force, with social provision undertaken by voluntary groups. In developing countries, this means a state with effective ministries in the capital, a small presence in the provinces and districts, but little role in the village or slum. The shrinking of the state would not, however, end the competition for resources between elites — all that would happen is that the vehicle for rivalry would change, a phenomenon explored by Chabal and Daloz (1999).

Ultimately, the smaller state would almost certainly be even less able to assert itself in mediating between and policing these elites. For all its faults, the state is the only potential source of legitimate and enforceable action within most countries. When bereft of autonomy the state may perform its functions poorly, but reducing its role further offers no solution. The shrinking state also serves only to reduce the links of accountability which offer one of the best hopes for constructive change. The individual in a local community would have little vested interest in either the efficiency or honesty of the shrunken state, thus removing an important impetus to democratic participation on the part of the poor (Collier 1996). Where the state retreats to a role of funding civil society-based social provision, then an unaccountable NGO layer is placed between the voter and the identifiable use of resources. Whom, then, should the poor blame for inefficiency and waste; the NGO or, assuming the funding relationship is clear, the state? In the development context, the reliance on NGOs as the primary sources of social provision raises much discussed issues of consistency and coordination.

Civil society and the weak state: a real issue for NGOs

If we accept that it is desirable for the state to have some degree of effectiveness at the local level (ideally under the rubric of a popularly elected government), then questions regarding the replacement of state

provision by NGO activities become acutely important, particularly in the light of continuing development trends. A broad overview of the reasons why NGOs should beware of the long-term consequences of replacing the state in service provision (often termed 'gap filling') is offered by Christy Cannon (1996, reprinted in this volume) and also by Mark Robinson (1995). Here, we will concentrate on the inherent long-term dangers for state-society relations.

International NGOs have contributed significantly to situations of strong civil societies and weak states through gap filling by taking advantage of the shrinkage of government services that result from structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). SAPs have tended to emphasise the drastic reduction of fiscal deficits in situations where tax receipts are traditionally low. The resulting cuts in health and education spending (see, for example, Tevera 1995: 83–5) led to the evils of user-charges, and gave strong encouragement to NGOs to replace the state in providing basic services. This is typified by the PAMSCAD-style safety-net programmes of the World Bank (Stewart and van der Geest 1995). Belatedly, the Bank has realised some of the negative consequences of a approach based purely on reducing the size of the state. Its 1997 report (World Bank 1997) recognises many of the problems, but still advocates competition in the provision of resources and the shrinking of the state to a level which fits its 'capability'.

The problem of NGOs engaging in gap filling (providing part of the competition advocated by the Bank) does not apply only to those groups that still take an institutional approach to aid, such as running schools and hospitals. Just as important is the 'bread and butter work' of NGOs at the community level. Yet few have had qualms about providing agricultural extension workers or offering training for health volunteers and traditional birth attendants (TBAs). Such activities are part of what an NGO does, but these are also functions which are nominally the responsibility of the state. Indeed, in Sri Lanka, for instance, they are part of what the state does best. However, international NGOs, and increasingly Southern NGOs, have been very willing to fill these gaps in grassroots social provision. This is not to argue that NGOs should abandon such activity for the sake of political theory and the niceties of nominal roles, for the state would often not be able to fill the gap. However, unless there are mitigating circumstances, such as a particularly repressive regime, the NGO should also seek to build up the capacity of the state *as an integral part* of this local grassroots work.

Bringing together state and civil society

For NGOs, there is nothing new in working alongside state structures in implementing development projects. For example, health programmes undertaken in association with local referral systems are commonplace. NGOs assist by strengthening each point in the referral chain, to ensure what is intended to be a significant improvement in local healthcare. In such programmes, and sometimes as a government requirement, counterpart training is included within the process, with managers for social ministries learning new skills and approaches from their NGO colleagues. These interventions help to bring the state more actively into community life and in the process raise local expectations of the state. The result is that the civil society groups thus nurtured, such as community-based organisations (CBOs) or larger local NGOs, are likely to engage more fully with the state in pursuing development aims, while the state should be able and willing to accept such engagement and also deliver results.

