

Development, NGOs, and civil society: the debate and its future

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Introduction

In reviewing the contributions to this *Reader*, I was struck by three things. First, by the wealth of empirically informed conceptual analysis that they offer, succinctly addressing many of the key issues that emerged in the 1990s on the theme of development, NGOs, and civil society. Second, by the mix of scholar-activist-practitioner authors, for whom the issues discussed really *matter*, because if they were clarified the world might become a better place. But third, and despite the quality and relevance of the papers selected for this volume, by the difficulty of generating wider debate about their content.

This is certainly not the fault of the contributions: on the contrary, they cover the range of issues admirably. The problem is that they are appearing in a world in which the collapse of intellectual and political reference points has prompted an eclectic outpouring of ideas and views, without organised and coherent debate. As a result, good thinking and writing is lost; much is duplicated and reinvented; people talk but do not listen; people write and do not read; and *vice versa*. At the start of the new millennium, development debates — if they can be called that — are like concentric circles, orbiting each other but without touching. These circles appear to share a centre, in that the same language and concepts are used by all, from the World Bank to Southern NGOs and grassroots movements. The reluctance to clarify the distinct meanings invested in these concepts, however, reflects collective collusion in the myth that a consensus on development exists, or even that some clear conclusions have been

reached about how to deal with global poverty. Take, for instance, a headline in the *International Herald Tribune* of 7 January 2000: 'Concept of Poverty Undergoes Radical Shift: Now a Solution Seems Possible'.

Not only is there very little consensus, but the real world of development NGOs and official donors is characterised by mistrust, and by fierce competition over resources and protagonism, all of which are very damaging to the anti-poverty cause. The inadequacy of responses to global poverty is only too apparent. UNDP's *1997 Human Development Report* gave a measured overview of progress and setbacks in addressing global poverty in the twentieth century, and a quantitative and qualitative picture of the scale of the problem still to be tackled (UNDP 1997, especially pp24–60). While there have been notable achievements, these have been neither continuous nor equally distributed. The economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s reflects what UNDP calls the 'ascents/descents' character of development processes. The suggestion is that economic liberalisation has widened existing inequalities, even when it encourages growth and accumulation for those already strong in the marketplace. Such strength may derive from legally acquired wealth, but also from coercive power and illegal dealings. Criminal mafias, of which there are now many in the South and in post-communist transition countries, have expanded with the relaxation of global financial and trade controls. Between 1987 and 1993, the number of people with an income of less than US\$1 a day increased by almost 100 million to 1.3 billion people, one-third of the population of the 'developing world'. Yet, between 1989 and 1996, the number of billionaires increased from 157 to 447. The value of their combined assets exceeded the combined incomes of half of the poorest of the world's poor (UNDP 1997: 38 and 110). Since the early 1980s, more than 100 developing and transition countries have suffered cuts in living standards and failures of growth more prolonged than anything experienced by the industrialised countries during the Great Depression of the 1930s (UNDP 1997: 7).

If one looks at the global picture, rather than that of the 'developing world' in isolation, the problem of human poverty assumes much greater proportions than is suggested by statistics which show that one-third of the population in the South is income-poor and one-quarter is poor in terms of the UNDP's Human Development Index. More than 100 million people in the industrialised countries, for example, also live below the income-poverty line (UNDP 1997: 34). But human poverty is not just a question of the number of people living below an agreed minimum: a category of poor on the wrong side of the relatively recent exclusion/inclusion dichotomy.

Nor is it enough to consider that millions who are not in fact below the 'line' live on its borders in constant fear of crossing over, suffering not just the threat of actual indigence but conditions of daily exploitation.¹ Rather, the issue is whether the 'inclusion' side of the border is worth preserving, and whether what it claims to offer can really be made universally available. There are cogent thinkers in the South today who, along with their Northern intellectual allies, argue for an end to 'development' as an idea. Majid Rahnema suggests that 'development' could never offer a sustainable option to all the people on the planet, even if it were successfully delivered:

The failures of development can no longer be attributed solely to the inability of the governments, institutions and people in charge of implementing it. In fact, if they had been successful in fulfilling all the promises they made to their peoples, and had there been enough money and resources to bring about the development of *all* the so-called underdeveloped countries of the world to the level of the 'most advanced', the resulting deadlocks and tensions would perhaps have taken an even more dramatic turn. For example, it has been estimated that a single edition of the *New York Times* eats up 150 acres of forest land. Other figures suggest that, were the rest of the world to consume paper, including recycled paper, at the same rate as the United States (with six per cent of the world's population), within two years not a single tree would be left on the planet. Moreover, considering that the number of private cars in the USA by far exceeds its population, an efficient development machine, capable of taking the levels of newspaper reading and car ownership in China and India up to those of the USA, would pose to those countries (and perhaps the rest of the world) problems of traffic, pollution and forest depletion on a disastrous scale. It is thus perhaps a blessing that the machine was actually *not* as efficient as its programmers wanted it to be!
(in Rahmena and Bawtree 1997: 378–9)

Even if we do not accept the full implications of the post-development position, given that, like dependency theory, it offers a strong critique but little guidance to action and policy, it is surely time to question profoundly the dichotomised schema of a 'successful North' and 'unsuccessful South'. Such a schema discouraged people from asking what kind of world we wanted to build, and instead focused the debate on how the Others of the 'third world' could become more like Us in the 'first world'. Most of us thought that such a schema, first encapsulated by 'modernisation theory' in the 1950s, had been intellectually defeated by

the 1960s and that it was effectively dead. However, it returned in new form and with new vigour in the 1980s and 1990s. Undoubtedly, its resuscitation was encouraged by Fukuyama-like musings on the 'End of History', as echoed by the millennium edition of *Newsweek*, which declared capitalism and democracy to be the effective victors of the second millennium. Yet, as 'Souths' proliferate in the North, and 'Norths' emerge in the South, we need to ask searching questions about 'development' as both an idea and an ideal, as well as about what NGOs might contribute to it.

