Bridging the gap?: the parallel universes of the non-profit and non-governmental organisation research traditions and the changing context of voluntary action

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Summary

The first CVO International Working Paper makes a set of general observations about international third sector research and argues that there are currently two 'parallel universes' of literature. The first of these is work which focuses on the 'North' (on what are often termed 'non-profit' or 'voluntary' organisations) and the second is work which examines these organisations and their activities in the 'South' (where they are generally termed 'non-governmental organisations'). These two research literatures are largely separate and barely acknowledge one another. This is surprising because, despite important differences between so-called 'developed' and 'developing' country contexts, there are many common overlapping themes and concerns. The separateness creates two main problems. The first is that opportunities for learning and exchange between researchers may be restricted, particularly around organisational issues (such as governance and accountability) and approaches to poverty reduction (such as credit). The second problem is the relevance of third sector research, which needs to respond to the growing interconnectedness of problems in North and South through processes of globalisation and the growing deployment of concepts such as 'social capital', 'civil society' and 'social exclusion' which may transcend a simple North/South dichotomy. In conclusion, brief case studies are presented which illustrate that (i) ideas from the third sector in the South are now influencing organisations in the North; (ii) third sector organisations are exchanging ideas between North and South; (iii) third sector organisations are promoting solidarity links between communities in North and South and (iv) organisations and individuals in North and South are working jointly to develop new approaches to development work. Bridging the gap between the two literatures would reflect these recent developments within the contemporary global third sector.

Introduction

There has been a growth of interest during the past decade among researchers on what have been variously termed 'NGOs', 'non-profit' and 'voluntary' organisations in both the industrialised and the aid-recipient countries (Salamon, 1994; Smillie, 1995). This has reflected the heightened profiles of these types of organisations amongst policy makers and activists in both domestic and international contexts. In development studies, the new research interest in NGOs has arisen partly in response to the perceived failure of state-led development approaches during the 1970s and 1980s and the 'new policy agenda' which combines neo-liberal economic policy prescriptions with that of 'good governance' (Robinson, 1993). It has also reflected post-Cold War policy contexts in which international NGOs have been brought centre stage in relief and emergency efforts (Fowler, 1995b). Within social policy research, the growth of research interest in the third sector has been associated with the restructuring of welfare policies in the industrialised countries (eg Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Kramer et al, 1993). Renewed social science interest in the concept of 'civil society' in relation to the 'third world', the former socialist 'transitional' countries and Western industrialised contexts has also focused considerable research attention on the third sector in recent years (eg Chambre, 1997; Brown and Tandon, 1994).

The origin of this paper can be found in my own recent professional experience in moving from a background in developing country research to an academic centre which has its roots in the study of the British voluntary sector.[1] As a researcher from a development studies background working on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and rural development in South Asia I have become intrigued by the existence of what might be loosely termed two 'parallel research universes' in the study of different types of non-governmental, voluntary and non-profit organisations around the world.

Academic research into 'third sector' organisations (i.e. those organisations which are neither part of the state nor the business sectors) can be broadly categorised into two distinct groupings: work which focuses on these organisations and their activities in industrialised countries and work which examines related types of organisations in developing or aid-recipient countries.[2] The non-governmental organisation 'universe' of literature is a growing set of inter-disciplinary writings within development studies which has concerned itself with the role of what are termed 'NGOs' in development (eg Korten, 1990; Clark, 1991; Edwards and Hulme, 1995). The non-profit literature 'universe' consists of research on what are variously termed 'voluntary', 'non-profit' or 'third sector' organisations working in Western industrialised societies (eg Powell, 1987; Billis, 1993; Salamon, 1994; Harris, 1998).

These two research universes do not form entirely watertight categories and some points of overlap are discussed later in this paper. While recognising that there is some permeability in the boundaries of these two universes, it is suggested that this dichotomy is a useful way of representing and conceptualising an important problem. A distinction is therefore maintained throughout this working paper between the 'NGO literature' on the one hand and the 'non-profit literature' on the other.

