Development NGOs: Actors in a Global Civil Society or in a New International Social System?

Terje Tvedt[1]

The international aid system forms a powerful structural force impacting organizational landscapes and civil societies all over the world in complex ways we do not yet understand. Dominant NGO research has failed to properly address this crucial issue, because of a conceptual, theoretical, and ideological tradition that is itself embedded in this very same system's normative, rhetorical agenda. This paper suggests some conceptual and theoretical approaches that should encourage more comparative research on the role of the development NGOs in shaping national and global civil societies.

KEY WORDS: development NGOs; global civil society; donor funding; globalization; power.

THE RESEARCH CHALLENGE

At the national congress of the African National Congress held in December 1997 in South Africa, President Nelson Mandela attacked the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for their critical stance on government and for carrying out the political agendas of foreign interests. A few years later, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Koffi Annan, famously described NGOs as the conscience of humanity. Mandela rebuked the NGOs, whereas Annan hailed them. Mainstream research on NGOs would tend to use Annan's claim as a well-placed argument supporting the notion of NGOs as voices of global civil society and democratic change. Mandela's criticism, on the other hand, will tend to be either overlooked and forgotten as soon as possible or interpreted as a political mistake by an otherwise great man. In fact, such a biased interpretation of two valid statements is unhelpful, and misses the role of NGOs in today's

---

[1]To whom correspondence should be addressed at Centre for Development Studies, University of Bergen, Strømgaten 54, N-5007 Bergen, Norway. E-mail: terje.tvedt@sfu.uib.no

world—for, the positions of Mandela and Annan can best be acknowledged, understood, and analyzed within what can be termed an international social system approach, and more particularly, within a Donor-States-NGO- (DOSTANGO-) system approach.

In the last decade or so, NGOs—sometimes under the label CSOs (civil society organizations)—have generally been described as a force of democracy, or in a more evocative language, as a movement "advanced by a planetary citizen alliance known as global civil society" (Korten, 2000, p. 1). Some commentators have gone so far as to talk of a new global superpower of consciousness (Dhanapala, 2002). The reality of the NGO world is, however, much more mundane and complex, and one cannot understand developments without criticizing such ideological generalizations. Just to mention two examples that challenge prevailing assumptions:

Example 1. In 1998, the Kenyan NGO, Mercy Relief International, were raided by a team of Kenyan police and US Federal Bureau of Investigations agents a few days after the August 7 bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Four other organizations—the Al-Haramain Foundation,[2] Help African People, the Islamic Relief Organization, and Ibrahim Bin Abdul Aziz Al Ibrahim Foundation—were deregistered because Kenyan authorities found that they were involved in the blast and in "activities and matters that are not in the interest of state security" (Achieng, 1998). Kenyan authorities suspected that materials used for the building of the bombs, each weighing at least 800 kg, were smuggled into East Africa disguised as relief aid with the help of some Islamic relief agencies.

Example 2. In the United States, the organization of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the Unification Church, has been seeking a major role in the NGO community at the United Nations. A US Congress report has stated that the "overriding religious goal" of this organization is "to establish a worldwide theocracy," a world order which would abolish separation of church and state and "be governed by the immediate direction of God" (US Congress report quoted in Paine and Gratzer, 2001). At the time of writing, three Moon groups have been granted formal NGO status and others have applied. The Moon organization has used the UN for conferences and held a mass wedding in a UN conference room. A Moon-sponsored "umbrella group," known as the World Association of NGOs (WANGO), describes itself as an authentic voice of the NGO community.[3] Moon activities have been judged illegal by a court of law in the United States, leading to the Rev. Moon's imprisonment for tax evasion, making false statements, and conspiracy to obstruct

---

[2]On March 11, 2002, the United States and Saudi Arabia acted jointly to block the funds of the Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina branches of the Al-Haramain Islamic foundation, because, as the two governments stated, these branches were diverting charitable funds to terrorism.

[3]The text of the WANGO homepage clearly embraces the global and dominant language of the NGOs (see www.wango.org/).

justice.[4] Moon organizations keep their finances secret, and the Unification Church has vast business and media holdings. The US Internal Revenue Service ruled for a number of years that it primarily acts as a for-profit corporation.