My introductory essay aims first to identify what this collection of papers tells us about the current state of thinking about development, NGOs, and civil society, and to clarify the points of debate that have arisen over the last decade. Second, I shall argue that the age of a rhetorical consensus should be declared over. Instead, I would partly agree with Michael Edwards (1999) that we should shift definitively from the 'foreign aid' paradigm towards a new idea of international co-operation, based on broad alliances between the different actors and institutions involved in the struggle against global poverty and exploitation. Building global alliances, or 'constituencies for change', he argues, would enable human beings to co-determine their futures on the world stage. It is evident that only through mutual engagement can any real difference be made: debate needs to be encouraged, to explore what does and does not work. International co-operation cannot be based, however, on concealing the divergence of values, interests, political positions, and, ultimately, the power to pursue them within the present global order. Edwards calls for a form of co-operation that is democratic and rooted in dialogue; one not based on any universal model imposed from above, but on the politically feasible goal of a more humanised capitalism. The purpose of co-operation is, however, by no means uncontested: Edwards' goal itself is a source of contention, as is the goal of 'development'. His understanding of what is 'politically feasible' is questionable. Where dialogue should take place, and how to ensure the equality of participation that Edwards calls for, are extremely complex issues.²

Above all, however, this introductory essay will argue that the theoretical, normative, and political basis for a critique of the global order is still weak and/or absent among NGOs, and that rhetorical consensus is one result of this vacuum. This has implications for practice and action, and also for the generation of open debate in search of common ground and new forms of co-operation. From the contributions to this *Reader* comes the call for NGOs to examine and re-examine critically their role

in the light of experiences during, and in particular after, the Cold War. For the past 15 years or so, NGOs have been courted by governments and multilateral institutions. The moment has come to count the cost of NGOs' responses, and to debate the criteria upon which choices about the future should be based. As they find themselves under greater scrutiny, it is surely time for some humbling self-analysis which includes the question *do NGOs have a future at all?*

The debate

An initial task for this essay is to draw out the major themes that arise from this *Reader* and assess what they tell us about the current debate on development, NGOs, and civil society. I identify four critical themes:

- NGOs and neo-liberalism;
- the roles and relationships of international (Northern) NGOs and Southern NGOs;
- NGOs and the state;
- theory, praxis, and NGOs.

NGOs and neo-liberalism

The first contribution to this *Reader*, that of Michael Edwards and David Hulme, reports on the first of three international conferences they organised during the 1990s (in 1992, 1994 and, together with Tina Wallace, in 1999) on NGOs and development. The 1992 conference reflected early tensions within the development NGO community as it found itself gaining unexpected respectability and potential funding from the world of official donors. Edwards and Hulme draw attention to the risks, as well as gains, implicit in the opportunity to 'scale up':

Increasing interest and support for NGOs among official donor agencies may create a predisposition, or foster a shift, towards operational and organisational expansion. These incentives need to be treated cautiously, because decisions to expand with official finance may have various unwelcome consequences: for example, they may close off potential courses of action; or make NGOs feel more accountable to their official donors than to their intended beneficiaries; or imply support for policies of wholesale economic liberalisation.

By the mid-1990s, an untypically cynical tone creeps into the pages of *Development in Practice*. Gino Lofredo suggests that the appeals to caution articulated by Edwards and Hulme went unheeded. His satirical commentary on the growth of ‘EN-GE-OH’s among Southern professionals is a warning to those who too quickly and instrumentally adopted the official donor agenda. Development turned into just another ‘business’ in a neo-liberal era, ultimately dedicated to what he calls ‘Sustainable (Self) Development’. By the end of the 1990s, Stephen Commins, writing this time about Northern NGOs, points to the negative outcome for those who chose to become ‘the delivery agency for a global soup kitchen’. He suggests that the backlash has begun, and that NGOs are no longer seen as offering significant advantages either in community development or in complex emergencies. Instead, they are ‘useful fig-leaves to cover government inaction or indifference to human suffering’, both in complex emergencies and in economic restructuring.

To what extent have development NGOs succumbed to the pressures and incentives to pick up the social cost of neo-liberal restructuring, and thus enabled multilateral and governmental institutions to avoid breaking with their neo-liberal faith by re-creating welfare states? While the discourse of these institutions has become notably more socially aware and ‘human’-oriented (and less ‘anti-state’ in an ideological sense), the underlying philosophy of market-led globalisation has not been questioned. Yet many progressive and well-intentioned NGOs of North and South (as well as the opportunistic ones) accepted funding from these institutions for carrying out community development, post-conflict reconstruction and, more ambitiously, democracy building, putting aside any residual doubts about neo-liberalism as such. Perhaps what has encouraged the beginnings of an anti-NGO shift is that, unsurprisingly, NGOs were unable to offer the solution to the social cost of economic restructuring. Criticisms of NGOs have focused on their technical deficiency, their lack of accountability, and their excessively politicised and critical character. This ‘failure’ has undermined their credibility among the technocrats within donor institutions, who demanded rapid and measurable outputs from investments in the NGO sector. And it weakened the influence of the pro-NGO social-development advocates within those institutions.³

If UNDP figures are correct, global poverty and inequality have grown in many parts of the world under the neo-liberal policy agenda and the processes of trade liberalisation, privatisation, and labour-market reform. The picture is not universally bleak, of course, and macro-economic performance did improve in some regions and countries. Consider,

however, the case of India, whose levels of public spending were under threat in the late 1990s from a neo-liberal focus on reducing fiscal deficits and minimising the role of the state (UNDP 1997: 52). UNDP attributes India's relative achievements in poverty reduction between 1976 and 1990 to its public-spending levels. India has a reputed one million NGOs (Salamon and Anheier 1997), but it is unclear whether even this number can offer a sustainable substitute for state spending. This is not to say that some NGOs in India and elsewhere did not do good work. It must be recognised, though, that increasing numbers of NGOs, however dedicated and efficient, could never offer rapid solutions to a problem on the scale of global poverty, or even alleviate it sufficiently to ensure relative social stability.

More worrying is the evidence that NGOs have sacrificed some legitimacy in their own societies by their willingness to participate in implementing the social safety-net programmes that accompany donors' neo-liberal policies. Richard Holloway (1999) has made this point forcefully:

While people inside the NGO world still think of themselves as occupying the moral high ground, the reality now is that few people in the South outside the NGO world think of NGOs like this. 'The word on the street in the South is that NGOs are charlatans racking up large salaries ... and many air-conditioned offices.'

An in-depth study of NGOs in Latin America, sponsored by ALOP/FICONG,⁴ highlights the growing awareness of this problem in the South. For instance, the case study on Argentina concludes:

In synthesis, the Promotion and Development NGOs are immersed in a social environment which shows interest in, and openness to, private institutions in the social field, but within a hegemonic ideological and practical model that does not prioritise social change nor see it as necessary. In other words, it is an environment (a 'market') which is basically interested in the more technical services of the Development NGOs (their services of financial intermediation or professional assistance) and not at all in their key social role of development promotion. This environment generates (via social recognition and financial opportunities) a strong tension in institutions, forcing them either to convert themselves into successful 'enterprises or social consultancies' or to maintain and strengthen their promotion role without the resources to carry it out. (Bombarolo and Pérez Coscio 1998: 45)

The pages of *Development in Practice* were not the only ones to carry warnings during the 1990s about the potential cost to NGOs of implementing official donor agendas.⁵ The introduction to the edited volume that arose from the second international NGO conference, 'NGOs and Development: Performance and Accountability in the New World Order', put it bluntly:

Our main conclusion is that NGOs must 'return to their roots' if they are to promote poverty reduction on a mass scale. With respect to this conclusion we posit a number of questions. Could it be that many [Southern] NGOs are so involved in service delivery that the local level associations they create empower NGO personnel and leaders but not the poor and disadvantaged? This can certainly be argued for some of the large NGOs in Bangladesh. Have [Northern] NGOs got so involved in lobbying donors directly that they have neglected their role in creating active citizenries that, through more diffuse political processes, can demand effective aid policies and other policy changes (for example, in trade, debt relief and foreign affairs) that will assist the poor in poor countries?
(Hulme and Edwards 1997: 20)

As a participant in that 1994 conference, it was clear to me that NGOs of North and South, and the academics who worked with them, had already tacitly split. This split was not organised around an open debate on the dilemmas themselves, but around two broad approaches to them. One emphasised the technical changes that NGOs should take into account if they were to remain relevant to the economically restructured order in which they were working. A proliferation of papers (on institutional strengthening, capacity building, improving accountability, measuring effectiveness through log-frames and social development indicators) addressed some real and specific problems that development NGOs faced if they were to improve their interventions and prove their worth to donors. On the other hand, there was a minority who felt deeply uncomfortable with this new language and who stressed the need to get the politics right first, and to resist donor-driven agendas if these served only to bureaucratise and depoliticise NGOs. It was easy to dismiss the latter as the traditionalists of the left failing to keep up to date, or as utopians whose ideas bore little relation to the real world. Those who preferred the discourse of politics tended to weaken their position by not engaging with the fact that contributing real improvements to people's lives is what it is all about, and that improving the capacity to do this is

not in itself the problem. Those who tried to bridge this divide found themselves viewed as marginal to the central issues. For example, despite decades of debate around gender and development (a social and political issue with considerable implications for development practice), it was still viewed as peripheral by those concerned with adapting to the New Policy Agenda, and ensuring the survival of NGOs within it (May 1995).

The possibility that improvements in efficiency and management should best be driven by political choices rather than *vice versa* was buried in the false dichotomy between political and technical agendas, an issue taken up later in this essay. This dichotomy, I argue, is one of the reasons why NGOs failed to develop their own critique of neo-liberalism, and why many ended up implementing a model with which they felt deeply uncomfortable.⁶ Indeed, it might be said that 20 years of economic liberalisation have damaged the NGO sector, fragmenting it and fomenting competition in which, as the free-market model argues, only the most efficient survive. The rush to efficiency, as if it were a discrete and neutral outcome of technical decisions, appears to have been at the cost of the time-consuming and messy business of debating other values, such as how greater efficiency could be pursued without a cost to social-change objectives.

Although it was never homogeneous, the NGO sector has been transformed over the last two decades, in more than quantitative terms, to incorporate a multiplicity of agendas, functions, and values. In the meantime, neo-liberal restructuring has been implemented throughout the South. Thus, rather than starting the new millennium having proved the case for international development co-operation, NGOs are having to confront a crisis in foreign aid from which they themselves are beginning to suffer, even though they are as yet still relatively favoured within the declining aid budget. The end of the Cold War and the irresistible rise of neo-liberal philosophy have transformed the rationale for aid. The North now evades responsibility for poverty in the South, given that no geopolitical interests drive aid programmes, and given also that Southern governments, which are now unable to play off the superpowers, have a much weakened voice in international forums. The burden is placed (in part correctly) on the South's ability to put its own act in order — but only through competing in a global economy where the odds are already heavily stacked against it. Aid focuses increasingly on the emergencies, disasters, and conflicts which hit the headlines and Northern public opinion.⁷

The crisis in international co-operation, and the future role of NGOs within the economic reality of globalisation, was the context of the third NGO conference, 'NGOs in a Global Future', held in January 1999.

Reflecting the fragmentation of perspectives over the previous decade, this conference was probably the most eclectic of the three, ‘a complex, wide-ranging conference where the diversity of experience and views was perhaps the hallmark’ (Wallace 1999: 2). The fundamental challenge laid down by the organisers in their background paper did not receive the attention it deserved. They had called still more clearly for a shift away from the roles that had come to dominate the neo-liberal age of the late twentieth century — in other words, from development as delivery to development as leverage. NGOs were called to return to their role as promoters of social change and of non-market values of co-operation, non-violence, and respect for human rights and democratic processes, and to make these the ‘bottom line’ in decisions over economics and the environment, social policy, and politics (Edwards, Hulme, and Wallace 1999: 13). Rather than acting as ‘unhappy agents of a foreign aid system in decline’, the organisers urged NGOs to ‘rethink their mandate, mission and strategies’ (*ibid.*: 16). NGOs needed to look towards the gradual replacement of foreign aid with a broader agenda of international co-operation in which they reshaped their roles and sought alliances around common goals with other social and civic organisations. The conference discussions themselves, however, although attended by representatives from a wider spectrum of NGOs from North and South than the earlier two, failed to engage with these ideas, and no clear future directions emerged.

Nevertheless, the parameters of debate are now clearer. This is after years in which many NGOs of North and South have more or less reluctantly let themselves be led and/or influenced by official donor agendas and techno-efficiency determinism. Official donors have reached out to NGOs while also pushing the neo-liberal restructuring that many believe is part of the problem faced by the poor, not the solution. At the same time, in the course of the 1990s, donors have begun to question how representative and effective NGOs can claim to be — and not just international, Northern-based NGOs, but also those in the South. Many donors have begun, as part of this process, to rename their NGO Units as Civil Society Units. They have become interested in funding a broader range of associations in the South, moving away from a focus on middle-class intermediary groups, of which NGOs are an example. Such a shift begs many questions about the donors’ assumptions, but for the purposes of this Introduction, it is yet another reason why NGOs of North and South are being forced to re-think their role and purpose, as well as their relationship with each other.

International (Northern) NGO and Southern NGO roles and relationships

The 1990s saw major changes in the relationships between international (Northern) NGOs and Southern NGOs, the nature of which is well illustrated in this *Reader*. A key problem to emerge in the 1992 conference was that of South–North NGO ‘partnership’, and as the decade wore on this idea of ‘partnership’ was increasingly seen to misrepresent the power of Northern NGOs as funders of Southern ones. As official donors also began to fund Southern NGOs directly, so the institutional identities of the latter grew less dependent on Northern NGOs. They began to set their own agendas and to develop research, policy, and advocacy capacities. In the late 1990s, Firoze Manji argued that British international NGOs (or BINGOs, as he calls them) had failed to accept this shift. Their arguments against the direct funding of Southern NGOs reflected their continuing paternalism, and they voiced criticisms that applied to themselves as much as to Southern NGOs (for example, their lack of accountability, their tendency to be driven by donors’ agendas and to respond to the chance of funding rather than to need). In effect, they were responding to a basic fear for their own future.