The characteristics of the two literatures

There is considerable overlap in the subject matter of the two literatures. In a recent review article Leat (1997: 47), herself a nonprofit researcher with a UK focus, reflects on this discovery. Acknowledging the odd sense of strangeness and familiarity, Leat describes her reactions while reviewing two collections of papers on NGOs by Edwards and Hulme (1992 and 1995) as 'akin to visiting New York from London':

> The language, structures, culture, tensions and challenges are the same but different, more vivid, more urgent, both more complex and starker. The world in which NGOs operate is bigger, more culturally and politically diverse, the poor poorer and relatively more disadvantaged. The issues are familiar: what is the relationship between service provision and campaigning; how do you combine delivery of service with participation and democratization; how should/could effectiveness be assessed and when, why and how are voluntary organisations most effective; how do you combine multiple accountabilities upwards and downwards, and what is accountability anyway; by whom and how is the organisation managed; how are associational roots and ideologies combined with bureaucratic structures; does he who pays the piper always call the tune, does sector matter, and so on.

With so many research concerns in common, the existence of the two parallel research universes is perhaps surprising. In country contexts as different as, say, Britain and Bangladesh it is apparent that organisations may be struggling in different ways with essentially similar sets of issues (eg Kramer, 1994; Wood, 1997). Both literatures are inter-disciplinary social science fields which seek to combine insights from economics, political science, sociology and anthropology and yet they remain different and largely separate from one another.

Difference

The NGO literature has been concerned with the growth and evolution of NGO roles in development and relief work, with policy issues of NGO relations with states and donors and with community-based action and social change (Drabek, 1987; Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Clark, 1991). In general, the NGO literature has focused on NGO roles in the 'aid industry' (Clark, 1991; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Fowler, 1997), and on development practice (eg Korten, 1990; Carroll, 1992; Smillie, 1995).[3] Its tone, while sometimes critical of the attention currently being given to NGOs, is usually one which documents and suggests the potential of NGOs to transform development processes in positive ways (eg Korten, 1990; Clark, 1991; Edwards and Hulme, 1992).[4]

By contrast, the non-profit literature has ordered its priorities slightly differently. This has included considering theoretical questions such as the different explanations for the existence of the third sector (eg Powell, 1987; Anheier, 1995) and policy issues such as the growth of contracting (eg Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Kramer, 1994). It has concentrated on service delivery and welfare organisations more than advocacy and social change organisations (Billis, 1993; Salamon, 1994) and has given a higher priority than the NGO literature to organisational structure and management issues (eg Butler and Wilson, 1990; Young, 1992; Billis and Harris, 1996). By contrast, organisational issues have hardly featured at all in the NGO literature.[5]

There are a number of other differences. The NGO literature has tended to see NGOs as one of a number of key actors in processes of development alongside the state, local government, foreign donors and private corporations (eg Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Wuyts et al, 1992; Hulme and Edwards, 1997). In contrast to this relatively 'integrated' approach, the non-profit literature has to a greater extent focused on the organisations themselves and on the concept of the 'sector' as a distinctive subject for research (eg Salamon

and Anheier, 1992 and 1997; Billis, 1993). This is also reflected in the appearance of specialised nonprofit journals such as Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, Voluntas and Nonprofit Management and Leadership. Research papers on NGOs, which in recent years have begun to appear in large quantity, are still published in general development journals such as World Development or the Journal of International Development.

Each literature also has its own distinctive sets of specialised terms. In the British nonprofit literature the term 'voluntary organisation' is commonly used for domestic third sector organisations. The term 'NGO' is usually reserved for organisations of both North and South working in aid-recipient countries. In the US nonprofit literature, the term 'non-profit organisation' is widely understood in the domestic context, while the term 'private voluntary organisation' (PVO) is sometimes used for US organisations working in the international context. By contrast within the NGO literature the umbrella term 'non-governmental organisation' is generally used throughout, although the category 'NGO' may be broken down into specialised organisational sub-groups such as 'public service contractors', 'people's organisations', 'voluntary organisations' and even 'governmental NGOs' (Korten, 1990) or 'grassroots support organisations' and 'membership support organisations' (Carroll, 1992).

