South African NGOs and the public sphere: Between popular movements and partnerships for development

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This article examines the widespread notion that post-apartheid democracy can be deepened and civil society strengthened by NGO activities in the sphere of public debate and participation. I focus on a number of interrelated processes which I argue may compromise NGOs' ability to expand the public sphere: firstly, donors' overwhelming focus on NGOs as the sole representative of civil society may contribute to a homogenous and institutionalised public sphere; secondly, the tendency for NGOs to be drawn into partnerships with government bodies and corporate sponsors casts doubt on their ability to open up spaces for critical public debate. By directing attention to popular movements as potentially offering a site for the production of critique, NGOs' relationships to such movements are examined. It is argued that attention must be paid to the processes of NGO-isation and reformism by which NGOs themselves come to define what civil society should be and may consequently contain counterpublic spheres.

Keywords: NGO; civil society; South Africa; social movement; counterpublics

Introduction

There are a number of South African non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whose objectives include enhancing public debate and participation and building civil society capacity. Generally donor-funded, the activities of such NGOs are understood as deepening democracy and supporting a healthy civil society. This article seeks to assess claims about the role of NGOs in the public sphere: does their work open up the sphere of debate and critique or are their endeavours by definition elitist, excluding the experiences and socio-economic realities of the majority population? A number of interrelated processes are charted by which certain actors are included and others excluded in conceptions of civil society in South Africa. This, it is argued, may in fact impact negatively on the existence of spaces of public deliberation and on the shape of post-apartheid democracy. The article thus seeks to contribute to a critical reading of formalised South African NGOs and their relationships with other components of civil society. In the first part, I examine how particular donor understandings of civil society, chiefly its conflation with professionalised NGOs, contribute to a limited definition of civil society in post-apartheid South Africa. In the second part, reconceptualisations of public-sphere theory are employed in order to direct attention to popular movements and their potential to open up spaces for critique NGOs may structurally be unable to engage in. In examining the relationships of formalised NGOs to social movements, I argue that processes of NGO-isation as well as NGOs' own 'reformism' of civil society may contribute to a narrowing of spaces for public debate.

The organisations sampled for this research are what I refer to as intermediary NGOs. Unlike pure service-delivery NGOs, the work of such formalised organisations

seeks to promote and extend democracy through capacity building, research, advocacy, monitoring and organisational development. Given their heterogeneity, it is not possible to give adequate space to the political and organisational differences between the NGOs considered here; what this article focuses on are the processes by which NGOs may come to represent civil society in South Africa.[i]

Civil society, donors and post-apartheid democracy: What role(s) for NGOs?

Theoretical perspectives on civil society and public sphere
South African political scientist Adam Habib characterises civil society as 'the organised expression of various interests and values operating in the triangular space between the family, state and the market' (2003, p. 228).[ii] The term has plural and often contradictory meanings for different civil society actors: many of those interviewed rejected it outright as a donor discourse, some saw it as an ambivalent category with limited use, and others employed the term strategically. Yet, the notion of civil society is perpetually evoked in the language of donors and international institutions. From its revival in the 1980s, when it was picked up by the development mainstream, resulted a huge extension of civil society support programmes; by the end of the decade, a new orthodoxy had evolved which discredited the state as at best inefficient. Civil society was hailed as a benign area through which to improve the democratic performance of governments in the developing world, with NGOs identified as primary agents of this vision.

Turning first to mainstream approaches of civil society, it is perhaps Robert Putnam's (1993, 1995) interpretation that has been most influential on institutional civil society discourse in the last two decades. Putnam's approach builds on Alexis de Tocqueville's work on early American democracy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Here, civil society is understood as the sum of voluntary organisations. The strength and stability of liberal democracy depends on a vibrant sphere of such associational participation as a means of ensuring equality and protecting the individual from conformity to the will of enfranchised masses (Howell and Pearce 2001). This approach to civil society is embedded in liberal democracy, placing great emphasis on political stability and the safeguarding of individual interests. Despite the fact that Putnam's work was specifically concerned with democratisation processes in Italy and associational life in the US, the revived notion of civil society was adopted as global development consensus. Assumptions that it can be transposed to any given political, economic or cultural context were justified by an appeal to the universality of (neo)liberal democracy. By the mid-1990s, the term had become a fixture in debates on South Africa's democratic future as well. This was not least due to the influx of international development funding and knowledge into the country in the period between 1990 and 1994, during which global policy discourses such as 'good governance' and 'civil society' were adopted and circulated by national NGOs (Pieterse 1997).