The growth and increasing protagonism of Southern NGOs is a theme of the decade. But concerns also began to focus on the implications of the decline in the easy funding that had fed previous years of growth, and on questions of NGO legitimacy, rather than on the problems of expansion. In their 1998 contribution, Mick Moore and Sheelagh Stewart argue that development NGOs in poor countries need to re-establish public confidence in order to persuade donors to continue to channel funds through them. They identify four areas of concern:

- the failure of NGOs to develop accountability within their own countries rather than accountability to wealthy foreign organisations;
- the need for internal reform and mechanisms to ‘institutionalise suspicion’ within NGOs that are undergoing structural growth, and thus to regain trust and confidence in the eyes of the public, government, and donors;
- the need for NGOs to pre-empt the often intrusive and inappropriate formal, quantitative performance evaluation favoured by donors, by developing quality ratings of their own;
- and the need to overcome the tendency for small NGOs to compete with each other, by seeking economies of scale through collectively provided services within the NGO sector.

Collective self-regulation could, the authors argue, enable NGOs to confront their critics, which might lead to increased funding.

Debate about the future direction of Southern NGOs is urgently needed, given the challenges that they face at the beginning of the new millennium. It is difficult to foster such debate, precisely because the events of the 1990s served to fragment and divide the sector so much. Signs are emerging, however, that such a debate is beginning. In Latin America, the region I know best, the ALOP/FICONG volume alluded to earlier illustrates the efforts being made to confront today's dilemmas, and to enable NGOs to decide their own futures through a more transparent dialogue with the North. Shrinking aid budgets have not affected all regions and NGOs in the same way. The problem in Latin America, with its long history of NGOs, has been the tendency of the aid community to see the region as relatively rich or 'middle-income'. Having achieved its initial goal, funding has been withdrawn from many organisations that were initially supported as a means of bringing about democratisation. In addition, given the region's rich history of social organising, donors' interest in broader 'civil society' rather than 'NGO' funding has forced NGOs to justify their existence to grassroots organisations as well as to donors.

The problems that Mariano Valderrama emphasises (in Valderrama and Coscio 1998) are less those of restoring donors' confidence than that of finding ways for NGOs to re-connect with their original social-change objectives, while also managing to retain access to a diminishing source of funds. The future of development NGOs, he argues, is not only influenced by globalisation and liberal reforms. The funding crisis has drawn attention to the external dependence of NGOs, and it has provoked great uncertainty, but the problem cannot be reduced simply to one of fewer resources. Donors have shifted their funding to specific and short-term projects based on erratic criteria relating to topics and geographical priorities, with much greater conditionality attached, and without covering institutional overheads. NGOs have been encouraged to look for local resources and self-financing from, for instance, philanthropic businesses. The case studies that Valderrama draws on showed that this alternative is very limited. Engagement in self-financing activities (which usually involve selling services and implementing projects for the state, local governments, and official aid agencies) 'brings financial dividends, [but] often distracts development NGOs from the mission that gave birth and sense to them' (*ibid.*: 420). Valderrama concludes:

Development NGOs today confront a problem of identity and coherence. How do they intervene in the market and extend and diversify sources of financing without losing sight of the objectives which are their *raison d'être*, and which are clearly related to democracy and human development? Evidently, in this field there are no magic formulae and simple recipes.

Valderrama fears that the rational response of most NGOs is to solve their short-term funding problems by undertaking activities that cause them to lose their focus and that give them a mercantilist character. Valderrama does not see a solution for NGOs in increasing their size in pursuit of economies of scale, although he gives no clear alternatives. Echoing to some extent the suggestion of Moore and Stewart, he argues for more synergy among Southern development NGOs, and greater coordination with Northern NGOs. Coordination could also help to build a more favourable local environment for the NGO sector, for example by influencing the media and public opinion.

These issues already confront, or soon will, Southern NGOs in many other parts of the world, as funding that is channelled through NGOs comes under greater scrutiny. But, as the Latin American case shows, the funding crisis is precipitating a more profound self-questioning among NGOs about the direction in which external funding has taken them. Is a continued claim to social and political protagonism justified, when such funding has often distanced them from grassroots movements and processes? Could a shift towards more horizontal communication among Southern NGOs help to overcome the bilateral and vertical character of the donor-NGO relationship, something which has fostered such fragmentation and competition among NGOs? What kind of reception would Valderrama's plea meet among the Northern NGOs, many of whom are also going through a process of upheaval in order to adjust their role to external changes?

Firoze Manji points in this volume to the reluctance of many Northern NGOs to change paternalistic patterns of engagement with Southern counterparts and build new alliances based on 'solidarity not charity'. At the beginning of the new millennium, however, Northern as well as Southern NGOs are facing tough questions about their future identity and survival. Southern NGOs, particularly the larger ones and those willing to scale up further, may now have gained some relative independence from Northern NGOs, but not from the official donors who have financed this expansion. Northern NGOs that have continued to act as conduits for

official aid⁸ have had to face dilemmas in trying to preserve their own agenda. The ability to raise funds from the public undoubtedly helps, as does the greater diversity of funding sources to which Northern NGOs have access. The heterogeneity of size, ethos, and influence of NGOs within the North is at least as great as in the South, and responses to the changing context are equally mixed. For instance, the Transnational Institute (TNI) suggests that some of the largest private foreign aid agencies are already transnational 'businesses' (Sogge *et al.* 1996).

In the vanguard of responses to change is undoubtedly Oxfam GB and the other members of Oxfam International. Their vision is to build a global network around a corporate Oxfam identity that can seriously challenge the hegemony in development policy of multilateral and bilateral institutions. However, the emphasis on decentralising the management of programmes to the South (but with constant vertical and horizontal communication among them), together with a shift away from the 'project' mentality that has dominated the world of development aid, has necessitated a costly organisational restructuring. For some, the shift will create a global institution, with trunk and branches in the North but roots in the South, through which will flow the evidence and information needed to shape and legitimise Oxfam's advocacy role on the international stage. For others, it is another hegemonising project which is in contrast to the strategy of broader alliance-building and co-operation, both vertical and horizontal, argued for by Michael Edwards, or the international solidarity model of Firoze Manji.

Another vision was articulated by Michael Taylor, the former Director of Christian Aid (Taylor 1997), who argued for a serious shift to internationalism by Northern NGOs, not just attempts to address international issues from Northern strongholds. Thus, no international NGO would have a core identity in a Northern country, but would be one part of an organisation, each of whose parts, wherever located (whether North or South), would build up a strong and competent capacity of its own and combine with the others to speak to the international organisation together. His model is the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign, with its national coalitions in Northern and Southern countries that meet together to agree a common international platform. And last, but by no means least, it is important to mention the conclusions of David Sogge and Kees Biekart, who believe that private aid agencies may well not have a future at all:

Must today's private aid agencies, like the poor who justify their existence, always be with us? And must they go on getting and

spending in the ways described, and questioned, in the preceding pages? ... The answer to both questions is: Not Necessarily. The agencies have no Manifest Destiny. Their righteous calling confers no special immunities and privileges, such as a 'right' to intervene. They are not captive to some immutable economic laws of motion, however much commerce grips them in its hammerlock. (Sogge et al. 1996: 198)

There are undoubtedly many other models and propositions. But at the core of this debate is not just relationships between NGOs of North and South, but whether or not the non-government organisation *as such* is still useful or relevant to an agenda for change in either part of the world. The emergence of the donors' broader agenda of 'civil-society strengthening' and democracy building in the course of the 1990s, for example, should provoke not only a concern for their own financial future among Northern and Southern NGOs, but also a serious debate on the implications of this agenda for grassroots movements and NGOs' own relationship with them. To what extent is the shift in emphasis towards advocacy, lobbying, and education, while enhancing disaster-relief and emergency capacity, a sufficient rationale for Northern NGOs to exist? Have Southern NGOs proved themselves more effective than states in the development process? And, if not, what kind of state, as well as what kind of NGOs, should we be thinking about?

