

Henry F. Carey and Oliver P. Richmond (eds) *Mitigating Conflict: The Role of NGOs* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 2003); pp.191, including Acronyms and Abbreviations, Abstracts, Notes on Contributors and Index. ISBN 0 7146 5430 2 hbk, £42.50; ISBN 0 7146 8406 6 pbk £17.50.

This book can be read on two levels. On one level it is a broad-ranging analysis of the problems and issues raised by NGO engagement in conflict prevention and peace-building. Divided into sections on thematic issues (six chapters) and case studies (four chapters) the key questions of NGO independence from donors and governments, problems of the manipulation of aid and capacity for long-term planning, and problems of politicisation under the human rights agenda are raised and addressed with a variety of different nuances.

Many chapters stand out as being of particular interest. For example, Michael Schloms' chapter on the contradictions and problems of NGOs pursuing a humanitarian or a human rights agenda handles the debate with great balance, highlighting the limited role humanitarian aid can play in peacebuilding. (p.53) Charlotte Ku and Joaquín Cáceres Brun highlight the reasons for the ICRC's stance on neutrality in the face of pressure to go down a more partisan and politicised path. Frances T. Pilch contributes a fascinating chapter on the struggle of Western legal NGOs, through elite advocacy and the provision of *amicus curiae* briefs, to 'engender' war crimes prosecutions and extend international law in relation to sexual violence. This book would therefore make a good introduction to the questions of NGO engagement in peace processes and one that I would recommend for undergraduate and MA teaching purposes.

On another level, the chapters and the introduction and conclusion offer very little that would be new or of interest to readers more familiar with the debates. In fact, the underlying impression is one of setting up a straw man which is then only criticised in a fairly circumstantial way. The problem is that the starting assumption for the editors and contributors is that NGOs have a vital role to play in peace processes. As Oliver Richmond states in his Introduction: 'NGOs are relatively unencumbered by sovereign concerns and are themselves relatively free from claims to sovereignty, which enables them to work in normative frameworks untainted by official, state and systemic interests.' (p.5) From this rather naïve and idealistic perspective, problems, issues and contradictions raised by the contributors are then of interest only in so far as they raise the need for 'further investigation in order to develop more effective and multidimensional responses to conflict in the field on the part of NGOs and the many actors they are associated with'. (p.10) The bland assumptions and anodyne conclusions, set up a highly restrictive research framework. This restrictive approach taints every contribution to the collection and establishes a framework for the book which tends to weaken and truncate the very useful points raised.

Some of the weaker chapters focus on prescriptive rather than analytical concerns, for example, Francis Kofi Abiew writes that NGO-Military relations need better understanding and coordination, Felice D. Gaer uncritically charts the mainstreaming of human rights concerns in UN bodies and urges further progress on this. The uncritical and narrow starting assumptions hugely exaggerate the role that NGOs can play. Wafula Okumu, in his chapter on humanitarian NGOs in Africa, for example, argues that NGOs are 'mitigating the social and economic consequences of collapsing states&implementing peace accords, promoting democratic and economic reforms, protecting human rights, and encouraging the settlement of conflicts' (p.120) before laying out his own prescriptive solutions. It is as if states and governments, markets and major powers do not really play a major role in the outcome of peace processes and that NGOs operate in some parallel universe where normative values are enough to turn wishes into reality.

The lack of any broader consideration of how NGOs, new security approaches and new normative frameworks fit into the increasingly unregulated, and increasingly hierarchical, framework of international relations is a frustrating lacunae. The questions raised about third party interference, ethics, coordination and long-term processes of external regulation are broader ones, concerning Western policy making and the breakdown of the Cold War framework of international regulation. Looking at these questions in technical terms of NGO practice and experience makes them less open to investigation or clarification.

In fact, the real question is why there is such a focus on NGOs when conflict resolution and peace-building processes are, if anything, affairs of states. Establishing the importance of NGOs for

policy-making is one thing, especially when it comes to the influence of Western elite advocates, such as high profile individuals or lawyers' groups; however, establishing the importance of NGOs for conflict resolution and peacebuilding in non-Western states is another. James Larry Taulbee and Marion V. Creekmore, Jr's chapter on the role of the Carter Centre highlights the dependency of Carter's 'Track 1½' diplomacy on US government advice and permission. Bronwyn Evans-Kent and Roland Bleiker in their chapter on NGOs in Bosnia highlight the token contribution of domestic NGOs, limited to multi-cultural drama groups and lecturing demobilised soldiers on the dangers of alcoholism. Mahmood Monshipouri's chapter on NGOs and peacebuilding in Afghanistan makes this clear. When the government's writ does not run outside the capital Kabul, the potential for NGOs to promote gender equality, long-term development, community participation or refugee return is somewhat limited. Not only is peace-building dependent on states and governing structures in the region, the success of conflict resolution is often dependent on states outside the region as well.

David Chandler is Senior Lecturer in International Relations, Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster.