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THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTERNATIONAL NGOs AND THEIR IMPACT ON DEVELOPMENT AID

Thomas Richard Davies

Abstract

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are among the key actors in the transformation of development as a global public policy issue in the post-Cold War era. This chapter explores how in the past two decades INGOs concerned with development have transformed their structures and practices as well as development discourse. The author shows how development INGOs have globalised, in terms of both the formation of international confederations and the collaboration of multiple INGOs in global coalitions. A key development has been the erosion of the apparent North–South divide among development INGOs, with INGOs that originated in donor countries reforming their structures to give a greater voice to their affiliates in recipient countries, and organisations that originated in developing countries forming affiliates in developed countries. The reorientation of INGO advocacy from states toward intergovernmental and corporate actors is also explored, as is the creation of new forms of partnerships with both governmental and private actors. The chapter addresses how development INGOs have attempted to respond to critiques of their accountability and legitimacy through reforms such as the International NGO Charter on Accountability, while the conclusion explores the limitations of the transformations of development INGOs, and the challenges that these new configurations pose.

1. Introduction

Addressing representatives of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) at the Millennium Forum in 2000, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, praised their ‘pioneering role’ in development and claimed that they ‘can work at the international level to lift billions out of poverty’ (Annan, 2000, 2). It is now widely recognised that INGOs are crucial actors in international aid and development (Lewis and Kanji, 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to explore the different ways in which development INGOs have both transformed themselves and played a transformative role in international development in the post-Cold War era. In order to provide the context for the transformations analysed, the chapter begins by exploring the

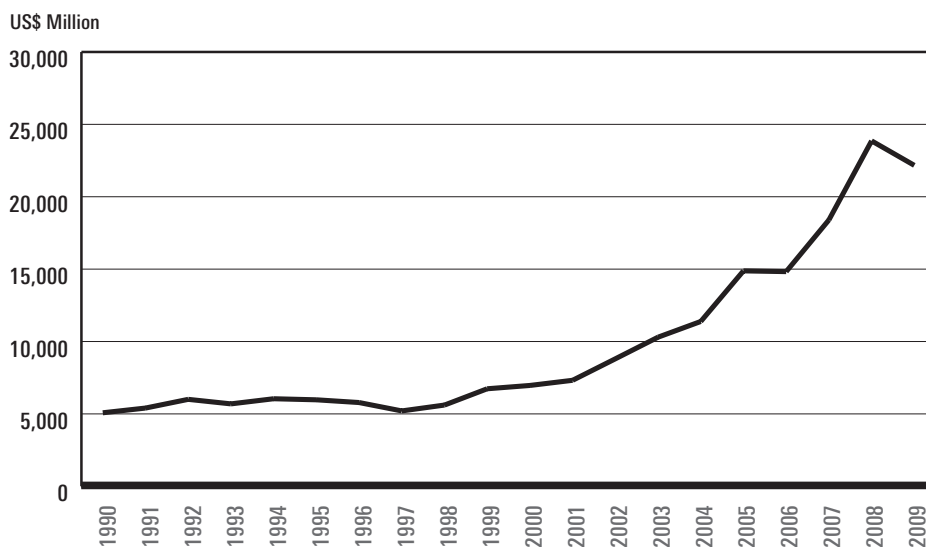
core characteristics of development INGOs and their evolution during the Cold War period. The main body proceeds to evaluate in turn the major aspects of the transformation of development INGOs in the post-Cold War era, including their structures and networking, their role in the developing world, their impact on development discourse and their development practices.

2. Development INGOs

There is no universally accepted definition of the characteristics of an INGO (Judge, 1978, 31). However, it has become common to follow the practice of the Union of International Associations (UIA), which collects data on organisations set up for non-profit-making purposes that were not established by governments and which operate in three or more countries. It is estimated that by 2009 there were more than 25,000 INGOs, of which more than 4000 were involved in development (UIA, 2010). Their diversity varies enormously and includes, but is not limited to, advocacy groups, grant-making foundations, research institutions and service-delivery organisations. As this piece will highlight, many INGOs concerned with development combine several of these roles. While some aim to promote development in general, others specialise in particular sectors such as education and health.

