

# Can NGOs Make a Difference?

*The Challenge of Development Alternatives*

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**edited by Anthony J. Bebbington,  
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ZED BOOKS  
*London & New York*

*Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives* was first published in 2008 by Zed Books Ltd, 7 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF, UK and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA  
[www.zedbooks.co.uk](http://www.zedbooks.co.uk)

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Designed and typeset in Monotype Bembo  
by illuminati, Grosmont, [www.illuminatibooks.co.uk](http://www.illuminatibooks.co.uk)  
Cover designed by Andrew Corbett  
Printed and bound in Malta  
by Gutenberg Press Ltd, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

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

ISBN 978 1 84277 892 0 hb

ISBN 978 1 84277 893 7 pb

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

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Have NGOs ‘Made a Difference?’  
From Manchester to Birmingham  
with an Elephant in the Room

**Michael Edwards**

In 1991, David Hulme and I found ourselves in a bar at the University of Hull enjoying a post-conference beer.<sup>1</sup> The conversation turned to a mutual interest of ours – the role and impact of NGOs in development – and after a few more pints we hit on the idea that eventually became the first ‘Manchester Conference’ on the theme of ‘scaling-up’, later to be summarized in a book titled *Making a Difference: NGOs and Development in a Changing World* (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). Fifteen years on, the NGO universe has been substantially transformed, with rates of growth in scale and profile that once would have been unthinkable. Yet still the nagging questions remain. Despite the increasing size and sophistication of the development NGO sector, have NGOs really ‘made a difference’ in the ways the first Manchester Conference intended, or have the reforms that animated the NGO community during the 1990s now run out of steam?

In this chapter I try to answer these questions in two ways. First, through a retrospective look at the Manchester conferences – what they taught us, what influence they had, and how NGOs have changed. And second, by picking out a couple of especially important challenges in development terms and assessing whether NGOs ‘stood up to be counted’, so to speak, and did their best in addressing them. These two approaches suggest somewhat different conclusions, which will bring me to the ‘elephant in the room’ of my title.

It is obvious that making judgements about a universe as diverse as development NGOs is replete with dangers of overgeneralization, and difficulties of attribution, measurement, context and timing. I suspect that my conclusions may be particularly relevant for international NGOs and to larger intermediary NGOs based in the South. So, with these caveats

in mind, what does the last decade and a half tell us about the role and impact of NGOs in development?

### **The Manchester Conferences: A Short Retrospective**

As Table 2.1 shows, the theme of the first Manchester Conference in 1992 was ‘Scaling-up NGO impact on development: how can NGOs progress from improving local situations on a small scale to influencing the wider systems that create and reinforce poverty?’ (Edwards and Hulme, 1992: 7). The conference concluded that there were different strategies suited to different circumstances, specifically: (1) working with government; (2) operational expansion; (3) lobbying and advocacy; (4) and networking and ‘self-spreading’ local initiatives. All of these strategies have costs and benefits, but the implicit bias of the conference organizers, and most of the participants, lay towards institutional development and advocacy as the most effective and least costly forms of scaling-up, what Alan Fowler later called the ‘onion-skin’ strategy for NGOs – a solid core of concrete practice (either direct project implementation or support to other organizations and their work), surrounded by successive and interrelated layers of research and evaluation, advocacy and campaigning, and public education. To varying extents, this strategy has become standard practice for development NGOs in the intervening years.

Buried away at the end of *Making a Difference* was the following statement: ‘The degree to which a strategy or mix of strategies compromises the logic by which legitimacy is claimed provides a useful test of whether organizational self-interest is subordinating mission’ (Edwards and Hulme, 1992: 213). For reasons that I will come back to later in my argument, that has turned out to be a prescient conclusion.