Other theoretical approaches can be traced back to a Gramscian conception of state and civil society, the latter a site where hegemony and counter-hegemony are played out. Such a framework allows accounting both for NGOs as articulated with the consent and legitimating functions of the state and for potentially more progressive movements seeking to carve out counter-hegemonic spaces. Jürgen Habermas (1987) argues that the 'colonization of the lifeworld', for example through commercialisation and

commodification of media or education, reduces the public sphere by bureaucratising and commodifying social life and replacing open dialogue by bureaucratic procedures and economic transactions. However, this process also gives rise to new social movements which can then construct relatively autonomous spaces for public debate about the legitimacy of the political and economic system: 'Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified forms to the public sphere' (Habermas 1996 cited Chambers 2002, p.96). In Habermas's account, social movements are thus identified as the principal actors for resistance and emancipation, responsible for generating and extending the public sphere in democratic systems. From this perspective, civil society provides a site for the 'production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state' and of the goals and values of governance (Fraser 2003, p. 84). His arguments further reveal how economic rationalities come to dominate other rationalities in the public sphere – a point which I believe can be applied to the commercialisation of NGOs discussed below and challenges an orthodox understanding of NGOs as necessarily strengthening democracy.

Some claim that the heyday of civil society discourse is 'passé' (Edwards 2004b), but this is certainly not backed up by an analysis of recent donor requirements and institutional policy texts, nor was it reflected in the interviews for this study. The link between civil society and democracy is frequently framed in terms of active citizenship, participation and debate – language immediately reminiscent of public-sphere theories. Donor-funded civil society projects in South Africa sometimes address the subject of the public sphere directly, arguing for instance that 'civil society must be able to participate in and influence public debate', thus advancing the democratisation process (Böll Foundation 2007). The funding guidelines of other donors similarly assume linkages between democratic civil societies and increased participation in public affairs.[iii] Accordingly, many formalised intermediary NGOs are involved in related activities: organisations as diverse as the Wolpe Trust, the Centre for Public Participation, Media Monitoring Africa and Agenda held grants for projects seeking to facilitate public dialogue and foster political participation in 2007. Other organisations that focus directly or indirectly on building capacity for dialogue and critique include the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI), the Edge Institute and the South African History Archive (SAHA), to name but a few.[iv]

The construction of civil society in liberal theory as a binary opposite to the state, as encountered above, oversimplifies the complex relationships and frequent collaboration between state and civil society actors. Habib (2003) distinguishes three different sets of civil society organisations (CSOs) which display distinct modes of engagement with the South African state: formalised NGOs, social movements and survivalist community-based organisations (the latter of which have little, if any, interaction with the state). These distinctions are not rigid; social movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) have taken on characteristics of formalised NGOs, a process I discuss in part two of this article, whereas NGOs such as the FXI see their role as supporting popular movements.[v] Nonetheless, the formal NGO sector in particular interlinks with the state in a number of ways, for instance through partnerships, through subcontracting or through personal histories and political affiliations. It is therefore more

apt to speak of a spectrum of relations that are fluid, and contingent on individuals in CSOs as well as in the state's agencies. In order to further elucidate this argument, a brief history of CSOs in South Africa, charting the increasing conflation of civil society with NGOs, is discussed next.

From civics to NGOs: state-civil society relations in South Africa
Under apartheid, service organisations were working explicitly against the state, providing a shadow welfare system to the majority of the population neglected by the state's separate development policy. Foreign governments and international donor agencies channelled funds through these organisations to fight apartheid. Besides the objectives of a non-racial democracy, however, the values of the various parts of the anti-apartheid movement were not always clearly defined and differed on essential issues such as the form of democracy and the economic system to be adopted after the end of apartheid. Tensions were largely suspended with the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF). This provided an umbrella organisation for hundreds of civics mobilising against National Party rule, but clear ideological and organisational divides remained among the different components of South African civil society.

