

Non-Governmental Organizations and Development

David Lewis and Nazneen Kanji



Routledge Perspectives on Development

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2009
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa company

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Typeset in Times New Roman by
Bookcraft Ltd, Stroud, Gloucestershire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Lewis, David, 1960–

Non-governmental organizations and development / David Lewis and Nazneen Kanji.
p. cm. – (Routledge perspectives on development)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Non-governmental organizations. I. Kanji, Nazneen. II. Title.
JZ4841.L49 2009

338.9–dc2 22008049965

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-45429-2 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-415-45430-8 (pbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-203-87707-4 (ebk)

ISBN 10: 0-415-45429-8 (hbk)
ISBN 10: 0-415-45430-1 (pbk)
ISBN 10: 0-203-87707-1 (ebk)

Non-Governmental Organizations and Development

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are high-profile actors in the field of international development, both as providers of services to vulnerable individuals and communities and as campaigning policy advocates. This book provides a critical introduction to the wide-ranging topic of NGOs and development. Written by two authors with more than 20 years' experience each of research and practice in the field, the book combines a critical overview of the main research literature with a set of up-to-date theoretical and practical insights drawn from experience in Asia, Europe, Africa and elsewhere. It highlights the importance of NGOs in development, but it also engages fully with the criticisms that the increased profile of NGOs in development now attracts.

The text begins with a discussion of the wide diversity of NGOs and their roles, and locates their recent rise to prominence within broader histories of struggle as well as within the ideological context of neoliberalism. It then moves on to analyse how interest in NGOs has both reflected and informed wider theoretical trends and debates within development studies, before analysing NGOs and their practices, using a broad range of short case studies of successful and unsuccessful interventions. The book then moves on to describe the ways in which NGOs are increasingly important in relation to ideas and debates about 'civil society', globalization and the changing ideas and practices of international aid. The book argues that NGOs are now central to development theory and practice and are likely to remain important actors in development in the years to come. In order to appreciate the issues raised by their increasing diversity and complexity, the authors conclude that it is necessary to deploy a historically and theoretically informed perspective.

This critical overview will be useful to students of development studies at undergraduate and master's levels, as well as to more general readers and practitioners. The format of the book includes figures, photographs and case studies as well as reader material in the form of summary points and questions. Despite the growing importance of the topic, no single short, up-to-date book exists that sets out the main issues in the form of a clearly written, academically-informed text: until now.

David Lewis teaches in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, where he has specialized in development policy issues in South Asia, with a particular focus on Bangladesh. An anthropologist by background, he is co-author with Katy Gardner of *Anthropology, Development and the Postmodern Challenge* (Pluto, 1996), and author of *The Management of Non-Governmental Development Organizations* (Routledge, 2007).

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Andrew Mould and Michael P. Jones at Routledge for their support with this book project, and the very helpful comments of three anonymous referees. We also thank Matthew Brown at Bookcraft for expertly managing the project during its final stages, and Judith Oppenheimer for her precise copyediting work. We are very grateful to former LSE MSc students Miranda Armstrong, Ayeleen Ajanee, Shefali Misra, Diogo Souto Maior and Maria Fernanda Galindo-Abarca, and to Carolyn Miller at Merlin, for allowing us to use some of their excellent photos in the book. Above all, our thanks are due to all the numerous individuals and organizations we have worked with over the years, whose insights and experiences have helped to inform this book.

