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Can service providing NGOs build democracy? Five contingent features

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Abstract

This article studies the role of service providing NGOs in the Middle East in promoting democracy. Challenging the assumption that service providing NGOs are apolitical, the authors argue that service providing NGOs play important roles in promoting democracy. They do so by serving as public arenas, or spaces in which members and beneficiaries practice democratic habits such as discussion and debate, collective problem solving, free expression, rights claiming, and the like—all of which contribute to the cultivation of a participatory form of democracy. Drawing upon existing literature, interviews, and participant observation of NGOs in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine, the authors argue that five features shape the role of service providing NGOs in promoting democracy. These include: (1) organizational readiness, or the organization's embeddedness in its beneficiary community and its organizational capacity; (2) organizational governance, or organization's commitment to participatory representation and transparency; (3) the nature of service an organization provides; (4) an NGOs' collaboration with other NGOs and the government; and (5) donor risk tolerance. The article's analysis contributes to our understanding of the varied, and often overlooked, roles of service providing NGOs, advancing the literature on NGO-state relations, NGO-donor relations, and democracy promotion.

KEYWORDS

civil society, democracy promotion, Middle East, NGOs

1 | INTRODUCTION

“The role of NGOs in the politics of development is far more complex than that proposed by the liberal democratic view, and concomitantly, by those donors bent on funding NGOs in order to build a strong civil society” (Mercer, 2002, p. 19). In making this argument, Mercer (2002) suggests that much of the literature on civil society adopts a normative approach to NGOs' roles in democracy building that overlooks the diversity and complexity of the NGO sector—and thus fails to appreciate the varied and nuanced effects NGOs may have on democratization. Instead of tending to this nuance, much of the literature portrays a bifurcated NGO sphere. On one side, service

providing NGOs are seen as addressing important daily needs and development priorities but are not considered to have a role in democratic political reform. Some scholars have argued that service providing NGOs in fact help to entrench authoritarianism (Albrecht, 2005; Teets, 2014). On the other side, advocacy, or human rights, NGOs are thought to be beacons of democracy building (Gotchev, 1998; Morayef, 2016). Much fewer in number than service providing NGOs, they are seen as being the hardscrabble warriors for democracy as they call out government corruption and campaign for human rights protections.

In this article, we challenge these prevailing notions of the roles of service providing NGOs in building democracy. By synthesizing the

existing literature and drawing upon data from interviews and participant observation in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine, we argue that the ability of service providing NGOs to promote democracy is shaped by five features. These include: (1) organizational readiness, or the organization's embeddedness in its beneficiary community and its organizational capacity; (2) organizational governance, or organization's commitment to participation and transparency; (3) the nature of service an organization provides; (4) an NGOs' collaboration with other NGOs and the government; and (5) donor risk tolerance.

We embarked on this research with no preconceived notions of how the literature and our interviewees would define "democracy." What emerged from scholarship and our data is that, in the case of service providing NGOs, the relevant definition of democracy is not a procedural one focused on the structure of national political institutions but rather a participatory form of democracy in which everyday citizens possess and deploy power over decision-making processes that affect their communities. In other words, the role of service providing NGOs in promoting democracy is not at the level of reforming official political institutions but rather at the level of civic engagement. It is this participatory form of democracy on which our analysis is built.

The article proceeds as follows. We first highlight main takeaways from the literature on service provision and democracy promotion. The next section provides an overview of our cases and research methods. We then lay out the definition of democracy that undergirds our analysis. Next, we present the five features that we argue shape NGOs' ability to promote democracy. To develop these features, we draw upon extant literature and interview data from Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine. The article concludes by offering implications for future research.

2 | SERVICE PROVIDING NGOs AND DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THEORY

Liberal theories of civil society, which dominated the literature through the 1980s, 1990s, and early aughts and helped to spur the proliferation of NGOs around the world, frame NGOs as part and parcel of civil society and a liberal democratic state. Dating back to the writing of Alexis de Tocqueville, NGOs have been narrated as schools of democracy in which citizens learn and practice habits of civic engagement and develop social capital, or the norms of trust and reciprocity that provide currency for democratic governance (Almond & Verba, 1963; Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2016; de Tocqueville, 1835; Fukuyama, 2001; Putnam, 1993, 2000). NGOs also represent citizens' interests to the state, amplifying citizens' voices in policy arenas and serving as watchdogs over the government. They are often considered to better represent poor and marginalized groups than government agencies (Fowler, 1991). And by their very proliferation, NGOs are thought to enhance diversity and pluralism in society at large.

Liberal theories also maintain a role for NGOs in promoting democracy in autocratic and semi-autocratic states. NGOs can serve

as mobilizing structures in which citizens form social movements and make claims on the state (Bernhard, 1993; Bratton, 1994). As in established democracies, NGOs in non-democratic states play a watchdog role by voicing opposition and dissent and calling out government corruption. They also defend human rights, broadcasting state atrocities and providing legal aid to victims of human rights abuses. And as countries transition toward democracy, NGOs provide training grounds for new political opposition candidates and advise on the democratic restructuring of government institutions (Hadenius & Uggl, 1996).