According to data of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on 'net private grants', development aid originating from non-governmental sources amounted to more than US\$22,000 million in 2009, the latest year for which data is available. Figure 4.1 indicates the dramatic increase in non-governmental development aid over the last two decades, with a slight dip following the economic downturn of 2008.

Figure 4.1 – Non-governmental development aid, 1990–2009 (in US\$ million)



Source: OECD (2011).

These figures are almost certainly an underestimate of the total volume of development aid provided by non-governmental sources, with some estimates approaching double the figures of the OECD (Riddell, 2007, 418). With the aid budget of World Vision International in 2005 being greater than that of Italy, INGOs are now among the most economically significant actors in international development (Koch, 2008, 1).

The involvement of INGOs in development is far from a novel phenomenon: the activities of missionary groups and transnational humanitarian organisations predate the emergence of concepts such as ‘international development’ in the twentieth century (Chabbott, 1997, 227). A significant turning-point came with the decolonisation of European empires in the period following the Second World War, when organisations such as Oxfam and CARE turned their attention from post-war relief in Europe to assistance to newly independent countries in Africa and Asia (Walker and Maxwell, 2009, 43–4).

Many of the contemporary roles of INGOs in development were pioneered in the Cold War period. Advocacy was spearheaded by organisations such as War on Want, which is credited with having contributed towards the creation of the industrialised world’s first separate government ministry dedicated to international development in the United Kingdom in 1964 (Willetts, 2011, 157). Six years earlier, the World Council of Churches is thought to have ‘set the first target for official development assistance at one percent of gross national product for each high-income country’, at a time when the overseas expenditure of the Ford Foundation exceeded that of many intergovernmental bodies dedicated to overseas development (Chabbott, 1997, 230–3). During the Cold War, the Society for International Development played an important role in the professionalisation of development work, in the reinterpretation of development from national economic growth to the well-being of the poor, and in pioneering the idea of a Human Development Report, later taken up by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (SID, 2010). Government subsidies to development INGOs increased significantly from the 1960s onwards (Smith, 1990, 4–5). At the same time, there were a growing number of bodies created to coordinate the work of development INGOs, such as the International Council of Voluntary Agencies set up in 1962. Development INGOs were also established in an increasing variety of contexts, reflected in the creation in Japan, in 1961, of the International Organization for Cultivating Universal Human Spirit and the formation, in 1967, of the Aga Khan Foundation. In the 1970s and 1980s, novel networking forms were pioneered, most notably among those concerned with women and development and with providing a ‘Southern’ perspective on development, such as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era and the Third World Network, respectively, both of which were established in 1984.

3. The transformation of development INGOs in the post-Cold War era

While much was pioneered during the Cold War, development INGOs have transformed in the two decades since its ending. One of the most significant changes is the increasingly global nature of the organisational structures adopted

by development INGOs. One aspect of this transformation is the tendency for nationally-based organisations to unite in international confederal structures, evident in the experience of such groups as Oxfam, Save the Children and CARE. In 1995, for instance, nine Oxfams – in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Quebec, the UK and the US – united to form Oxfam International in order ‘to further the Oxfams’ common goals, promote, assist and co-ordinate collaboration among the Oxfams where this will result in a greater impact of the sum total of their joint efforts, [and] protect the Oxfam name and enhance its standing’ (Oxfam International, 1996).

There is a spectrum of organisational forms adopted by INGOs, varying according to the degree of centralisation of their decision-making structures. Development INGOs have traditionally occupied the extremes of the spectrum: at the one end, loose groupings of nationally-based organisations that may share a common name but make decisions independently (such as the Oxfams in the early 1990s), and at the other end, unitary corporate bodies (such as early World Vision), which direct the actions of their offices in various countries from the centre. In the post-Cold War era, there has been an increasing tendency for development INGOs to move from these extremes to federal and confederal forms of organisation, which blend some centralised coordination with a degree of independence of member organisations (Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001, 139–45).

