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NGOs, civil society and
democratization: a critical review
of the literature

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Abstract: One of the most striking features of the anglophone literature on NGOs is the diversity
of NGO sectors and their contributions to civil society and democracy; yet, exploration of this
complexity is often eschewed in favour of a normative approach in which the apparently
mutually enhancing relationship between NGOs, civil society and the state is underpinned by
liberal democratic assumption rather than an engagement with wider debates about the politics
of development. Following a critique of this approach to NGOs, civil society and democracy, the
paper argues that the role of NGOs in the politics of development is far more complex than much
of the NGO literature would suggest, and calls for a more contextualized and less value-laden
approach to the understanding of the political role of NGOs.

Key words: civil society, democratization, development, neoliberalism, NGOs, state.

1 NGOs and the political turn

The literature on NGOs has proliferated over the last 15 years, and with it the range of
debates in which NGOs are implicated. While early publications in the 1980s grappled
with such issues as NGOs’ efficiency, impact and scale, a new set of debates has gained
prominence in the literature on NGOs since the early 1990s. Taken together, these
represent a concern with the political dimensions of NGO activity. The new
watchwords in international development discourses with which NGOs have become
inextricably bound up are now civil society, democracy, good governance and social
capital, all of which derive from western historical experience, and all of which are
employed as if their meaning were universal and unequivocal (Tvedt, 1998).

One of the first commentators to suggest that the contribution of NGOs to
development might be important for political rather than economic reasons was
Michael Bratton (1989), who argued that NGOs are significant bolsterers of civil society by virtue of their participatory and democratic approach. Since then, a wealth of literature has emerged from the academic, donor and NGO communities alike that has indicated the increasing interest in, and (material) support for, the role of NGOs in promoting democratic development. Of particular concern is the widespread embracing of NGOs as democratic actors that is discernible in much of this literature. This appears to owe more to ideological persuasion and assumption than to an engagement with wider debates about the politics of development. Relatively few critical analyses of the role of NGOs in democratization have been undertaken within the theoretical literature to date. Clarke (1998a), in one of the few studies that examines the role of NGOs in the politics of development across the developing world, opines that the failure to theorize the political impact of NGOs has lead to an overly ‘inadequate, explicitly normative interpretation of NGO ideology’ (1998a: 40). It is this failure that has encouraged the tendency to take NGOs’ positive role in democratization as axiomatic. This is a significant issue to raise not least because of the key role NGOs now play in donor-, government- and even World Bank-funded development projects and programmes as key agents of democratization.

This paper reviews the anglophone academic literature on NGOs, civil society and democratization in order to highlight a number of tendencies, assumptions and biases that have conspired to produce this dominant normative consensus on the political role of NGOs. It is accepted that not all writers on NGOs reproduce all such assumptions; the point is to draw out and comment upon the most common tendencies within the literature as a whole, in an attempt to move the debates forward. Studies that deal with NGOs in development, but that do not explicitly make an argument for their political role in civil society or democratization, are therefore not included here. Similarly, the broader literature on civil society and democracy that does not deal with the role of NGOs directly, is not considered in detail. The term ‘NGO’ is understood here to refer to those organizations that are officially established, run by employed staff (often urban professionals or expatriates), well-supported (by domestic or, as is more often the case, international funding), and that are often relatively large and well-resourced. NGOs may therefore be international organizations or they may be national or regional NGOs. They are seen as different from Grassroots Organizations (GROs) that are usually understood to be smaller, often membership-based organizations, operating without a paid staff but often reliant upon donor or NGO support, which tend to be (but are not always) issue-based and therefore ephemeral. The distinction between NGOs and GROs is a significant one, not only in organizational terms but, as this paper will draw out, in the differing ways they act in, and are affected by, the politics of development. In presenting a critical review of the NGO literature, the paper will address three major concerns. First, the paper identifies the ideological basis upon which much of the literature founds its understanding of democracy, civil society and the role of NGOs in boosting them, as a liberal democratic one. The paper then explores a number of liberal democratic assumptions about NGOs and outlines reasons why they are problematic. The third section follows some of the central debates in the the empirical literature. It is argued that, given the current climate of economic and political neoliberalism within which NGOs are necessarily embedded, their role in democratization is far more complex than the liberal democratic model would suggest. A selection of the empirical evidence is reviewed here in more detail in order to highlight how different commen-
tators interpret the impact of NGOs on state and society. While some suggest NGOs can strengthen state and civil society, others argue that strengthening NGOs actually undermines democratic development. In conclusion the paper calls for the need for greater contextualization of the role of NGOs in the politics of development.

II NGOs, civil society and democratization: the dominant liberal view

The relationship between NGOs, civil society and democratization is often assumed to be as follows: that while NGOs are part of civil society, they also strengthen it through their activities, which in turn supports the democratic process. Such a line of reasoning is informed by a particular vision of ‘democracy’, ‘civil society’ and the role that NGOs play in bolstering them. This vision is an unmistakably liberal one. Taking their cue from writers such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Samuel Huntington, Robert Putnam and others from the modernization and political development schools of thought on democracy, the NGO literature reproduces the liberal maxim that democracy within capitalist society requires a vibrant and autonomous civil society and an effective state capable of balancing the demands of different interest groups. ‘Democracy’ here, is of course understood to be liberal democracy, as if the ‘end of history’ has indeed arrived and there are ‘no other games in town’ (Baker, 1997), while ‘civil society’ is conceived ‘as the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules’ (Diamond, 1994: 5). According to liberal democratic theory, the state should provide accountable government that is subject to free and fair elections, while civil society should be able to enjoy civil and political rights and associational autonomy. A strong and plural civil society is therefore necessary to guard against the excesses of state power, but also to legitimate the authority of the state when it is based on the rule of law (Diamond, 1994). By channelling and processing the demands and concerns of disparate interest groups to the state, civil society underpins an effective and streamlined state, ensuring legitimacy, accountability and transparency: effectively, strengthening the state’s capacity for good governance. Liberal democratic theory thus sees a strong state and a strong civil society as separate from, yet essential complements to, one another. In this vision, civil society exists only in its relationship to the state: it is not envisaged as a potentially democratic sphere in its own right through which alternative visions of democracy might be pursued (Baker, 1997).

