

Ann C. Hudock, *NGOs and Civil Society: Democracy by Proxy?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) pp.120, including Glossary, References and Index.

This short book makes one very good point and raises a number of important questions about international aid for democratisation and civil society-building. The one point that it makes is the empirical one that international support for Southern NGOs generally described as 'capacity-building' tends to build the 'capacity' of donors and international agencies rather than empowering Southern NGOs. The important questions raised concern the theoretical understanding of why capacity-building meets with such limited success and the policy responses to this.

Where the book is strong is at the level of description. Drawing on a large number of examples and four case studies, from Sierra Leone and The Gambia, Hudock illustrates that international funding for Southern NGOs tends to have negative consequences for their capacity to work with the poorest and most marginal groups. There are two central difficulties. Firstly, the funding of projects tends to involve these NGOs in a lot of bureaucratic and administrative tasks, in both applying for funding and in the monitoring and accounting for expenditures, drawing resources away from 'front-line' work. Secondly, in order to meet donor targets, Southern NGOs will seek to work with groups and individuals where positive results are easiest to achieve, for example, those with easy access, organisation skills and easily attainable goals. She argues that while international resources being ploughed into capacity-building of Southern NGOs may increase their numbers and influence, the building up of the NGO sector does not necessarily give voice to the poor and marginalized in these societies thereby creating the 'democracy by proxy' of the sub-title.

This basic point is a refreshing change and a challenge to much of the literature which assumes that NGO-building in some way equates to democratisation or civil society-building. Her work, which mainly uses examples from Africa, is supported by recent studies in other regions where NGO-building has been a focus of international initiatives, for example, Bosnia.

Where the book is less informative is the theoretical understanding of the problems of 'capacity-building' and policy alternatives offered. Hudock illustrates that the resource inequalities between Northern donors and Southern NGOs have resulted in a relationship of dependency which gives donors leverage over the operations and aims of Southern NGOs. The alternatives are clearly limited, yet she seems certain that there can be a technical 'fix' that can make the power inequalities disappear, giving Southern NGOs a say in the 'capacity-building' process. She makes a number of suggestions for overcoming this structural inequality in the donor/NGO 'partnership' - from a plea for donors to give funds on a secured long-term basis with less monitoring and conditionality so that Southern NGOs can pursue their own, independent, strategies, to ideas for alternative funding through corporate sponsorship or networks of dinner parties. She argues that 'capacity-building' should not be focused on 'internal' questions of management and administration but 'external' ones which address the key problem of resources, such as fund-raising capacities, for example by funding the post of fund-raiser. The discussion of policy alternatives is at worst, a facile one, and at best, merely a circular argument, failing to address the main questions at issue.

The problems with the book are not merely at the level of solutions. She makes a number of key assumptions which are never examined, for example, that Southern NGOs can actually 'empower' the poor and excluded (if left to their own devices) and that Northern donors can 'empower' Southern NGOs (once they adopt her strategy of giving money without strings attached). These assumptions indicate that Hudock is not as hostile to 'democracy by proxy' as it may at first appear. In her work there is little consideration of the importance of the political process, democracy or self-government, and certainly little hostility to international donors calling the shots. Hudock, in fact, appears to be supportive of elite advocacy or 'democracy by proxy'. She argues: '&it is imperative that NGOs engage with international organizations. NGOs often represent local communities' only opportunity to influence international agencies' policies and programmes, and in the process change local conditions.'(p.57) How unelected and unaccountable Southern NGOs which spend their time in international policy forums can claim to either represent 'local communities' or to be better representatives than governments or to 'influence' international agencies are issues which are all conveniently ignored.

It appears that Hudock's concern is not that NGOs, being feted by international donors, are creating 'democracy by proxy' but that this process, whereby international control over the work of NGOs is so overt and NGO dependency on international donors so transparent, may undermine

NGO's legitimacy and new role as preferred policy partners to governments. Hudock's theoretical assumptions about the role of NGOs and of civil society advocacy seem to be directly challenged by her empirical work. It is this contradiction at the heart of her book which makes her seek refuge in technical solutions and restricts the discussion of the political issues raised to the aside of 'areas for further study'. Nevertheless, despite the contradictions and the truncated nature of the analysis, this book still makes a valuable contribution to the current discussion on NGOs and civil society-building.

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