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that there is an arbitrariness to the different usages of these terms and categories both within and between the two literatures, and that these terms are culture bound. Sometimes the different labels reflect genuine organisational distinctiveness and difference while at other times the varied usages simply generate conceptual confusion. Why for example does the nonprofit literature tend to use different terms for essentially similar kinds of organisations working at home or internationally? Why does the NGO literature continue with a negative definition which expresses what these organisations are not? Najam (1996) has identified as many as 47 different and largely bewildering organisational terms in common use around the world which express the scale of the classificatory problem. Vakil (1997) has recently provided a useful taxonomy of NGOs, but does not address directly the question of different usages in the two literatures.[6]

It is refreshing to find that some researchers do not make arbitrary cultural or geographical distinctions in the terms which they use. For example, a recent article by Kumar and Hudock (1996: 195) on accountability simply refers to "NGOs ... [which] ... provide social services in Britain" and "NGOs based in the 'South', for example African NGOs" and does not reserve different terminologies for third sector organisations based on whether they are related to the so-called developed or the developing areas of the world.

Separateness

The two literatures are not only different, but they are also largely separate and relatively little cross-referencing has taken place between them. One reason given for this separation is that there are vast differences in the scale and order of problems in poor and rich countries which require very different research approaches and terms and ultimately different kinds of organisational and policy solutions. For example, Billis (1984: 64) in his discussion of UK welfare agencies makes a point of distinguishing between two different sets of priorities in welfare provision. The relief of 'social discomfort' is contrasted with the more extreme need to address 'social breakdown'. Following from this idea a terminological distinction is later developed in his work in which the term 'non-governmental organisation' is used in the developing country context and 'voluntary agency' is used in the UK context, reflecting in part the different levels of need in the different contexts (Billis and MacKeith, 1993: 3).

Another reason for the separation is the geographical division of disciplinary labour which has existed in many areas of the social sciences. A line has frequently divided 'domestic' researchers from those with an

international or third world focus.[7] A growing awareness of the importance of non-profit and voluntary organisations in Europe and the US has gradually attracted attention from social policy and organisation researchers, leading to the establishment of a distinct field of non-profit studies. Development studies has concerned itself with understanding the lower income countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America and the study of NGOs has gradually grown to form part of this research. Many academic departments in the UK still contain people working on similar research subjects - such as 'social exclusion' - which either have a domestic or an international focus, but who only rarely or informally compare ideas across these boundaries. Each field has established its own professional associations, so that for example while the UK Development Studies Association has its own specialised NGO sub-group, non-profit researchers have gone further and created an Association for Research on Nonprofit Organisations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) and the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR).

It would be wrong to suggest that the two literatures are entirely insulated from each other. Some researchers can be seen partly at least to straddle both camps (eg Najam, 1996; Vakil, 1997; Fisher, 1994). The non-profit literature has begun to make efforts to internationalise its research perspectives (eg Anheier, 1990). This change is signified by the establishment of the ISTR and by the growth of comparative research projects such as that of Salamon and Anheier (1992 and 1997) and Kramer et al (1993).

However, one rarely finds researchers from the NGO literature writing in the 'internationalising' non-profit literature and vice versa. Only a handful of researchers have begun the process of building links between the two literatures. For example Billis and MacKeith (1993) have used concepts drawn from research within the UK voluntary sector to explore organisational change among a sample of British development NGOs. Edwards and Hulme (1995) have drawn attention to connections between work on contracting in the South and its implications for development NGOs. Fisher (1994) has linked Western organisational theory with work on development NGOs and has suggested that Michels' iron law of oligarchy is challenged by the experience of some large Southern NGOs which have maintained more participatory management styles. Tandon (1995) has examined organisational issues around the accountability of NGO governing bodies, covering some similar ground to work in this area undertaken in the UK and US contexts, although without making direct reference to such work. Fowler (1995b) has attempted to draw on the organisational work of Kanter and Drucker to assess NGO performance. However, this kind of cross-fertilization is comparatively unusual.

Implications of the separateness

If the two literatures are studied side by side it is difficult to escape the conviction that their separateness creates a set of problems which need to be addressed. These problems are essentially of two types, one related to learning and exchange, the other related to relevance.