There are different schools of thought among political analysts trying to understand the mechanisms by which democratic transitions take place and then take root (Luckham and White, 1996). Civil society is thought to play different roles at different stages of the democratization process. Most political analysts distinguish between democratic transition and democratic consolidation (Diamond, 1994; Diamond et al., 1995, 1997). In democratic transitions, civil society is thought to play a major role in mobilizing pressure for political change. Organized social groups such as students, women’s groups, farmers organizations, NGOs, GROs, trade unions, religious groups, professional organizations, the media, think tanks and human rights organizations are ‘a crucial source of democratic change’ (Diamond, 1994: 5), whether this takes place quickly and dramatically as in the assertion of ‘people power’ in the Philippines in 1986, or whether transition is a lengthy, negotiated process, as in South Africa in the...
NGOs, civil society and democratization

early 1990s. Civil society is also considered to play a key role in the consolidation of democracy, in checking abuses of state power, preventing the resumption of power by authoritarian governments and encouraging wider citizen participation and public scrutiny of the state. Such actions enhance state legitimacy; ‘a vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than for initiating it’ (Diamond, 1994: 7). However, it is important to recognize that, according to the liberal worldview, civil society can also have a detrimental impact on democratic consolidation. Where civil society is considered to be weak, underdeveloped or fragmented, or where there is severe socio-economic strain, corruption, an ineffective legal system, a tendency towards civil disruption and conflict and a lack of ‘democratic culture’, democratic consolidation is thought to be threatened. Ethnic or regional differences, particularly when accompanied by socio-economic inequalities, are often considered to be a potential problem for the consolidation of democracy (Diamond et al., 1995, 1997).

1 The role of NGOs in strengthening (liberal) democracy

Three central arguments are made in favour of NGOs’ role in strengthening civil society and democratic development within the literature on NGOs and democratization. First and foremost, by virtue of their existence as autonomous actors, NGOs are said to pluralize (and therefore to strengthen) the institutional arena. More civic actors means more opportunities for a wider range of interest groups to have a ‘voice’, more autonomous organizations to act in a ‘watchdog’ role vis-à-vis the state, and more opportunities for networking and creating alliances of civic actors to place pressure on the state. For example, Garrison argues that Brazilian NGOs have become the most important interlocutors in civil society, having ‘mushroomed’ since the re-installation of democracy, a point also made by one of Brazil’s leading NGO activist-intellectuals, Herbert ‘Betinho’ de Souza, who declared NGOs to be ‘microorganisms of the democratic process’ (1992, in Garrison, 2000: 10). In southeast Asia, Clarke (1998b) argues that the rapid growth and important political roles played by NGOs has amounted to an ‘associational revolution’ in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Remarking on the phenomenal growth and particularly prominent political role of NGOs in the Philippines, Silliman and Noble suggest that ‘NGOs . . . enhance democracy by expanding the number and range of voices addressing government’ (Silliman and Noble, 1998: 306).

Secondly, NGOs are said to work with grassroots organizations that are often comprised of poor and marginalized groups. In this respect they both widen (in social and geographical terms) and deepen (in terms of personal and organizational capacity) possibilities for citizen participation. At the same time, NGOs represent the interests of marginalized groups within the wider public arena, campaign on their behalf and seek to influence public policy. For example, several commentators have pointed to successful NGO efforts to support indigenous peoples’ and environmental movements across Latin America and Asia (Clark, 1991; Bebbington et al., 1993; Fisher, 1998). Fisher in particular argues that this type of ‘bottom-up democracy’ has been so successful in many instances that it might eventually lead to ‘top-down political change’ (1998: 126). In Kenya, the grassroots mobilizing work of the Undugu Society in a Nairobi slum has
been cited by several authors as being important in empowering the local community organizations that it supports to engage with the local state in order to pursue their interests (Fowler, 1993; Ndegwa, 1996; Fisher, 1998).

