Generic Negative: NGO's Bad

By “Coach Vance” Trefethen

This is a generic NEG brief against reliance on NGO's for anything. NGO's (Non Governmental Organizations) are non-profit groups that do charitable work in various countries, often providing services that governments can't or won't do (health clinics, famine relief, disaster recovery, refugee assistance, etc.). Sometimes they provide services local governments are trying to do and replace or crowd them out, leading to weakening of governments and a net loss to the people they're supposed to be helping. NGOs are outside of the elected accountable system of government and are not elected by nor accountable to the people they're supposed to be engaged with.

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Negative: NGO's Bad

SOLVENCY

1. No gain in efficiency compared to government

Less efficient than government: NGO workers have to devote a lot of their time to other activities besides service delivery

Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern Univ 2020. 7 Aug 2020 "Why Well-Meaning NGOs Sometimes Do More Harm than Good" (accessed 17 Mar 2023) (Desserano and Qian are both professors at Northwestern Univ.) <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/international-aid-development-ngos-crowding-out-government> (brackets added; ellipses in original)

[Associate Professor of Managerial Economics & Decision Sciences, Dr. Erika] Deserranno and [Prof. Nancy] Qian theorize that these unfortunate outcomes might in part be attributable to the commercial incentives. [Previous research](https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/app.20170670) by Deserranno [and](http://dspace.bracu.ac.bd/xmlui/handle/10361/13249) [others](https://experts.illinois.edu/en/publications/supporting-and-retaining-village-health-teams-an-assessment-of-a-) have found that while government workers devote an average of 10 hours per week to the delivery of health services, employees at this NGO spend an average of 14 hours per week on the job—but only seven of those hours go to free health services, with the other seven going to sales work. “The fact that they spend less time on the important task is problematic,” Deserranno says. “This suggests that the NGO may need a different incentive structure. … It’s just unclear at this point what the ideal incentive structure is.”

2. Doesn't solve corruption

Bypassing the government, giving aid money to NGO's doesn't avoid corruption and waste. Example: Haiti

Margot Patterson 2018 (journalist) 22 Feb 2018 " Are N.G.O.s in Haiti doing more harm than good?" (accessed 17 Mar 2023) https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/02/22/are-ngos-haiti-doing-more-harm-good

In Haiti, U.S food aid flooding the market has provided cheap food but driven many Haitian farmers off the land. Haiti has a reputation for corrupt government, but waste, mismanagement, fraud and corruption also plague charities, non-governmental organizations and aid agencies. Only a small fraction of the outside aid pledged to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake actually reached the Haitian people. Concerned about corruption, donors circumvented the Haitian government. Unfamiliar with local conditions and resources, they squandered millions of dollars in ill-conceived and poorly executed projects that actually made life worse for Haitians.

3. State capture

Using NGO's to circumvent "bad" governments doesn't work because the NGO must comply with the government or else it will be put out of business by the government. Example: Bangladesh

Dr. Feyzi Ismail and Prof. Sangeeta Kamat 2018 (Ismail - PhD in Development Studies. Kamat - associate professor, Univ. of Mass.-Amherst) 2 Mar 2018 "NGOs, Social Movements and the Neoliberal State: Incorporation, Reinvention, Critique" ASSOCIATION FOR CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY (accessed 17 Mar 2023) https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0896920517749804

When Bangladesh began to develop its manufacturing base in garments for export, it could rely less on foreign aid, creating leverage for the state to become more autocratic and reclaim power over NGOs that had become well-funded and influential power brokers at national and international levels. She describes how smaller, independent community-based NGOs inspired by leftist and feminist ideologies are quickly disciplined and contained by an assertive state, while powerful and controversial NGOs such as the Grameen Bank are skilfully brought within the ambit of the state, attenuating NGO agency and capacity for engagement in official politics. Under conditions of an increasingly authoritarian government, working within the acceptable limits of development – of which microfinance is one of the main preoccupations in Bangladesh – ensures the continued existence of NGOs. Those NGOs that resist these constraints and develop autonomy from the state and corporate sector risk survival.

Governments can co-opt the NGOs and make them neutered tools of the state. Example: Russia

Dr. Andrew Heiss 2018 (PhD in public policy analysis) 15 June 2018 "NGOs and Authoritarianism " (accessed 17 Mar 2023) https://www.andrewheiss.com/research/chapters/heiss-ngo-ir-2019/heiss-2019-ngos-authoritarianism.pdf

Similar to Palestinian nonprofits aligning themselves with the PNA to secure funding, foreign aid to Russian NGOs created the unintended consequence of creating patron-client ties between international donors and Russian recipients, strengthening vertical ties rather than the horizontal networks necessary for a more robust and socially responsive civil society sector. Instead of a strong grassroots civil society, foreign democratization aid in post-Soviet Russia—enabled by laws that shaped the distribution of foreign funds—helped created a “professionalized realm of NGOs, inaccessible to most local groups and compromised by its links to a neoliberal vision of development” (Hemment 2004, 215). This effectively allowed the Russian state to contain the side effects of democratization aid and neuter NGOs that could potentially destabilize the regime. Russia has continued to regulate its civil society sector in a way that has linked it more closely to the state and moved it away from its intended constituents.

