How Can NGOs Build Democracy Through Service Delivery?

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Service-providing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play prominent roles in international development, driven in part by the diminishing role of governments in welfare provision. International donors have bankrolled the proliferation of NGOs under the assumption that these organizations are more effective and efficient service providers than government agencies.

Yet the rise of service-providing NGOs may come at a price. Scholars have elucidated the ways in which governments control and co-opt service-providing NGOs, leaving only a small population of advocacy NGOs relatively unfettered to promote democracy. In some cases, control and co-option are achieved through top-down regulatory and monitoring schemes. In other cases, partnerships between governments and NGOs erode organizations' identities and independence, leaving NGOs less responsive to citizens and less likely to challenge the government.

However, service-delivery NGOs can promote democracy by serving as public arenas, or spaces in which members and beneficiaries build and practice democratic habits such as discussion and debate, collective problem solving, free expression, rights claiming and the like. To do that, certain institutional and contextual factors must be in place. These include:

1. **Local embeddedness**. NGOs need to be deeply rooted in the local community. Organizations must grasp community needs and priorities to acquire legitimacy and trust. When organizations are locally embedded, they can serve as public spheres in which members engage in discussion, debate and collective problem solving; express themselves freely; and learn about their rights as citizens. Locally embedded NGOs also can link smaller communities and marginalized groups to the larger political arena.
2. **Organizational capacity**. Here capacity refers to an organization's ability to deploy sufficient human, financial and capital resources to fulfill its mission. For service-delivery NGOs, capacity is focused on the ability to provide services; democracy building can happen if it does not consume that capacity and if the organization can transform the remaining capacity into a relational one. The dilemma here is that NGOs with sufficient capacity to provide services and build democracy are typically larger, professionalized organizations that are not as embedded in their communities.
3. **Organizational governance**. An organization cannot promote democracy if it does not practice democracy internally. This means an organization must be representative of and responsive to the stakeholders it serves. It also must be transparent in its operations and decisions and willing to be held accountable for its actions. Service delivery NGOs whose governance structures are transparent, representative and inclusive will have higher levels of accountability and trust among citizens and, as a result, be better able to promote democracy than NGOs that are governed opaquely by elites.
4. **Collaboration**. Collaboration is important for promoting democracy. NGOs that collaborate can learn from each other, hold each other accountable, generate more trust and more effectively spur citizen participation. In addition, democracy building is a concerted effort; collaborative NGOs are able to coordinate logistical and technical support. Service-delivery NGOs attempting to build democracy should also have working relations with the government to represent the interests of minority and marginalized groups whose voices would otherwise be silenced.
5. **Relations with Donors.** Scholarly literature highlights the negative impact of donor funding in terms of "NGO-ization" of civil society, producing managerial NGOs that are highly professionalized, depoliticized and upwardly accountable to donors. If service delivery NGOs want to promote democracy, they need to restore their relations with their constituents by recommitting to downward accountability to those they serve and inward accountability to their mission. Donors, on the other hand, need to support NGOs endeavors, not necessarily through additional funding but rather by moving away from their top-down approach, engaging with locally connected NGOs, and tolerating the risk of failure of some of their supported initiatives.
6. **Nature of service provided**. Not all services are conducive to democracy building. Emergency or relief services aim to address pressing nee spur political reform. Services that are subcontracted by government agencies are restrictive; when NGOs provide fee-based services, they are r

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motivated to meet their targets than to promote democracy. Services that are more public and contentious from a policy perspective may help to build democracy by stimulating discussion and debate among members and beneficiaries.

7. **Societal accommodation for democracy promotion and consolidation.** On one hand, a certain degree of pluralism allows NGOs to be actively involved in promoting democracy. On the other hand, if the political space or activism within the society is restrictive, then service delivery becomes the only mechanism for NGOs to subtly promote democracy without being cracked down on by the government.

It is important to note that these factors are not necessary for sufficient conditions for service-delivery NGOs to be able to promote democracy. We also should not expect all service-delivery NGOs to be able to or interested in assuming that responsibility. And finally, before talking about democracy building, the pending question—which should be the first question to ask—is what is democracy?

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