Thirdly, NGOs are said to check state power by challenging its autonomy at both national and local scales, pressing for change and developing an alternative set of perspectives and policies. A recurring theme in the literature is the important role played by the NGO sector in democratic transitions and democratic consolidation in a number of countries, particularly across Latin America, and specifically in Chile and Brazil. In Chile, NGOs played a vital role in opposing the Pinochet regime throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, and, while their role has undergone some degree of change since the early 1990s (Bebbington, 1997; Lambrou, 1997), several authors have nevertheless heralded them as among the key political actors before, during and after the democratic transition (Hojman, 1993; Diamond et al., 1995; Lambrou, 1997; Clarke, 1998a, b; Fisher, 1998). Similarly, in Brazil, commentators have suggested that from the late 1970s Brazilian NGOs were ‘important players in the groundswell of civil society forces pressing for political amnesty and opening’ (Garrison, 2000: 10; also Landim, 1993; Fisher, 1998). In the context of southeast Asia, Clarke (1998b) argues that in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, NGOs have contributed to the fight for and transition to democracy, and have remained a significant political force since. In India and the Philippines NGOs are considered to have emerged to fill the institutional vacuum caused by the weakness of political parties and trade unions (Clarke, 1998a). Similarly in Thailand the growth of NGOs and the weakness of the party political system during the 1980s encouraged NGOs to take on a key role in organizing the opposition movement against General Suchinda, which ultimately led to his downfall in May 1992 (Clarke, 1998b). In Indonesia, the fall of Presidents Suharto and Habibie’s GOLKAR (which dominated Indonesian politics from the 1970s) at the June 1999 general elections could also be read as a victory, not only for Megawati Sukarnoputri’s opposition party but also for those leading Indonesian NGOs that had aligned themselves with the opposition in the fight for democratization (Clarke, 1998b).

It is not the aim of this paper to suggest that all commentators on NGOs reproduce the above arguments in their entirety. Nevertheless, the adherence to many liberal democratic assumptions and ideals within much of the anglophone literature on NGOs is striking. Most common is the allegiance to the normative ideal that civil society and NGOs are inherently ‘good things’; microcosms of the (liberal) democratic process, comprised of the grassroots, both separate and autonomous from the state, while acting as a ‘bulwark’ against it (see for example, Korten, 1990; John Clark, 1991, 1995; Hojman, 1993; Diamond, 1994; Sandberg, 1994; Webster, 1995; Hadenius and Uggla, 1996; Fisher, 1998; Gyimah-Boadi, 1999; Jeffrey Clark, 2000; Garrison, 2000; World Bank, 2000). To take an example from the World Bank, which has increasingly recognized that ‘NGOs and civic movements are on the rise, assuming an ever-larger role in articulating people’s aspirations and pressuring governments to respond’ (2000: 43), it is suggested that increased pressure from civil society will serve to reduce the scope for autonomous government action and encourage wider monitoring of the state, thus preventing ‘the worst excesses of authoritarian systems’ (2000: 44). An active civil society that encourages greater participation across all sectors of society will also aid decentralization, particularly in those countries with ‘marked ethnic divisions and deeply rooted local identities’ (World Bank, 2000), encouraging development to be carried forward by
NGOs, civil society and democratization

As we shall see below, such a position is problematic not simply for its ideological underpinnings, but more importantly because the complex realities of NGOs and their relationships to their wider social, economic, political and cultural contexts make it very difficult to generalize about the political role of NGOs. Before we explore these complexities, the following section highlights three ideological assumptions that make such a position possible; the conflation of NGOs with civil society, the normative rhetoric associated with NGOs and democratization and the lingering influence of modernization theories.

III NGOs: civilizing society and democratizing development?

In the first instance, it is often argued that NGOs aid democratization because they pluralize the institutional arena, expand and strengthen civil society, and bring more democratic actors into the political sphere. However, it is too simplistic to suggest that the mere existence of an NGO sector will lead to these outcomes. Such a position often rests on the conflation of NGOs with civil society itself (and vice versa), so that sheer numbers of NGOs are taken as indicators of the existence or otherwise of a civil society in a given place. To take a typical example, Fisher (1998), in her account of the promotion of civil society by NGOs in the developing world, suggests that NGOs strengthen civil society simply by increasing the number of intermediary organizations between citizen and state, and that furthermore, the sheer number of NGOs indicates the strength of civil society. Such a position is not unusual (see Fukuyama, 2001), and is problematic for several reasons. First, it must be acknowledged that part of the reason why NGOs should have become the embodiment of civil society in developing countries in the last two decades of the twentieth century has as much to do with the dovetailing of the timing of their growth with changing development discourses as with any inherently democratizing characteristic of NGOs. Secondly, the conflation of NGOs with civil society can be problematic from a definitional perspective: the range of organizations that qualify as NGOs differs between author, organization and locality, thus rendering ‘civil society’ itself conceptually vague. Thirdly, it credits NGOs as being in possession of certain popularly held characteristics of civil society that may be largely unwarranted, such as the role of ‘watchdog’ vis-à-vis the state, or in representing and acting for the interests of the poor and disenfranchised. Such attributes cannot be taken as axiomatic. At the same time, the conflation of NGOs with civil society speaks straight to donors: fund NGOs, and you are building civil society. However, Fisher is quick to point out that ‘there is nothing foreordained’ (1998: 17) about the relationship between NGOs and civil society. Citing the activities of Islamic extremists in Sudan in the late 1980s, she suggests that autonomous organizations can also destroy civil society as much as they may be able to build it. There is then the implication that it is possible to distinguish a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ type of NGO, and that only the former should be considered desirable in the pursuit of civil society. That civil society itself might be conceptualized as a sphere of competing interests (whether these be political, cultural, social or economic) is not considered, it is only a ‘good’.