Influential research literature on NGOs has overlooked these types of organizations when the role of NGOs in society has been analyzed. David Korten's widely cited theory on "generations of NGOs" is a good case in point (Korten, 1987, 1990). It is easy to falsify, but the theory, or slightly different variations of it, has long served and still serves as the NGO community's imagined past. This story about NGOs is in reality only about the "good," "progressive," and "humanitarian" NGOs, as if they alone constitute the NGO scene, or transnational civil society, or global civil society. The history of these chosen organizations is further constructed so as to fit a mobilizing story about maturing NGOs. This type of NGO research can be likened to the role of glorious national narratives produced by nationalist historians in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The close relationship between this type of research and activism, which has sustained a large group of consultants for a couple of decades, is a very problematic one (Tvedt, 1998). Korten spelled out the reasons for this worry almost 20 years after his "generations" approach was first published: underlining the historical importance of NGOs and the civil society he wrote in 2000 that "Most important cultural orientations are grounded in a defining story, often a creation story, that provides the culture with its sense of identity, meaning, and purpose. One key to changing a cultural orientation is to change its underlying story" (Korten, 2000, p. 5). By creating an underlying story, or an imagined past, the researcher-cum-activist hoped to change (the cultural orientation of) the world.

From another point of view the framework of this kind of research can be likened to the reaction of moderate Muslims in the wake of September 11, 2001. They claimed that the Muslims who captured the airplanes were not Muslims or not *real* Muslims. The mechanisms are the same: chasing away those who might destroy both self-image and the way the system or the group of people communicates about itself to itself and to the outside world. The tendency has been, at the same time as the heterogeneity of the NGO scene is rhetorically acknowledged, to describe the field as if "not good," "reactionary," or "fundamentalist" NGOs are not NGOs, or after all, not *real* NGOs.

The main challenge to NGO research at this stage, then, is not to develop grand theories or develop another aspirational project, but to develop research designs that are able to analytically integrate both the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the NGO scene (in political, religious, institutional, and financial terms), its

---

[4]A Congressional report (052-070-04729-1) suggested that the Moon organization had committed criminal acts such as tax evasion, money laundering, and evasion of currency controls. Subsequent media articles suggested that the Moon organization manufactures and trades weapons, promotes a view of women as inferior, and maintains close contacts with far-right movements.

political role(s) and potential(s) within an agency/structure perspective, and at the same time to identify more systemic conflicts and power relations affecting the arena—both externally and internally.

If the aim is to understand the actual and potential role of NGOs in transforming societies and the world, it is crucial to establish less-normative conceptual tools and concepts that can objectify the research object. Because research in this field to a large extent has been the continuation of politics by other means, and as it has been much more successful as politics than as science, it also implies that a number of very different questions have been mixed and now need to be unraveled. Nongovernmental organizations and their roles have to be analyzed uninfluenced by the veil of conventions and traditions that the whole system has been wrapped up in. By discursively maintaining the distinctiveness of the research system and its basic constitutive values (true vs. false, or good research vs. bad research) researchers can genuinely advance understanding.

Moreover, comparative research on NGOs requires deep questioning of whether or not the key concepts and measurement tools are relevant and appropriate in different historical and social contexts. Research should take a universalist, as opposed to relativist or absolutist, stance to the study of the NGO and NGO work in different settings and traditions. It is important to recognize that universalism as an epistemological strategy does not require a balance between "local" and "global" (which is impossible), or a search for "indigenous" concepts and practices, but a research strategy that is able to identify similarities and differences in comparable concepts and practices, and a conceptual and analytical approach that is aware that to analyze is to exercise power (in one way or another).

To date, however, mainstream research on development NGOs has not been very interested in the issue of power. To understand power mechanisms within this field (what may conventionally be called the international NGO world) the role of development NGOs within it, and this system's relation to its externalities raises particular problems, because the aid system's basic legitimacy will be regarded by most people as morally just and a system that ought to be furthered. Research on power relations within this policy field confronts the task of having to unravel the complex relationship between its egalitarian justification and its hierarchical structure, between the NGO-speak of partnership and bottom-up, and the reality of donor power and a global hegemonic discourse on development.