Fast-forward to the second Manchester Conference in 1994, in a context in which NGOs had begun to ‘scale-up’ rapidly in an environment in which they were seen as important vehicles to deliver the political and economic objectives of the ‘New Policy Agenda’ that was being adopted by official donor agencies at the time – deeper democratization through the growth of ‘civil society’, and more cost-effective delivery of development-related services such as micro-credit and community-driven development. As a result, many NGO budgets were financed increasingly by government aid, raising critical questions about performance, accountability and relations with funding sources. The key question for that conference was as follows: ‘Will NGOs be co-opted into the New Policy Agenda as the favored child, or magic bullet for development?’ (Edwards and Hulme, 1995: 7). And, if so, what would that do to NGO mission and relationships? Will they, as

**Table 2.1** The Manchester conferences: a summary

Location and date	Theme(s)	Key conclusions	Published outputs
Manchester 1992	<p>Scaling-up NGO impact on development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘How can NGOs progress from improving local situations on a small scale to influencing the wider systems that create and reinforce poverty?’</li> </ul>	<p>Different strategies suit different circumstances: (1) working with government; (2) operational expansion; (3) lobbying and advocacy; (4) networking and ‘self-spreading’ local initiatives.</p> <p>All have costs and benefits but implicit bias to institutional development and advocacy to control for dangers (the ‘onion-skin’ strategy): ‘The degree to which a strategy or mix of strategies compromises the logic by which legitimacy is claimed provides a useful test of whether organizational self-interest is subordinating mission.’</p>	<p><i>Making a Difference: NGOs and Development in a Changing World</i>  <i>Scaling-up NGO Impact on Development: Learning from Experience</i> (DIP)</p>
Manchester 1994	<p>NGO growth raises questions about performance, accountability and relations with funding sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Will NGOs be co-opted into the New Policy Agenda as the favored child, or magic bullet for development?’</li> <li>• If so, what does that do to NGO mission and relationships: ‘too close to the powerful, too far from the powerless’?</li> </ul>	<p>Problems are not inevitable – they depend on the quality of relationships between actors and how ‘room to manoeuvre’ is exploited. Therefore, negotiation between stakeholders is vital, requiring innovation in performance assessment, accountability mechanisms, and relations with funders.</p> <p>‘The developmental impact of NGOs, their capacity to attract support, and their legitimacy as actors in development, will rest much more clearly on their ability to demonstrate that they can perform effectively and are accountable for their actions. It is none to soon for NGOs to put their house in order.’</p>	<p><i>Beyond the Magic Bullet: NGO Performance and Accountability in the Post Cold-War World</i> (x 2)  <i>NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?</i> (x 2)  <i>Too Close For Comfort: The Impact of Official Aid on NGOs</i> (WD)  <i>Policy Arena: New Roles and Challenges for NGOs</i> (JID)</p>