NGOs and the state

Goodhand and Chamberlain offer a significant entry-point to a theme that recurs throughout this *Reader*. They discuss here a complex political emergency (something which has become only too common in parts of the South) where the state is chronically weak, and yet the means of waging war are sophisticated and available. In their case study of Afghanistan, NGOs — themselves mostly external creations and staffed by members of the country's very small educated elite — 'are occupying the space left by the collapse of the state, and so wield great influence in the absence of effective government institutions'. Goodhand and Chamberlain conclude that such NGOs are 'not a panacea for the intractable problems of development in Afghanistan', although they clearly have a role, given the erosion of state and civil-society structures in the country. However, there is a danger that, as NGOs try to negotiate spaces with the different strongmen who control these structures, they in fact end up severely compromised.

Complex political emergencies are extreme expressions of the wider issue of the role of NGOs in countries where the state is weak. Two case studies in this *Reader* focus on how NGOs can avoid further weakening the very idea of public goods and service delivery, to which many development NGOs remain committed. Christy Cannon discusses the complexities of this in Africa, where a functioning public sector has never existed. Her study of NGOs in the health sector in Uganda suggests that NGOs could attempt to enhance the capacity of government at the District level, where NGO leaders and government medical personnel can get to know each other better, and the latter can help to influence and lobby national government. Christopher Collier's case study from Zambia follows a similar theme, suggesting that NGOs should help poor people to make claims from government and not to expect less from it because NGOs are providing the goods and services. Such a role, however, requires the active participation of NGOs in decisions about public resources, not a simple service-delivery role that by-passes the state, as many donors have favoured.

In the above illustrations, the idea that national states have a role to play in the provision of public goods is not questioned: how to strengthen the state and make it sensitive to the needs of the poor is the critical issue. The nature of the debate on the relationship between states, markets, and civil society had evidently advanced qualitatively by the end of the 1990s, with the state making a come-back of some kind. This is illustrated particularly well in this volume by Alan Whaites. It is wrong, he suggests, to see development as nurturing a strong civil society, while ignoring the weakness of an ineffective state. He argues that redressing such imbalances should be the aim of development, on the understanding that an effective government structure is just as essential to development as a strong civil society. Weak states can become hostage to the most powerful groups in a society, creating a real obstacle to development. This links to the arguments presented earlier in this essay about the impact of neo-liberalism on the way in which the role of NGOs in development is conceptualised. International NGOs, argues Whaites, in effect contributed to the strengthening of civil societies at the expense of the state when they took advantage of the shrinkage of government services that was brought about by structural adjustment programmes.

Alan Whaites makes the important suggestion that the theoretical framework that development practitioners derive from liberal philosophers of civil society, such as de Tocqueville, cannot be applied unreflectively to situations in the contemporary South. Here, the problem

is weak rather than strong states, and the weakness of civil society has arguably been exaggerated.

There is some evidence to support this argument. But the issue is perhaps less the strength or weakness of the state than its capacity to develop the ability to distance itself from dominant groups. There is a long history of Marxist theorising on the capitalist state to this effect. It is perhaps time to recall the famous but long-forgotten debate of the 1970s between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas. Is the capitalist state the instrument of the particular ruling-class groups that occupy positions within its machine of government, or is the state able to look after the interests of capitalism because it is structurally set up to do so? In the latter scenario, the state has an ability to retain its distance from the direct influence of the ruling class. Adrian Leftwich's collection of essays on development and democracy concludes that, where this situation obtains, late capitalist development has been more effective (Leftwich 1995).⁹

In conclusion, it is not enough to reverse the paradigm that came to the fore in the early 1990s, so that from strengthening civil society we shift to strengthening the state or simply to building a greater equilibrium between the two. Another series of questions is needed if NGOs are to take up the challenge, outlined earlier, of re-appropriating their own agenda of social change in the face of donor imperatives and those of the economic liberalisation policies that have driven globalisation over the last two decades. Such questions include:

- In whose interests should the state act?
- What kind of relationship do we want to build between the state and 'civil society'?
- How does the operation of the market, and capitalism in general, affect our vision?
- And ultimately, what kind of world do we want to live in?

In other words, prior to, or at least alongside, the policy issues raised by Whaites lies a series of theoretical, normative, and political questions. The failure to address these questions in the name of the supremacy of practice and/or of technical determinism, I shall argue, lies behind the loss of direction and fragmentation of NGOs in the 1990s.

Theory, praxis, and NGOs

Many NGO workers are committed to the idea of making a practical contribution to building a better world. As such, they contrast their

action-oriented approach to that of academics who reflect, analyse, and criticise from their ivory tower. In the field of NGO studies, there has been a *rapprochement* between the two, and the pages of *Development in Practice* reflect this to some extent. However, the remaining essays in this *Reader* seek to go beyond this collaborative potential on policy and practice, and ask what might be the potential for collaboration in the realm of development theory, normative reflection, and politics.

A key argument of this introduction centres on the failure of NGOs to develop new tools for theoretical analysis and normative critique, following the collapse of different socialist models of development that had previously guided their actions. The result has been a problem-solving approach to development, defended on the grounds that too much abstract theoretical debate prevents practical achievements. Michael Edwards has argued:

The challenge for the future is not an intellectual one. More research is always needed, but we already know the principles of project success: engage with local realities, take your time, experiment and learn, reduce vulnerability and risk, and always work on social and material development together. The real issue is why so many agencies cut corners on these principles, and the answer to that question lies in ... the short-termism, control orientation and standardisation that have infected development work for a generation or more. In this world view, projects are a mechanism to deliver foreign aid, not short-term building blocks of long-term change. (Edwards 1999: 86)

Much of what is described here is familiar to anyone with recent experience of the NGO world, but I would argue that there *is* a serious intellectual challenge, and that sorting it out is as important as getting the praxis and attitudes right. It might not be an empirical research problem as such, but it is about where NGOs ultimately decide to locate themselves in the global system. This raises not abstract, theoretical questions but core issues, such as: *what and who is your work for?* Among other outcomes, the failure to ask such questions has led to the false, linguistic consensus of the 1990s and, to be somewhat harsh, to an intellectually lazy reliance on a handful of concepts and words as a substitute for thought.¹⁰ This has weakened and confused practice and, I would argue, contributed to the present crisis of legitimacy within the NGO sector. Several articles in this collection, as well as my own experiences from Latin America, lead me to such a conclusion.