Firstly, the separation of the two literatures may reduce opportunities for learning by researchers across different contexts. As third sector issues are increasingly prioritised by researchers and policy makers in different parts of the world there is a danger of 're-inventing the wheel' unless more comparative work is undertaken and more exchange of conclusions from existing work within the two literatures takes place. For example, while we might not expect the current growth of contracting arrangements between NGOs, governments and donors in developing country contexts to bring exactly the same sets of challenges faced within the British voluntary sector during the onset of welfare pluralist policies and enterprise culture in 1980s, it may be extremely useful to compare aspects of the two experiences.

Despite the different order and scale of problems in rich and poor countries, there are many common approaches to poverty eradication and welfare provision which are comparable (eg experiments with

empowerment, credit provision and participation) and joint learning and exchange may therefore be possible. Ideas from the South are also reaching the North, creating new levels and layers of global exchange and learning:

> As savings and credit schemes invented in Bangladesh catch on in the ghettos of Chicago, as African urban activists help community officials in the banlieus of Paris cope with social decay, and as local government officials from Europe make pilgrimages to Curitiba, Brazil to see how cities can be made more sustainable, fresh policy ideas will get transmitted at low cost, and know-how created in 'poor' countries will be revalued (Sogge, 1996: 169).

Linking the two literatures more effectively may allow a more efficient use of what is known by filling gaps in knowledge through comparative research.

Secondly, the relevance of both of these literatures may be diminished unless their research agendas can react to the changing international contexts of voluntary action. Research structured by concepts of 'North' and 'South' (or the many other euphemisms for rich and poor countries) may be ill-suited to forces of globalisation which may ultimately be dissolving, or at least complicating such distinctions further. In addition, researchers need to engage with international third sector linkages which are already evolving between organisations in different parts of the world outside the lines of the conventional 'aid industry'. It is this second set of issues which the remainder of this paper seeks to develop.

There are of course other related practical, political and academic dilemmas which are currently important in international third sector research. These include:

- tensions between theory and practice
- the relative importance of welfare and social change organisations in different contexts
- the domination of Southern research agendas by Northern researchers
- debates concerning different perspectives on what constitutes 'development'

These issues will be touched upon in the discussion which follows, but a more detailed coverage will require a future paper.

The changing context of voluntary action

The economic and political forces of globalisation are creating new patterns of similarity and difference across a social, cultural, economic and political landscape which is undergoing massive change (Giddens, 1993). The usefulness of the concept of the 'third world' has been under attack for some time (Harris, 1986) with the economic growth of the newly industrialising countries and the growing numbers of middle income countries of Asia and Latin America. As Escobar (1995) has argued, the construction of a 'discourse' about the 'third world' had as much to do with the assertion of Western economic and political power in the period after 1945 as it did with local realities in the countries of the South.

Given the fragility of many of these assumptions, there are many pitfalls for the third sector researcher. It is perhaps instructive to link Escobar's analysis of development discourse with our discussion of the parallel universe problem. Models and concepts of the non-profit sector have so far tended to be developed in the North and then applied to the South (Salamon and Anheier, 1997). The problem of ethnocentricity or Eurocentricity is already well-documented in the case of the application of Western models of development economics to the developing world (see Mehmet, 1995). Similar problems may be apparent in the efforts

by Northern scholars to label, quantify and understand third sectors in other parts of the world. The power of development agencies to shape research on NGOs is visible in much of the published material on NGOs. Northern researchers are often funded in their research by official donors or write up work as by-products of consultancy assignments.[8] This is a situation which has potentially dangerous implications for the objectivity of third sector research (Edwards and Hulme, 1995).

The interconnectedness of social and economic issues is a feature of modern life emphasised by new focus on the concept of 'globalisation' rather than 'development' increasingly taking place among researchers and policy makers. For the first time since the heyday of 'dependency theory' in the 1970s, it is again being asserted that poverty in many parts of the world is inextricably connected to policies in other, more prosperous areas. For example, Sogge (1996: 146) has drawn attention to the fact that a central tenet of the 'aid paradigm' has been the idea that

> ... the Problem is 'out there' on a poor periphery of the world, whose misfortunes have no connection with acts and omissions by the powerful in the wealthy core of the world.

As well as an emphasis on linking the causes and stressing the interconnectedness of poverty on a global level, we are also currently witnessing a convergence of research concepts across North and South.