In recent decades, scholarship has increasingly challenged these liberal theories and argued that NGOs play less of a democratizing role than previously assumed. In fact, NGOs may serve to bolster autocracy (Brumberg, 2002). Some of this work points to the strategies that savvy autocrats use to control and co-opt NGOs. Rulers can use a variety of regulatory incentives and disincentives to encourage NGOs to work toward meeting the state's goals (Teets, 2014). Intrusive monitoring and reporting requirements render all aspects of NGO administration—including registration, governance, activities, budgeting, and fundraising—visible to the government. Coupled with laws that penalize NGOs and their staff for taking on political or controversial issues, these requirements cause NGOs to avoid activities that might be threatening to the regime or in opposition to the political status quo (Herrold, 2016; Wiktorowicz, 2000). Government regulations typically restrict the size and scope of NGOs, creating large sectors of small organizations that compete against each other rather than coalescing around shared democratic goals (Herrold & Atia, 2016). And by their very proliferation, NGOs present a guise of democratization and liberalization to the international community, masking realities of tight government control and human rights abuse (Albrecht, 2005).

Funders, too, play a role in weakening NGOs as agents of democracy. A rapidly expanding body of literature finds that rather than supporting the types of grassroots organizations and social movements that mobilize local citizens and attempt to disrupt unjust political, economic, and social structures, the international donors that bankroll NGOs favor managerial organizations that employ a professional class of educated elites and are more upwardly accountable to donors than downwardly accountable to local citizens (AbouAssi, 2013; Atia & Herrold, 2018; Banks et al., 2015; Bano, 2008; Bush, 2015; Chahim & Prakash, 2014; Henderson, 2003; McMahon, 2017; Suarez & Gugerty, 2016). To win lucrative grants, NGOs must develop the professional capacity to manage complex application and reporting requirements (Alexander et al., 2004; Balboa, 2014; Bratton, 1989; Stiles, 2002). This entails securing office space and modern technology and employing staff who understand the language of international development and democracy (Chahim & Prakash, 2014; Hammami, 2000; Hanafi & Tabar, 2003). Donor-dependent NGOs must also submit regular reports that show progress in meeting short-term output goals (AbouAssi, 2013; Ebrahim, 2005). Rarely do grants fund the type of long-term mobilization work that leads to fundamental change. Instead, they provide short-term support for specific projects that carve larger political,

economic, and social issues into discrete objectives that distract from the underlying structural problems (Zencirci & Herrold, 2022).

International donors have further distorted NGOs' roles in democracy promotion by constructing categories of NGOs that tap certain organizations as operating squarely within the democracy promotion arena and exile other organizations to its outskirts (Zencirci & Herrold, 2022). Funders typically distinguish between humanitarian assistance NGOs, economic development NGOs, and advocacy/democracy promotion NGOs. Because the number of democracy promotion NGOs in any given country tends to be significantly smaller than humanitarian and development NGOs. These distinctions drive competition between different types of organizations which diminishes the wider sector's democratization potential (Atia & Herrold, 2018). The organizational distinctions also lead to the assumption that only a small number of NGOs promote democracy.

Recent empirical studies, however, suggest that service providing NGOs may play a larger role in democracy building than the extant literature recognizes. In the U.S., where voting is often seen as the *sine qua non* of democracy, LeRoux and Krawczyk (2014) found that human service organizations that engaged in "agency-based" voter engagement—including voter registration and other forms of voting support services—were effective in spurring voter turnout among low-income clients by at least 12%. In Kenya, individuals who interacted with service providing NGOs were significantly more likely than those who had not interacted with NGOs to either protest or to raise issues with government officials (Brass, 2022). Yet these same individuals who interacted with service providing NGOs were not more likely to vote in elections. In the case of Bolivia, Boulding (2010) found that NGOs stimulated democracy by providing resources (including educational, financial, and infrastructural) that can be used for political organizing and by creating spaces in which people can associate and interact with each other; yet there was little evidence of a strong connection between NGOs and voter turnout.

Democracy promotion does not need to be equated with increased rates of voting in official elections. In autocratic and semi-autocratic states, voting is typically not considered to be an effective democratic act since elections are rarely free or fair and since the political institutions in which elected officials serve are undemocratic (Harris & Hern, 2019). Democracy is instead manifested far from the ballot box, in public spaces ranging from libraries and schools to arts and culture venues, summer camps, health clinics, and of course the street (Herrold, 2020).

Service providing NGOs can provide out-of-the spotlight spaces in which citizens cultivate substantive forms of democracy. Herrold (2020) revealed that NGOs that on the surface appeared to be doing the "safer" work of providing social services in Egypt post the Arab Spring were covertly promoting substantive democracy by encouraging among members discussion, debates, and collective problem solving, free expression, and the claiming of basic human rights. In essence, they were creating public spheres and training members on their rights and responsibilities as democratic citizens. Similarly, Fu (2018) uncovered "disguised collective action," or a

strategy of labor organizations to coach members to make individual claims on government officials.

And finally, service providing NGOs may influence not only citizens but also governments. In an era of economic austerity and rollbacks of the welfare state, governance increasingly takes place via collaborations or interactions between NGOs and governments (AbouAssi & Bowman, 2018). Often, this leads to two-way learning and enhanced governance outcomes. In Kenya, government agencies learned from NGO successes and began to mimic and adopt NGO processes. Notably, the Kenyan government engaged in more participatory forms of governance, integrating former NGO leaders in government, and increasing the number and variety of voices in government decision-making. This, coupled with government adoption of NGO processes and NGO lobbying, led to more democratic forms of governance in Kenya (Brass, 2012).