NGO's get told by the state

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Autocrats can use international NGOs to stabilize and reinforce their political power at home. As discussed previously, because competition for foreign patronage created an absence of strong links between Russian advocacy groups and the public, the Russian state has been able to restructure the civil society sector so that only NGOs that “work on issues that align with the national interest” receive funding and support (Henderson 2010, 13 254), short-circuiting international spiral pressure and silencing domestic advocacy movements.

4. Unresponsive to local needs

NGO's can't respond effectively to local needs because of conflicts between what the people need and what the donors want their money spent on

Nicola Banks, David Hulme and Michael Edwards 2015 (Banks - Lecturer in Urban Development, Univ. of Manchester, UK. Hulme - professor of development studies, Univ. of Manchester. Edwards - former Director of the Ford Foundation's Governance and Civil Society Program ) WORLD DEVELOPMENT Feb 2015 "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?" (accessed 17 Mar 2023) https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939

Contrary to popular perceptions, NGOs face significant difficulties in tailoring programs to local needs. A competitive funding environment means that their strategies must align with donor priorities and interests ([Ebrahim, 2003](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0180), [Elbers and Arts, 2011](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0200), [Epstein and Gang, 2006](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0205), [Fowler, 2000a](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0240), [Fowler, 2000b](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0225), [Gill, 1997](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0260), [Mohan, 2002](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0420), [Tvedt, 2006](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0520)). In Malawi, donor prioritization of HIV/AIDS has led to the decline or disappearance of other priorities – much to the frustration of many NGOs there ([Simon Morfit, 2011](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0495)). Likewise, [AbouAssi (2012)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0005) explores how environmental NGOs in Lebanon shifted their programmatic focus to adapt to changing donor priorities. In Tanzania, too, [Levine (2002)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0370) finds strategic shifts among national conservation NGOs in line with priorities of international development agencies. Tensions between the different priorities of donors and the Zapatista movement in Mexico also illustrate how donor requirements prevent NGOs from prioritizing the grassroots.

5. Structural limitations

Too many structural barriers block the effectiveness of NGO's in the modern world

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If anything, the beginning of the 21st Century has been characterized by the shrinking room for maneuver that exists for NGOs and their cooptation into the international aid system ([Fowler, 2011](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0235), [Townsend et al., 2004](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0515)). Ultimately, the inability and/or unwillingness of NGOs to fulfill their perceived advantages in terms of innovation, grassroots orientation, and accountability undermines their legitimacy as ‘development alternatives’ and their ability to tackle structurally entrenched forms of poverty and dispossession. Returning to [Table 1](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "t0005) this reiterates the limitations faced by development NGOs in fulfilling their society functions where they lack a strong membership base and inward accountability. So long as these issues remain un-addressed, their leverage over the long-run drivers of development and social change – and their ultimate impact – will be weak ([Edwards, 2008](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0195), [Mitlin et al., 2007](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939" \l "b0410)).

DISADVANTAGES

1. Crowding out government services

Ghana Study: Increase in NGO activity crowded out (replaced) government funding and services in the same sectors

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The researchers found evidence of financial crowding-out. Government funding decreased by 6.8 percent in the sectors where the NGO was active, even as it increased by 7.4 percent in areas where the NGO was not focused. This indicated that money was flowing away from the government institutions that villagers had previously relied upon and into the new programs and services sponsored by the NGO—yet these new programs and services were less effective at improving people’s well-being.

Impact: Citizens being "served" by the NGO's ended up worse off than before the NGO arrived

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In Ghana, there was reason for optimism that the participatory development NGO would achieve its lofty goals: In villages that began working with the NGO, Karlan and Udry found that villagers became more likely to attend community meetings and contribute to projects, while trust in leaders and perceptions of accountability also improved. By all accounts, these villages seemed on track to develop better, more equitable public services than peer villages that weren’t assigned to work with the NGO. However, the boost in civic participation didn’t translate into real socioeconomic outcomes. In fact, after several years, the average person was worse off than they’d been before the NGO arrived.