<p>Birmingham 1999</p>	<p>The changing global context poses questions about NGO roles, relationships, capacities and accountabilities. 'Adapt or die!' Three key changes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. globalization reshapes patterns of poverty, inequality and insecurity;</li> <li>2. 'complex political emergencies' reshape humanitarian action;</li> <li>3. the focus of international co-operation is moving from foreign aid to rules, standards and support for the most vulnerable.</li> </ol> <p>Hence transnational organizing among equals for systemic change in North-South transfers and interventions.</p>	<p>This changing context gives rise to four challenges for NGOs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. mobilizing a genuinely inclusive civil society at all levels of the world system;</li> <li>2. holding other organizations accountable for their actions and ensuring they respond to social and environmental needs;</li> <li>3. ensuring that international regimes are implemented effectively and to the benefit of poor countries;</li> <li>4. ensuring that gains at the global level are translated into concrete benefits at the grassroots.</li> </ol> <p>NGOs must move from 'development as delivery to development as leverage', or 'marry local development to worldwide leverage'. This requires more equal relationships with other civic actors, especially in the South, new capacities (e.g. bridging and mediation), and stronger accountability mechanisms.</p>	<p><i>NGOs in a Global Future: Marrying Local Delivery to Worldwide Leverage (PAD)</i></p> <p><i>New Roles and Relevance: Development NGOs and the Challenge of Change</i></p> <p><i>NGO Futures: Beyond Aid (TWQ)</i></p> <p><i>Global Citizen Action</i></p>
<p>Manchester 2005</p>	<p>NGOs and development alternatives: have we <i>really</i> changed things? NGOs have helped to change the debate on globalization, increase commitment to participation and human rights, and keep the spotlight on the need for reforms in the international system (trade, intervention etc.). But the foreign aid system/paradigm has changed much less than was predicted in 1999. Has this been a disincentive to deeper changes in NGO practice (the 'security blanket' effect)?</p>	<p>Significant changes in the external environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increasing pace of global change and commonality in causes and effects (no more 'North' and 'South?');</li> <li>• geopolitical rearrangements and their impact on global governance (USA, China, India/Brazil/South Africa, Middle East);</li> <li>• cultural cleavages on values and ideology (religion);</li> <li>• the reality of climate change, esp. given urbanization.</li> </ul> <p>But also stronger conventional international cooperation (increased ODA; continued donor influence, imposed democratization and economic reform, democratic deficits in international institutions, despite recipients' dissatisfaction and growing external criticism). Will the international system, including NGOs, change faced with new global realities?</p>	<p><i>NGOs and the Challenge of Development Alternatives</i></p> <p><i>Have NGOs 'Made a Difference'?</i></p> <p><i>From Manchester to Birmingham with an Elephant in the Room</i></p>

another of the conference books put it (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 275), become 'too close to the powerful, and too far from the powerless'?

At the time, our conclusion was that such problems were not inevitable. Whether they arise depends on the *quality* of the relationships that develop between actors, and on how each NGO uses its 'room-to-manoeuvre' to control for the costs of growth and donor-dependence. Therefore, negotiation between stakeholders is vital, requiring innovation in performance assessment, accountability mechanisms, and relations with funding agencies. 'The developmental impact of NGOs,' we concluded, 'their capacity to attract support, and their legitimacy as actors in development, will rest much more clearly on their ability to demonstrate that they can perform effectively and are accountable for their actions. It is none too soon for NGOs to put their house in order' (Edwards and Hulme, 1995: 227–8).

Since 1994 there have been some important innovations in this respect, like the Humanitarian Accountability Project; the rise of self-certification and accreditation schemes, seals of approval and codes of conduct among child sponsorship agencies and other NGOs; the development of formal compacts between government and the non-profit sector in the UK, Canada and elsewhere; the Global Accountability Project in London; ActionAid's ALNAP system; and simple but powerful things like publicizing the financial accounts of an NGO on public bulletin boards that are being encouraged by MANGO and other organizations (Jordan and van Tuijl, 2006).

In retrospect, however, NGOs did not heed this call with sufficient attention, and are now suffering from it in a climate in which, unlike ten years ago, weaknesses in NGO accountability are being used as cover for an attack on political grounds against voices that certain interests wish to silence. Examples of such attacks include the NGO Watch project at the American Enterprise Institute, the Rushford Report in Washington DC, and NGO Monitor in Jerusalem. Stronger NGO accountability mechanisms won't do away with politically motivated attacks like these, but they would surely help to expose them for what they are.

In 1999, the Third NGO Conference took place in Birmingham, framed by a rapidly changing global context that posed some deeper questions about NGO roles, relationships, capacities and accountabilities. 'Adapt or die' was the subtext of that meeting, whose organizers highlighted three key sets of changes:

First, globalization reshapes patterns of poverty, inequality and insecurity, calling for greater global integration of NGO strategies and more 'development work' of different kinds in the North;

Second, 'complex political emergencies' reshape patterns of humanitarian action, implying more difficult choices for NGOs about intervention and the need to re-assert their independence from government interests; and,

Third, a move from foreign aid as the key driver of international cooperation to a focus on rules, standards and support for those who are most vulnerable to the negative effects of global change implies greater NGO involvement in the processes and institutions of global governance, both formal and informal. (Edwards et al., 1999: 2)

The thrust of these changes is clearly visible in the titles of the books that emerged from the Birmingham conference – *NGO Futures: Beyond Aid* (Fowler, 2000); *New Roles and Relevance* (Lewis and Wallace, 2000); and *Global Citizen Action* (Edwards and Gaventa, 2001) – holding out the promise of transnational organizing among equals for systemic change as opposed to a secondary role shaped by the continued asymmetries of the foreign aid world.

