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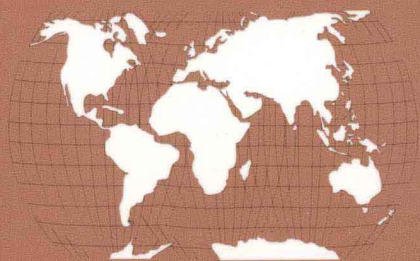
NGOs and the Political Development of the Third World

Julie Fisher

NONGOVERNMENTS

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Kumarian Press

To my parents, David and Frances Hawkins,
who have never wavered in their support
for my eclectic, sometimes erratic journey

Nongovernments: NGOs and the Political Development of the Third World

Kumarian Press Books on International Development

Foreword

—Jeremy Rifkin

The global economy is undergoing a fundamental transformation in the nature of work brought on by the new technologies of the Information Age revolution. These profound technological and economic changes will force every country to rethink long-held assumptions about the nature of politics and citizenship.

At the heart of this historic shift are sophisticated computers, robotics, telecommunications, and other Information Age technologies that are fast replacing human beings, especially in the manufacturing sector. Automated technologies have been reducing the need for human labor in every manufacturing category. By the year 2020 less than 2 percent of the entire global workforce will still be engaged in factory work. Over the next quarter century we will see the virtual elimination of the blue-collar, mass assembly-line worker from the production process.

Acknowledging that both the manufacturing and service sectors are quickly reengineering their infrastructures and automating their production processes, many mainstream economists and politicians have pinned their hopes on new job opportunities along the information superhighway and in cyberspace. Although the "knowledge sector" will create some new jobs, they will be too few to absorb the millions of workers displaced by the new technologies. That's because the knowledge sector is, by nature, an elite and not a mass workforce. Indeed, the shift from mass to elite labor is what distinguishes work in the Information Age from that in the Industrial Age. With near-workerless factories and virtual companies already looming on the horizon, every nation will have to grapple with the question of what to do with the millions of people whose labor will be needed less, or not at all, in an evermore automated global economy.

Julie Fisher's book captures the new role nongovernmental organizations are playing in addressing this issue. The civil society is playing an increasingly important social and economic role in nations around the world. People are creating new institutions at both the local and national levels to provide for needs that are not being met by either the marketplace or the public sector.

Today, NGOs are serving millions of citizens in scores of countries. Their reach and scope often eclipse both the private and public sector, touching and affecting the lives of every citizen, often more profoundly than the forces of the marketplace or the agencies and bureaucracies of government.

Expanding the role of NGOs in socioeconomic development requires that we rethink our notion of politics. While politicians traditionally divide society into a polar spectrum running from the marketplace, on the right, to the government, on the left, it is more accurate to think of society as a three-legged stool made up of the market sector, government sector, and civil sector. The first leg creates market capital, the second leg creates public capital, and the third leg creates social capital. In the old scheme of things, finding the proper balance between the market and government dominated political discussion. In the new scheme, finding a balance between the market, government, and civil sectors becomes paramount. Thinking of society as creating three types of capital—market capital, public capital, and social capital—opens up new possibilities for reconceptualizing both the social contract and the meaning of work in the coming era.

The key to a genuine attempt to recast the political landscape will depend on the political will to increase the clout and elevate the profile of the civil society, making it an equal player with both the marketplace and government. But since the nongovernmental sector relies on both the market and government for its survival and well-being, its future will depend, in large part, on the creation of a new political force that can make demands on both the market and government sectors to pump some of the vast financial gains of the new Information Age economy into the creation of social capital and the restoration of civil life around the world.

The potential for a new third force in political life exists but has not yet been galvanized into a mainstream social movement. It consists of the millions of citizens who give of their time each week serving in the many NGOs that make up the sprawling civil society. These individuals already understand the importance of creating social capital in their own neighborhoods and communities.