A NEW INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SYSTEM

Hence, this paper advances an alternative to analyzing NGOs as civil society actors or as third sector organizations with a definite and "morally good" mission ascribed to them, and instead focuses on a very powerful organizational category affecting civil society globally—development NGOs as part of a new, much broader international social system. This approach is taken because of the financial

and conceptual power and the degree of system integration in the development aid channel, and because the distinction between actors outside and inside this aid system is important if relations and power issues between NGOs in general and states are to be understood on a national and global level. It should be underlined that a focus on the development aid system does not imply that informal associations or protest movements outside the development aid system are not important or less important than development NGOs. The benefit of acknowledging this distinction is that it will sharpen both the research approach and the delineation of the object of research, and it will enable us to understand how the development aid system has interacted with and affects the rest of the organizational landscape, and how these organizations again might affect the aid system.

Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? (Tvedt, 1998) was written in opposition to a dominant school of thought that overlooked this distinction or regarded it as unimportant, and thus failed to explain the structural forces forming the global organizational landscape. The proposition advanced was that the NGO channel in aid should be viewed as a distinct, very powerful, and new type of international system reflecting global power relations and continuously developing and framing national NGO subsystems and national organizational landscapes globally. If the aim is to understand the complexity and context of NGO activities and their political role, it is absolutely crucial to analyze and understand the particular role of development NGOs in the global upsurge of nonstate organizations.

This new international system should be seen as a system embracing not only NGOs attached to the aid system, but also the donor offices that provide funds and assess their performance and the research milieus that for various reasons serve NGO interests. The NGOs and their members, activists and employees, the research consultancy business that feed on the same NGO-system sources and that provide the language with which NGO experience is described and communicated, and the government offices that deal with them and the UN offices contracting NGOs as implementing agencies, are here regarded in the same way as a river and its "feeders." A river system consists of both channels (rivers) and reservoirs. Research has also shown that personnel in public donor offices and NGO leaders share essentially the same ideas about NGO roles and NGO activities (Tvedt, 1998). The system is socially integrated through continuous exchange of personnel between NGO leadership and state offices working with NGOs both in donor countries and in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The strength of the river system analogy is that this social system consists of both the NGOs as diversion channels and the donor offices and funding sources as reservoirs. As one does not understand the way a river runs without knowing about its reservoirs, it is thought necessary to understand the linkages that different NGOs have to funding sources to understand structures that have impacted the history and function of a particular NGO and its activities.

The system can be seen as consisting of different subsystems, or different tributaries, or deltaic streams. The US-NGO system is different from the

French-NGO system and the Norwegian-NGO subsystem, and so on. When analyzing these national subsystems, the employees working with support to development NGOs in government ministries, and development agencies and people working in NGOs (be it in so-called "northern" or "southern" NGOs, a terminology that tends to blur and simplify the power structures involved) but paid mostly by the same governments, should be seen as belonging to the same social system. These subsystems are impressed by particular national histories and shifting international relations, but form parts of a bigger multinational NGO system, together with and mingling with other subsystems having different donor states as the reservoir or core. Our knowledge is still very scant of how these subsystems relate to each other, how they differ and why—and what kinds of constraints and possibilities NGOs from different donor countries experience in the field, and what implication support from different donor countries have on organizational developments.

This system perspective provides a frame for realistic comparative analyses of the history and character of the NGO landscape in any particular country—of how it is connected to, and impacted by, global developments and state power, of the potential for and limits of action. It also opens up a broad historical dimension. How have organizational landscapes been impacted by national and international aid systems? How has development aid, as a particular way of organizing relationships between states and societies—only some few decades old—impacted systemic power relations?

The system itself is primarily produced and reproduced and defined vis-à-vis the rest of the world and the rest of the organizational landscape by the flow and transfer of funds, and the character of this resource transfer. What today has become a worldwide system was established by an American government initiative in the early 1960s (Smith, 1990). The United States asked other OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; OECD, 1983) governments to follow their lead in giving money to NGOs or private voluntary organizations primarily to mobilize them as propagandists. It was thought that NGOs could be useful in increasing and rooting public support for the official aid project. Gradually the role of the NGOs was enlarged, expanding dramatically in the 1980s and early 1990s. We can now talk of a worldwide system, dispersing billions of dollars every year, engaging tens and thousands of NGOs, and assisting hundreds of millions of people.