This changing context, we believed, gave rise to four key challenges resulting from the evolution of a more political role for development NGOs in emerging systems of global governance, debate and decision making:

1. how to mobilize a genuinely inclusive civil society at all levels of the world system, as opposed to a thin layer of elite NGOs operating internationally;
2. how to hold other (more powerful) organizations accountable for their actions and ensure that they respond to social and environmental needs – something that implicitly demanded reforms in NGO accountability;
3. How to ensure that international regimes are implemented effectively and to the benefit of poor people and poor countries (getting to grips with ‘democratic deficits’ in global institutions and protecting ‘policy space’ for Southern countries to embark on their own development strategies); and
4. how to ensure that gains at the global level are translated into concrete benefits at the grassroots, translating abstract commitments made in international conferences into actions that actually enforce rules and regulations on the ground (Edwards et al., 1999: 10).

NGOs, we concluded, must move from ‘development as delivery to development as leverage’, and this would require the development of more equal relationships with other civic actors, especially in the South, new capacities (like bridging and mediation), and stronger downward or horizontal accountability mechanisms.

Since 1999 there have certainly been some examples of innovations like these, like the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign in the UK, which has developed stronger coordination mechanisms among development and non-development NGOs, and other organizations in UK civil society, and the development of much more sophisticated advocacy campaigns on aid, debt and trade.

If one believes that there is a credible chain of logic linking these three conferences, their outputs, and those of other similar efforts that were ongoing during the same period, with the emergence of a more thoughtful and professional development NGO sector, and (going one stage further) linking the emergence of that sector with at least the possibility of a greater aggregate impact on development, then one can begin to answer the question posed by this volume in the affirmative, breaking down those answers by country context, type of organization, type of impact, longevity, sector, issue and so on in the ways that other chapters try to do.

I think one would have to argue an extreme version of the counterfactual to say otherwise – in other words, to claim that the world would be a better place without the rise of development NGOs, however patchy their impact may have been, especially given the huge and complex challenges that face all NGOs in their work today. Perhaps I am not setting the bar very high in making this point, but in critiques of NGOs it is often forgotten. There *has* been a positive change in the distribution of opportunities to participate in development debates and in democracy more broadly, and in the capacities and connections required by NGOs to play their roles effectively, even if global trends in poverty and power relations, inequality, environmental degradation and violence are not all heading in a positive direction.

In other words, some of the preconditions, or foundations, for progress are being laid, brick by brick, organization by organization, community by community, vote by vote. If one believes that democratic theory works, then, over time, more transparency, greater accountability and stronger capacities for monitoring will feed through into deeper changes in systems and structures. Civil society may yet fulfil Kofi Annan's prediction as the 'new superpower' – a statement that was largely rhetorical but contained at least a grain of truth. And as context for that conclusion, think back thirteen years to the first Manchester Conference when NGOs were still something of a backwater in international affairs. No one could say the same thing today.

### **Where We Were Wrong, and Why It Is Important**

So, so far, so good. There was one major area, however, in which the analysis of previous conferences was seriously awry, and it has some significant consequences for the NGO world going forward. This was the prediction that foreign aid would be replaced by a different, healthier and more effective system of international cooperation in which the drivers of development and change would no longer be based around North–South transfers and foreign intervention.