Thus, while local advocacy and human rights NGOs and international democracy promotion NGOs are often conducting the high-profile work of reforming national political institutions, service providing NGOs can play an important role in cultivating participatory democracy under certain conditions. The following sections identify five features by drawing on the existing literature and on illustrative examples from Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine.

3 | CASES AND METHODS

Besides the fact that the three countries are Middle Eastern Arab countries, Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine are all characterized by political turmoil, insecurity, and contested democracy. In 2020, the three countries ranked 18, 43, and 25 over 100 on the global freedom score with Lebanon being partially free and Egypt and Palestine being not free (Freedom House, 2021). The three countries continue to slip in their global freedom ranking. Measured by the quality of democracy based on freedom, equality, and control, Egypt and Palestine are considered moderate and hard autocracies, respectively, while Lebanon is considered a hybrid regime, exhibiting a mixture of characteristics of both democracy and autocracy (Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, 2020).

In addition, the three countries face a range of economic, political, and social challenges, typical of a developing country setting. In such settings, the central government often lacks the capacity and resources to implement public policy and therefore often relies on NGOs to deliver public services (Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2016). The NGO sector in the three countries is dynamic as a space is created for NGOs to operate, sometimes collaboratively with the central government but sometime at odd with the authorities, and in most cases with heavy financial reliance on international donors in the absence of local philanthropic incentives (AbouAssi, 2014; Atia & Herrold, 2018; Herrold, 2018).

To illustrate the potential applicability of the features in facilitating democracy building, we rely on a series of interviews with 23 representatives of NGOs, public agencies, and experts in the three countries (additional details are provided in Table 1). Conducted in

TABLE 1 List of interviewees

Interview ID	Organization	Interview date	Interview location
1	NGO	February 2, 2010	Egypt
2	Activist	September 26, 2011	Egypt
3	NGO	October 22, 2011	Egypt
4	NGO	November 14, 2011	Egypt
5	NGO	February 7, 2012	Egypt
6	NGO	March 4, 2012	Egypt
7	Foundation	July 21, 2016	West Bank
8	NGO	July 19, 2016	East Jerusalem
9	NGO	July 5, 2018	West Bank
10	NGO	May 31, 2019	West Bank
11	NGOs	February 2, 2021	Lebanon
12	Public sector	February 3, 2021	Lebanon
13	Expert	February 4, 2021	Lebanon
14	NGOs	February 5, 2021	Lebanon
15	NGOs	February 6, 2021	Lebanon
16	NGOs	February 7, 2021	Lebanon
17	Public sector	February 10, 2021	Lebanon
18	NGOs	February 11, 2021	Lebanon
19	NGOs	February 12, 2021	Lebanon
20	NGOs	February 15, 2021	Lebanon
21	Expert	February 17, 2021	Lebanon
22	NGO	April 2, 2021	Egypt
23	Expert	April 8, 2021	Lebanon

Arabic and English over the last decade for larger research projects, the interviews ranged in length and medium (in person or virtually). The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions around organization's goals, relationships with stakeholders, resource mobilization strategies, and understanding of the meanings and manifestations of concepts such as "democracy." This approach allowed the themes to emerge from the responses instead of being prompted by the researchers. Most interviews were pre-arranged and lasted between 1 and 2 h in length; some stretched into day long site visits and were less formal. We often met interlocutors in their NGO offices, however we also held some interviews in cafes, other inconspicuous locations, or virtually via videoconference.

The research design for these projects used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling helps discern the relevance of particular themes to "develop theoretically and empirically grounded arguments" using qualitative methods (Mason, 2002, p. 123; Yin, 2003). In our cases, purposive sampling helped ensure that our data reflected the perspectives of NGOs that ranged in the types of services they provided, their geographic locations, and their sizes. We strove to mitigate potential selection bias in several ways. First, we drew on data from a variety of sources including both service providing and advocacy

NGOs, public officials, and civil society experts. Second, we included three countries in our case selection and triangulated our data within and across cases. Third, we included participant observation in our data gathering strategies. Finally, purposeful sampling helped mitigate potential risks in countries marked by political turmoil and government suspicion of both NGOs and researchers, which brings us to the context. To protect our interlocutors, we guaranteed anonymity and, in some cases, only took copious notes and transcribed each interview after it was conducted. Often, we obtained oral, rather than written, consent.

3.1 | Defining "Democracy"

Before proceeding, it is important to distinguish what we mean by the term, "democracy." Often, democracy is conceptualized in procedural, or institutional, forms. It involves free and fair elections, representative legislatures, and independent judiciaries. In this procedural form of democracy, the primary way in which everyday citizens are involved in political processes is through voting.

In the Middle East and other non-democratic states, the institutions of democratic governance are weak or missing altogether. Voting, when it occurs, is neither free nor fair. Legislatures are stacked with loyalists of the ruler's party. Judiciaries maintain close links to the ruler and military. And the state security apparatus monitors all aspects of public, and sometimes private, life. In such contexts, voting loses relevance. It is an act that is undertaken to avoid penalties or to benefit from vote-buying, not because voters believe their ballot will influence the result of the election.