The transition and immediate post-1994 period was mainly characterised by a harmonisation of development objectives and co-operation between civil society and the newly democratic state. This was the result of a consensual model of nation building in the 'new South Africa' that attributed a service delivery role to CSOs. The shift, in 1996, away from a framework seemingly emphasising reconstruction towards the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution plan (GEAR) moreover favoured 'institutionalised corporatist relationships involving all social forces in the project of "nation building" through political/ideological "consensus"' (McKinley unpublished). The adoption of GEAR also marked the increasing exclusion of civil society from consultation in policy processes. Structural and legislative changes included the establishment of the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO), the National Development Agency (NDA) and legislation such as the Non-Profit Act. Many organisations folded as a consequence of funding modalities changing towards bilateral relations with the ANC government and much of the expertise of the sector being absorbed into the new state bureaucracy. Other NGOs survived the funding crisis, but found that they needed to reposition themselves either as service-delivery organisations or to carry out contracting work for government bodies. As a result of these processes, the sector was weakened in terms of capacity, reduced in numbers and increasingly dependent in terms of activities, and had restructured itself partly in line with government policies and priorities. This transformation and formalisation mirrored the global development priorities of institutionalism and inclusion as encapsulated in the Post-Washington Consensus.[vi] Civil society effectively became equated with NGOs that had successfully professionalised.

These changes gave rise to what we may call new-generation NGOs. Having innovative funding models and a variety of resource mobilisation strategies, such NGOs are organisationally configured towards strong partnerships with the public and the corporate sector. The partnership mode can be contrasted with NGOs that remain structured around a more classical donor-beneficiary model. Clearly, all NGOs are currently forced to seek new income-generating strategies and develop self-financing

strategies. Also, adherence to monitoring and evaluation standards leads donor-based NGOs to corporatise to some extent. The South African NGO sector is highly differentiated: 'new' NGOs by no means encapsulate the entire NGO sector nor do I argue that partnerships have the same impact on all organisations. That said, the model that new-generation NGOs are employing has important effects on the whole NGO sector in that it renders partnerships as a necessity in the eyes of donors and establishes a blueprint for a streamlined NGO. Many of the case NGOs have narrowed their programmatic focus, expanded their activities into the Southern African region and subcontracted to government in recent years. Around the time of the second democratic election in 1999, South Africa also began to witness an eruption of mass protests and mobilisations expressing dissent over the government's failures in service delivery.

Broadening participation or extending partnerships?
Intertwining national and global processes of professionalisation and homogenisation have produced as ideal-typical CSO a formal and streamlined NGO with cross-sectoral linkages. In the present study, the organisations that emerged as most successful in accessing donor funding in the spheres of civil-society strengthening and public participation were NGOs based in the three urban centres; they had professionalised and all had considerable quantitative-analytical skills. Being able to adhere to the stringent reporting requirements demanded by donors already implies a high level of financial, management and language expertise. The point to emphasise in relation to donor demands of monitoring and evaluation is their organisational-structural effects. Project evaluation and performance reviews overemphasise quantitatively measurable outcomes, therefore they are changing the ratio between financial/administrative and project staff, impacting on organisational culture and producing specific types of expertise. Monitoring and evaluation practices thus require certain organisational conditions which not only favour but indeed produce highly professionalised types of NGOs.

In addition to favouring such types of organisations, donors delineate specific roles for CSOs, such as 'partnering with government to improve the quantity and quality of basic services' or 'engaging in policy formulations' (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation 2007). The emphasis placed on partnering is central to a contemporary understanding of development that sees partnerships between civil society and the state as a means to deliver inclusively and efficiently. At the same time, the fact that many donors support the South African government via bilateral aid means that they shy away from supporting NGOs that work with social movements which may be seen as critical of government. The constantly shifting alliances in partnerships have severe implications for NGO accountabilities to their supposed constituencies. However, a simple argument of international donors putting into place the existing development regime does not capture the complexities of the South African non-profit sector for which the state is in fact the biggest donor. Civil-society-enhancing programmes continue to be constructed by external actors, but they overlap, and occasionally conflict, with other (for instance state-led or community-based) versions of development. Many NGOs have themselves incorporated donors' interpretations of their roles.