Within British academia, research traditions such as 'development studies' and 'social policy' have for some time been widening well beyond their established North or South focus. Some social policy researchers are attempting to construct stronger links with development issues (eg Midgley, 1995), while in development studies there is a growing tendency to link concepts and research from both the developed and the developing world (eg Putzel, 1997). At a recent UK Development Studies Association seminar, for example, papers were presented on NGO work which mixed experiences from the South and from Britain. A recent collection of work on poverty and identity in urban areas by Beall (1997) combines writing on urban areas in both North and South, by researchers from both contexts.

There are now debates taking place about whether or not concepts developed in the North may have relevance as well to the South. Relatively new social science concepts such as 'social exclusion' (Bhalla and Lapeyre, 1997; Gaventa, 1997) and 'social capital' (Harriss, 1997; Putzel, 1997) may be encouraging new insights and action around development and poverty issues, while the rediscovery of older ones such as 'civil society' both animate and complicate contemporary debates about democracy and voluntary action (Harbeson et al, 1994; Hann and Dunn, 1996). The research literature on social movements has an increasingly global focus and work within both the nonprofit (eg Hall and Hall, 1996) and the NGO literatures (Fox, 1996) have begun to make relevant links with work in this field.

A particularly striking example of the choices faced by third sector organisations within these changing landscapes is the case of the British NGO Oxfam, which recently decided that it would establish projects to address poverty in the UK instead of working solely in the 'third world'. Oxfam argued that its expertise which had been acquired through many years of working in developing countries might be transferable to Britain and that common problems of poverty and exclusion might exist in both North and South. The decision proved a controversial one. In the UK, the Daily Mail's headline when Oxfam announced its new programme was 'Stick to the Third World!' (NCVO, 1996). It was not clear whether this reflected a view on the political right that poverty is not a feature of British social life and only exists in the 'third world', or that if poverty did exist in the UK, it was not the place of an international development NGO to address the problem. The 'parallel universe problem' can in a sense be seen as a microcosm of the research and policy challenges generated by trends towards globalisation and the continuing dominance of Western discourses of knowledge and power about poverty and development (Gardner and Lewis, 1996).

Current research is beginning to highlight the fact that poverty is not confined to the third world but is also

found in the growing inequalities between social groups in the North. Organisational responses to poverty and marginalisation are similarly inter-connected. This is apparent if we consider the efforts of women to organise in response to the rise of neo-liberal policy change at the global level, in the North in the face of restructuring of welfare systems and in the South by the structural adjustment process. Within a global conceptual framework linking gender and organisational responses to poverty, comparisons and connections can be made between women organising communal soup kitchens in Peru, influencing policy in Bolivia and fighting violence against women in New York (Lind, 1996).

Within the global third sector, conceptual and practical boundaries are therefore breaking down. Links between organisations in North and South are increasingly being constructed and assumptions about the separateness of the two parallel research universes can easily be challenged. For example, Local Agenda 21 efforts since the 1992 UN Earth Summit Conference in Rio to promote environmental action and sustainable development have released funds to community organisations in both North and South and within both contexts many common challenges have been observed (NGLS, 1997). Third sector organisations in the two parts of Ireland receive funds from the European Union intended to promote social and economic development. The relationships which result from these funding inflows create challenges, such as the management of relations with multilateral donors and the building of community participation, which are reminiscent of those involving NGOs in a developing country context (eg Williamson, 1996). Conversely, in some developing countries such as Ethiopia and India there are growing numbers of NGOs which raise money from private individual givers as well as corporate funds, in a manner usually associated only with rich European and North American countries (Norton, 1996).

If it continues to influence action and policy, other practical problems may follow from the parallel research universe problem. One is the question of resource allocation. What for example will be the impact on public giving if organisations such as Oxfam find that working with poverty at home is unpopular with their supporters? What are the implications for bilateral aid donors such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) if it follows trends in some of its own offices in its partner countries (such as Bangladesh and India) to fund Southern NGOs directly instead of working through the Swedish NGOs whose roots are in the church, trade unions and cooperatives within Swedish society (Lewis and Sobhan, 1998)? The roles of Northern NGOs working in development in particular are currently being rethought. For example, at a recent bilateral donor meeting reported to the author the issue was raised as to whether Northern development NGOs were the most appropriate intermediaries between donors and specialised Southern NGOs, or whether links should be promoted between British voluntary sector organisations working on, say, child poverty in London with an Indian organisation working with similar issues in New Delhi.[9] The resource implications of these questions may turn out to be significant for domestic voluntary organisations, NGOs and governments alike during the coming years.