Up to now, however, the millions of people who either volunteer or work in this sector have not seen themselves as part of a potentially powerful constituency—one that, if politicized, could help reshape the national agenda in every country. Participants in the civil society come

from every race and ethnic background, and from every class and walk of life. The one thing they share is a belief in the importance of service to the community and the creation of social capital. If that powerful shared value can be transformed into a sense of common purpose and identity, we could redraw the political map. Mobilizing these millions of people into a broad-based social movement that can make tough demands on both the market and public sectors will be the critical test of the new politics of social capital.

The ever-deepening problem of rising productivity in the face of declining wages, vanishing jobs, and poverty is likely to be one of the defining issues in every country in the years ahead as the global economy makes the tumultuous transition out of the Industrial Age and into the Information Age. The growing social unrest and increasing political destabilization arising from this historic shift in the way the world does work is forcing activists of every stripe and persuasion, as well as politicians and political parties, to search for a "new center" that speaks to the concerns and aspirations of a majority of the electorate. The conventional political discussion continues to take place along the polar spectrum of marketplace versus government—a playing field that becomes increasingly limited in addressing the magnitude of the challenges and opportunities that exist in this new age. As Fisher suggests, redirecting the political debate to a tripartite model with the civil society in the center between the market and government spheres fundamentally changes the nature of political discourse, opening up the possibility of re-envisioning the body politic, the economy, and the nature of work and society in wholly new ways in the coming century.

Preface

Years ago, when I was in graduate school, I was required to read a great deal of "modernization" theory. I remember being uncomfortable with the idea that developed countries were considered so advanced. One of my earliest memories was the terrible poverty in the alley behind our apartment on Rhode Island Avenue in Washington, D.C. And I wondered whether something might be lost in the modernization of traditional societies. Another early memory was my maternal grandfather, wrapped in his *Taraoumara* blanket, eating his morning eggs with Tabasco and lemon juice, and telling me stories of his years in northern Mexico. Later, as a teenager, when I lived in Mexico with my parents, I felt welcomed—indeed overwhelmed—by the warmth of the people and the beauty of their traditions. I was further inoculated against the underdeveloped-developed dichotomy by my lively anthropology professor at Pomona College, Charles Leslie.

There was one corner of modernization theory that fascinated me, however, and that was the subject of "political development." As much as I loved Mexico, I couldn't help being aware that its political system, while promoting industrialization, was perpetuating poverty. I retained this fascination, even as my successors in graduate school were reading dependency theory and being taught that the idea of political development was naive and ethnocentric. My doctoral dissertation, written over the course of five years as I coordinated the naps of two little boys and hired afternoon baby-sitters, dealt with neighborhood organizations in the Latin American squatter settlements. Maybe, I remember thinking, democracy was still possible, at least on a local level.

During four years working with Philip Coombs on a major study of global education trends, I became aware that, at least in Thailand, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, there were intemediary nonprofit organizations that worked with grassroots organizations. In 1982, shortly after my first husband died unexpectedly, I immersed myself in teaching comparative politics and a senior seminar of my own design at Connecticut College. I

called it "The Politics of Third World Development," and I spent some time returning to the political development literature and focusing on the political role of grassroots organizations.

After a field evaluation of Save the Children's women's program in Colombia in 1986, I attended a meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Boston. There I met the late Mario Padrón, an influential leader of the global as well as the Peruvian nongovernmental organization (NGO) movement, and Brian Smith, who, in a panel presentation, asserted that there were at least seven or eight thousand intermediary NGOs in the Third World working with grassroots organizations. Suddenly, everything came together, and I decided to learn all I could about this new global phenomenon. Along the way, I gained professional support from the Program on Non-Profit Organizations (PONPO) at Yale and confirmation from the work of others. As Robert Berg wrote almost ten years ago, "Something is happening out there."