The often internally divided relationships of NGOs with the state are further complicated not only by their involvement in partnerships, but also by their subcontracting for government as part of a drive for sustainability. A number of NGO

staff characterised their location as necessitating a constant tightrope walk. IDASA was said to have a 'schizophrenic capacity to work in different ways with different people'.[vii] On the one hand, civil society should be a site for the production of discourses that can be critical of the state, especially in the context of high levels of poverty and inequality. Given that NGOs are tasked with building capacity for and extending civil society, they are assigned a critical role that goes beyond holding the state accountable. This is why a celebration of civil society's plurality must be carefully formulated: NGOs working with other parts of civil society have a responsibility to strengthen these formations in their own abilities to advance dialogue and critique. On the other hand, collaboration with national government or provincial ministries on particular policies can impede their ability to exercise this twofold critical role. Service-related NGOs by definition are in more collegiate relationships with the government than many of the NGOs considered here that are working in the fields of human rights, advocacy or monitoring. Nevertheless, even for this set, assisting government and hence 'contributing to change seriously' can be an important aspect of their work.[viii] The dualism of supporting government in implementation whilst remaining in a critical watchdog role that holds government accountable is difficult to accomplish, especially given the state's apparent definition, for much of the post-apartheid period, of appropriate state-civil society relations as collegiate and uncritical, and its branding of non-adherence as unpatriotic. This dilemma is particularly evident where NGOs' perspective on popular movements is concerned, the latter of which have been subject to state marginalisation and repression for challenging government policies and its failures in service delivery. NGOs' engagement with the state clearly affects their positioning towards other components of civil society.

The link between expanding the public sphere and democratic growth is regularly evoked, but – as those involved in initiatives designed to stimulate public dialogue readily acknowledge – remains under-researched.[ix] Precisely because of this lack of evidence, it is important to question whether NGOs are the appropriate agents to engage those excluded from political processes and to encourage criticism of the narrowing of spaces for debate. After all, NGOs have for many years been criticised for frequently not reaching the marginalised, having little legitimacy with communities and having a specific base. Donor objectives of supporting a diverse civil society seem largely rhetorical where it is almost exclusively formal NGOs that qualify for funding intent on broadening public participation and strengthening civil society. The structural location of formal NGOs may result in donors supporting very particular interests and reproducing existing elites. Donors' focus on NGOs could then be seen as limiting civil society and democratic participation, running the danger of 'thwart[ing] the formation and effectiveness of interest groups that could push for state accountability' (Howell and Pearce 2001, p. 185). With civil society itself being constructed, discursively and materially, according to often narrow donor criteria, its extension through capacity-building projects can arguably result in more of the same civil society, as opposed to contributing to greater participation.

NGOs and social movements

From the public sphere to counterpublics

The fact that most funded NGOs may structurally not be in a position to forge critical debate then necessitates the question of which other civil society formations are able to open up such spaces. In particular, it is popular movements and their repression by the state that bring the relationships of NGOs towards non-elitist forms of participation and protest into sharp focus. South Africa now has the greatest number of protest actions in the world – 10,000 per year, according to some (Bond 2007c). The persistence of high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality, resulting from the restructuring of the economy and the adoption of a cost-recovery model in service provision, have given rise to the upsurge of movements out of such protests. What are sometimes referred to as new social movements encompasses a whole array of issues and constituencies that vary considerably in scale, organisational form, capacity and strategies.[x] Whilst movements tend to be vociferous in their critique of the state, their positioning can be divergent, ranging from confrontation to partial engagement on specific issues. The differences between NGOs and movements are not in all instances clear-cut either, as was stated earlier: TAC, for example, bridges the space between NGO and movement, employing a range of tactics to hold the state accountable. Nonetheless, community movements are usually excluded from donors' definition of civil society and the public sphere. Donor-funded NGOs likewise struggle with defining their identity in relation to movements, as the next section of the article explores: whilst situating themselves in alliance with movements, their relationship is also characterised by attempts to contain or shape movements.