Two articles appeared in 1996, and are reproduced here, which made

a valiant attempt to call NGO attention to the practical implications of different ways of using concepts. Sarah White makes a fundamental point about the concept of 'participation'. The word must be seen as political because it has no *intrinsic* connection with a radical project, since it can just as easily entrench and reproduce existing power relations. We can invest meanings in such concepts through learning from praxis and being guided by theoretical clarity and ethical principles. But if we treat them as unproblematic, neutral, or technical terms, they can become words whose meaning is defined by whoever chooses to do so, and for whatever purpose. The concepts are then depoliticised and in effect rendered useless for shaping praxis. White demonstrates this by deconstructing some different ways in which participation as a concept can be used, and how that influences processes on the ground in Zambia and the Philippines. She suggests that there are always questions to be asked when 'participation' is invoked, 'about who is involved, how, and on whose terms'; and the interests of those represented in the concept must be analysed. Finally, she underlines that if participation is to mean anything, it will challenge existing power relations and it will bring about conflict: 'the absence of conflict in many supposedly "participatory" programmes is something that should raise our suspicions'.

The second article is on the concept of civil society and development, a 'conceptual marriage' that, with my colleague Jude Howell, I have spent some time exploring (Howell and Pearce, forthcoming). Alan Whites seeks to show how lack of conceptual clarity confuses practice. In particular, he focuses on two visions of 'civil society'. On the one hand, there is the liberal, Tocquevillean approach which contrasts civil and traditional society, identifying the former with groups who have detached themselves from primordial loyalties of blood and kin and cut across such boundaries to form coalitions around small issues. On the other hand is the view of Jean-François Bayart, which has a more universal vision of civil society (more appropriate, Bayart would argue, to the African context), and which includes primordial associations.¹¹ Whites calls for greater attention to be paid to the way in which civil associations emerge out of community groups along lines that de Tocqueville articulated. He is implicitly cautious of the notion of reinforcing primordial attachments in the name of civil society. This contributes to what ought to be a major debate among development practitioners in terms of choosing whom to work with in the South, and why. But, without the intellectual work on the concept of 'civil society', the debate is effectively avoided. I would add that there is another view

of ‘civil society’ (particularly critical in countries with traditions of left-wing organisations and mobilisation) which appropriates the term to help describe the Gramscian, counter-hegemonic struggles against the market as well as the state. This challenges NGOs to select who they are going to support according to certain criteria, something that requires serious conceptual and strategic discussion.

There is no ‘correct’ view of civil society, but there is an essential point to make about the way the concept is used. The use of the term as a normative concept (i.e. what we would *like* civil society to be, or what we think it *ought* to be) is often confused with an empirical description (i.e. what it *is*) (Pearce 1997). The constant slippage between the two in the development literature and in the practice of multilateral agencies, governments, and NGOs has contributed to a technical and depoliticising approach to the strengthening of civil society which has had political implications. It has, for instance, mostly privileged the vision of Western donor agencies and turned ‘civil society’ into a project rather than a process.¹² In other words, by assuming that there is no debate around what we would like ‘civil society’ to be, and assuming that it is an unproblematic and empirically observable given, whose purpose is unquestionably to build democracy and foster development, the vision of powerful and well-resourced donors predominates. Failure to clarify their own position means that many NGOs end up simply implementing that vision on the donors’ behalf. If doing so coincides with their own objectives, there is no problem — but if it is an unintended outcome of lack of reflection, there is indeed a problem.

Two articles published in *Development in Practice* at the turn of the millennium draw our attention to other aspects of the discussion about theory, praxis, and NGOs. Lilly Nicholls discusses the conceptual weaknesses of efforts to generate new, more human-centred ideas of development. The critical question she raises is whether the ideas of Sustainable Human Development (SHD) and People-Centred Development (PCD) are sharp enough to inform praxis:

SHD/PCD ideas may be appealing, but the key question is whether the paradigm is conceptually sound and can be implemented in the world’s poorest countries (Uganda, in this case) where it is most needed. And if so, whether multilateral agencies such as UNDP, and indeed much smaller and less bureaucratic international NGOs such as ActionAid are capable of translating its more ambitious components into practice.

Nicholls' conclusion is very negative. SHD/PCD ideas are based on such complex and abstract principles that the gap between the theory and a realistic development strategy and action plan cannot be overcome. In addition, the ideological ambiguity and internal contradictions of the ideas themselves limit their translation into an effective development strategy. The argument that theory matters to practice centres on the need for conceptual tools that guide the implementation of policy, not for abstract principles that sound good but have no relation to action.

Finally, and to show that out of *Development in Practice* comes more than just critique, is the paper by Amina Mama. She demonstrates that doing research that builds theory and knowledge not from abstract principles but from the 'ground' up may be a more fruitful way forward than the attempt to take such principles to the 'ground' and merely apply them. Mama's research team (composed of African women researchers in the ABANTU for Development network, working under the difficult conditions of military rule in Nigeria) investigated how a gender perspective could be incorporated into a regional programme to strengthen civil society. The researchers used a participatory method, starting from local, actually existing, understandings of 'policy' within NGO communities. The research 'uncovered levels of gender activism that might not have been discernible' without the participatory method, and insights into 'locally diverse relationships between state and civil society', opening up possibilities for praxis that might not have been possible otherwise.

In conclusion, this section makes a plea for NGOs to reconsider the way they view the relationship between theory and praxis. In the first place, it calls for recognition that theory underpins everyone's understanding of the social and political world; it is not extraneous to it, and we are all part of its construction and potential deconstruction.¹³ Theory, and the policies which derive from it, have political effects and implications that should not be ignored. The more explicit the theoretical assumptions that inform our understanding, the more responsible we are in our commitment to the people whose lives we claim to improve. The problem-solving approach to development, on the other hand, leads to a technocratic, solution/output focus (as opposed to a learning/process focus) that views people as clients, beneficiaries, and recipients rather than as active participants in agendas for change.

These issues echo debates taking place within my own area of Peace Studies which, like development, is fundamentally concerned with an agenda for change. Two colleagues have argued against the danger of

producing ‘technically exploitable knowledge’ rather than knowledge to enhance capacity for ‘enlightened action’ (Featherstone and Parkin in Broadhead 1997). The construction of the latter kind of knowledge is the responsibility of practitioners as well as theorists. Among other potential tools, those of critical social theory provide some important starting points. These have begun to inform peace researchers and are, I would argue, of relevance also to the field of development. They ask us to recognise, for instance, that knowledge is historically constructed and that we are agents in, not outsiders to, that process. It suggests we must ask what, and whom, the knowledge is for, and how can we develop a practical and theoretical knowledge that is transformative and non-exploitative. It assumes that nothing is immutable, given that everything has been constructed by someone and for some purpose: it only asks us to clarify the purpose for which we would reconstruct what presently exists.