My research, carried out between consulting jobs, finally led to the publication of *The Road from Rio: Sustainable Development and the Nongovernmental Movement in the Third World* in 1993. That book was what David Cooperrider calls an "appreciative inquiry," an attempt to understand the who, what, and where questions. Yet I continued to research the larger issues of how NGOs are impacting politics, governance, civil society, and democratization, as well as sustainable development.

The result is this second book, which could not have been written without the support of many people. My husband and consulting partner, Richard Peck, first inspired me to undertake this long scholarly journey and read, reread, and edited the manuscript more times than either of us cares to remember. Many thanks as well to my father, David Hawkins, who read and commented on the entire manuscript with the keen judgment of a philosopher. My son, Tom Fisher, was great at pinpointing trouble spots, and I tested many ideas with my other son, Scott. My stepdaughter, Linda Peck, was a continual source of guidance on computers. My colleagues at PONPO—Peter Hall, John Simon, Brad Gray, Lisa Berlinger, and Dick Magat—were both supportive and challenging. Many thanks also to Karen Refsbeck and Pam Greene for continual encouragement. David Bronkema, Adil Najam, Eric Sievers, Iman Ghazallah, and Celia Kl amath—all John D. Rockefeller fellows at PONPO—inspired me with both their intellect and their excitement about the subject. Thanks also to biologist Bob Wyman, who twice asked me to help teach a course on international population issues at Yale, enabling me to get to know students such as Liza Grandia, who is now working in Guatemala to use NGOs to extend family planning to the Peten region.

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NGOs, Civil Society, and Political Development

■ There is no central committee: each committee is central.
—Brazilian Citizen's Campaign

■ We have it in our power to begin the world again.
—Thomas Paine

SINCE THE RIO CONFERENCE in June 1992, the global community has haltingly inched along the "steep and rocky path" of sustainable development.[1] Rio not only increased global awareness of the need to develop without destroying the resources needed for future development but also stimulated international debate about the relationships among poverty, population, and environmental degradation.

Two stories in the *New York Times* of July 13, 1993, symbolize the enormous gap separating the mindless destruction of natural resources from the promise of sustainable development. Hinunangan, on the Philippine island of Leyte, was once a rich tropical ecosystem of tall trees, bamboo, monkeys, wild boar, ducks, and ostriches. Because of the rapacious deforestation of valuable hardwoods, most wildlife is now extinct, water is in short supply, and even the basic rice crop is threatened. Hawaii, in contrast, has a laboratory and a commercial park complex that use differentials in seawater temperature to produce electric power and desalinated water. Its economic spin-offs include fruit, vegetables, commercial fish, and lobster.

Implementing a sustainable development project—be it a technologically sophisticated laboratory or a simple program such as planting fruit trees or teaching women to read—is never easy, as thousands of indigenous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Third World have already learned. Yet the complexities of implementing locally sustainable

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development are dwarfed by the magnitude of the political and institutional changes needed at the local, national, and international levels to halt the gradual destruction of the global ecosystem.

Fortunately, the emergence of indigenous NGOs over the last three decades is a positive addition to the political mix in the Third World. Indeed, NGOs strengthen the institutions of civil society that mediate between the individual and the state, both on their own and in conjunction with governments. This, in turn, can promote increased governmental responsiveness and accountability.

This book is about the growing political and technical capacities of Third World, or "Southern," NGOs and their relationships with their governments. More specifically, I deal with NGOs' ability to contribute to environmentally sustainable development in their relationships with governments and how these relationships may become politically sustainable as well. Political sustainability depends on the roles that NGOs play in strengthening civil society and on their ability, in interacting with governments, to contribute to increasing governmental responsiveness and accountability at both the local and the national levels.

The rise of Third World NGOs has coincided with the increasing inability of the nation-state to muddle through as it confronts the long-term consequences of its own ignorance, corruption, and lack of accountability. At the same time, international networking among national NGOs from all parts of the globe and the proliferation of international NGOs (INGOs) have coincided with the post–Cold War emergence of an international community continually confounded by intertwined and intractable crises at the national level. Violence and ethnic conflict in some countries dominate the global media, but the underlying poverty-environment-population crisis dominates the news in many more places.