In fact, the clear decline in real aid flows that was observed between 1992 to 1999 from US\$57,950 million to US\$49,062 million (German and Randel,

2004) – exactly coinciding with the first three NGO conferences – turns out to have been an atypical period in recent history. With the support of a growing coalition of celebrities, charities, politicians, journalists and academics, we are firmly back in a period of rising real aid flows, up to around \$78 billion in 2004, set to grow still further, and perhaps even reaching the promised land of \$150–200 billion a year estimated to be required to meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. The critical literature on aid effectiveness, the importance of institutions, and the primacy of politics that emerged during the 1990s has largely been marginalized from the current discourse (Edwards, 2004b). From Jeffrey Sachs to Bob Geldof, the new orthodoxy asserts that more money *will* solve Africa’s problems, and, if we add in an American twist, make the world safe from terrorism too.

Of course, in 1999 no one could have predicted some of the key reasons behind this reverse – principally the events of 9/11 and the ensuing ‘war on terror’, or the recent catastrophic tsunami in Asia – but previous conferences were also guilty of confusing normative and empirical arguments. Much of the discussion at the Birmingham Conference was driven by what the organizers and participants *wanted* to see happen in the future, not necessarily by a hard-nosed analysis of likely trends and opportunities.

Why is this important for the rest of my argument? The reason is that the perseverance of the traditional aid paradigm, even in its modified version of Millennium Challenge Accounts, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, International Finance Facilities and the rest of the current paraphernalia of aid reform, makes any kind of quantum leap in NGO impact much more difficult to achieve because it weakens the incentives for deep innovation by providing a continued ‘security blanket’ for current practice. Of course, one can read this as a much more positive story, particularly when calls for aid are coupled with serious action on debt relief and trade justice. And I don’t mean to imply that investment in developing countries is irrelevant – simply that is difficult to detach the dysfunctional aspects of the traditional aid paradigm from the injection of ever-larger amounts of money by powerful national interests into societies with weak institutions and fragile systems of accountability. To explain what I mean, let me move to the second way in which I’ve chosen to answer the questions I posed at the beginning of my argument.

### **The ‘Larry Summers Test’**

I recently attended a dinner at which the keynote speaker was Larry Summers, ex-president of Harvard University. After his speech was over, one brave member of the audience – a leading Arab academic – asked him

point-blank whether he thought that America 'has been a force for good in the world'. His answer was unconvincing, but interesting, since he said that it would be impossible to give a sensible answer to that question in any general sense. There are too many 'ifs, buts and maybes', and too many variations of detail, context and circumstance. However, he went on to say, one *can* ask whether America 'did the right thing' at those few moments in history when a certain course of action was unquestionably important – such as intervention in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. And in those cases, the answer was unequivocally 'yes'.

Of course, one can dispute Summers's conclusion, but I think the way in which he repositioned the question is useful in relation to the topic of development NGOs and their impact. Instead of trying to generalize across the huge diversity of the NGO universe, we can ask ourselves whether NGOs 'did the right thing' on the really big issues of our times.

On the positive side of the balance sheet, I think development NGOs have helped to do the following, albeit with limited practical results thus far:

- changed the terms of the debate about globalization, leading to the emergence of a new orthodoxy about the need to manage the downside of this process, level the playing field, and expand 'policy space' for developing countries;
- cemented an intellectual commitment to participation and human rights as basic principles of development and development assistance; and,
- kept the spotlight on the need for reforms in international institutions and global governance on issues such as unfair terms of trade and investment, global warming, Africa, and the kind of warped humanitarian intervention represented by the war in Iraq.