The boundaries of this money flow have produced a rather closed system (and by that reproduced its systemness), in the sense that the partners or members have formally to apply to be included in it or allowed to cross the "boundaries." If you get money, you are inside. If not, you are on the outside. Today, many are looking in—thousands upon thousands of organizations worldwide are knocking at the donors' doors or at a potential partner's door—to join the system. Exactly how boundaries are established and where they are drawn vary from country to country and from time to time, partly reflecting national donor policies and

national contexts, but these boundaries are important because they give different subsystems their particular features. In Scandinavia, for example, for-profit firms have traditionally not been allowed to join this system. In some countries, for example, trade unions and interest organizations are eligible for support through the NGO channel, whereas in Bangladesh and Nicaragua this has not been the case. One important impact of the demarcation of this system is that to join the system, *ad hoc* organizations or small grassroots organizations have had to transform themselves into more formally established NGOs, and to take on the language of the donor subsystem in question. It is thus a boundary that produces the system's distinctiveness in its communication about itself, distinguishing the actors of the aid system from the rest of society and the rest of the organizational landscape.

One of the most important structural properties of this system is the members' discursive internalization of what is very often rhetorically described as "shared values" of the channel. People have employed a common value-laden language as a means of communication, while not necessarily internalizing its conflicting norms. In the NGO literature since the mid-1980s the basic, although changing, concepts have been shared.

This does not presuppose that there has always been value consensus among NGO activists and between NGOs and official donors. There has been, however, something that can be called a "NGO-speak" (employed both by NGO people, donor bureaucrats, and NGO consultants), that is a language that has functioned as a "symbolic order" within the whole system, organized around a dichotomy, a rhetoric code with two values: "good" development and "not good" development—and where NGOs have been seen as the embodiment of good development.

The symbolically powerful NGO language may change over time, but it always tends to serve as an identity marker for the system vis-à-vis the external world. The system is extremely dependent on how the rest of society perceives it, and therefore also on image management and image production.[5] The fact that the system feeds on gift money has created a system that does not develop according to laws or rules in the marketplace or in political life, but according to how the system itself manages political and moral dilemmas and conflicts within the channel itself. In spite of the real or potential contradictions between, for example, NGOs aiming at mobilizing the poor through project or advocacy work, mission organizations and secular NGOs organizing business leaders, or between

[5]Social movements also transform, and may redefine themselves, and they do so also as they negotiate their role and position within the development aid system. Cynical observers may argue that some NGOs will simply define their mission to agree with whatever a donor wants, but this is to simplify the issue and also to regard the power relationship as only a one-way affair. This relationship tends to be seen as a predominantly moral and political issue, rather than as a social process that is important to understand. A typical example is "There is always the danger that NGOs administering funds are more accountable to their donors than to their beneficiaries" (Edwards, 2000, p. 209). It is unclear why it, by definition or in principle, should be more "dangerous" to be accountable to a donor than to the beneficiaries.

NGOs and public funding institutions, there are sufficient overlapping interests to provide common ground for consensus.

The actors in this system are structurally integrated, primarily through resource transfers and communication exchange.[6] Its "systemness" has also been produced and reproduced through many local and global gatherings and conferences where NGO leaders, from both the "North" and the "South," meet donors and consultants. These "come-together" meetings play a very important integrative role, and can explain why the channels "buzzwords" travel so fast to "all corners" of the world, surpassing the borders of the national subsystems. Actors learn and rhetorically internalize the same language and "symbolic orders" as they are socialized in the channels routinized practices.

This system is maintained through the way in which system members express themselves as actors within the system and in relation to the wider world. Such rhetorical consensus can be understood as norms that also help to establish and maintain boundaries around the NGO channel, but, and this is crucial, a "consensus" to which a variety of and in reality competing value agendas and even manipulative attitudes have been attached. Some government organizations pose as NGOs to attract funds and legitimacy, some for-profit firms dress up as NGOs to earn money, some mission organizations act within the development aid channel while using the latter as a shield for achieving their main aims, and some political parties and movements establish what have been called neutral humanitarian organizations to compete for funds. Although the character of the resource transfer has created the structural form of this system, one might say it is this rhetoric and the way it has been handled which have created the feeling of "systemness"—that has made it into, and reproduces it as, a social system. The rhetoric that has influenced the whole NGO scene can be analyzed as functional for the maintenance of the system as it has functioned in the past (this does not mean, however, that this language is necessary for its continued existence).

This has encouraged institutional isomorphism among a great number of NGOs all over the world—during an astonishingly short period of time (Tvedt, 1998). Within a few number of years, thousands of NGOs have been established in many European, American, Asian, African, and Latin American countries—in urban centers and in the remote countryside. These NGOs share the same development language that has been adopted by donors. Discussions and research on the role of NGOs that miss this aspect will underplay the aid channels role as a transmission belt of a dominant discourse tied to Western notions of development, and downplay the fact that this arena is actually a site of struggle between different development paradigms, ideologies, and NGOs.