These three horsemen of the global apocalypse—poverty, environmental degradation, and population growth—are clearly interrelated, yet the directions of causality are complex and multidimensional. Overpopulation leads to deforestation or soil exhaustion, which leads to increasing poverty. Increasing poverty leads to migration to more remote areas, where the cycle begins again. Landlessness, an absence of opportunities for women, and a lack of hope that children will survive provide little incentive for the success of family planning. And environmental destruction by outside interests can increase poverty, even if the people and the environment have coexisted for generations.

Deforestation, for example, is fueled by both greed and need. Japanese timber companies have ruthlessly destroyed tropical ecosystems in Asia in their quest for profits. Governments have shortsightedly joined in this destructive frenzy in their efforts to pay off mounting debt burdens, and their lack of accountability only accelerates the tendency to choose the

quick buck rather than sustainable development.[2] But once a tropical forest is "opened up" by timber companies or governments, deforestation is propelled by growing numbers of desperately poor people who may have no other means to survive.

On a deeper, even more troubling level, there are those who question whether we have already exceeded the earth's carrying capacity. Rees (1996, 207), for example, uses the concept of "ecological footprint" to show that it is the developed countries that are already "over-populated in ecological terms—they could not sustain themselves at current material standards if forced by changing circumstances to live on their remaining endowments of domestic natural capital. This is hardly a good model for the rest of the world to follow."[3]

Thus, if sustainable development is to be implemented on a large scale, massive political change will be required everywhere. There are some politically encouraging signs. In the United States, despite the mixed environmental record of many major multinational corporations, President Clinton reversed the Bush administration's refusal to sign the mandatory provisions of the treaty to stabilize greenhouse gases. The Clinton administration also reversed the long-standing "Mexico City" policy, which placed restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance to population and family planning NGOs in the Third World. And democratization is visible in some Third World and formerly communist transitional countries, despite the lapse into violence and civil war in others.

Despite such encouraging trends, most governments lack the means, to say nothing of the will, to confront democratization and sustainable development. Indeed, there are those who argue that human beings have already sown the seeds of their own destruction and are incapable of political adaptation to the magnitude of the global challenge. Perhaps the road from Rio is, quite literally, impassable.

There are, however, signposts along this road, although they are rarely erected by governments. They are being painted not only by visionary scientists and industrialists in the developed countries but also by thousands of Third World NGOs. There are also "roads less traveled" in the Third World that may intersect with existing ways of progressing that have become impassable. Yet the signposts and alternative paths emerging in Third World countries are largely ignored by a public and world media that continue to disregard the ominous causes of the global environmental crisis while focusing on its dramatic, short-run symptoms.

I wrote *The Road from Rio: Sustainable Development and the Nongovernmental Movement in the Third World* to illuminate the signposts that are being painstakingly constructed out of sheer necessity by hundreds of thousands of professionals and millions of common people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. *The Road from Rio* was written as an

Figure 1.1 Third World NGOs: GROs, GRSOs, and Their Networks
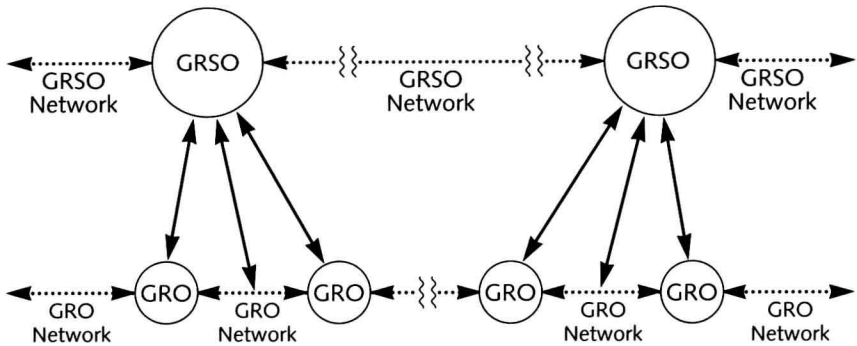
appreciative inquiry into the organizational ingenuity increasingly required for people to survive and improve their lives in the Third World.[4] If it did nothing else, I am gratified that the book was described by one reviewer as "[exploding] two especially pernicious myths about sustainable development: that the concept was invented by the Brundtland Commission report of 1987 and that how to put this difficult goal into practice is not yet known" (Levy 1994, 26).