The debate ... and its future

This introduction has identified four critical areas for reflection and debate that have come out of papers published in *Development in Practice* over almost a decade, as well as from other sources.

- 1 Neo-liberalism and globalisation driven by the values of neo-liberalism have seriously harmed the anti-poverty and anti-exploitation struggle in the world today. The benefits to the few have not compensated for the increased poverty, inequality, and uncertainty which very many have experienced. The idea of NGOs as value-driven facilitators of change has been adversely affected by the decision of many to implement the welfare, social-net programmes of institutions that are committed to economic liberalisation and concerned to reduce its social cost. At the same time, fragmentation and competition has grown among NGOs and encouraged further division within a historically heterogeneous community. The millennium begins with the challenge to NGOs to reflect critically on this reality. As the more ideological form of neo-liberalism which dominated the 1980s and early 1990s is replaced by concerns to build a more regulated global capitalism, NGOs must decide where they want to stand in relationship to it. Otherwise, they will drift into implementing the donor-defined agendas of the new age, as many of them did in the past decade or more.
- 2 The roles of Southern and Northern NGOs, and their relationship to each other, are having to evolve in response to the new world order and

policy agenda of the 1990s and beyond. This has been widely recognised, and different models are gradually emerging. But, if the differences are to be respected while co-operation rather than competition is fostered, a more open and transparent debate and self-reflection needs to take place among NGOs of the South as well as between them and NGOs in the North. It is likely that NGOs, like the relatively privileged social groups who mostly staff them, will be polarised around the social and political tensions of the broader world. Some may choose to institutionalise themselves as service-deliverers, others to engage in the growing number of spaces for dialogue on global governance issues. Others may accept that they are ultimately facilitators, not agents, of social change (Pearce 1993), and re-connect with grassroots activists. This does not render irrelevant the search for common ground in order to build more effective alliances. But it should be recognised that the survival of the very idea of 'NGO' and the NGO sector, at least in its present form, can no longer be assumed.

- 3 NGOs cannot and should not replace the state in promoting 'development'. There have been many discussions on what should be the relationship between the two, and how NGOs can make the state more accountable and sensitive to the needs of the poor. There has been less debate on what the role of the state is, and what we would like it to be. Is it worth fighting for in some form, given the apparent anti-state logic of capitalist globalisation? Or should local and regional sites be the new focus of attention, as the World Bank's 1999/2000 Report suggests? Greater care in how the concept of 'civil society' is used is important if it is to be given a role in rethinking the state. Used as an empirical description of voluntary associations and social groups, it necessarily reflects the social differences embedded in any society. These may not 'determine' the character of the state, but they do shape it in critical ways. They are in turn shaped by the dynamics of the market, as well as power relationships of all kinds. As such, 'civil society', used in this empirical sense, can also have an impact on re-shaping the state; and therein lies room for action and change. This is contingent on the particular objectives each group might have, and is by no means inevitably progressive.
- 4 In order to clarify what action and change they want to bring about, NGOs, as one set of associations within an empirical 'civil society', need to develop their theoretical, normative, and political critique of the global order and the discourses of 'development' that have hitherto

dominated the post-war epoch. They should not assume that practice is sufficient, and that people who try to conceptualise processes are necessarily diverting energy from the 'real' problems. Not only is practice always a reflection of implicit theoretical assumptions, it can rarely be 'improved' by technical solutions alone, which themselves mask political and normative choices. For NGOs, this should be one major lesson of the last decade or more. The purpose of greater clarity around their critique should be to improve practice and promote debate, and to seek common ground with others engaged in the same enterprise.

I will conclude by reflecting a little more on the impact of current shifts in thinking about the global order on the choices open to NGOs at the beginning of the new millennium, and the potential impact on their future. The paradigmatic shift towards building new forms of global governance and a role for 'civil society', however understood, has been established. There is now a more explicit acknowledgement that some form of regulation in the global economy is necessary. Today, the World Bank puts out a message of co-operation: another clear step away from the ideological neo-liberalism of the 1980s. Its 1997 Report accepted that the state and civil society, as well as the market, have a role in its tripartite model for country-based development. And now the Bank argues:

The message of this report is that new institutional responses are needed in a globalising and localising world. Globalisation requires national governments to seek agreements with partners — other national governments, international organisations, non-government organisations (NGOs) and multinational corporations — through supranational institutions. (World Bank 2000: 3)

As spaces for global co-operation and participation 'from above' proliferate, NGOs face a new set of choices, a situation which makes the plea for debate and clarification of the foundations of their critique more urgent. The benefits of co-operation and resistance to co-optation depend on first knowing why, and for whom, you choose to engage in dialogues in supranational spaces dominated by more powerful institutions and corporations. We must also understand the limits of dialogue. Willingness to struggle for what you believe to be right must surely remain a tool of the powerless and their allies, part of their necessarily diverse 'repertoire of contention' (Tarrow 1998: 20). Clarity on what you believe to be right, and why, is essential.

NGOs are not political parties, nor are they grassroots social movements. Their identity crisis lies in the fact that they are in between,

and they have won a part in the drama to some extent because of the crisis in the former and the often temporary, unstable nature of the latter. In the development field, the neo-liberal antagonism towards the state also played a key role, of course. If NGOs are institutionally reified outside this context as part, for instance, of an emerging 'Third Sector',¹⁴ we can easily forget that they are merely organisational spaces which reflect the *choices* open to the better-educated and socially aware 'middle' social sectors of North and South, i.e. those with relative privileges *vis à vis* the rest of their societies in class, ethnic, and/or gender terms.

For development NGOs (i.e. those concerned with global poverty and exploitation), the choices for how to engage with or challenge global capitalism at the beginning of the new millennium are becoming clearer. There is the option of continuing to work within the evolving neo-liberal approach to globalisation, administering welfare to those whom market forces cannot reach. Alternatively, globalisation can be recognised as an inevitable process, but NGOs can take advantage of new supranational spaces to argue for new forms of regulation in markets and international regimes in favour of the poor. Multinational corporations are also opening up spaces for dialogue with their NGO critics around the theme of corporate ethics. Or NGOs can actively side with the anti-globalisation movements, in all their diversity, as they emerged in Seattle during the 1999 World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations. As Seattle showed, anti-globalisation may or may not mean anti-capitalism, but it does mean anti-neo-liberalism, even in its moderated form. On the other hand, NGOs can take the financial consequences of an option which prioritises grassroots support work, building on the Gramscian idea, for example, of the 'organic intellectual'. This would reflect an understanding that global change depends on how the relative and absolute poor, the millions of the world's working and workless population with no material stake in the perpetuation of the existing order, choose to act.