This brings me to my second point: that much work on NGOs weaves a normative narrative, imagining future scenarios for the potential contribution of NGOs to
democratic development given more favourable conditions (or donor funding), which usually involves decrying the forces of neoliberalism that have pushed NGOs towards becoming public service contractors (particularly common within the literature on Latin America). The normative ideal that is imagined for the contribution of NGOs to democratic development is overwhelmingly a liberal democratic one. That civil society might be conceptualized as a more problematic sphere of competing interests across both state and society, that it is not an inherently democratic space separate from the state and that the liberal interpretation stems from historical western experience, are largely neglected matters. That said, it is important to acknowledge the increasing body of literature (to which we return below) that conceptualizes civil society and NGOs within the tradition of Hegel, Marx and Gramsci, and that argues that the democratic role of NGOs is circumscribed by wider social, economic and political cleavages. While this is to be welcomed, there is no simple division between those writers who adhere to a Tocquevillian perspective (civil society is a ‘good’ and therefore all NGOs are ‘good things’) and those who adhere to a Gramscian one (civil society is a contested space, therefore NGOs reflect struggles within wider society). Even among those who acknowledge the various social, political and economic inequalities associated with NGOs and civil society, there are commentators who (seemingly inexplicably, given their empirical material) cling to the normative and hopeful conclusion that, given the right conditions, NGOs might be able to fulfil their democratic promise at some point in the future (see, for example, Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Ndegwa, 1996; Dicklitch, 1998). Moreover, in highlighting the ‘incivilities’ within NGOs and civil society (such as ethnic and regional tension, undemocratic practice and weak capacity), much of this critical NGO literature runs the risk of reinforcing the widespread perception that civil societies in poor countries are indeed ‘fragmented’, ‘weak’ and ‘unorganized’. The assumption is that civil society (in its familiar western guise) has somehow gone wrong in the developing world; that these societies are incapable of becoming ‘civil’.

In the third instance, then, it is quite clear that those whose perspectives are informed by various strands of liberal democratic, modernization or political development theory, consider the cultures and social structures of developing countries as ‘blockages’ to modern western democratic development or, certainly, to building a desirable civil society. As Hadenius and Uggla have argued, the ‘traditional norms, rituals and patterns of authority are part of the reason why a strong and viable civil society is absent in many Third World countries’ (1996: 1625). For many such writers, NGOs and civil society implicitly become part of a wider project of transformatory development that seeks to break down undesirable traits and structures within ‘other’ societies and to engender modern, liberal, democratic ones in their place; in fact, to make societies truly ‘civil’. For example, membership of NGOs and other civil groups that cut across ethnic and regional cleavages are considered a key mechanism for breaking down ‘traditional’, ‘deeply rooted’ and potentially divisive socio-cultural identities that are anathema to the liberal democratic vision; ‘civil society can also be a crucial arena for the development of other democratic attributes, such as tolerance, moderation, a willingness to compromise, and a respect for opposing viewpoints’ (Diamond, 1994: 8). Hadenius and Uggla similarly argue that ‘making civil society work’ is a question of ‘socialization into democratic norms . . . it is a matter of changing popular norms (or mentality)’ (1996: 1622–23). Civil society organizations, and NGOs...
in particular, are thus seen as the institutional vehicles for effecting the democratic transformations of developing societies into modern, liberal societies. As John Clark, now of the World Bank, suggests, ‘countries which are Western in outlook . . . are likely to have strong NGO sectors’ (1991: 80). According to Williams and Young (1994) and Hearn (1999), such a perspective is partly responsible for driving the donor (and some academic) interest in ‘engineering’ civil society, in which NGOs become key actors in a process of transformatory development.

IV  Complexity and diversity: the many roles of NGOs in the politics of development

One of the most striking features of the NGO literature is the diversity and difference of NGO sectors and their contribution to civil society and democracy; and yet, exploration of this diversity is often eschewed in favour of more ideologically and normatively informed studies that tend to generalize about the role of NGOs in the politics of development. While it is often assumed that NGOs strengthen both state and civil society, it is far more apparent that NGO impact is more complex, serving to strengthen the state and/or society in some contexts, but to weaken or undermine them in others. Moreover, while state and civil society are often dichotomized, much of the empirical evidence actually points to the interweaving of the two. These complexities are overlain by differences between NGOs and GROs and the spatial and temporal contexts in which they act. In the following sections, I will explore three areas that highlight the diversity of NGO roles in the politics of development, focusing on the spatial diversity of NGO roles and impacts, how strengthening NGOs can weaken civil society and how NGOs can both strengthen and weaken the state.