While nationally-based bodies have established international confederations and federations, these INGOs have in turn increasingly involved themselves in coordinated action with other INGOs. The organisation claiming to be ‘the world’s largest civil society movement calling for an end to poverty and inequality’, the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP), for instance, counts among its participating INGOs ActionAid International, *Agir Tous pour la Dignité Quart Monde*, CARE International, *Caritas Internationalis*, Oxfam International and Save the Children. GCAP is an example of a transnational coalition, which brings together national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from a wide range of backgrounds to mobilise for a common cause. It is a more centralised form of organisation than the transnational network, and could even be described as a super-INGO, in that much of its membership consists of bodies that are themselves already INGOs. One of the most notable aspects of GCAP is the way in which it unites organisations with an exceptionally diverse range of backgrounds, from human rights groups such as Amnesty International, to peace associations such as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, to environmentalist organisations such as Friends of the Earth (GCAP, 2011a).

The participants in GCAP are indicative of the broad range of INGOs that are concerning themselves with development in the post-Cold War era. With the emergence of the ‘sustainable development’ agenda, many environmentalist INGOs are now among the most vocal actors in discourse concerning development. In addition, human rights organisations which have traditionally focused their attention on civil and political rights have increasingly turned to economic and social concerns, with Amnesty International expanding its mandate to include such issues following a contentious meeting of its International Council in Dakar in 2001 (Chong, 2009, 119–20). Amnesty International’s change of direction was spearheaded by its Senegalese secretary-general Pierre Sané, reflecting the more diverse leadership of INGOs by the 1990s.

4. INGOs in the developing world

Among the most significant aspects of the transformation of development INGOs in the post-Cold War era is their relationship with countries in the developing world. In the case of development INGOs headquartered in OECD countries, efforts have been made to adjust decision-making procedures to provide a greater voice for affiliated bodies in recipient countries. A growing trend has been the adoption of 'global bumblebee' (as opposed to earlier donor-dominated) structures pioneered by organisations such as World Vision International, which adjusted its governing structures in 1995 to ensure that its international board was elected from seven regional forums (Foreman, 1999). The 'bumblebee' reference 'alludes to the intricate network of influence and interaction between member organizations and with the central organization' (Foreman, 1999, 181).

Global coalitions also feature a growing role for participant organisations based in developing countries. Such transformation is evident in the evolution of Publish What You Pay, which began as a coalition of predominantly British and other OECD country-based groups (Catholic Overseas Development Agency, Global Witness, the Open Society Institute, Oxfam Great Britain, Save the Children UK and Transparency International UK), but by 2011 featured a membership of over 600 organisations among which those based in developing countries outnumbered those in OECD countries by a ratio of approximately 4:1 (Publish What You Pay, 2011). Another transnational coalition, the Clean Clothes Campaign, comprises INGOs in 15 European countries that work with more than 200 national and local organisations in developing countries 'to identify local problems and objectives, and to [...] develop campaign strategies' (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2011). While older coalitions such as these have their origins in OECD countries, more recent coalitions such as GCAP have their origins in developing countries. GCAP, for instance, emerged in a series of meetings in Maputo in 2003, Johannesburg in 2004 and at the World Social Forum in 2005, and has a global secretariat based in Johannesburg, Mumbai, New York and Accra (GCAP, 2011b).

INGOs concerned with development that are headquartered in developing countries have multiplied in the post-Cold War period. Some of these operate within particular regions in the developing world, such as the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), established in 1997 and working in ten Arab countries 'for more sound and effective socio-economic reforms in the region, which integrate the concepts of sustainable development, gender justice, and the rights-based approach' (ANND, 2011). Others aim to represent the global 'South' more generally, such as Focus on the Global South, set up in 1995 and headquartered in Bangkok. For many of these INGOs the focus of their activities is upon research and advocacy rather than direct provision of development assistance.