To direct attention to social movements as potentially offering spaces for debate and critique requires briefly revisiting Habermas's work on the public sphere. Whilst his analysis can provide a tool to understand the commercialisation of NGOs, more problematic for the present context is his assumption that social movements have shifted their attention from capital/labour struggles to grievances connected to the colonisation of the lifeworld by state and economy. This is difficult to uphold in the context of South African community mobilisations against the neoliberal reordering of the economy.[xi] Habermas's thinking on the public sphere also falls short in this context because it assumes that a multiplicity of alternative public spheres indicates fragmentation and democratic decline. Nancy Fraser (2003), for instance, has shown that, in stratified societies, existing structural inequalities are exacerbated if there is only one single public sphere: members of subordinated groups have no spaces for deliberation among themselves, resulting in a danger of absorption into a comprehensive public sphere. Her concern certainly resonates with the stigmatising of public protests as seemingly constituting a betrayal of the national democratic revolution and of national democratic citizenship. The discourse of nation building as it is circulated by political elites is in fact central to this understanding of the public sphere as necessarily consensual and homogenous. Xolela Mangcu (2008) argues that nationalism, instead of being a tool in the struggle against repression, has become an instrument of rule. Based on the same logic is the inclusive vision of development and social change that is encapsulated in the contemporary emphasis on multisectoral partnerships.

Conversely, Fraser's concept of counterpublics captures the 'plurality of competing publics', providing spaces for subordinated groups to 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (2003, p. 91). Her notion challenges the oft-criticised assumption that

members of the Habermasian public sphere are able to debate as equals, notwithstanding their economic or social status. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, with its formally inclusive public sphere but historical structural relations of dominance and inequality, greater attention to discursive interactions and the rules governing inclusion and exclusion in public spaces is necessary. Support of formalised NGOs' work for the purpose of widening democratic participation has to be carefully reassessed taking into account these concerns. Moreover, the ongoing attempts by certain sectors of government and other centres of power to contain critical voices present in the convened public sphere point to the essential role for counterpublics in South Africa. As sites enabling public deliberation, critique and active citizenship, social and community movements have the potential to act as counterpublic spheres.[xii] Turning now to NGO relations to movements, several positions are highlighted: whilst some cast movements as providing much-needed critical voices, there is also a tendency to draw these alternative spaces into a consensual civil society.

Relationships of NGOs to movements
A small set of NGOs, such as the FXI or Khanya College, has in recent years played a supportive role to movements by providing legal resources, training and publicity, or by building capacity.[xiii] The repression of protest by the state has defined such NGOs' positioning.[xiv] Whilst NGOs may see themselves as supportive of the activities of social movements, the extent to which they are able to support them materially is dependent on their own funding modalities: 'quite a few NGOs […] have shunned working with social movements because they don't want to be tainted with the aura of radicalism', as Jane Duncan, Executive Director of the FXI, put it.[xv]

The majority of NGO staff felt that the appropriate relationship between their NGOs and movements should be one of 'solidarity' and 'mutual respect', yet the NGOs were not actively supporting movements. Similar to the first set of organisations, such NGOs understood the contribution of social movements to democracy as positive: social activism and protest are signs of the maturity of post-apartheid democracy. NGO accounts often drew on an idea of civil society as plural, depicting populist movements as the vanguard that demonstrates to NGOs their failure in challenging the status quo: '[Social movements] have become that critical voice to say that's the role you should have been playing. They just went and they did it. They just marched'.[xvi] Again, decisions not to support social movements despite pronouncements of solidarity may be motivated by concerns about their own funding.