1  Homogenizing space?

Taken as a whole, the empirical literature on NGOs, civil society and democratization is characterized by a rather selective geography, as is clear from the material cited in this paper. Claims for the role of NGOs as important civil society actors pursuing democratic development are often backed up by reference to the experiences of several core countries: those most frequently referred to include Brazil, Chile and the Philippines; Bangladesh, India and (to a lesser extent) Kenya also feature frequently; while South Africa and Thailand have been mentioned more recently. The regional geography of these ‘clusters’ of countries is also significant: four in Asia, two (strong) examples in Latin America, and two (weaker) examples in Africa. This has led to the pronouncement of generalizing statements that homogenize civil societies across regional spaces. It is not uncommon to come across claims made for the strength of ‘civil society’ (in the singular) and NGOs in Latin America and their growing vitality across some parts of Asia, while passing reference may be made to the weakness or ethnically challenged nature of civil society in Africa (see, for example, Haynes, 1996; Diamond, 1997; Fisher, 1998). Other commentators echo these sentiments through their preference for a number of Latin American and Asian examples (see Clark, 1991, 1995; Clarke, 1998a). Of course, this may indicate that NGO sectors are indeed more vibrant in places where some form of democracy has been the political norm for some time.
Several authors have suggested that part of the reason why democratic consolidation has been relatively successful in Chile and the Philippines is due to factors particular to those countries’ historical development, such as legacies from the colonial period and historical processes of class formation and urbanization (Hojman, 1993; Clarke, 1998a; Fisher, 1998). Nevertheless, the inattention to geography within the broader NGO literature is problematic for two reasons: first, what is taken to be an ‘NGO given’ – that is, the ability to foster an inclusive and democratizing development process – is on closer inspection the experience of only a handful of countries (and only a handful of NGOs and localities within those countries); secondly, these successes become the normative ideals to which other NGOs in other (mostly African) countries should aspire; and thirdly, countries whose NGO sectors are not able to replicate such experiences are labelled as having ‘weak’ and ‘underdeveloped’ civil societies in need of strengthening (usually through increased donor support to NGOs). As other authors have argued, ‘civil society’ is not spatially and temporally homogenous (McIlwaine, 1998; Sen, 1999; White, 1999) and, I would add, neither are NGO sectors. The diversity of NGOs’ contributions to civil societies and democratizing forces are significant, and yet, the spatialization of NGO activity and impact remains largely ignored despite growing evidence that NGOs are serving to ‘pluralize’ particular places and spaces at the neglect of others. The proliferation of NGOs and civil societies in urban over rural spaces has been noted in Ethiopia (Campbell, 2001), Uganda (Dicklitch, 1998) and Vietnam (Gray, 1999), while the tendency for NGOs and civil societies to be stronger in ‘development hotspots’ over regions neglected by development agencies has also been noted in Chile (Clarke, 1998a), Nepal (Shrestha and Farrington, 1993) and Tanzania (Mercer, 1999). What this calls for is a more contextualized approach that pays attention to local dynamics and histories, and that moves beyond the use of homogenizing labels that imply the inferiority of those NGO sectors that do not match an implicit normative standard.

2 Building civil society?

Representing something of a backlash against the fascination with the ‘innate goodness’ (Young, 1994: 47) of civil society, the late 1990s saw a proliferation of studies from across the developing world that collectively argued that civil societies are often fragmented, unorganized, uncooperative and weak. Furthermore the major constituents of these civil societies, NGOs, are often internally undemocratic; characterized by authoritarian or charismatic personalized leaderships; competitive; riven along class, gender, religious, regional, spatial and ethnic faultlines; and steered by either the state or donors, or both. In other words, the social, political, cultural or economic cleavages that exist in civil society are more likely to be replicated in (and even exacerbated by) NGOs than they are to be challenged. For example, in Bangladesh, Wood (1997) argues that NGOs must be seen as a constituent part of the culture in which they work, and that hierarchical and authoritarian social structures that encourage dependence and deference will often be replicated in NGOs. In particular the tendency for NGOs to be headed by one charismatic leader can stifle individual staff autonomy and discourage wider staff participation in decision-making processes (which, ironically, is usually what staff are trying to achieve with the NGOs’ ‘beneficiaries’). Ndegwa (1996) has
commented on a similar situation in two Kenyan NGOs (the Green Belt Movement and the Undugu Society), the internal workings of which he likens to ‘personalized rule’, whereby the decision to undertake political action rests solely with the NGO leader. In general, he finds Kenyan civil society to be fragmented along ethnic and class lines (although he omits gender) reflecting wider social and political fissures in the country. For example, the dominance of Kikuyu and Luo ethnic elites within those autonomous development organizations placing pressure on Moi’s (dominantly Kalenjin) government is more likely to reflect longstanding ethnic power struggles criss-crossing state and society, rather than a genuine call for democratic governance from a democratically constituted civil society (see also Fowler, 1993). The fragmented nature of NGO sectors also has important ramifications for NGO coordination and coalition-building. For example, Clarke (1998b) argues that, despite the efforts made by Indian NGOs to establish the Voluntary Action Network India (VANI), the unity of the NGO sector remains relatively remote owing to deep ethnic, religious, political and regional cleavages in civil society (see also Robinson et al., 1993). Clarke (1998b) also points to the highly organized NGO sector in the Philippines where, for all their political engagement, broader movements are often reactive and short, principally because their longevity is challenged by personal, ideological and regional tensions. Evidence of NGOs building effective, broad-based coalitions over a substantive period of time is somewhat thin. The danger here, of course, is in laying the charge of the absence of broad-based coalitions and ‘fragmented’ NGO sectors at the door of ‘weak’ civil (or ‘uncivil’) societies. This is not to deny the realities on the ground, but rather to point to the insufficiencies of the liberal democratic model in explaining the relationship between NGOs, civil society and democratization. Again, context is all-important.

**NGOs, civil society and the neoliberal agenda:** If we take a wider view of the context within which NGOs are working, there is now widespread recognition that the ability of NGOs to fulfil their democratic roles vis-à-vis civil society is increasingly circumscribed by the forces of political and economic neoliberalism as mediated through international financial institutions, states and donors. Certainly, this is a key theme occupying much of the literature reviewed here (see, for example, Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Robinson, 1994, 1997; Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Zaidi, 1999). In the first instance, the increased availability of large-scale funding has been one of the primary factors driving NGO growth since the 1980s, encouraging the proliferation of social welfare organizations that often have little or no political agenda. A general trend towards focusing on donor-funded service provision at the expense of political activities has been noted.1