By focusing on resource transfers and discursive domination within this system perspective, power mechanisms within the aid system can be highlighted. Aid

---

[6]This is of course a general point as well. No organization can ever truly retain its independence. Organizations are both relatively autonomous and under the strong constraining influence of the environment.

in general and NGO assistance reflects inequality between "donor" and "receiver" at all levels within the system, the system's fundamental ethical justification aside. But because it is often the receiver, or the small NGO in a poor country, that bestows the system with its ethical and political legitimacy, power may be negotiated and there are cases where rather small southern NGOs—because they are seen by their donors as valuable organizations from a political or image-producing point of view—have made big Western donor governments dance to their tune (consider Tvedt, 1998, pp. 78–86). By analyzing NGOs as part of a broader system of power, accountability, image management, and organizational survival, one has to address ordinary system mechanisms that are at play here; from the maximization of organizational self-interest to the iron law of oligarchy which also impacts the grassroots-oriented, progressive, altruistic nature of organizations.

This system approach goes together with a nonnormative definition of NGOs. The NGOs cannot be treated and understood as if they possess some shared values or capabilities. The idea, for example, that NGOs have a "comparative advantage" has been falsified (consider Tendler, 1982). No study has so far substantiated a claim about either comparative advantages or "shared values" for this wide variety of organizations vis-à-vis another equally multifaceted group of states. The heterogeneity of the NGO scene makes it futile to ascribe NGOs definite and similar political and ideological characteristics. The growth and role of NGOs cannot be explained by some essentialist characteristic or function(s), as is all too often the case. The point here is that these organizations basically share systemic and relational similarities, rather than essentialist, ideological characteristics.

CONTRA GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

This system concept is radically different from conceptions of a "global civil society." For, the term *global civil society* downplays a dominant empirical fact: namely, most influential organizations are financed by the state and are working in accordance with regulations issued by individual states or the international state system. On the one hand, the notion of global civil society disregards the role of the state in funding and influencing NGOs. On the other hand, according to the underlying ideology, the civil society actors and the donor bureaucrats belong to opposing parts in a binary opposition—the state versus civil society. In this conventional perspective the state is represented as "opponent," thus producing an image of the NGO world that places NGOs outside the influence and power of states.

The system concept makes it possible to analyze development NGOs individually and as a group, and how they articulate with donor communities, state administrations, and other and different types of nonprofit organizations, and not only with "CSOs" (which is a very recent label, and a label that fits very few organizations literally), or with only organizations defined as third sector organizations, or with only voluntary organizations but with all types of organizations,

including those who have no idea about what a "civil society" was—until very few years ago.

The development aid system can, for lack of better words, be termed the DOSTANGO system. This is a "global" system, but it cannot be called a global civil society, because the NGO system in aid is donor led and many of the most influential NGOs are more influenced by states' donor policies than by what is going on locally or nationally, or at least, forced to be more accountable when it comes to resource management toward their donor state than toward what is called in system jargon the "local constituency" or "beneficiaries." It is not a third sector phenomenon, because it operates in countries where no third sector has been developed or emerged and trespasses the boundaries of conventional sector definitions in all societies. It interacts with civil society and people all over the world and helps to transform the conceptual horizons of millions of people. The system concept as used here regards the empirical field as a pattern of relationships between actors and institutions, regarded as having emergent properties of its own, over and above the properties of the individual actors or institution.

The concept of social system has been criticized on the grounds that systems do not possess emergent properties over and above the social actors who comprise them, but are rather produced and reproduced by structured and routine social practices, the systematic properties of social systems thus stem from the nature of social action rather than from the system itself. The DOSTANGO system and its properties cannot be reduced to properties produced and reproduced by structured and routine social practices, because of the historical importance of structures established by resource flows and language. The term does not imply that the system has an inherent tendency toward equilibrium, as much system theory argues, although it underlines the need to understand those mechanisms that maintain equilibrium, both internally and externally, in relation to other systems. It is a system that encourages and institutionalizes different forms of social integration, but despite the use of the word *integration* there is no assumption that the relationships so described are harmonious. The terms *social integration* and *system integration*, as used here, embrace both order and conflict.[7]