With respect to service delivery, it has been common to note the dramatically increased role for local-level and national-level non-governmental bodies based in developing countries 'as neoliberal development policies have emphasized a decreasing role for governments as service-providers' (Lewis and Kanji, 2009, 92). It has less-commonly been observed that service-providing NGOs in developing countries are increasingly organising themselves internationally, and

creating some of the most substantial INGOs operating in the present day. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), for example, claims to be ‘the largest development organisation in the world [...] employing more than 60,000 people, and organising and training an additional 60,000 self-employed health volunteers, agriculture and livestock extension agents and part-time teachers’ (BRAC, 2011a). It now operates programmes not only in Bangladesh, but also in Afghanistan, Haiti, Liberia, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda; and it has set up affiliate offices in the United Kingdom and the United States of America for ‘resource mobilization’ (BRAC, 2011b).

With development INGOs headquartered in donor countries reforming their governance structures to provide a greater voice for affiliates in recipient countries, and development INGOs headquartered in developing countries setting up ‘resource mobilization’ affiliates in developed countries, a convergence of organisational forms is emerging, which bridges the former divide between ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ INGOs.

5. INGOs, advocacy and the transformation of development discourse

While direct service delivery remains an important feature of the work of INGOs in international development, advocacy has acquired a greater significance in the post-Cold War era. This is in part the result of the growing number of INGOs headquartered in developing countries for which advocacy is their key focus. In addition, INGOs based in developed countries that formerly concentrated their attention upon service delivery are giving greater priority to advocacy. Among the most notable examples of the latter are the national Oxfams, which united to form an Advocacy Office in Washington in 1995, due to the perception that development issues had become ‘global concerns calling for global analysis and action’ (Anderson, 2007, 89). Another prominent example is CARE International, which has argued that advocacy better enables them to address the ‘root causes of poverty and discrimination’ and to ‘reach a large segment of the population and broaden the scope of [their] impact’ (Sprechmann and Pelton, 2001, 6).

Participation by INGOs in global coalitions is commonly primary for the purpose of advocacy. Some advocacy in global coalitions is perceived to have had considerable impact: the Jubilee 2000 coalition, for instance, has been especially lauded for having contributed to significant debt reduction for many developing countries (Birdsall and Williamson, 2002, 1). More recently, development INGOs have become involved in the broad movement for ‘global justice’, and have been among the most vocal participants in events such as the World Social Forums. GCAP, which was formally launched at the 2005 World Social Forum, has been credited with contributing towards promises at the Gleneagles G8 Summit of 2005 for substantial increases in official development assistance, although these largely failed to materialise (Willetts, 2011, 157). While less well known, INGO advocacy on a local scale has also been influential, with CARE International claiming to have made a difference by lobbying for change on issues as varied as pesticide use in Nicaragua and contraceptives in Cambodia (Sprechmann and Pelton, 2001, 3).

As the key relevant actors to international development have evolved, so have the targets of advocacy by INGOs. While advocacy traditionally focused on national institutions, intergovernmental actors have become increasingly important. The establishment of the World Bank Inspection Panel in 1994 was in part a response to non-governmental pressure (Clark et al., 2003), as was the creation of the Independent Evaluation Office of the International Monetary Fund in 2001 (Scholte, 2011, 93). Formal consultative mechanisms between the international financial institutions and INGOs remain limited, however.

Given the significance of transnational corporations in the contemporary era, these have been among the most common targets of INGO advocacy since the pioneering work of organisations such as War on Want in the 1970s and 1980s in developing the Nestlé boycott movement (Chetley, 1986). While confrontational strategies by INGOs with respect to corporations have become well known, some of the most effective initiatives have involved cooperation with corporations, including private certification schemes such as Fairtrade and international standards for social and environmental performance reporting such as those of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) that were used by more than a thousand organisations in 2009 (GRI, 2010, 16).

The most significant impact of INGOs' advocacy on international development has been in transforming understandings of the nature of international development. The role of INGOs in transforming development discourse towards human development during the Cold War has already been mentioned. In the post-Cold War era, INGOs have been important in bridging development discourse with numerous other discourses, from environmentalism to women's rights. A 'new rights advocacy' on development has emerged 'which makes explicit reference to internationally recognized human rights standards', due to a shift to 'rights-based' development methods by INGOs such as Oxfam and CARE, the turn to economic and social rights by INGOs originally primarily focusing on civil and political rights such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, the creation of transnational coalitions such as GCAP that involve both development and human rights INGOs, and the emergence of INGOs explicitly focused on economic and social rights such as the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Nelson and Dorsey, 2008, 19–21).