A perhaps surprisingly large number of NGO staff, consciously or unconsciously, distanced themselves from social movements. For instance, the contribution of social movements to democratic practice was praised in the abstract, but the strategies and tactics they employ were critiqued by the director of Agenda:

> You know, I have always worked at a grass roots level. So for me social movements are critical. And I think we as civil society organisations, as NGOs that might give you a different flavour from a social movement, I think there is a need for civil society organisations to put their weight and put their resources and thoughtfully move social movements to a place where it is much more credible.[xvii]

Commonalities with movements by virtue of shared values or politics were often evoked, for example by drawing on the reified 'we' of civil society. However, marching or 'burning the tyres outside' loomed large in NGO narratives of community activism. This is appropriate in that one characteristic of post-apartheid movements is their high degree of popular participation. Yet, they cannot be reduced to it. In fact, many social movements have used a variety of strategies and have developed a 'maturity around when to use the courts, when to use struggle-on-the-streets tactics, when to use publicity, and when to use all three together', argues Jane Duncan.[xviii]

Another way in which NGO staff distanced themselves from social movements was by pitting 'constructive engagement' with the state against 'marching on the street'. Institutionalised politics, the media and the courts were in some interviews portrayed as the legitimate and proper channels through which policy can be impacted on in the democratic era. Conversely, mass mobilisation was portrayed as outdated, with the effect of it seemingly being no longer acceptable to use what was constructed as backward apartheid-era struggle tactics. This discursive opposition throws up interesting parallels to development discourses on modernity, progress and liberal democracy. It also resonates strongly with a dominant understanding of civil society as an arena for formal organisations suited to a liberal model of organising society. Besides establishing which means are appropriate to register protest, NGO accounts of social movement activity thus also work to define what a modern CSO should be. Others argued that whilst protest was justified given the lack of service delivery, social movements were simply not effective enough: 'If you are going to engage with the major policy issues and try to shift the way your society operates, you are going to have to have organised forms of civil society. The best model would appear to be, at this stage, some kind of sensitive NGO'.[xix] NGO constructions of social movements resonate with the above-encountered donor understanding of civil society in that they envisage an organisation that mediates between communities and the state. The liberal tenet requires more and more civil society, but not the kind of civil society that social movements embody. The kind of organisation supposedly best suited to post-apartheid liberal democracy is an effective, efficient and formal NGO, staffed with 'well-mannered activists who play by the rules, settle conflicts peacefully, and do not break any windows', to cite one commentator (Carothers 1999 cited Howell and Pearce 2001, p. 42).

The following extract from an interview with the director of an NGO that focuses on strengthening democracy through citizen participation and civil society promotion points further towards some of the politics underlying NGO relationships with movements:

> And we've offered them: if you want to use our training manuals here; if you want capacity building, having a workshop and sandwiches and stuff, we can provide that. And we have materials and manuals that you want to use, that's fine […] But one of them came to me and said they'd smashed their car. And they came to us; you know what, can we get a car? I said no I can't do that […] that is where we differ; I have to be completely accountable for how I spend the money of the organisation. It does not work like that. I said you also have to learn how these things operate.[xx]

Holding the purse strings in a potential relationship does not just indicate a resource inequality that may or may not play itself out similarly to a classical donor-beneficiary relationship; the provision of training itself establishes particular practices and provides

access to communities and their immediate organisations.[xxi] As I implied above, the capacity-building role that many NGOs are sponsored to fulfil in civil society is itself problematic. Organisational development, one of the fields of activity for intermediary NGOs, may itself contribute to the restructuring of their civil society partners in line with a particular version of civil society.

Whether supportive or critical of their work, wanting to 'move social movements to a more credible place' or the teleology characterising the above account of a meeting with members of Abahlali baseMjondolo betrays a sense of NGOs wanting to change social movements' practices in line with their own version of civil society. Such 'reformism' is a central issue in NGOs' relations to social movements. This argument underlines how civil society practice is also defined by NGOs wanting to shape social movements in their own image, and highlights the potential for an NGO-isation of movements. In accessing funding or other resources, CSOs have to engage with a variety of bureaucratic questions arising from the need for accountability. The quantitative-analytical skills required for reporting, monitoring and evaluation practices are one example. Moreover, once an NGO has entered into funding and monitoring regimes, it becomes increasingly difficult to work with less formalised organisations since these are not structurally equipped to prove results-based management or adhere to complicated reporting systems. As the director of an NGO that provides education and research for the labour and social movements put it: 'we only work with the ones who do have a photocopying machine, who can account for all the money and so on'.[xxii] As a result, CSOs may become – in terms of activities and organisational structure – more like NGOs. In important ways, the professionalisation and formalisation of the NGO sector that were charted earlier translate to civil society more broadly.