One of the signposts along the road to sustainable development is a historically unprecedented partnership between intellectual elites and the common people. This partnership defines two major types of NGOs in the Third World—member-serving grassroots organizations (GROs) based in local communities, and nationally or regionally based development assistance organizations called grassroots support organizations (GRSOs) (see Figure 1.1). GRSOs are usually staffed by professionals who channel international funds to GROs and help communities other than their own to develop. In addition to these vertical connections between GROs and GRSOs, there are two other types of NGOs in the Third World defined by their horizontal connections with each other—GRO networks linking local communities to one another, and networks of GRSOs.

That these two types of NGOs, tied to each other, should have emerged at the same time, independently, all over Asia, Africa, and Latin America is nothing short of remarkable. Third World professionals have been creating GRSOs and building ties to traditional and newly organized groups at the local level for some thirty years. Yet this historic and cross-nationally similar response to increasing impoverishment was not only unanticipated by their Northern colleagues; it is, to this day, largely unappreciated by most Northern academics, to say nothing of mainstream policy makers. This worldwide expansion of civil society, now also occurring in transitional countries, is bound to be consequential, although not in ways that we can easily predict.

This chapter, divided into five sections, begins with background information on these four broad types of NGOs—GROs, GRO networks, GRSOs, and GRSO networks. The second section, which explores the meaning of civil society, is followed by an exploration of the multiple roles that NGOs play in creating, strengthening, and sustaining it. Since civil society is a static concept, however, that cannot encompass dynamic interactions with governments, the fourth section of the chapter resurrects the concept of political development, elaborated in the 1960s and academically discredited *before* NGOs began to proliferate throughout the developing and transitional countries. Although political development is far from inevitable, when it does occur, it takes place in the political commons between government and civil society. Contrasts are also drawn between the concepts of political development and democratization, even though democratization may be indicative of political development. The concluding section of the chapter provides an outline of the rest of the book.

The Nongovernmental Movement in the Third World

The term NGO has many different meanings. Some observers use it to mean all nongovernmental organizations everywhere, including Northern NGOs (NNGOs) based in one developed country that operate internationally, international NGOs (INGOs) or networks based in three or more countries, Southern NGOs from the Third World, and many other kinds of nonprofit organizations throughout the world. The term also has numerous culturally specific meanings. In Western Europe, it generally means nonprofit organizations that are active internationally.[5] In the transitional countries of Europe and the former Soviet Union, it tends to mean all charitable and nonprofit organizations.

In the Third World, the term NGO generally refers to organizations involved in development, broadly defined. Hospitals, charitable organizations, and universities are usually called voluntary or nonprofit organizations rather than NGOs.[6] Although some observers of the Third World use the term NGO to mean only intermediary or grassroots support organizations, all four types of NGOs are involved in sustainable development, and many individual organizations interact with governments. This section first explores GROs and their horizontal connections with one another in GRO networks. Next, the focus is on GRSOs and their vertical connections with GROs, as well as their horizontal connections with one another in GRSO networks. The section concludes with a discussion of how NGOs are "scaling out," or extending their reach to include more people.