INGOs have helped to transform development discourse in part because of their involvement with epistemic communities. Development INGOs and the 'development studies' academic community commonly collaborate, in organisations such as the Development Studies Association and in journals such as the *Journal of International Development*. This collaboration helps legitimise the perception of development INGOs as repositories of development 'expertise' on which governments and intergovernmental bodies may draw. While the use of non-governmental 'experts' in intergovernmental policy formulation is far from a novel phenomenon (it was used extensively by the League of Nations (Zimmern, 1930)), the practice is far more common in the post-Cold War era than it was during the previous four decades. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, for instance, INGOs took part in the official proceedings by providing statements in the 'partnership plenary meetings' on specialist issues, the general debate, and a multi-stakeholder

event, in addition to their numerous unofficial gatherings on the fringes of the conference (UN, 2002, 82–118; Willetts, 2011, 51–2). In environmental negotiations, governmental reliance on INGO expertise has extended as far as ‘delegation capture’, by which some governments such as that of Nauru have appointed as their entire delegations INGO ‘experts’ from foreign nations (Spiro, 1995). However, probably the most significant means by which INGOs have helped to transform discourse is not through their direct interactions with states, but by transforming wider public awareness and perceptions of development issues through their reports, propaganda, demonstrations and use of media.

6. The transformation of INGOs’ development practices

Given the greater prominence of INGOs in development in the post-Cold War era, their activities have been subjected to increased scrutiny. By the mid-1990s a wide range of critiques of INGOs’ roles in development had surfaced. Some critiques have focused on INGOs’ effectiveness in service delivery, claiming that their impact can be ‘highly localized and often transitory’ (Edwards and Hulme, 2002, 53). Where their impact is more far-reaching, INGOs are vulnerable to the critique that they may weaken already often fragile state institutions in developing countries (Barber and Bowie, 2008). Others have critiqued INGOs’ advocacy role, with apparent successes having counterproductive impacts, such as the promotion of a ban in 1993 on imports to the United States of textiles produced by child labour that is said to have ‘forced young girls into much more abusive forms of work such as street trading, domestic work, and prostitution’ (Harper, 2001, 253). While INGOs’ roles in service delivery have been challenged with respect to their accountability, INGOs’ roles in advocacy have been challenged with respect to their legitimacy.

Partly in response to such criticisms, INGOs involved in development have transformed many of their practices. In an effort to improve effectiveness and accountability, greater priority has been given to monitoring and evaluation procedures, reflected for instance in CARE’s creation of a director of monitoring and evaluation in 1995 (Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001, 225). Like some transnational corporations, a number of INGOs now report to the global standards set by organisations such as the Global Reporting Initiative. Since 2007, for instance, Oxfam Great Britain has produced accountability reports to the standards of both the Global Reporting Initiative and the INGOs Accountability Charter (Oxfam Great Britain, 2007, 3). The INGOs Accountability Charter was launched in 2006 with the support of 11 INGOs and aims ultimately to become ‘the authoritative voice and standard code of practice for all INGOs’ (International NGO Charter of Accountability, 2011a). Previous efforts, whether international (such as AccountAbility, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International, One World Trust and the Sphere Project) or national (such as Bond, InterAction and Zewo), are thought to have failed to address ‘adequately...global cross-sectoral issues’ (International NGO Charter of Accountability, 2011b).

Rather than challenging the authority of developing-country governments, INGOs in the post-Cold War era have commonly made greater efforts to work in partnership with them, and with local community structures. The combinations of partners can be extensive, and can include major corporations as well as governments. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has played a pioneering role in forging partnerships between transnational corporate actors, developing country governments and NGOs, such as in its Global Education Initiative, which claims to have ‘helped over 1.8 million students and teachers and mobilized over US\$100 million in resource support in Jordan, Rajasthan (India), Egypt, the Palestinian Territories and Rwanda’ and to engage ‘over 40 private sector partners, 14 governments, seven international organizations and 20 NGOs’ (WEF, 2011).