Closing the gap

Closer links between the two literatures would bring potential complementarities of knowledge which would greatly enrich the research process. But more importantly, it would also allow research to link more closely with current policy and practice, which may be well ahead of research in terms of North/South third sector links. The separateness of the two literatures may limit our understanding of examples of practical linkage, collaboration and learning which are already taking place among third sector organisations. Four examples of this are briefly discussed below.

(i) Ideas from the third sector in the South influence organisations in the North

The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh started life as a micro-credit action research project undertaken in the mid-1970s by Professor M.Yunus, an economist working at Chittagong University in the south of the country. The project was expanded with the help of some of his former students into a private non-profit specialised financial institution dedicated to providing loans to mostly female members of low income landless rural families, challenging prevailing ideology that poverty resulted from a lack of access to waged labour and that the economic needs of male household members should be prioritised. The research showed poor people had the skills to operate viable enterprises but lacked access to capital. By 1994 loan disbursement had reached about US$1 billion with two million active borrower-members across 35,000 of Bangladesh's villages, providing loans of around $140 per person on average. What is particularly interesting about this third sector initiative in Bangladesh is the wider influence the organisation has gained on an international level. Based on a decision to support replication of its models and ideas by other organisations in other contexts rather than simply expanding itself, the Grameen Bank has helped organisations develop similar approaches to lending in Latin America, Asia and Africa as well as in the United States (Holcombe, 1995; Hulme, 1993).

(ii) Third sector organisations working in North and South share ideas

Secondly, there are cases of learning and exchange between third sector organisations working with marginalised communities in both North and South. The Highlander Education Center in the United States serves as an excellent example. Established in the 1930s, the Centre moved from working on labour organising through civil rights work in the 1950s to Freirean empowerment strategies during the 1970s and 1980s. Gaventa (1991) points out that the organisation is located in a part of the Southern United States where areas of Third World-like poverty exist in a 'South within the North' which has 30% unemployment, a growing illiteracy rate, the total absence of doctors from some counties, 70% absentee landlord rate, the destruction of forest resources by multinational corporations and the illegal dumping of toxic waste on roads and in waterways. The organisation has taken part in exchanges of grassroots NGO staff and membership from countries such as India and Mexico and has found it useful to pursue common community interests across communities of North and South.

(iii) North/South community solidarity links

Thirdly, there are third sector organisations in North and South promoting international solidarity. North-South community linking has been taking place between communities and organisations in Britain and aid-recipient countries for many years and a range of efforts have been documented. A British NGO known as the UK One World Linking Association established in 1985 has more than a decade of experience in working to create links between community groups, local authorities and NGOs with the English speaking countries of Africa and the Caribbean. A wide range of experience has been documented in which voluntary action is directed towards mutual learning around jointly agreed agendas on education, administration and solidarity. Short case studies from Britain and The Gambia have recently been published (Bond, 1996).

(iv) Individuals and organisations in North and South jointly develop new approaches

Fourthly, the technique of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) has many of its roots in the South (Biggs and Smith, 1998) and was developed and refined jointly by academics, public sector officials and NGO practitioners. PRA is now used all over the world to assess community needs, challenge top down official and professional bias in planning and policy implementation and to provide opportunities for a more participatory evaluation of projects and programmes by stakeholders (Chambers, 1996). The use of PRA in the UK urban setting has recently been documented (Cresswell, 1996). A similar participatory planning

methodology to PRA known as 'planning for real' was coincidentally being developed in the UK urban context at the same time as PRA was evolving in the South. 'Planning for real' has subsequently been applied outside the UK in both Northern and Southern contexts (Gibson, 1996).