David Lewis and Nazneen Kanji
London, March 2009



Abbreviations and acronyms

ACORD	Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development
AEI	American Enterprise Institute
ASSEFA	Association of Sarva Seva Farms (India)
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (now Building Resources Across Communities)
BRLC	Baptist Rural Life Centre (Philippines)
CBO	community-based organization
CSO	civil society organization
CSR	corporate social responsibility
CVM	Cruz Vermelha de Moçambique (The Mozambican Red Cross)
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (of the OECD)
DEC	Development Emergency Committee (UK)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DHA	UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs
ECLA	UN Economic Commission for Latin America
ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
EU	European Union
GM	genetically modified
GONGO	government-organized NGO
GSO	grassroots support organization

IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development (UK)
IFI	international financial institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	international NGO
INTRAC	International NGO Research and Training Centre (UK)
LFA	logical framework analysis
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	non-governmental organization
NNGO	Northern NGO
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDI	Project Development Institute (Philippines)
PLA	participatory learning and action
PPA	programme partnership agreement
PO	people's organization
PRA	participatory rural appraisal
PRS	poverty reduction strategy
RONGOs	royal NGOs
SAPs	structural adjustment policies
SCF	Save the Children Fund (UK)
SDI	Slum/Shack Dwellers International
SEWA	Self-Employed Women's Association (India)
SIDA	Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation
SNGO	Southern NGO
SWAPs	sector-wide approaches
UNCED	UN Conference on Environment and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VO	voluntary organization
WHO	World Health Organization



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1

Introduction

What are non-governmental organizations?

- **Definitions.**
- **The diversity of NGOs.**
- **The variety of NGO values, approaches and activities in development.**
- **The claims made for development NGOs.**
- **The various critiques of development NGOs.**

Introduction

During the past two decades, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in development have increased their profiles at local, national and international levels. NGOs have come to be recognized as important actors on the landscape of development, from the reconstruction efforts in Indonesia, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami disaster, to international campaigns for aid and trade reform such as 'Make Poverty History'. NGOs tend to be best known for undertaking one or other of these two main forms of activity: the delivery of basic services to people in need, and organizing policy advocacy and public campaigns for change. At the same time, NGOs have also become active in a wide range of other more specialized roles such as emergency response, democracy building, conflict resolution, human rights work, cultural preservation, environmental activism, policy analysis, research and information provision.

It is probably impossible to say how many NGOs there are in the world, since there are no comprehensive or reliable statistics. In any case, definitions of what actually constitutes an NGO tend to vary. Some estimates put the figure at one million, if both formal and informal organizations are included, while the number of registered NGOs receiving international aid is probably closer to ‘a few hundred thousand’. The United Nations currently estimates that there are about 35,000 large established NGOs. Nor are there accurate figures available for the amount of aid overall that NGOs receive, but there is agreement that the increase has been dramatic since the 1980s, when almost all foreign aid tended to be provided to governments. In 2004, it was estimated that NGOs were responsible for about \$US23 billion of total aid money, or approximately one third of total overseas development aid (Riddell 2007: 53).

The acronym ‘NGO’ has become part of everyday language in many countries. It has entered the vocabulary of professionals and activists, and that of ordinary citizens. Images and representations of NGOs and their work have also become mainstream. In the UK, NGO fundraising leaflets fall from the pages of the Sunday newspapers each week, more often than not featuring a photo of a young, wide-eyed African or Asian child. NGOs also feature prominently in cultural life, such as in movies and books. In the Hollywood film *About Schmidt* (2002), the central character, played by Jack Nicholson, finds redemption when he sponsors an African child after seeing a television appeal. In Helen Fielding’s novel *Cause Celeb* (1994), the heroine escapes an empty London working life when she joins an international NGO and works with African famine relief (Lewis et al. 2005).

Though the presence of NGOs seems to be everywhere, the challenge of understanding the phenomenon of NGOs remains a surprisingly difficult one (Box 1.1). One reason for this is that NGOs are an extremely diverse group of organizations, which can make meaningful generalization very difficult. NGOs play different roles and take very different shapes and forms within and across different country contexts. Another reason is that ‘NGO’ as an analytical category is complex, often unclear and difficult to grasp. An NGO is normally characterized in the literature as an independent organization that is neither run by government nor driven by the profit motive like private sector businesses. Yet there are some NGOs that receive high levels of government funding and possess some of the characteristics of bureaucracies, while others can resemble highly professionalized private organizations with strongly corporate identities. As one might