These do not exhaust all the options for NGOs, nor are these options all mutually exclusive. There is room for plural choices of action and tactical alliances. But what *is* dangerous is to enter any of these without clarity of purpose, and without thinking through the implications from the perspective of a theoretical, normative, and political critique of the existing global order.

The events in Seattle await a full evaluation, but they are highly significant in relation to the subject of this *Reader*. All NGOs, including development NGOs, won unprecedented acknowledgement of their power and influence in the wake of those events. *The Economist* (1999)

nervously asked: 'Will NGOs democratise, or merely disrupt, global governance?'. *The Economist* tends to lump all critical groups into one basket, and thus claimed 'the battle of Seattle is only the latest and most visible in a string of recent NGO victories'. The reality is very different, of course. Seattle actually reflected the differences that exist among lobbyists, organised labour, campaigners, and protesters worldwide, of which the NGO is only one variant. One observer noted, 'even in the run-up to WTO week in Seattle, the genteel element — foundation careerists, NGO bureaucrats, policy wonks [sic] — were all raising cautionary fingers, saying that the one thing to be feared in Seattle this week was active protest' (St Clair 1999: 88). There will be many debates, as there should be, about whether it was direct action, dignified restraint, or the arrogance, ignorance, and bad planning of Northern governments (particularly the US) that made the difference in Seattle. Whatever the conclusion, it cannot be denied that creative street-protest played its role. The real question is how the momentum will be maintained, as corporate capital and governments prepare a new trade agreement. This is precisely the kind of situation that forces development NGOs, for whom any such agreement is a major issue, to clarify where they stand, as well as to recognise the limitations of their role, and show humility with respect to the many other forms of social and collective action.

Given the diverse and in many respects contradictory set of possibilities, we ought perhaps to abandon the search for *the* role of NGOs in development, or *the* role of 'civil society', and even such a thing as an uncontested goal of 'development'. We could concentrate much more on discussing the choices for action and the principles and implicit theoretical assumptions that guide them. We could learn from practice, discussion, and critical thought, rather than referring to ideology or check-lists. This would allow us to assess the real impact of external interventions in situations of poverty and exploitation, and help us to decide where and how to act in the global order. Making assumptions explicit is one way of identifying differences, clarifying choices, and ultimately fostering debate and co-operation among people who are committed in some way to building a better world.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Janet Bujra, Donna Pankhurst, and Deborah Eade for reading and commenting on this paper.

Notes

1 If the poverty line is put at US\$2 a day, for instance, the figure of those below it is 2.8 billion, almost 50 per cent of the world's six billion people. I am grateful to my colleague, Janet Bujra, for reminding me that the emphasis on global poverty *per se* can conceal the social relationships of exploitation which remain critical to any understanding of poverty and impoverishment.

2 There is an important debate in the field of discourse ethics on this very point, from which Edwards' interest in a dialogic form of engagement derives. The Mexico-based philosopher, Enrique Dussel (1998), for example, challenges the propositions of Jurgen Habermas, with their origins in the 'North'. He argues that the discourse principle must first be realised in the 'community of victims', the majority of whom are in the 'South', as part of the process of recovering the right/ability to speak. I am grateful to Ute Buehler for drawing my attention to this literature.

3 For instance, preliminary findings of the Operations Evaluation Department (OED) of the World Bank on the contribution of NGOs to development effectiveness in Bank-supported projects found that 'NGO partnerships do not always lead to successful outcomes. While NGOs in all their various forms are numerous, the number with proven development capabilities and a willingness to work closely with governments on a meaningful scale — essential in most Bank-supported projects — remains small. This and other factors has led to skepticism among some borrowers and Bank staff about the role of NGOs in Bank operations. For some borrowers, NGOs are viewed more as

critics than as potential partners. For some Bank staff, NGOs are seen as adding demands on their time without corresponding benefits' (World Bank NGO Unit Social Development 1998: 13).

4 ALOP is the Latin American Association of Promotion Organisations (Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción). FICONG is the Institutional Strengthening and Training Programme for NGOs in Latin America and the Caribbean (Programa de Fortalecimiento Institucional y Capacitación de ONGs de América Latina y el Caribe).

5 International NGOs, many of whom received money from their governments, increasingly adopted the language of efficiency and competence in order to earn their funds, and then demanded it of their partners in the South. See Tina Wallace (1997) on the impact of the 'log-frame'.

6 In the article reprinted in this *Reader*, Edwards and Hulme had observed even in 1992 that 'while NGOs have succeeded in influencing official donors and governments on individual projects and even on some programme themes (such as environment in the case of the World Bank), they have failed to bring about more fundamental changes in attitudes and ideology, on which real progress ultimately depends'.

7 There has been a 20 per cent drop in real terms in Official Development Assistance flows from the OECD Development Assistance Committee countries, from US\$60.8 billion in 1992 to US\$48.3 billion in 1997. The average proportion of GNP given to overseas aid declined to 0.22 per cent in 1997, less than one-third of the 0.7 per cent target (Rasheed 1999: 25).

8 Edwards, Hulme, and Wallace (1999: 8) suggest that this is because donors still value reliable delivery and financial mechanisms of accountability, for which Northern NGOs are considered to be a safer option than Southern counterparts. In addition, few Southern NGOs have the capacity to deliver large-scale humanitarian relief.

9 This conclusion certainly came out of my own contribution to that volume ('Democracy and development in a divided country: the case of Chile'), which attempted to explain the relationship between the changing nature of the state in Chile, the Pinochet dictatorship, and the 'success' of the macro-economic model of the 1980s and 1990s. The variable of the state and its relative distance from powerful socio-economic interests was a more critical issue than democracy or dictatorship *per se*.

10 To be fair, Marxism often served in the past to provide a common 'language' through which to avoid critical thinking and debate.

11 This debate is replicated in much of the literature. Gellner (1994) articulates the liberal view, while an anthropological critique is found in Hann and Dunn (1996). Wachira Maina raises the policy implications for this distinction in his case study chapter, 'Kenya: the state, donors and the politics of democratisation', in Van Rooy (1999: 134–167); and Mahmood Mamdani (1996) makes it a very central theme.

12 This is the topic of Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce, 'Civil society: technical solution or agent of social change?', forthcoming in a volume of papers delivered at the 1999 Birmingham conference, edited by Michael Edwards, David Hulme, and Tina Wallace.

13 These reflections derive from an unpublished paper that I presented with Sarah Perrigo to the Political Studies Association conference in Nottingham, March 1999, entitled 'From the Margins to the Cutting Edge: challenges facing peace studies in the next millennium'. I am grateful to Sarah for her contribution to our discussion on political theory and peace studies which informs these reflections.

14 An important contemporary discussion not addressed in this Introduction concerns those who see NGOs as part of a voluntary and non-profit sector of increasing political and economic significance. Lester Salamon (1997) and others associated with the journal *Voluntas*, and the Center for Civil Society Studies at Johns Hopkins University, are putting forward a particular construction of the role of non-state organisations that is gaining considerable influence in the academic and policy world.

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