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CREATING KNOWLEDGE TO END POVERTY

NGOs AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION

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Emerging in the late 1970s as service providers and advocates for the poor, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been praised for their innovative, grassroots-driven pursuit of participatory, people-centred development. Our research, however, highlights the growing distance between NGOs and low-income communities. NGOs must rediscover their roots if their role as civil society actors is to be fulfilled.

NGOs rose to prominence on the basis of their grassroots linkages. These enabled them to design programmes using innovative approaches centred around community participation. In theory, not only do they strive to meet the needs of the poor through service provision, they also aim to assist them in articulating those needs, so that programmes reflect local contexts.

Organisational imperatives of survival and growth have dominated these development principles, however. In realigning their relationships with donors and the poor, NGOs have become too close to the powerful and too far from the powerless. Strong competition for funds, donor-driven agendas, and increasing accountability to donors and pressures to scale-up, make it difficult for NGOs to tailor programmes to local needs. Losing their responsiveness and accountability to the poor has undermined the legitimacy of NGOs as civil society organisations representing grassroots communities.

Increasingly focusing on service delivery, the adoption of technical and managerial solutions to poverty has also depoliticised definitions of poverty. NGOs have shifted away from the radical pursuit of 'little-d' development – that seeks to negotiate different ways of organising the economy, social relationships and politics. Instead, they have steered towards 'Big-D' development, in which project-based, target-oriented activities do not seek to change society's dominant institutions. This leaves little scope for NGOs to advance empowerment agendas. Their grassroots participation is limited and their activities overlook the systems that perpetuate poverty.

Development objectives of 'strengthening civil society' have so far achieved limited progress. The development community, and particularly aid donors, have had a simplistic vision of civil society as a collection of NGOs, rather than a space for contesting and negotiating power. New ways are needed for NGOs to 'return to their roots' and follow participatory, grassroots-driven development. They can thus become stronger civil society

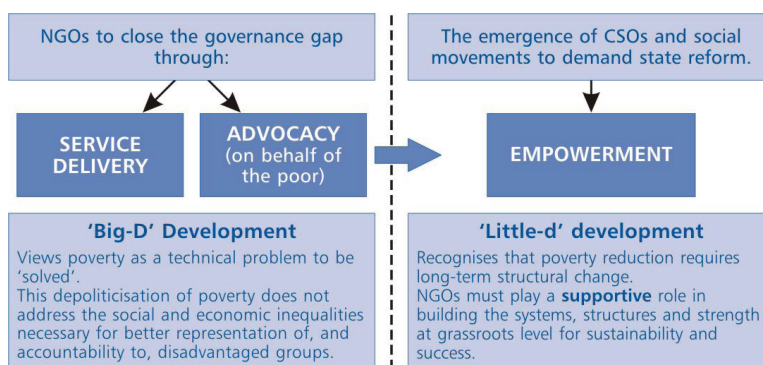


Figure 1: The challenge for NGOs

organisations, tackling structurally-entrenched poverty.

Figure 1 outlines our model through which NGOs can shift from 'Big-D' development activities to a new development paradigm focusing on the processes and outcomes of poverty. A stronger civil society function requires NGOs to assist communities in articulating their concerns and participating in the development process. They must become supporters of more deeply-rooted forms of social action, placing power and activities in the hands of low-income communities themselves.

This is a risk-strewn path. It is unclear whether NGOs are willing and able to reposition themselves as secondary actors in the development process. We can, however, learn from successful models such as Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). Here NGOs are functional to the needs and demands of the social movement, allowing the network to remain loyal to its grassroots approach and encouraging low-income urban communities to lead negotiations with the state and its agencies.

Key policy points

- NGOs rose to prominence as grassroots-level development organisations, offering disadvantaged communities a route to social and political empowerment.
- Their increasingly professional and depoliticised nature, and closeness to donors and governments, limits their ability to promote long-term structural change.
- Civil society provides an important space in which social movements and other community organisations can contest existing institutions and processes that underlie their exclusion or underrepresentation.
- To act as stronger civil society organisations, NGOs must reorient their operations back to their original vision, returning communities and participatory approaches to the heart of their strategies and activities.

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Further reading

N. Banks with D. Hulme (2012), 'The role of NGOs and civil society in development and poverty reduction', *BWPI Working Paper No 171*. <http://www.bwpi.manchester.ac.uk/resources/Working-Papers/bwpi-wp-17112.pdf>

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