There is a parallel as well between NGO-isation and the processes of homogenisation that are the outcome of NGO partnerships with the public and private sectors. The expertise that NGO-isation produces is organisational, financial and managerial; the channels through which it is circulated are organisational practices and procedures that are connected to the responsibilisation of CSOs. Whilst NGO attempts at reforming movements may be purely discursive, they serve to define what civil society should be, thus marginalising certain forms of CSOs and contributing to a narrow definition of civil society. NGO-isation and NGO reformism have the potential of institutionalising community struggles over the meaning of development and democracy, thereby containing and civilising them. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that the institutionalisation of movements is an incomplete project; there are constantly challenges to NGOs' discourses and practices within civil society (cf. Li 2007).[xxiii]

Conclusion

This article has examined the idea that post-apartheid democracy can be deepened, and civil society strengthened, by NGO activities in the sphere of public debate and participation. I do not wish to imply that such activities are futile. On the contrary, the case NGOs are all committed to opening spaces for participation and critique. I have sought, however, to emphasise that the overwhelming focus of donors on NGOs as the only legitimate representative of civil society may in fact narrow spaces for critique by excluding CSOs that do not fit their criteria. A gap between donor rhetoric and funding practices was identified where a plural civil society is regarded as central to democratic

development, but in practice it is mainly formal and urban NGOs that are supported to carry out public-sphere-enhancing activities. This funding preference may well contribute to a homogenous and institutionalised public sphere, thus reinforcing societal elites and marginalising the majority population. NGOs increasingly acting as a development partner for government and the corporate sector further cast doubt on their ability to open up spaces for critical public debate and engagement as their involvement in multisectoral partnerships impacts on their positioning towards wider civil society.

Whilst some NGO accounts celebrate the pluralism of civil society, I have asked whether the capacity-building activities of NGOs may not ultimately construct less professionalised components of civil society as something to be reformed and drawn into a circle of consensus. The danger here lies not only in a marginalisation of other CSOs, but also in the homogenisation of civil society through processes of NGO-isation. This certainly raises concerns over the institutionalisation of community struggles and the containment of counterpublic spheres. I have only tentatively indicated what the democratic deficit resulting from narrowly conceived notions of civil society and processes of NGO-isation may be. Nonetheless, the exclusion of less formal types of organisations runs a danger of excluding actors that could push for state accountability, where NGOs may be structurally unable to do so. Attention must be paid to the processes of governmentality by which NGOs themselves come to define and transfer what civil society should be and in how far they limit or contain the existence of counterpublic spheres.

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Notes

[1] This article draws on data gathered from interviews with directors or senior staff of NGOs. Clearly, these do not necessarily represent the often divided opinions within their organisations on key questions of location and identity.

[ii] There is considerable discussion about what is included and excluded in civil society, and particularly whether the economy should be included in the definition of civil society. See G. Edwards (2004) and Elliott (2003) for overviews of the debate.

[iii] See, for example, the Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation and the UK Department for International Development (DfID), as well as a number of Northern NGOs that act as grant makers in South Africa.

[iv] There are also academic institutions whose public lectures and research programmes seek to foster debate and bridge the gap between communities and academia but which do not fit the description of NGO as I employ it here. Many of the case NGOs are also involved in capacity-building initiatives with local or community-based organisations as a way of extending civil society and strengthening democracy.

[v] As I indicated in the introduction, the NGOs sampled for this research are what I have chosen to call intermediary organisations, rather than straightforward service-delivery NGOs providing welfare to the population.