The central issue here is that, if NGOs are taking up greater roles in social welfare activities as more donor funding becomes available, then the legitimacy of their claims to work with and represent the interests of the poor and disenfranchised on a political level, thereby building a broad-based civil society, comes under threat. Indeed, the question of NGO accountability to and legitimacy among the grassroots, given their increased funding, has become a dominant theme within the recent literature. For example, increasing financial support to NGOs has encouraged the proliferation of particular types of organizations with distinctive social and geographical characteristics. Fowler points out that many NGOs in eastern and southern Africa are staffed by urban, educated, middle class elites ‘with no substantive roots in underprivileged
groups’ (1991: 73). The deluge of funding now available for NGOs must be seen as a factor here. Those in the best position to take advantage of the donor penchant for NGOs are often urban-based educated elites, professionals or civil servants with access to information and contacts only available in capital cities where donor organizations and foreign embassies congregate. Given the considerable ‘streamlining’ of civil services associated with structural adjustment across many developing countries, the donor fascination with NGOs seems to have come at a propitious time for many former state employees. The urban middle-classes are thus over-represented within these growing NGO sectors, and often lack mass-based rural constituencies. Under these circumstances, the extent to which the agenda of such NGOs represents the concerns of marginalized groups, or whether they are a reflection of the types of activities that donors are willing to fund or that urban-based elites deem to be important, is a real concern (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993). Increased financial support for NGOs may actually undermine the building of a representative and participatory civil society.

Gray (1999) details such a situation in Vietnam, where the advent of doi moi (renovation) reforms in the 1990s has had a profound effect on the proliferation of NGOs, which were legalized in 1991. However, he finds the growth of NGOs has not been accompanied by the mobilization of a broad-based civil society. This is due to the donor-driven nature of NGO growth in the country, and the fact that the majority of Vietnamese NGOs are urban, elite-based organizations whose staff are often linked to the (Communist) party–state apparatus. It is in the countryside that Vietnamese NGOs have yet to make their mark, where entrenched power networks pose a formidable obstacle to urban NGOs’ attempts to lobby for issues such as land rights on behalf of the rural poor:

In sum, it still remains unclear how urban NGOs can support civil society in rural Vietnam. This may be of little relevance if the ‘type’ of civil society being promoted is only concerned with urban pluralism – a simple increase in the number and size of Vietnamese NGOs. For most Vietnamese, who live in rural areas, how important can this be? (Gray, 1999: 706).

For NGOs in Vietnam, the problem is in gaining a broad-based mass constituency in the first place. In contrast, where NGOs have a longer history, some are experiencing problems retaining their links with grassroots organizations in civil society. This has been the case for many well-established Latin American NGOs, many of which built up their reputation and legitimacy on the basis of their participatory and democratizing work with grassroots organizations during authoritarian periods. Significant transformations of both state and civil society have taken place since the polarized era of the 1960s and 1970s when NGOs were important actors in civil societies united in their opposition to authoritarian regimes. The return to democratic civilian rule across the continent during the 1980s has been heralded in some quarters as a triumph for civil societies in general, and NGOs in particular (Hojman, 1993; Landim, 1993; Diamond, 1994; Diamond et al., 1995; Clarke, 1998a; Fisher, 1998; Garrison, 2000). However, despite their key role in pushing for democratic change, Latin American NGOs seem to have suffered something of an identity crisis in the aftermath of transition (Bebbington, 1997), and their continued role in the democratic process is less clear within the current neoliberal climate as they find themselves steered towards social service provision and away from grassroots activism.

The resulting ‘crisis of legitimacy’ (Bebbington, 1997) that many NGOs are facing
entails the loss of linkages with grassroots constituencies (and with it the close relationships required in order to represent their interests in policy-making fora), less transparent NGO operations as accountability now flows upwards to the donor rather than downwards to rural constituencies and the exclusion of grassroots organizations from policy dialogue (Farrington and Lewis, 1993; Bebbington, 1997; Gideon, 1998). The impact of increased direct donor funding on NGOs’ internal bureaucratization, management structures and relationships with beneficiaries is well-documented (see, for example, Perera’s, 1997 account of Sarvodaya; also Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Hulme and Edwards, 1997). Reflecting on the experience of NGOs in Bangladesh, White (1999) suggests that NGOs are increasingly adopting formal procedures required by donors and developing the conservatism and self-protection usually characteristic of state agencies. This has been compounded by the donor-funded growth of some of the country’s largest NGOs, which have become ‘formidable institutions . . . Increased size has inevitably meant increased distance from the grassroots, and the early pioneering vision has been replaced by an ethic of efficiency and professionalism’ (White, 1999: 321). The irony here then, is that as donors attempt to ‘scale-up’ the impact of their work, to handle more (foreign) funding and take on greater roles in service provision, they are simultaneously forcing NGOs to loosen their connections to their grassroots constituencies. Strengthening NGOs may actually serve to weaken civil society (Tvedt, 1998).

3 NGOs in a neoliberal era: strengthening the state?

The co-opting of NGOs into state service provision has also had wider repercussions for states, although the jury appears to be out as to whether they are strengthened or weakened overall. The establishment of state-sponsored social funds, which usually carry World Bank and international donor backing, have used NGOs to implement state development plans designed to mitigate the harshest effects of structural adjustment programmes. Many governments, somewhat wary of the political effects of NGOs, have had little choice but to concede the important role of NGOs in providing social services. On the one hand, many authors consider the drafting of NGOs into government-sponsored social funds to pose the least threat to state legitimacy, and may actually boost it, both among international donors (because civil society involvement, in the form of NGOs, complies with donor demands for good governance) and among the electorate (owing to better services, associated with the state development programme even if delivered by an NGO). It has been noted that some governments direct social funds towards social welfare provision for politically sensitive groups, in order to minimize opposition to the state (see Gideon, 1998, on Latin America and Gray, 1999, on Vietnam).