There may be other less well documented examples of learning between North and South which would support the need for non-profit and NGO researchers to pay close attention to each other's work and to respond to these changing contexts of voluntary action. For example, in Brazil, the efforts of the Catholic Church in developing local community 'base' organisations have spread to other church communities in the United States, initially among Latin Americans but increasingly now among other sections of the community.[10]

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there are now two 'parallel universes' of academic literature dealing with third sector organisations in North and South which are both different and separate such that they barely acknowledge each other. This is a problem because the two literatures actually cover many comparable issues and potential learning opportunities are therefore being missed. Secondly, this separateness runs counter to current interests in the phenomenon of globalisation as well as potential theoretical convergences apparent in North and South around such concepts as 'civil society', 'social exclusion' and 'social capital'. Thirdly, there is now a varied and dynamic spectrum of international third sector linkages already existing between North and South which the third sector research literature should perhaps reflect more fully.

Nevertheless, in sketching out potentially new third sector research agendas and a possible era of enhanced cooperation between non-profit and NGO researchers, there are many potential hazards to be faced. On a practical level, there is evidence that learning across contexts and the replication of approaches can be a difficult process (Hulme, 1993). There is the risk of continuing domination of Southern policy agendas by the North as Northern nonprofit researchers move into wider transnational research work. We might lose sight of the scale of problems of poverty in the South as compared to the North. However, if the separateness of the parallel research universes as presently constituted is allowed to solidify further, then opportunities for further learning may be missed and the relevance of third sector research may be diminished.

Future research on third sector organisational roles and contexts in both North and South will need to take account of the changes and challenges outlined in this paper. Are NGOs to be seen merely as humanitarian relief organisations ('ladles for the global soup kitchen', as Fowler, 1995a, has suggested) to mop up during complex political emergencies or are they catalysts contributing to the promotion of social and economic change? Are non-profit organisations increasingly being asked to bear the brunt of state withdrawal from public services in industrialised countries or do they form part of a pluralistic 'civil society'? Will international connections between third sector organisations contribute to the formation of 'global civil society' (Macdonald, 1994)? Such concerns may be as central to the voluntary sectors of the UK or the US as they are to those in aid-recipient countries in the South.

Notes

1. I am very grateful for comments on earlier drafts of this paper to Margaret Harris, Romayne Hutchison, Nazneen Kanji, Colin Rochester, Arti Sinha and an anonymous referee. This is a revised version of the overview paper presented at the CVO Conference 'NGOs and voluntary organisations in North and South: learning from each other? organised by the Centre for Voluntary Organisation and held at LSE on 18-19th September 1997. The edited papers from the conference can be found in International Perspectives on Voluntary Action: Reshaping the Third Sector, edited by David Lewis, Earthscan, 1998.

2. While recognising the limitations of any simple dualist terminology, the terms 'North' and 'South' are used in this paper to distinguish rich industrialised countries from low income, aid-recipient ones.

3. Brett (1996) is an important exception to the latter generalisation.

4. Exceptions to the pro-NGO tone found in much of the literature can be found in Tendler (1982) and Sogge (1996). Much of the more 'critical' research literature focuses on the emergency relief work of 'Northern' NGOs in Africa, such as Abdel Ati (1993) and Hanlon (1991).

5. There are some notable exceptions, such as Tandon (1995), Fisher, (1994) and Fowler (1997).

6. In order to make more constructive links between the two literatures we need to find a way through the terminological and conceptual confusion which exists around the international third sector. It is suggested here that many of the differences of terminology, emphasis and focus may derive as much from the histories of these different fields of study as from differences between third sector organisation structures, activities or contexts. For example, organisational differences might be reflected more accurately if a conceptual distinction is made between 'grassroots membership associations' and 'formal bureaucratic organisations' or between 'welfare organisations' and 'social change organisations'. This might provide a sounder basis for comparative research than the current practice of drawing taxonomic distinctions on the basis of whether organisations are working in developing country or rich country contexts.

7. This is not a universal problem, however. For example, the 'community development' literature has tended to combine Northern and Southern perspectives quite effectively (e.g. Craig and Mayo, 1995).

8. The present author is by no means blameless on this score and has himself published material from this source.

9. Personal communication, staff member of the British Department for International Development (DFID).

10. Personal communication, Peter Robinson, Humanitas Foundation, New York.

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