GROs and GRO Networks

There are probably over 200,000 GROs in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, defined as locally based membership organizations that work to develop their own communities.[7] Although many GROs have been promoted and stimulated by GRSOs, they have also become more active on their own. Faced with the combined deterioration of their environment and the increasing impoverishment of the 1980s, and sustained by the gradual liberation of women, both traditional and newly created GROs are organizing horizontal networks among themselves. Although many GROs face frustration and failure, there is an immense field-based body of evidence that GROs are the sine qua non of effective and sustainable development. In the slums of Orangi, near Karachi, Pakistan, for example, lane committees provide self-help sewerage and water with little outside help to over 100,000 people (Uphoff 1993, 617).

A majority of GROs are nonprofit organizations. The two most common types of GROs are local development associations (LDAs), such as village councils or neighborhood associations that represent an entire community, and interest associations (IAs), such as women's clubs or irrigators organizations that represent particular groups within a community.[8] A third type of GRO—including borrowers groups, pre-cooperatives, and cooperatives—may make profits. Cooperatives can have a major impact on developing their own communities, yet they clearly differ from nonprofit GROs, as well as from private businesses without members.[9]

Regional or horizontal GRO networks link local community organizations in three different ways. First are the formal umbrella networks that link individual GROs such as cooperatives, LDAs, and IAs. Second are the informal economic networks tied together by barter arrangements that can widen local markets and build a vested interest in regional collaboration. Third are the amorphous grassroots social movements that increasingly focus on environmental concerns; they may or may not be based on individual GROs. For example, the Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Jungle (AIDESEP), organized in 1980, unites GROs representing two-thirds of the 300,000 indigenous peoples that live there. In some cases, GRO networks become self-supporting and create GRSOs from below by hiring their own expertise. The Committee for Development Action, a regional training center in Senegal, links three different ethnic groups and sixteen villages and is funded by a percentage of profits from a communal field (Pradervand 1990).

Although there is an enormous amount of development activity and institution building bubbling up from below, the right mix and quality of outside technical assistance and self-reliance are not easy to determine.

And even self-reliance can degenerate into self-serving behavior. Unfortunately, one large Senegalese peasant federation is already "generating bureaucrats," according to Pradervand (1990, 171). Yet GRO networks help scale up impact, are "more accountable to local people than any other development institution" (Bebbington 1993, 286), and are often in the forefront of understanding the connections between poverty and environmental degradation, if not yet the population issue.[10] Moreover, horizontal linkages between GROs seem to have an additive impact on both participation and equality (Fisher 1993, chap. 2).

GRSOs and GRSO Networks

The proliferation of GRSOs began in the late 1960s. On the supply side, there was an increased availability of official and voluntary foreign assistance. On the demand side, these new resources provided idealistic young professionals, who had benefited from widespread governmental investment in universities in the 1960s, with protection from political repression; a means to express their genuine commitment to the poor; and an alternative to unemployment, dead-end government jobs, or migration to the developed countries. In response, these Third World baby boomers created thousands GRSOs concerned with development, environment, the role of women, and primary health care that work in partnership with GROs.

The most obvious long-term consequence of this phenomenon is that there are now at least 50,000 active GRSOs in the Third World (Fisher 1993, 80–94; United Nations Development Programme 1993, 86). Although there are few data on the birth and death rates of GRSOs, their numbers continue to increase, and Schneider's (1985) estimate that GRSOs were reaching over a hundred million people in the Third World could safely be tripled by 1996 (Fisher 1993, 93–5). A second, striking fact is how similar these organizations are in Bolivia, Botswana, or Bangladesh.[11] Yet what is truly extraordinary about these organizations is that in all but a few Third World countries throughout the world, this coincidence of education and idealism has continued to be nourished by grassroots ties. Indeed, the idea and practices of grassroots support have spread to vastly different types of organizations. Although a small group of professionals that obtains foreign support and begins to work with one or more GROs is the most typical pattern, other organizations are adding grassroots support to their repertoires without necessarily giving up other functions. GRSOs, in other words, turn up in unexpected places such as hospitals, universities, churches, nonprofit theater groups, and, particularly in Latin America, private research centers.[12]