Stripped of all its theory and nineteenth-century thinkers, this is where a key aspect of civil society connects with the process of development and the work of NGOs. It is in these existing roles of supporting civil associations *and* building the capacity of local state service-providers, that the issue finds a form which avoids either by-passing civil society or undermining the state. In a DFID funded World Vision community health project in Kompong Tralach, Cambodia, project activities were primarily implemented by medical workers within the local district health department. Project staff worked alongside these government employees and provided training and essential equipment over a five-year period. Training government health staff extended beyond increasing the overall level of health skills to questions of administration, record-keeping, and the use of participatory techniques in community work. The project encouraged the establishment of new CBOs including women's health clubs and microcredit associations. The nurturing of these civil associational groups has been balanced within the project by the increased involvement of district-level government structures with individual communities.

Similarly, in Brazil World Vision became involved with the community of Jucuri (on the outskirts of Mossoró) following a drought. The community consists almost entirely of landless farmers who had been permitted by local landowners to cultivate crops on the neighbouring land free of charge, provided that they left fodder for the landowners' cattle. Community organisation within Jucuri was already

very strong before World Vision's involvement. The Farmers' Association was the partner agency, and it had developed a formidable process of lobbying the local government and of finding other sources of income for the community. It had, for example, struck a deal with Petrobras oil company to drill a well. A committee had been set up by the community to deal with the local government on issues affecting them, and to lobby for the provision of basic services.

For World Vision, particularly in the health sector, local government capacity building was integral to its objectives. Three government health workers involved with project activities visited the community regularly, and worked closely with the Association in training the community in basic primary healthcare education and awareness campaigns, with a major emphasis on cholera. The project also helped the community to receive training from a local government alternative health specialist, thus gaining access to a state service that might otherwise have remained unused. The project's ability to involve local government health workers enabled community-level training and education in improved nutrition to take place, with small vegetable gardens being started individually in most homes. Such projects are neither unusual nor new, but they do illustrate the genuine contribution which NGOs can make to local government capacity building; a contribution which creates new linkages between state and society at the grassroots.

Getting the state and civil society straight: central themes

For some NGOs, the labelling of all potential partner groups as 'civil society organisations' reflects the continued acceptance of a universalistic, Bayartian view of civil society. However, there is room for dialogue within the development community about the usefulness of more traditional definitions. The de Tocquevillian analysis of those characteristics that are central to the transformation of a community group into a civil association will provide a firmer theoretical underpinning to NGOs' application of the concept of civil society, just as PRA provided the practical means to use new anthropological theory. Crucially, it also allows NGOs a starting point in addressing that first central question: how do NGOs separate beneficial from non-beneficial civil society, North or South?

The classical de Tocquevillian perspective suggests that the issues around which groups associate are central to the way in which these should be defined. Where groups exist in a highly heterogeneous environment,

and yet fail to cut across these identities, serious questions must be asked. To strengthen such groups, particularly where improvements are viewed by them as a comparative or competitive gain in relation to others, may be counterproductive.

Alternatively, groups that use 'small issues' (such as the provision of credit, healthcare, or education) and that *do* span primordial identities may have tremendous potential. Even in more homogeneous societies, where a single religion or ethnic or linguistic group is dominant, it is possible to seek out those groups that promote the idea of association in a way which cuts across any continuing divisions, such as local geography, gender, and even political loyalty.

The second crucial question revolves around the state: how do NGOs weave a strategy for nurturing civil society into a strategy for building the capacity of the state? This chapter has not tried to address in detail the unquestionable difficulties of capacity building in relation to the localised state (side-stepping thorny issues such as corruption). But it has sought to highlight the real connection that exists between the theory which underpins a much favoured concept among NGOs — civil society — and the dynamics of NGO-state relations. The reality of developing country contexts, where weak states and relatively strong civil societies are now a factor, calls for the theory to be adapted to meet situations not faced by de Tocqueville or Hegel during the industrial revolution. But, in accepting the *reality* of strong civil societies and weak states, we must also accept that this brings both developmental and political dangers.

These dangers are the flip-side of the counterbalance to the state which de Tocqueville believed civil society offered the individual. For NGOs, they are a further reminder that the short-term benefits of 'gap filling' are outweighed by the dangers of doing so in a way that undermines the state. NGOs should not greet the involvement of the state as a 'complicating' factor, but rather as an important part of the development process. The only sustainable course is one which acts both to nurture civil society and to build the capacity of the state at local level — an area in which NGOs have much experience and a great deal to offer.