This reality was reflected in the definitions provided by several interlocutors. "Democracy is not only about the right to vote but rather the right and responsibility to be included and heard" (Interview #13) and "the right of the people to make their choices or decisions based on their free will while respecting others' choices and wills" (Interview #20). In our analysis, we focus on this participatory form of democracy. The contours of participatory democracy are harder to define, distinguish, and measure, but we identify three over-arching sets of practices that constitute participatory democracy: (1) discussion, debate, and collective problem solving in a public sphere, (2) free expression in a public sphere, and (3) the claiming of basic human rights from government authorities (Herrold, 2020).

4 | SERVICE PROVIDING NGOS AND DEMOCRACY BUILDING: FIVE FEATURES

In this section, we draw upon existing literature and data from 23 interviews with civic actors in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine to identify a set of features that may influence the ability of service-providing NGOs to promote a citizen-centered, participatory democracy. We summarize these features and their potential implications in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Five features for democracy building by service providing NGOs

Features	Implications for democracy promotion potential
Organizational readiness	
a. NGO's embeddedness in its local community	Organizations that are embedded in their communities are seen as more legitimate agents of change and facilitators of participatory democracy.
b. NGO capacity	NGOs with adequate capacity can connect with local communities and are able to facilitate democracy building.
Organizational governance	
a. Level of participation and representation	Democracy starts at home; NGOs that practice democracy within and integrate local people into their governance structure can foster democracy in the community.
b. The practice of transparency and accountability	Being transparent and accountable yields public trust, which is an ingredient of democracy building.
Nature of service provided	
a. Transactional relations with service receivers	Dealing with beneficiaries as clients and focusing on outputs detract from NGOs' ability to promote democracy.
b. Contractual arrangements	Complex contracts lead NGOs to focus on efficiency and compliance, thus detract from organizations' democracy promotion potential.
c. Level of policy contentiousness	NGOs that provide services that are politically contentious can shape knowledge, attitude, and behavior and convene members to debate these issues and are thus well positioned to promote democracy.
Collaboration	
a. Collaboration among NGOs	NGOs that collaborate can share knowledge, engage larger populations, and coordinate citizen-based reform efforts around democracy building.
b. Collaboration with the government	NGOs that collaborate with the government may be better able to connect citizen-based decision-making and official government policy, but NGOs that collaborate too closely with the government may be co-opted and their democracy building potential may be compromised.
Donor risk appetite	
a. Top-down approach to funding	When donors fund quick-fix and low risk-tolerance projects, NGOs focus on short-term vision rather than investing in long-term civic engagement and democracy building.
b. Cumbersome grant administration	Complying with donors' cumbersome application and reporting requirements to avoid risk distracts NGOs from democracy promotion.
c. Preference for small group of NGOs	When donors tend to reduce risk by favoring a small group of NGOs, they restrict newcomers and create further dependence that detracts NGOs from democracy building potential.

4.1 | Feature 1: organizational readiness

The first feature is organizational readiness. AbouAssi and Trent (2013) frame readiness in terms of the embeddedness in the local community and sufficient organizational capacity. To promote a citizen-centered democracy, organizations must be embedded in the communities they serve to relate to and understand their local constituents. They must possess deep knowledge of community needs and priorities as well as legitimacy and trust among local community members (Bano, 2019). These are all necessary antecedents of cultivating the citizen participation necessary for democracy.

Participatory approaches serve to empower beneficiaries, promote alternative political views, and give voice to the

underprivileged, all of which can lead to reforms of prevailing power structures (Brass, 2012). Participation should be beneficiary- and planner-centered (Michener, 1998) and valued in its own right, not as a management tool to lower costs or improve project design and implementation (Uphoff, 2000). Participation cannot be sporadic, a one-time event, or unproductive as that could have the opposite effect on the constituents: disempowering or disenfranchising them (AbouAssi & Trent, 2013). By cultivating participation among members, service providing NGOs can promote democracy by, (1) serving as a public sphere in which members engage in discussion, debate, and collective problem solving; (2) promoting and providing space for free expression among members; (3) coaching members on their basic rights as citizens and supporting members as they make claims

on government officials; and (4) linking smaller communities and marginalized groups to the larger political arena (e.g., by channeling citizens voices in policy making spheres) (Brass, 2016; Fu, 2018; Herrold, 2020).

Empirical evidence supports the role of organizational readiness and member participation in democracy building (LeRoux & Krawczyk, 2014). Boulding (2010) argues that through provision of resources and opportunities, Bolivian NGOs helped mobilize people to more “radical” forms of political participation, such as protesting and demonstrating. Brown et al. (2007) conclude that Brazilian NGOs performing community-based projects do in fact affect the politics of the communities in which they work but the nature of the impact depends on the structure of the programs.

Our interlocutors regularly stressed that local embeddedness allowed NGOs to facilitate participatory democratic processes of collective needs assessments, problem solving, and community building. “Building a democratic society requires that you know these rural areas and their needs and that you are connected to them geographically but also mentally by understanding and listening to the local communities,” indicated a Lebanese NGO leader (Interview #16). Even when NGOs’ work was seemingly far removed from politics and policy, local embeddedness could serve democracy building functions. For example, a cultural NGO in Palestine performed dabke dance for free in local communities to stimulate conversations and build solidarity around Palestinian freedom and identity; “Our music and dance is free—we want it in the community. It has messages,” a staff member of the NGO explained. “A poet wrote songs for our current production. It will someday become folklore. It tells a story of a prison. The lyrics, music, and choreography are from different prisoners. There is collective creative production. This slows the process but enriches the people working on it” (Interview #9).