On the other hand, there is a less positive side to this story when one looks beyond the short-term gains that have been made in the development discourse to grapple with the underlying goals that NGOs were set up to pursue. In my view development NGOs have not 'stood up to be counted' sufficiently on the following crucial questions. They have not been very innovative in finding ways to lever deep changes in the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and the abuse of human rights, despite the recent boom in Corporate Social Responsibility and public-private partnerships. The 'onion', to go back to Alan Fowler's phrase, is still incomplete, made up by layers of fairly conventional development projects and advocacy work. For example, development NGOs have not changed power relations on anything like the necessary scale in the crucial areas of class, gender and race. They have not faced up to the challenges of internal change – changes in personal attitudes, values and behaviour – in any significant way. They have not established strong connections with social movements that are more

embedded in the political processes that are essential to sustained change. They have not come to grips with the rise of religion as one of the most powerful forces for change in the world today, increasingly expressed in fundamentalism and demanding large-scale action to build bridges between pluralists in different religious traditions.

Equally important, development NGOs have not innovated in any significant sense in the form and nature of their organizational relationships. For example, little concrete attention is paid to downward accountability or the importance of generating diverse, local sources of funds for so-called 'partners' in the South (a weakness that underpins many other problems, including legitimacy and political threats to organizations perceived as 'pawns of foreign interests'). They have internalized functions that should have been distributed across other organizations – local fundraising by international NGOs inside developing countries (or 'markets' to use a telling common phrase) provides a good example, and there are others – franchising global brands instead of supporting authentic expressions of indigenous civil society, and crowding out Southern participation in knowledge-creation and advocacy in order to increase their own voice and profile, as if the only people with anything useful to say about world development were Oxfam and a handful of others.

Of course, there are exceptions to all of these generalizations. I would single out ActionAid for the changes it has made, and on a smaller scale I was struck by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy's decision to transfer spaces on the NGO delegation to the Cancún trade talks from Northern NGOs to groups from the South in 2004. But these examples tend to get noticed because they are exceptions that prove the rule. The rules of the international NGO world seem to stay pretty much the same. Does anyone believe that development NGOs still aim to 'work themselves out of a job', that old NGO mantra? Maybe it was never true, but there isn't much evidence to suggest that it is taken seriously today. Let's face it: NGOs are a major growth industry, back in the 'comfort zone', and set to continue along that path. There has been little real transfer of roles or capacity in either 'delivery' or 'leverage'. It's almost as though they have taken the entire 'onion' and swallowed it whole!

NGOs may give a nod in the direction of 'levelling the playing field', diversifying NGO representation in the international arena, empowering marginalized voices, building the capacity of actors in the South for independent action, helping them to sustain themselves through indigenous resources, 'handing over the stick', becoming more accountable to beneficiaries and so on, but in practical terms the 'institutional imperatives' of growth and market share still dominate over the 'developmental imperatives' of individual, organizational and social transformation (see Table 2.2). And

**Table 2.2** NGO imperatives

Developmental imperatives	Institutional imperatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bottom line: empowering marginalized groups for independent action.</li> <li>• Downplay the role of intermediary; encourage marginalized groups to speak with their own voice.</li> <li>• Democratic governance; less hierarchy; more reciprocity; a focus on stakeholders.</li> <li>• Multiple accountability, honesty, learning from mistakes, transparency, sharing of information.</li> <li>• Maintain independence and flexibility; take risks.</li> <li>• Address the causes of poverty; defend values of service and solidarity.</li> <li>• Long term goals drive decision making; programme criteria lead.</li> <li>• Rooted in broader movements for change; alliances with others; look outwards.</li> <li>• Maximize resources at the 'sharp end'; cooperate to reduce overheads and transaction costs.</li> <li>• Maintain focus on continuity, critical mass and distinctive competence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bottom line: size, income, profile, market share.</li> <li>• Accentuate the role of intermediary; speak on behalf of marginalized groups.</li> <li>• More hierarchy; less reciprocity; a focus on donors and recipients.</li> <li>• Accountability upwards, secrecy, repeat mistakes, exaggerate successes and disguise failures.</li> <li>• Increasing dependence on government funds; standardization; bureaucracy.</li> <li>• Deal with symptoms: internalize orthodoxies even when antithetical to mission.</li> <li>• Short-term interests drive decision-making; marketing criteria lead.</li> <li>• Isolated from broader movements for change; incorporate others into your own structures; look inwards.</li> <li>• Duplicate delivery mechanisms (e.g. separate field offices); resources consumed increasingly by fixed costs.</li> <li>• Opportunism – go where the funds are; increasing spread of activities and countries.</li> </ul>

Source: Edwards, 1996.