2. Steal local talent

NGO's hire local talent away from existing government organizations, harming the people they're supposed to help

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Erika Deserranno noticed a pattern during her years doing research in Uganda: when a nongovernmental organization (NGO) arrived in a village, workers in the local government often shifted to new jobs with the NGO, which invariably paid much more. She found herself wondering what the implications of this move might be. On the one hand, it was plausible that by offering such high pay, NGOs incentivized workers to perform better, improving life for the individuals they serve while allowing local governments to direct scarce resources elsewhere. Alternatively, it was also possible that those NGOs were siphoning talent away from government services that citizens depend on, but without improving those services. Deserranno, an associate professor of managerial economics and decision sciences at Kellogg, decided to take a closer look at the impact of NGOs’ entry into small, low-income, rural villages. She partnered on the research project with Nancy Qian, a professor of managerial economics and decision sciences at Kellogg, who had heard similar stories of global aid “crowding out” local services during her time in Rwanda. In a new study, they find evidence that NGOs can indeed crowd out government-provided services and, in doing so, may inadvertently harm the people they’re seeking to help. “When I saw the results, I thought, ‘Wow, all of those stories—I guess they’re true!’” says Qian, who is also the founding director of Kellogg’s China Lab. “It’s one thing to hear the stories; it’s another to see them bearing out in the data.” Deserrano and Qian’s findings suggest that independent organizations may not fully grasp the needs of the communities they serve, leading to adverse consequences.

3. Weakens government legitimacy

Link: NGO's operate without democratic accountability and, acting independently of the state, de-legitimize it in the eyes of the people

Margot Patterson 2018 (journalist) 22 Feb 2018 " Are N.G.O.s in Haiti doing more harm than good?" (accessed 17 Mar 2023) https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/02/22/are-ngos-haiti-doing-more-harm-good

U.N. troops brought cholera to a country where it had not existed; charities, the American Red Cross notable among them, used the millions of dollars collected for earthquake relief for their own purposes; aid workers from outside the country who swarmed into Haiti operated without oversight or accountability. “Two centuries of turmoil and foreign meddling had left a Haitian state so anemic it couldn’t even count how many citizens it had,” Mr. Katz writes. After the quake*,*the almost-absolute power of aid groups operating independent of the Haitian government weakened an already weak state, delegitimizing it in the eyes of its people. “There was no way for Haitians to appeal an NGO decision, prosecute a bad soldier, or vote an unwanted USAID project out of a neighborhood,” he writes.

Link: NGO's become a substitute for the state, take over its workers and functions, and erode the legitimacy of the state

Dr. Andrew Heiss 2018 (PhD in public policy analysis) 15 June 2018 "NGOs and Authoritarianism " (accessed 17 Mar 2023) <https://www.andrewheiss.com/research/chapters/heiss-ngo-ir-2019/heiss-2019-ngos-authoritarianism.pdf> (brackets in original)

NGOs have substituted for authoritarian state power in many other countries, often with negative consequences. In many instances, states with fewer resources or with weak government capacity purposely “cede responsibility for the provision of basic services” (Bratton 1989, 569) to better-funded NGOs in an effort to maintain political stability. Doing so, however, deeply entrenches the economic and social power of these NGOs, and “no incentive is ever provided to them to promote the kind of changes which would ultimately reduce their dependency on foreign donors” (Martin 2002, 12). In other countries, NGOs attract skilled workers by offering higher salaries, which allows them to siphon off the most skilled public sector employees and further weaken state capacity (Ahmed and Potter 2006; Chege 1999). In Zambia, development NGOs have been far more successful than the government in providing social services and public infrastructure (Ahmed and Potter 2006, 66), which in turn has led to the “steady erosion of state [political] hegemony and credibility” (Ihonvbere 1996, 196).

Link: State legitimacy matters because it determines state capacity

Sue Unsworth 2010. (worked for the UK government's Dept. for International Development) The State’s Legitimacy in Fragile Situations (accessed 17 Mar 2023) https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/the%20States%20legitmacy%20in%20FS.pdf

State legitimacy matters because it provides the basis for rule by consent rather than by coercion. Lack of legitimacy is a major contributor to state fragility, because it undermines the processes of state-society bargaining that are central to building state capacity.

Impact: Long term, Citizens end up worse off. Weaking legitimacy weakens the state's capacity to solve problems and respond to citizens' demands, which weakens legitimacy, which weakens capacity…

Sue Unsworth 2010. (worked for the UK government's Dept. for International Development) The State’s Legitimacy in Fragile Situations (accessed 17 Mar 2023) https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/the%20States%20legitmacy%20in%20FS.pdf

Capacity and legitimacy are distinct but interdependent. Legitimacy strengthens capacity because the state can rely mainly on non-coercive authority: citizens contribute willingly and actively, and are motivated to mobilise and engage in collective action vis-à-vis the state. This in turn allows states to better manage competing interests and to design and implement policies that are responsive to citizens’ needs. Capacity is likely to improve legitimacy and further stimulate collective action that effectively aggregates and channels citizen demands. So capacity and legitimacy are mutually reinforcing, and can create virtuous or (in fragile situations) vicious circles (where lack of capacity undermines legitimacy).