The second element of organizational readiness is capacity. Service providing NGOs need to have adequate administrative capacity—internal management skills and resources needed to operate the organization (Balboa, 2014) to deliver these services; their resources should be utilized to directly serve their beneficiaries. Any additional work these organizations might undertake should not be at the expense of their main mission, otherwise they would be failing their constituents. Implementing participatory approaches or promoting democracy will have a toll on the limited capacity some organization have and would require further development of that capacity (AbouAssi & Trent, 2013), leaving most of the work to larger, professionalized, donor-connected NGOs (Bano, 2008; Bornstein, 2003; Elbers & Arts, 2011; Jad, 2007; Suarez & Gugerty, 2016). Yet the majority of these NGOs often have weak roots within civil society (Banks et al., 2015).

For NGOs to play an active role in democracy building, they must possess a more relational form of capacity, i.e., the ability to understand their role and position in the surrounding environment and to serve as a trusted convener and honest broker between citizens and the state. Cultivating this form of capacity depends more on an

organization’s embeddedness in its community than on the particular level and mix of human, financial, and capital resources—and the technical capacity—it possesses (Bano, 2019).

As noted by an NGO leader in Lebanon, “if an NGO is doing two jobs at the same time, then the quality of both—service providing and democracy building—would suffer” (Interview #19). Interviewees clearly distinguished between the forms of capacity conducive to democracy promotion, pointing out that organizations with the highest levels of financial and technical capacity are often based in capital cities and relatively removed from the people. In Egypt, one interviewee said, “It doesn’t work when people sit in Cairo and decide what people want. We go in and sit and drink tea and listen to what people want” (Interview #3). NGOs in these cases need to serve as bridges connecting local communities and policy spheres. Having relational capacity would build trust among the local communities to start community conversations about shared grievances and long-neglected community needs and make their voices heard in broader policy debates.

4.2 | Feature 2: organizational governance

The second feature shaping an organization’s ability to promote democracy is its internal governance. Participation and transparency are two aspects of organizational governance that most significantly affect an NGO’s democracy promotion potential. Organizations which involve local stakeholders and beneficiaries in their governance and decision-making structures are better suited to constructing democratic citizens (Dodge & Ospina, 2016; Herrold, 2020). As individuals participate in NGOs’ operations and express their opinions in internal discussions and debates, they cultivate democratic skills and habits which are thought to translate into more widespread civic engagement in the community. By contrast, NGOs that are led or captured by elites, and where succession of power is absent, lack inclusive participation in organizational governance and administration. These groups are less able to connect meaningfully with community stakeholders and are ill equipped to inculcate norms of civic engagement among members and are ill equipped to play the convening roles necessary to promote democracy (Bayat, 2013).

First, NGOs “need to pay attention to their own governance. Do not preach what you cannot practice,” said an NGO leader in Lebanon. Governance “is really about responsibility [... to] accept to be in charge and make decisions but then to report back and inform your constituents. It is about the passage of power and not being in your position for way too long that you become so comfortable. A proper governance system will bring people to this democratic state of mind that will then trickle down through the NGOs to the society at large” (Interview #17). This applies to the relevance of the service and mode of delivery to the affected population. In the realm of poverty alleviation, for example, a critical aspect of governance includes determining how poverty and its alleviation are assessed.

Local understandings and meanings are critical. As an Egyptian NGO leader explained, “An income-based classification of well-being is not sufficient. We need other dimensions. We need to base measures on people’s understanding of poverty. There is a struggle to give credit to people’s thoughts, ideas, and expression” (Interview #1). Such top-down approaches to solving social problems were not only more likely to fail due to lack of resonance in target populations; they also missed the opportunity to build participatory democracy by involving local citizens in addressing the challenges that they face, signaling that these populations were disposable and their voices and needs unimportant.

Transparency is “the basis of any accountable relationship” (Striebing, 2017, p. 66). Transparency is not about compliance and meeting requirements as much as it is about opening activities and records to public scrutiny, giving access to the decision-making process, and providing reliable, timely and accurate information (Rawlins, 2008). Organizations that are transparent in their operations tend to maintain higher trust and are perceived more favorably by citizens, as access to more information allows citizens to learn about the organization and reduce uncertainty (Becker, 2018; Porumbescu, 2017). This is particularly the case for NGOs, which often have high levels of information asymmetry between themselves and their constituents (Bekkers, 2003). Organizations that have narrowed this information asymmetry through transparency and third-party accreditation have been found to be perceived as more trustworthy than opaque organizations that fail to secure accreditation by third party regulators (Becker, 2018; Becker et al., 2020). As explained by an interviewee, “It is about reporting and transparency that are coming from within and serving a purpose rather than being mechanical to follow procedures; it is a culture where they are transparent about it all: their work, funding, [and even] the services themselves-why they are not provided by government and how they should be” (Interview #16).

Taken together, participation and transparency affect an organization’s accountability to, and trust among, its members, beneficiaries, and the public at large. First, accountability of and trust in an organization tend to yield more engagement with the organization (Bekkers, 2003; Cabedo et al., 2018). Individuals’ interest in being involved with an organization rises as barriers to information fall and transparency rises, and the organization demonstrates its accountability and transparent. Second, public trust is an important predictor of citizen participation and a main element of democracy (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Smith et al., 2013; Uslaner & Mitchell, 2005). Individuals are mobilized to engage in some form of democracy, such as voting, when there is a certain degree of trust (Bäck and Serup Christensen, 2016). Trust in nonprofits is an integral part of public trust; it encourages more engagement in civic action. “NGOs need to treat their beneficiaries as citizens that deserve both the service and the information and not deal with them as clients that do not have much say in what they need and get,” as a civil society expert in Lebanon stated (Interview #23). They need to be accountable to and not removed and closed off from local populations and beneficiary communities.