– returning to the quotation I cited from *Making a Difference* earlier in this chapter – this failure places an important, continuing question mark against the legitimacy of development NGOs and their role in the contemporary world. It is these failings, I believe, that stand in the way of increasing NGO impact in the future, and it is these failings that represent the 'elephant in the room' of my title. We don't want to recognize the beast, but we know it's there. And while it remains in the room – a hulking, largely silent presence – NGOs will never achieve the impact they say they want

to achieve, because their leverage over the drivers of long-term change will continue to be weak.

One can read this story under the conventional rubric of institutional inertia, defensiveness and the difficulties of raising money for new and unfamiliar roles. But I think something more fundamental is going on. Underlying this situation is a much broader struggle between two visions of the future – one that I call ‘international development’, and the other ‘global civil society’, for want of a better phrase.

The ‘international development’ vision is predicated on continued North–South transfers of resources and ideas as its centrepiece, temporarily under the umbrella of US hegemony and its drive to engineer terrorism out of the world, if necessary by refashioning whole societies in the image of liberal, free-market democracy. This vision requires the expansion of traditional NGO roles in humanitarian assistance, the provision of social safety-nets, and ‘civil society building’ (crudely translated as support to advocacy and service delivery NGOs; Edwards, 2004a). It privileges technical solutions over politics, and the volume of resources over their use. The role of the North is to ‘help’ the less fortunate and backward South; if possible, to ‘save it’ from drifting ever further away from modernity, defined as liberal market democracy (God forbid there is a viable alternative, like Islam); and if that fails, then at least to ‘prevent it’ from wreaking havoc on Northern societies. The ‘war on terror’, I would argue, reinforces and exacerbates the worst elements of the traditional foreign aid paradigm.

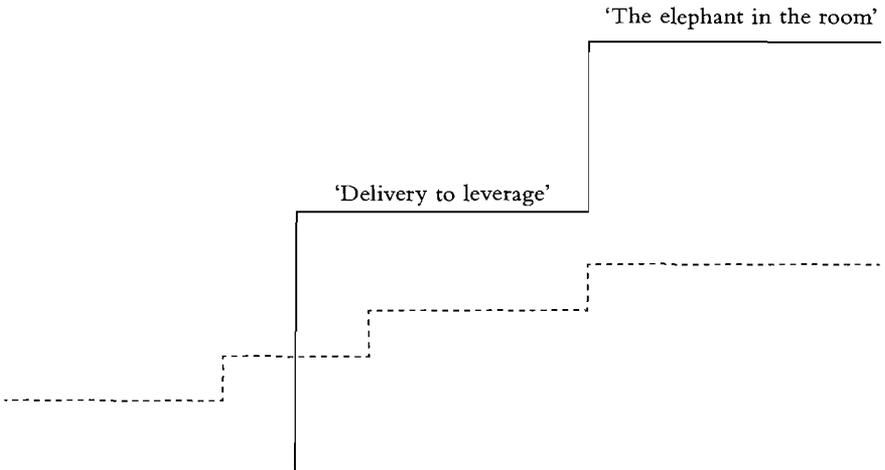
The ‘Global Civil Society’ vision, and here I’m exaggerating to make a point, takes its cue from cosmopolitan articulations of an international system in which international law trumps national interests, and countries – with increasingly direct involvement by their citizens – negotiate solutions to global problems through democratic principles, the fair sharing of burdens, respect for local context and autonomy, and a recognition of the genuinely interlocking nature of causes and effects in the contemporary world. This vision, to be successful, requires action in all of the areas in which I think development NGOs have been found wanting – levelling the playing field, empowering Southern voices, building constituencies for changes in global consumption and production patterns, and injecting real accountability into the system, including personal accountability for the choices that NGOs make. The struggle for *global* civil society can’t be separated from the struggle for *personal* change, since it those changes that underpin the difficult decision to hand over control, share power, and live a life that is consistent with our principles. In this vision our role is to act as ‘critical friends’, as I put it on the last page of *Future Positive*, sharing in ‘the loving but forceful encounters *between equals* who journey together towards the land of the true and the beautiful’ (Edwards, 2004b: 233).