Postscript

The two articles on which this chapter is based sought to highlight the need for discernment in interventions aimed at nurturing civil society, and called for a renewed focus on the need to build the capacity of the state. Both issues have been thrown into fresh light by broad discussions of civil society and

aid (e.g. Van Rooy *et al.* 1998; Fisher 1998; Boli *et al.* 1999). The question of civil society undermining the state has been taken much further by writers exploring conflict and political crisis in Africa. Bayart (1999) has linked the potential for elite misuse of the increasing privatisation of development to what he terms the 'criminalisation' of the African state. Clapham (1996, esp. chapter 9) and Chabal and Daloz (1995) similarly see civil society, including Northern NGOs, as new sources of, and vehicles for, clientelistic *largesse*.

The academic source of these works underlines the reality that while international NGOs have been forced by Alex de Waal and others to debate the role of aid in complex emergencies, there has been little to provoke a wider debate on the long-term political impact of civil society-based development. The implication of the arguments put forward in this chapter is that such support is intrinsically and unavoidably political. NGOs must, therefore, face up this reality and make positive choices in the impacts they seek, locally, nationally, and at the global level. It is this issue above all that must lead NGOs to consider the third crucial issue posed in the foreword: how do NGOs rescue the idea of global civil society from the priorities of donors, and develop the critical micro-macro linkages that affect the daily lives of the poor?

Donors, theorists, and NGOs themselves have done much over the last decade to thrust civil society to the centre of the development process. NGOs now need the courage to listen to, and embrace, the broadest aspirations of the poor from the outset of the civil society building process. If we do not keep in mind the potential for civil society to transform national and global society, NGOs risk simply becoming a methodological tool for delivering development assistance down to the grassroots.

Manuel Castells, echoing de Tocqueville, implies that civil society acts as much to provide new sources of identity for individuals as to provide a springboard for fundamental social change. In suggesting that civil society can act more to build havens than heavens, Castells (1998: 64) highlights the danger that the ultimate political impact of civil society may be insular and regressive. Without a commitment to supporting broad visions for social and political change, the strengthening of civil society may do as much to silence the aspirations of the poor as to give them form.

This is not to say that it is wrong for civil society to flourish. On the contrary, it offers new forums for communities, and this had much to do with its growth in most developed states. One must remember, however, that the politically beneficial aspects of civil society, upon which donors have seized so feverishly, are associated not with the rise of the sector as a whole, but with the emergence of a certain type of civil association that

is willing to engage directly with the state. To date, the vision for the potential offered by such groups on the wider level has come more often from individuals than from civil society organisations themselves. Michael Edwards (1999) has reminded the development movement of the need for a broader view. Elsewhere, I have also argued that NGOs must see macro-political change as a legitimate objective of the development project, and not just the preserve of donors and their 'good governance' mantras (Whaites 2000).

In embracing the aspirations of the poor in their broadest sense, NGOs must recognise that global civil society needs to pursue macro objectives of its own. Just as multilateral institutions can mimic a global state in some albeit limited areas (such as trade), so NGOs have shown they can act effectively on the global stage on some issues. Hope has been offered by the ability of shifting coalitions to influence and stall the global policy debate. The fate of the MAI (for now) and the collapse of the 1999 WTO trade talks at Seattle owed at least something to such (often Internet-based) cross-border and cross-sectoral amalgams of NGOs. More positively, the Campaign to Ban Landmines and Jubilee 2000 have gone beyond forcing the abandonment of policy and instead created global momentum for affirmative change.

We are still at the start of the globalisation of civil society forms. Encouragingly, some coalitions have already taken steps to redress the traditional Northern bias of international movements. Even so, the Internet-based processes that lead to protests such as those at Seattle tend to ensure a louder voice for the fringe concerns of the North rather than for the substantive concerns of the poor. Civil society, including the major international NGOs, might usefully see their future priority as being to strengthen this micro-macro global voice.

Notes

1 'Building Capacity in the South: partnerships, policies and the role of donors', *BOND*, 18 September 1995.

2 'Scaling-up NGO Impacts: learning from experience,' SCF and University of Manchester, January 1992.

3 See *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, Vol 1 (1835) and Vol 2 (1840), a summary of which can be found in Keane (1988).

4 Oxfam GB offers an example of how to address imperatives to build 'civil society' in heterogeneous contexts. A December 1995 paper, *Former Yugoslavia: towards a durable peace,* specifically calls for development projects which are 'integrative', cutting across primordial identities.

5 For a discussion on this point, see Catherine Boone (1994), 'States and Ruling Classes in Postcolonial Africa: the enduring contradictions of power', in Migdal (1998).

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