4.3 | Feature 3: nature of service provided

The third feature to shape NGOs’ ability to promote democracy is the nature of services provided. Service characteristics that may affect NGOs’ democracy promotion potential include the nature of the relation with service receivers, the complexity of the service arrangements, and the extent to which the service is contentious from a policy perspective. Some NGOs provide fee-based services and some of the services yield private benefits to individual recipients, while others are free and have more social benefits (Laing, 2003; Van der Hart, 1990). The marketization of social services erodes NGOs’ ability to build democracy (Dodge & Ospina, 2016). Fee-based services that deliver private benefits detract from the democratic notion of individuals as rights- and responsibility-bearing citizens (Merz, 2012). Instead, individuals become clients, distinguished by their economic capacities and treated as customers who purchase services from business-oriented NGOs. In addition, relations between the service provider and the beneficiary become transactional, with managerial efficiency prized over the cultivation of relational norms of trust and reciprocity that stimulate and underpin civic engagement (Cooley & Ron, 2002). Thus, members and beneficiaries who engage with managerial NGOs fail to develop self-images, norms, and habits of democratic citizens.

Interviewees underscored the impact of the nature of services provided, as not all of them are equal; “some services are really basic and cannot afford to be mixed with anything else; delivering food for example, for someone who is hungry or doing testing for someone who is dying; do you expect to be promoting democracy then and there?” (Interview #14). Others stressed the importance of treating beneficiaries as citizens and not clients. The leader of an Egyptian NGO explained, “We deal with people as citizens, not as clients. People have full rights and responsibilities [... and] must ask for and claim their rights. It is a process to go from passively receiving services to actively claiming rights” (Interview #22).

Contractual arrangements add complexity to service delivery (Johnston & Romzek, 1999) and therefore demand that NGOs prioritize efficiency when dealing with beneficiaries. Services tied to complex contract management may impede NGOs’ democracy promotion potential. Contracts come with strings attached: NGOs must abide by the terms of the contract and not venture into new domains, even if those are prioritized by beneficiaries. At the same time, NGOs that take on contracts may help to enhance government legitimacy. Government leaders bolster their reputations by promoting, supporting, and collaborating with NGOs that provide services that the shrinking government apparatus can no longer supply (Hsu, 2010). Beneficiaries of services tend not to mind who is delivering a particular service, as long as it is provided in an effective manner (Brass, 2016). As a result, NGOs are incentivized to cover for governments that cede responsibility for the social safety net and, in doing so, mollify citizens who otherwise might express discontent. A Lebanese NGO leader’s frustration highlights the extent to which these arrangements may impede NGOs’ ability to promote democracy. “The final decision [about these contracts] goes back to the

minister... where the political interference happens. So, when the mechanisms to deliver services are not democratic, how do you expect an NGO delivering these services to be interested in democracy?" (Interview #18).

And finally, some service categories must contend with competing demands and conflicting perspectives on policy goals that create significant institutional collective action dilemmas (May & Jochim, 2013). When NGOs provide services that are more contentious from a policy perspective, they may help to build democracy by stimulating discussion and debate among members and beneficiaries. The provision of family planning and reproductive health services, for example, may be contentious in particularly pious and conservative communities and can spark debates about the rights of women. Education programs that depart from state-sanctioned curricula can enhance critical thinking skills and present challenges to the prevailing social, political, and economic status quo. Interviewees clearly described the link between convening members around contentious policy issues and democratic reform. An NGO representative in Lebanon commented, "an NGO can build democracy while delivering services when it can work on the knowledge, attitude, and behavior [... when it can] bring and mobilize people together around hot issues" (Interview #15). An NGO director in Egypt added, "Civil society should be bolder and stick its neck out on social issues. The social agenda was part of the revolution. Not 'oh, we're poor.' It was political. A few months later, there were a few voices addressing social issues and poverty but [most of the conversation was] about politics. We need more of a social justice and poverty focus...The social agenda and poverty is the ideal role" (Interview #6). All these follow-ons from service provision can help to cultivate democratic subjectivities among beneficiaries.

4.4 | Feature 4: collaboration

The fourth feature shaping NGOs' ability to promote democracy is collaboration. Collaboration may bolster NGOs' democracy promotion potential in several ways. First, when organizations collaborate, they learn from each other. The sharing of information may help NGOs to develop new ways of engaging citizens and advocating for citizens' interests in policy arenas (Brass, 2012). Second, NGOs that collaborate with each other can more effectively spur citizen participation. Coordination among NGOs that engage in participatory practices are better able to translate the results of participation into policy change and avoid redundant duplication of efforts (AbouAssi & Trent, 2013). Cross-sector collaborations can also enhance NGOs' transparency and accountability and help to ensure their sustainability, thus enhancing their ability to generate trust and engagement over the long term. Furthermore, collaborative NGOs are better able to coordinate logistical and technical support for more loosely-networked social movements (Banks et al., 2015).