Recent history can be read as a reversal in what the Birmingham NGO Conference predicted would be a steady, long-term transition from the 'international development' model to 'global civil society'. Led by the United States, we are seeing a retreat from the cosmopolitan vision and a return to culturally bound fundamentalisms, the hegemony of the nation-state, and the belief that the world can indeed be remade in the image of the dominant powers through foreign intervention – with Iraq as the paradigm case. That, at root, is why there are so many attacks today on the institutions, or even the idea, of global governance, the rise of non-state involvement and the threats it supposedly carries, the legitimacy of international law, and the transnational dimensions of democracy – as opposed to the domestic implantation of versions of democracy in other peoples' countries.

It is no accident that hostility to international NGOs forms a key plank of neo-conservative thinking in America today. 'Post-democratic challenges to American democratic sovereignty should be clearly defined and resisted', writes John Fonte of the Hudson Institute, one of the key think-tanks of neo-conservatism. 'NGOs that consistently act as if they are strategic opponents of the democratic sovereignty of the American nation should be treated as such. They should not be supported or recognized at international conferences, nor permitted access to government officials' (Fonte, 2004). 'NGOs should be at the top of every Conservative's watch list', says Elaine Chao, President Bush's current secretary of labor. So, 'you have been warned'. No matter how much additional foreign aid gets pumped through the international system, NGOs are unlikely to get very far unless they recognize that there are much bigger issues at stake. This is nothing less than a battle for the soul of world politics, and NGOs need to decide which side they want to take. I was convinced in Birmingham in 1999, and I'm even more convinced today, that we need to break free from the foreign aid paradigm in order to liberate ourselves to achieve the impact that we so desperately want.

### Conclusion

To sum up, my case is that the return of foreign aid to favour provides a security blanket for NGOs who might otherwise have been forced to change their ways. There may, of course be more unforeseen events in the near future that, like 9/11, provide an external shock to the system large enough to interrupt current trends and initiate new directions – or, as in this case, return us to old ways of doing business. This might happen to development NGOs, for example, if aid donors ever got serious about cutting intermediaries (national and international) out of the equation,

**Figure 2.1** Trajectories of NGO impact

but I don't think this is very likely – the donors need a conduit on which they can rely.

Therefore I see only incremental increases in impact – shown by the hatched line in Figure 2.1 – unless NGOs can break out of the foreign aid box, as a few pioneers are already doing. As they have recognized, there is a much healthier framework for civic action available to us if we decide to choose it. In my view, the advances made by development NGOs throughout the 1990s – spurred on significantly but not exclusively by the Manchester Conferences – represented a much bigger leap in NGO strategy and potential impact, shown by the solid line in Figure 2.1. Dealing effectively with the 'elephant in the room' represents the next such quantum leap.

In conclusion, the question facing development NGOs today is the same question that faced participants in the first NGO Conference in Manchester in 1992, albeit framed in a somewhat different context. That question is less about what NGOs have achieved in the absolute sense, since they can never achieve enough, and more about how they can achieve more, however well they think they are doing. How satisfied are NGOs with their current performance? Do they wait until another 9/11 hits the system and shakes them out of their complacency, or can they 'bite the bullet' and implement their own gradual reforms now? Perhaps when the development NGO community meets again in Manchester in ten years time, there will be a different set of answers on the table.

### Note

1. The views expressed in this chapter are the author's personal views and should not be taken to represent the views or policies of the Ford Foundation.

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