[vi] The term Post-Washington Consensus describes the shift in economic thinking and development policy, in the last decade, towards recognising the centrality of institutions and social factors in the efficient functioning of markets.

vii   Interview with R. Calland, Director, Governance Programme, IDASA, 23 Apr 2007.

viii   Interview with A. Motala, Executive Director, CSVR, 4 May 2007.

ix   Interview with T. Bailey, National Coordinator, Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust, 25 Apr 2007

x   See, for example, the edited volume by Ballard *et al.* (2006), which contains chapters on the Landless People's Movement, the Concerned Citizens Forum, the TAC, the Anti-Privatisation Forum and other movements.

xi   For reasons of space, it is not possible to discuss the critiques of Habermas's original account, such as his exclusion of women and workers. Rather, this section is concerned with reconceptualisations of his account as they may apply to the politics of civil-society sponsoring in South Africa.

xii   Whilst it is not implied that every protest action is indicative of public debate or the existence of emancipatory public spaces, social movements continue to formulate alternative policies and approaches to development, democracy, the state, etc.

xiii   There are other donor-funded organisations that are aligned with, or supportive of, social movements, such as the University of KwaZulu Natal's Centre for Civil Society, SAHA, International Labour Research and Information Group or the Alternative Information Development Centre. Some of these reject the characterisation as an NGO, others are academic research centres and therefore not included in this analysis.   Conversely, some international NGOs also support relatively more formalised movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) or the TAC. This article is not concerned with NGO-social movement relations, although a shift in terms of how such organisations conceive of popular movements has taken place in recent years (personal conversation with D. McKinley, Anti-Privatisation Forum, 11 Jul 2007).

xiv   Following the mobilisations around the World Conference against Racism and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2001 and 2002, respectively, the government started to ban gatherings and repress movements – sparking new struggles and increasing support for existing movements. These events represented the first very public rejection of the ANC and its economic policies and also signified collective national action of previously highly localised community struggles (Desai 2002). They are noteworthy also because they marked a defining point in terms of repositioning the relationships between some of the movements and NGOs, with a small set of progressive NGOs and donors now beginning to support these movements (interview with J. Duncan, 30 Mar 2007).

xv   Interview with J. Duncan, Director, FXI, 30 Mar 2007.

xvi   Interview with anonymous NGO director, 25 Jun 2007.

xvii   Interview with M. Oyedan, Director, Agenda, 27 Jun 2007.

xviii Interview with J. Duncan, 30 Mar 2007.

xix   Interview with W. Bird, Director, Media Monitoring Africa, 13 Jun 2007.

xx   Interview with anonymous NGO director, 25 Jun 2007.

xxi   However, it is important to note that rather than seeking funding or collaborations with NGOs, those movements that come from an autonomist tradition would reject funding from NGOs or other donors or NGOs outright.

xxii   Interview with L. Gentle, Director, ILRIG, 24 Apr 2007.

xxiii An analysis of social movements' understanding of NGOs would clearly yield quite different results which go beyond the scope of this article. Far from seeking relationships with NGOs, some movements come from a strong autonomist tradition and would reject funding from donors or NGOs outright (such as the Western Cape Eviction Campaign). Other movements, such as the APF, receive some funding from NGOs, work with them on a number of clearly specified projects, but likewise do not see a natural connection or political alliance with them – their relationship is at best a 'tactical temporary alliance' (personal conversation with D. McKinley, 11 Jul 2007).   Many contemporary movements in South Africa have theorised their ideas of development and democracy in opposition to NGOs (including left NGOs). Richard Pithouse, for instance, writes about Abahlali that it has been driven by a commitment to intellectual autonomy from its beginnings, further noting that '[r]ival state and NGO vanguards have responded to the emergence of a politics of the poor with strikingly similar paranoia and authoritarianism' (2008, p. 86; also see Gibson 2008). Conversely, some NGO leaders are acutely aware of the danger of institutionalising the struggles of emerging movements or of speaking for them.

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Biographical note

Natascha Mueller-Hirth is a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her work focuses on the role of NGOs in development. She has presented her research at various international conferences and has recently translated a booklet of Rosa Luxemburg writings (*Rosa Luxemburg, or: The price of freedom*. Berlin: Karl Dietz, 2008).