Balanced inter-organizational collaboration can help to amplify citizens' voices and advocacy in policy spheres. One interviewee commented "Democracy is a big thing and requires scaled up and

coordinated efforts; that cannot be done by one organization like an island in an ocean" (Interview #11). However, NGOs often hesitate to collaborate. According to a public official in Lebanon, "There is no cooperation or collaboration between these organizations because they don't listen. They are trying to meet their immediate missions by delivering X services, which makes me question whether they are interested in building democracy and introducing change" (Interview #17). Along the same line, an NGO leader in Egypt noted that NGOs struggled to collaborate but "we are working together now. Our organization is convening NGOs. [...]. There is definitely coordination now, but unfortunately this came only in a time of disaster" (Interview #4), referring to the uprising. The same is case of Palestinian NGOs pursuing political change. They engaged in different activities—including hiking, agriculture, arts and culture, and charitable relief—and shared knowledge and ideas. "We don't compete," stressed the leader of one organization. "We learn from each other. Coordination between groups is important" (Interview #10).

NGOs' collaboration with state governments has ambiguous effects on organizations' democracy promotion potential. On the one hand, NGOs are positioned to be intermediaries between the state and the citizens and to rebuild the social contract. NGOs that collaborate with governments have a unique opportunity to represent the interests of minority and marginalized groups whose voices would otherwise be silent (Brass, 2016; Teets, 2014). This requires a healthy working relationship between NGOs and the government. According to an expert "They just need to deal with the government and not avoid it; at least that would help with duplication of effort and wasted resources and time and would create synergies" (Interview #23). An NGO leader in Lebanon stressed the importance of cross-sector collaboration. "Sometimes municipalities are not aware of what the NGOs are doing, although the NGOs are doing the work the municipalities should be doing and in their own jurisdictions. When you exclude municipalities and monopolize service delivery, you cannot be expected to be inclusive and democratic" (Interview #18).

On the other hand, NGOs can be easily co-opted by the government. Savvy autocrats use various strategies to create cultures of competition among NGOs. Herrold and Atia (2016) refer to a "divide and throttle" approach reflecting autocrats' efforts to fragment and weaken NGO sectors, by using laws and regulations to flood the field with many small NGOs that compete against each other for funding. NGOs' focus on competing detracts from energies devoted to democracy building. Autocrats also use several strategies to ensure that collaborative efforts benefit, rather than threaten, the autocratic status quo. For example, they form GONGOs (government NGOs) to maintain control over contentious policy debates (Stacher, 2012); place government officials on NGO boards to monitor internal debates and activities (Herrold, 2020); and contract service contracts and offer perks and access to government officials to NGOs that work in line with government priorities (Jamal, 2007). In these cases, NGOs become co-opted by government, serving as its extended arm, at the expense of representing the marginalized people (Bebbington, 2004).

In Egypt, prior to the 2011 uprisings it was common for organizations that collaborated with the government to be co-opted. Describing Egyptian philanthropic foundations' relations with the Mubarak regime, one NGO leader said, "They are in cahoots. The heads of foundations in Egypt – the larger ones – have vested interests in maintaining the status quo" (Interview #1). After the revolution, organizations that worked to cultivate democracy carefully avoided engaging with the government. "Everyone is getting the 'no democracy' message," said the leader of one NGO. "Most aren't foolhardy enough to continue after getting the message" (Interview #3). They went on to explain that their organization *did* promote democracy but that it did so carefully and covertly and certainly not in any collaborative way with the government.

4.5 | Feature 5: donor risk appetite

The fifth feature influencing NGOs' democracy building potential is donor risk appetite: specifically, donors' willingness to cede power and control to local NGOs. A wide body of literature has argued that in order to mitigate risk, donors favor professional NGOs that are upwardly accountable to their funders (Atia & Herrold, 2018; Bano, 2008; Chahim & Prakash, 2014; Jad, 2003; Suarez & Gugerty, 2016). Compounding the problem, the proliferation of these NGOs has been shown to marginalize the types of grassroots groups and social movements that have the greatest potential to build democracy thanks to their roots in civil society (Chahim & Prakash, 2014).

First, many donors use top-down approaches to grant making. They set the agenda and the NGOs work on specific projects with structured theories of change (Bebbington, 2004; Bornstein, 2003), thereby reducing risk of failure. Projects carry short time frames and grant recipient NGOs must demonstrate measurable progress toward pre-determined goals (AbouAssi, 2013; Ebrahim, 2005). This approach emphasizes low-hanging fruits related to immediate impact and leaves no room for the longer-term, difficult-to-measure, and riskier processes of mobilizing and empowering democratic citizens (Zencirci & Herrold, 2022).

In Egypt, interlocutors indicated that the NGO sector's focus on short-term projects detracted from their organizations' potential to organize campaigns and left them sidelined when the 2011 uprisings broke out. Project-based NGOs "certainly weren't related to the uprisings, instigating social revolt or revolution. And they never acquired a prominent role in society since then," argued one Egyptian activist (Interview #2). A Lebanese expert commented, "A donor would give NGOs funding to provide services and show immediate results; with limited funding and mounting demands, these NGOs recreate almost immediately clientelism and patronage networks. People are asking you for services; you cannot say yes to all. You have to choose [and...] play favoritism" (Interview #21). International donors could be more effective by providing non-monetary support or taking some risk. In Lebanon, one NGO leader emphasized the important role that donors could play in pressuring policy makers to

develop and revise regulatory standards in ways that supported service providing NGOs' work (Interview #14).