It is quite clear from the NGO literature that the impact of the state social funds has been felt nowhere more strongly than across Latin America (Bebbington, 1997; Lambrou, 1997; Miraftab, 1997; Pearce, 1997; Gideon, 1998). Formerly authoritarian states have given way to a set of open civilian governments keen (in rhetorical terms, at least) to build alliances with civil society and NGOs. A key priority for these new governments has been to shore up their legitimacy by reaching down to the poorest sections of society, previously the constituencies of the NGOs. This is being attempted
both politically (through decentralization) and economically (through improvements in social welfare provision). In practice this has meant enrolling NGOs into state social funds and programmes. As Gideon has observed, ‘NGOs have become harnessed by the state and [have] been used as a tool to implement the neoliberal model’ (1998: 304).

A recent study of civil society–government–World Bank relations in Brazil (Garrison, 2000) published by the NGO and Civil Society unit of the World Bank’s Social Development Department, is an insightful example here. Reminiscent of many World Bank documents on the virtues of NGOs and civil society, Garrison argues that Brazilian NGOs are significant actors in the democratic process, both before, during and after the transition itself. While they have made important contributions to social welfare, Garrison argues that Brazilian NGOs have also made significant contributions to public policy and have acted in a ‘watchdog’ capacity with regard to the state, demonstrated in their ability to network around certain issues and to initiate national-level civic campaigns. A key organization in formulating NGOs’ strategic role has been the Associação Brasileira de ONGs (ABONG), Brazil’s first NGO umbrella organization that was formed in 1991, although Garrison points to several regional and sectoral networks and coalitions that not only bring together NGOs, but also NGOs and social movements, to work with government. In terms of policy impact, Garrison points to the central role played by NGOs in initiating and supporting the widespread movement that led to the impeachment of President Collor in 1992 for corruption. However, instances of NGO experiences in more sustained policy dialogue with government are patchier: there is very little evidence to suggest that NGOs are actually fulfilling the policy role that Garrison attributes to them. The examples cited seem to have been initiated by the World Bank in discussions related to Bank-financed sectoral loans in an attempt to create ‘developmental synergies’ between state, private and civil sectors, rather than as a result of NGO initiatives. Garrison also points to the increasing linkages between the Brazilian state and NGOs as a sign of their role in democratization; the government–citizen policy councils that foster ‘deliberative democracy’ at the local level; the provision of technical assistance to local governments on a consultancy basis; increased government funding to NGOs through various government- and Bank-sponsored small-grant facilities in order to carry out a host of (mostly social welfare) projects and programmes; and the election or hiring of leading figures from civil society organizations to positions within local and national government. It is instructive to note, however, that the government–citizen policy councils are given only a consultative rather a deliberative role. In fact, their role seems to be to support and legitimize government policy rather than to question it:

These informal citizens’ movements should thus be seen as a complementary power that adds strength and depth to the democratic system, rather than a movement that challenges the power of elected representatives. As the Bank’s 1997 World Development Report recognized: ‘The growth of these intermediary organizations reflects the larger movement toward democracy in many regions and, in some countries, the need to bridge the “missing middle” between citizens and the state’ (Garrison, 2000: 47).

In other words, NGO participation serves to legitimize the status quo, not to challenge it. This is further evident from the technocratic discourse surrounding the apparent advantages of increased Bank–civil society linkages in Brazil: it improves the process of public policy-making; it may improve the rate of return; governments and Banks have
NGOs, civil society and democratization

the expertise and knowledge to provide the ‘development hardware’ (macro policies, economic modelling, baseline research sector work). Civil society organizations, on the other hand, provide the expertise in ‘development software’ (participatory approaches, community organizing, stakeholder ownership strategies); NGOs are often smaller and therefore more innovative, adaptable, cost-effective and locally informed; and their grassroots representation brings legitimacy and community mobilization to the programme (Garrison, 2000). Any agenda for social and political change is lost in this technocratic discourse that essentially argues that NGOs be utilized to legitimize World Bank-sponsored attempts to foster widespread acceptance of the neoliberal Brazilian state.

Clarke’s (1998b) thorough study of the role of NGOs in southeast Asian politics echoes many of these points. Given the right conditions, he argues, NGOs can play a vital role in shoring up the legitimacy of vulnerable democratic regimes, as the instances of Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand exemplify. In (newly) democratic countries characterized by a weak institutional political realm, Clarke argues that NGOs strengthen the state through their participation in improving efficiency in government services, acting as strategic partners for reform-oriented ministries, filling in gaps in service provision and helping the government forge ties with the grassroots. At the same time, NGOs strengthen civil society. Through protest, NGOs serve to ‘aggregate and moderate political demands and [provide] channels distinct from Congress through which disputes can be negotiated and dissipated’ (1998b: 211). In a recasting of Huntington’s ‘praetorianism’, Clarke views NGOs as a distinct ‘layer of civil society’ (1998b: 207) that take on a role in the ‘rationalization of authority’ (1998b: 205). That is to say, NGOs strengthen and support newly democratic regimes while also organizing (or ‘channelling’) protest and citizen participation into organized and recognized institutional forms (NGOs) that are subject to rules laid down by the state. But is this not another way of arguing that NGOs legitimize and strengthen the neoliberal regimes that have flourished or that are emerging across southeast Asia? As Feldman (1997) argues with respect to Bangladesh, the growth of (foreign-funded) NGOs is merely ‘institutionalizing representation’, channelling all protest and citizen participation into the NGO sector that has come to represent a ‘legitimized ... controlled, organized arena of public debate with institutional and financial support from the donor community, [which] has come to speak on behalf of the citizenry’ (1997: 59). Moreover, ‘the participation of the donor community in NGO initiatives corresponds to a move toward the privatization of resource distribution and forms of production away from locally initiated and locally controlled development activities’ (1997: 59). While the state may be legitimized and therefore strengthened by NGO action, these experiences suggest a distinct weakening of broad-based civil societies.