The closeness between some INGOs and corporate and governmental actors has been criticised for being ‘part of the same loose, political formation that oversees the neoliberal project’ (Roy, 2004, 43). In some cases, INGOs are directly created by businesses, such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), which aims ‘to provide business leadership as a catalyst for sustainable development and to support the business license to operate, innovate and grow in a world increasingly shaped by sustainable development issues’ (WBCSD, 2011). However, the considerable diversity of INGOs should not be underestimated, since many INGOs have been among the most vocal critics of ‘neoliberal’ policies, such as Focus on the Global South. In addition, a number of INGOs are among the most central actors in advocating measures to address potential conflicts of interests between INGOs and business concerns. The Conflicts of Interest Coalition, for example, is leading calls for a code of conduct on managing conflicts of interests with respect to private sector involvement in global public policy, and calls for the United Nations to ‘distinguish between industries, including business-interest not-for-profit organisations (BINGOs) and public interest non-governmental organisations (PINGOs), that are both currently under the “Civil Society” umbrella without distinction’ (Conflicts of Interest Coalition, 2011).

By working together with organisations run from developing countries such as BRAC and Focus on the Global South in umbrella groups such as GCAP, INGOs headquartered in developed countries have endeavoured to enhance the legitimacy of their actions. Among the most significant steps towards enhancing the legitimacy of OECD-country-headquartered INGOs have been the reforms that have been taking place in their organisational structures outlined in section 4 of this chapter. Furthermore, however limited the organisational structures of INGOs run from OECD countries may be, they can often provide a greater voice to some sectors of society in developing countries than their own governments, such as the indigenous groups for the benefit of which Survival International aims to act. In addition, ‘Northern’ INGOs have been important in endeavours for capacity building of local and national NGOs in developing countries (James, 1998), and have played a crucial role in challenging failures to involve local civil society actors in poverty reduction strategies. Where local NGOs in developing countries operate in restrictive political environments, the assistance of some external INGOs has even extended to the dissemination of the techniques of non-violent resistance to authoritarian rule, with the Belgrade-based Centre

for Applied Non-Violent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) training some of the activists that led the Egyptian revolution of 2011 (Davies, 2011a).

7. Conclusion

INGOs have been central to the transformation of development as a global public policy issue in the post-Cold War era. They have globalised their organisational structures and bridged former divisions between 'Northern' and 'Southern' organisations. The range of organisations with which INGOs cooperate on development issues has become much broader, including corporate as well as governmental and intergovernmental actors. INGOs have played a key role in transforming development discourse and advancing practices to promote the accountability and legitimacy of actors involved in development.

However, the changes that have taken place remain limited. The great majority of the governing structures of development INGOs headquartered in OECD countries are still dominated by their members in these countries. The volume of development INGOs headquartered in developing countries, although increasing, remains comparatively small, and they are greatly outnumbered in many transnational coalitions including GCAP. As of September 2011, only 24 INGOs are members of the INGOs Accountability Charter. Furthermore, local and national NGOs in developing countries still commonly operate in a dependent relationship with donor governments and INGOs in developed countries (Michael, 2004).

In addition to their limitations, aspects of the transformations that have taken place among development INGOs in the post-Cold War era may even be considered to be counterproductive. The increasing role of advocacy may have come at the expense of the operational capacity of INGOs in service delivery (Fioramonti et al., 2008, 364). Moreover, the increasingly close relationship between INGOs and corporate and governmental actors in multi-stakeholder initiatives and collaborative projects may reflect a growing corporatisation of international development, which is limiting the prospects for effective pluralism of approaches (Peña, 2011).

Historically, the formation of large coalitions of INGOs, such as the Central Office of International Associations in 1907 and the International Consultative Group in 1932, has preceded a precipitous collapse of transnational associational activity in subsequent years, in part because of the hubristic goals of their organisers (Davies, 2011b). Whether or not the global coalitions of the contemporary era will follow a similar path remains to be seen.

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