The DOSTANGO approach encourages a focus on the political and institutional environment, both externally and internally, and the particular types of linkages established in each society between these organizations and different

---

[7]In literature on social integration and system integration it is often noted how conflict theorists emphasize the conflict between groups of actors as the motor of social change whereas normative functionalists downplay the role of actors and seek to emphasize the (functional or dysfunctional) relationships between the institutions of society. Neither approach is of course adequate, precisely because each deals with only one side of the agency versus structure problem. The task should be to overcome this dualism, but the micro versus macrodistinction cannot be overcome by regarding social integration as something which should only refer to situations where actors are physically copresent and system integration to where they are not. This is unsatisfactory because face-to-face interactions are not confined to microprocesses and macroprocesses may be organized as face-to-face interactions. The NGO system, if anything, demonstrates this in all its facets.

types of states. It is therefore not only a question of addressing the obvious: that of bringing the state–society linkage back in. This approach advances a research strategy that transcends methodological nationalism and those theories—so popular after the fall of Eastern Europe—that argued that the organizational structure and landscape in a particular country should be seen as a reflection of that country's cultural and historical characteristics (see, e.g., Hood and Schuppert, 1990; Salamon and Anheier, 1992a, 1992b). There is no doubt that national organizational culture impacts particular organizational landscape (DiMaggio and Anheier, 1990, p. 137). But to give national tradition too much weight, or to claim that it is possible to "predict the legal form of most organizations if one knows the industry and nation-state in which they operate" (DiMaggio and Anheier, 1990, p. 139), downplays the formative power of the international NGO system in aid. A national cultural perspective also tends to focus on factors that change slowly, that is, that what is required to understand an NGO scene is a "deep and holistic understanding of the individual political system within which these political decisions are made" (Hood and Schuppert, 1990, p. 95). The analysis of the relationship between such organizations and the state or the position of the "third sector" tells, therefore, the way "in which societies choose to govern themselves" (Anheier and Seibel, 1990). Much work on NGOs and the third sector in Western welfare states has been in a "national style vein" (Hood and Schuppert, 1990, p. 95), and explanations of institutional patterns have been done on a country-by-country basis. It is, however, clearly insufficient if the aim is to explain the organizational landscape in developing countries and the development NGO landscape in donor countries.

A solely national focus cannot grasp the impact of the DOSTANGO system, and diverts attention away from crucial questions of long-term development: namely, the relationship between the entire organizational landscape in the country and the role of this system, and the role and potentials it gives and has given to different types of national organizations and their relation to their own state. Present organizational landscapes are not organic outcomes of long-term, deep-seated traditions. In fact, they are rather superficial present-day products, often (but far from always) characterized by weak roots in the society they operate. For more than a decade there has been a rush among donors to find fundable national NGOs in developing countries. Such NGOs have usually mushroomed as a response to external funds and rapid political change, both concerning types of organizations, value orientations, and development rhetoric. A simplified chronology would be cooperatives in the 1970s, women's groups in the 1980s, environmental groups in late 1980s, and AIDS groups and "civil society" organizations in the 1990s. Simultaneously their working style, nearness to the state, degree of integration with society and the public sector will reflect both cultural traditions, national institutional environments, and the dynamics between the organizational landscape and the international aid system.

In the literature it has been argued that the "existence of NGOs, their types, interests, activities etc., is an indication of the situation of civic society vis-à-vis

the nation state" (Fowler, 1988, p. 2). This not only is empirically wrong but also diverts attention away from the fact that many organizations are an outcome of primarily external influences, and in some cases, direct pressure. To argue that institutional designs tend to be deeply rooted in traditions, linked to fundamental constitutional rules and legal assumptions, which themselves change only very slowly, presupposes that strong state authority exists. Because many countries have weak states with often-feeble authority and power for efficient rule making and rule enforcement, the space for NGOs may be larger than fundamental legal assumptions and traditions assume.

What is crucial is the need to combine domestic and international structures in analysis. The domestic or national context affects the nature of the NGOs and of the NGO–government relationship and the institutions with which the NGOs interact. It is not a good guide to rely only on the "national past" in understanding this particular area of third-sector–government relations. Neither is it fruitful to introduce static, ahistorical terms such as "indigenous NGOs" as opposed to "not-indigenous NGOs," because most organizations are an outcome of internal traditions and external influences. Structural, institutional history has to be combined with an analysis of the concrete historical process of how the system produces and reproduces particular relations and practices. By using this perspective, the object of analysis can be constructed in a new, and hopefully, more fruitful way. The DOSTANGO system should not be regarded as one unified whole, and it may well be that, for example, the American system tends to impact and interact with the organizational landscape differently from the Scandinavian or Canadian system. The fact that these questions have not been asked is an argument in favor of this perspective.