Second, donors' application and reporting requirements that enhance donor control and reduce risk often lead NGOs to professionalize, become more efficient, and be more selective about the services they provide, thereby causing the NGO to focus on populations that are easiest to access. Typically, this leads NGOs to neglect the poorest and neediest communities (Banks et al., 2015; Bebbington, 2004; Chahim & Prakash, 2014; Zaidi, 1999). Professional NGOs struggle to connect with the communities they do serve and maintain participatory governance structures—in other words, professional NGOs lack relational capacity with citizens and tend to be governed opaquely by elites. Frustration with donors' requirements was particularly acute in Palestine. "There is a really annoying part of an aid application called a 'log frame,'" grumbled the director of one NGO. "Applicants must list activities, indicators of success, measurement, results, and offer to provide photos and press releases. This is a total waste of time, money, and effort. It makes us more dependent to learn the whole process" (Interview #8).

Third, donors reduce risk by working with the same group of professionalized NGOs, forming what Stiles (2002) labels as intermistic circles. These circles are barriers for both NGOs aiming to collaborate beyond their circles and new NGOs trying to access funding. In addition, funding creates a dependency and NGOs become constrained by donors' preferences (AbouAssi, 2013). These preferences may force NGOs to sacrifice their own mission for the donor's agendas and become depoliticized and upwardly accountable to donors, steering them away from mobilizing as a sector to bolster democratic values and leading them to pursue relatively tame, uncontroversial activities (Bush, 2015; Carapico, 2014).

Interviewees agreed on the fragmenting effects of foreign aid on the NGO sector across all three countries. "International donor funding does not promote collaboration, instead it promotes competition. It is a competitive field in which if others gain you lose," lamented the founder of an Egyptian NGO (Interview #5). While a staff member of a local Palestinian grant making foundation mentioned, "some coalitions fail because of competition among the NGOs. Within networks, organizations fight. They fight for concepts that lead to funding" (Interview #7), an interviewee in Lebanon echoed the same sentiment; "they are very much siloed [...] within the donor circle where everyone speaks the same language; [they need to] step out of the comfort zone and reach out to new and different entities" (Interview #21).

5 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we argue that service providing NGOs are better able to promote democracy when (1) they are embedded in their communities and have high organizational capacity, (2) they practice representative, transparent, and accountable governance that generate trust, (3) their services are not transactional and contract-bound but rather tailored to change attitude and behaviors, (4)

they collaborate with other NGOs and not ignore government, and (5) they work with donors that maintain a high tolerance for risk.

These features need to be verified, individually or collectively, in subsequent research. We are not claiming that the presence of all these features is a necessary and sufficient condition for service providing NGOs to be able to promote democracy; however, we are inviting scholars and practitioners to consider these features when they approach the subject. We are also not claiming that features are exclusive or applicable in the same way. On the contrary, we acknowledge substantial variation in application based on both the geographical and sociopolitical contexts. Yet similar findings from studies in other countries cited in this article suggest that there is reason to suspect that service providing NGOs throughout the Global South, and especially those operating under repressive regimes, may be building democracy in ways that go unnoticed by traditional metrics. This should be investigated in future research. This brings us to two important points for readers to ponder.

First, while there are certain similarities across countries, the local context and its institutional environment will remain unique. On the one hand, it is important to examine the availability of political space or activism within the civil society arena (Edwards, 2009). If such a space is restricted, then the NGOs, regardless of their missions or services, will be repressed and considered either rivalry or co-opted by the government (Banks et al., 2015; Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2002). In that case, as succinctly stated by one interviewee, "If there is a limited space for activism, your hands are tied; delivering services is the only thing you can do. You are in a very shrinking civic space, you are trying to promote certain values or principles of human rights, without necessarily labeling them as such. In a context with relatively more political freedom or activism, you are less restricted" (Interview #19). On the other hand, it is important to recognize local traditions and culture, namely how and where decisions about public affairs and services are being made and by whom. In many societies, decision making is located with local elites (or families or tribes) that are more powerful than the formal institutional structure. Scholars caution against the possibility of NGOs disturbing the local power structure through their work (AbouAssi & Trent, 2013; Brett, 2003; Mansuri & Rao, 2013).

Second, democracy building can help to restore "the social contract that should exist between citizens and those governing them (including NGOs) about the expectations defined for everyone. That social contract is tarnished" (Interview #20). As NGOs step in to deliver the services that the state cannot meet, the legitimacy of the state may suffer if individuals assume that the NGOs are more efficient in their performance in comparison to states' agencies (Houtzager, 2003; Riddell, 2007). Zaidi (1999) makes a clear argument that if the primary problem is state failure, then the state needs to be brought back into the discussion. The state itself needs to be involved in the process, while emphasizing reforming the nature of the state. "Having a well networked civil society is huge in its ability to deliver on their mandate as a civil society. The results would be strengthening the social contract" (Interview #12).

Service providing NGOs respond to people's immediate, basic needs. They run orphanages, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, health clinics, and similar organizations that alleviate the worst effects of social problems. But when their work addresses the root causes of social challenges by integrating citizens into problem solving processes, service providing NGOs not only enhance a community's economic and social well-being but also contribute to more democratic societies.

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