However, there are also those for whom the handing over of social welfare activities formerly executed by the state to the NGO sector can be very damaging for state power. The diversion of funding away from states towards NGOs serves to threaten state legitimacy, while continuing to undermine the ability of the state to play a role in social service provision (Fowler, 1991; Tvedt, 1998). Strengthening civil society through NGOs can actually weaken the state (Marcussen, 1996). In Bangladesh, for example, the rise of NGOs has been accompanied by a decline in state legitimacy (White, 1999); Clarke (1998a) describes them as a ‘virtual parallel state’ while Wood (1997) refers to
Bangladesh as a ‘franchise state’. For many, the issue is one of accountability and citizenship; states, at least, must account for their actions (in principle), while NGO accountability is increasingly considered to be upwards to the donor rather than downwards to the grassroots (Zaidi, 1999). As Gary points out, ‘would not reformed state institutions be more efficient in providing social welfare services, let alone planning development, than scattered NGO efforts?’ (1996: 163).

Commenting on the *Fondo Social de Emergencia* (FSE), the Bolivian government’s social fund established in 1986, Arellano-López and Petras (1994) argue that increased donor support to NGOs has weakened both state and civil society. The FSE was funded by international and multilateral donors and administered by the Bolivian government, who parcelled out social welfare projects to bidding NGOs and other private organizations. According to Arellano-López and Petras (1994), Bolivia’s GROs, the popular movements that have traditionally been more politically active in their attempts to represent the interests of workers, peasants and different ethnic and cultural groups to the state, have been doubly disenfranchised by the neoliberal agenda of the international financial institutions that the Bolivian state has had little choice but to embrace. Not only has the enervated state been weakened through the structural adjustment period, rendering it less able to meet the demands of GROs, but the GROs themselves have increasingly been bypassed by donors in preference for NGOs. At the same time, the NGOs ‘have demonstrated a notable lack of enthusiasm for participating in the political mobilizations of poor people that have occurred during the 1980s’ (1994: 567).

They continue:

... the weakening of state agencies and grassroots organizations, coupled with the strengthening of NGOs, which are heavily dependent on international donor funds, undermines the institutional capacity of Latin American countries to define and defend alternatives to the development agenda articulated by international financial institutions and development agencies. This mutes voices of opposition and fundamentally weakens democratic political processes. It is ironic that NGOs, which generally see themselves and are often seen by others as agents of democracy, have been instrumental in undermining the institutional bases of political participation in this way (1994: 567).

It is, therefore, quite clear that the role of NGOs vis-à-vis states in democratic development is a contested one, in which NGOs are interpreted from a range of standpoints as providers of structural support for emerging neoliberal democratic regimes, or as principal actors in the undermining of weak states, and even of weak states and societies. At the same time, the impact of the neoliberal agenda advocated by international financial institutions has encouraged the blurring of the NGO and state sectors. The point is that the role of NGOs in the politics of development is far more complex than that proposed by the liberal democratic view, and concomitantly, by those donors bent on funding NGOs in order to build a strong civil society.

V Conclusions

The main aim of this paper has been to problematize the ideological biases and normative assumptions that are commonly reproduced in anglophone writings on NGOs. Support for NGOs in their democratizing role is often framed by a liberal
democratic view of politics in which the strengthening of NGOs is beneficial for bolstering civil society and enhancing state legitimacy. This is problematic not least because it legitimizes a normative (western) worldview against which the successes and failures of NGOs, states and civil societies are judged. This paper has argued that, despite increasing support for NGOs in their assumed democratizing role, the outcome of NGO involvement in the politics of development is far less predictable than the liberal democratic view imagines, and that the contributions made by different types of NGOs to development differ spatially and temporally. Indeed, from the literature reviewed here, it is clear that whether NGOs strengthen or weaken the state and/or civil society is a highly subjective issue. Moreover, the very language of the debate (‘strengthening’, ‘weakening’ and particularly ‘civil society’) betrays a normative view on how democratic development should be ‘done’, which ultimately obscures a potentially more fruitful engagement with the ways in which NGOs are embedded in their local contexts.

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Note

1. See, for example, Feldman (1997), Wood (1997) and White (1999) on Bangladesh, and material on Bolivia (Arellano-López and Petras 1994), Chile (Hojman, 1993), Mexico (Fox and Hernández, 1992; Miraftab, 1997), Sri Lanka (Hodson, 1997), Uganda (Dicklitch, 1998) and across eastern and southern Africa (Fowler, 1991), Asia (Farrington and Lewis, 1993) and Latin America (Fox and Hernández, 1992; Lambrou, 1997 and Gideon, 1998) more generally; for a contrasting view, see Clarke (1998b) on Indonesia and Edwards (1999) on India.

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