CONCLUSION

The DOSTANGO approach addresses the research challenge of trying to objectify the research object by using a language alien to the system and its actors. It addresses the problem of conceptual universalism, studying the NGO system as a universal system but establishing an empirical base for such an approach. It also addresses the question of power relations, both within the NGO community itself, among actors in the system, and between the system and the rest of the society. It allows all kinds of organizations into the picture, both Islamic fundamentalists, the Moon sect, and Oxfam—but focuses only on one segment of the organizational landscape. Because the organizational field is defined in a nonnormative and relational way, it makes comparative analyses of historical developments possible (consider Tvedt, 1998, pp. 11–41, for a discussion of definitions and classifications of NGOs). And the approach makes intelligible both Mandela's and Annan's viewpoints, both representing different state actors, who, because of different systemic relations, will tend to react differently to NGOs: the first object to

foreign-sponsored NGOs to legitimate and strengthen a national government; the latter need NGOs to legitimize world government. The aim must be to understand how national and global civil societies have been impacted by, and shaped by, different forces: corporate capital; local and global protest movements and authorities; and, not least, by a new but powerful international social system—the aid system.

REFERENCES

Achieng, J. (September 18, 1998). Ruling on Muslim charities averts a major strike. *International Press Service*. www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/36/266 html.

Anheier, H. K., and Seibel, W. (eds.) (1990). *The Third Sector: Comparative Studies of Nonprofit Organizations*, Walter de Gruyter, New York.

Dhanapala, J. (2002). Keynote address: Session VI, the role of civil society in the implementation of the United Nations programme of action on small arms. Undersecretary-General for Disarmament Affairs United Nations African Conference on the Implementation of the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms: Needs and Partnerships, Pretoria, South Africa, March 18–21, 2002.

Edwards, M. (2000). *NGO Rights and Responsibilities: A New Deal for Global Governance*, The Foreign Policy Centre, London.

Fowler, A. (1988). *Non-Governmental Organisations in Africa: Achieving Comparative Advantage in Relief and Micro-Development*, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, England.

Hood, G., and Schuppert, C. F. (1990). Para-government organizations in the provision of public services: Three explanations. In: Anheier, H. K., and Seibel, W. (eds.), *The Third Sector: Comparative Studies of Nonprofit Organizations*, Walter de Gruyter, New York, pp. 93–106.

Korten, D. C. (1987). Third generation NGO strategies: A key to people-centered development. *World Dev.* **15**(Suppl.)**:** 145–160.

Korten, D. C. (1990). *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*, Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, CT.

Korten, D. C. (2000). Civilizing society: The unfolding cultural struggle. Paper presented at ISTR Conference, Trinity College, Dublin.

OECD (1983). *The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Development Cooperation*, Bulletin (no. 10, new series), OECD, Paris.

Paine, H., and Gratzer, B. (2001). Rev. Moon and the United Nations: A challenge for the NGO community. www.weedbonn.org/unreform/

Salamon, L. M., and Anheier, H. K. (1992a). In search of the non-profit sector. I: The problem of definition. *Voluntas* **3**(2)**:** 125–153.

Salamon, L. M., and Anheier, H. K. (1992b). In search of the non-profit sector. II: The problem of classification. *Voluntas* **3**(3)**:** 267–309.

Smith, B. (1990). *More than Altruism: The Politics of Foreign Aid*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Tendler, J. (1982). Turning private voluntary organizations into development agencies: Questions for evaluation. In: *Programme Evaluation Discussion Paper No. 12*, USAID, Washington, DC.

Tvedt, T. (1998). *Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? NGOs & Foreign Aid*, James Currey, Oxford/Africa World Press, Trenton, NJ.

Weisbrod, B. A. (1977). Towards a theory of the voluntary nonprofit sector in a three sector economy. In: Weisbrod, B. A. (ed.), *The Voluntary Nonprofit Sector: An Economic Analysis*, D. C. Heath, Lexington, MA, pp. 51–79.