

# **NGOs, Networking, and Problems of Representation**

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## **Abstract**

Networking is currently recommended as particularly suitable for NGOs to improve performance and enhance impact. Since many NGOs are small and dispersed, networking is commonly seen as a cost-effective means to share information and spread knowledge about grassroots' needs, solutions and best practices. Also, networking is believed to strengthen NGO's ability to speak with one voice and to significantly increase their impact as policy negotiators and advocating agencies.

However, while NGO-networking definitely has a potential to improve the undertakings of NGOs and grassroots' organizations in LDCs, much of this potential is not realized. NGOs have been found not to share information voluntarily as they are often fierce competitors for funds, market-shares and clients and – particularly – for the right to represent other, smaller NGOs.

The so called 'NGO-community' is heterogenous and there is reason to doubt that it should have only one voice. Too much networking is done to boost the dominance of a few large and well-connected NGOs while too little networking is devoted to practical and grassroots-relevant efforts on the ground.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have claimed – and also often attained – the right to speak for ‘grassroots’ and ‘civil society’ in a multitude of national and international fora and on a wide range of topics. Sometimes, NGOs have had to be satisfied with presenting their analyses and claims at parallel, unofficial, sessions but increasingly they claim the right to take part in formal decision-making processes as delegates with official status in, for example UN summits (Dunér 1997). Apparently, this is not seen as a problem and “[m]ost of the literature on NGOs is exceedingly optimistic on the roles NGOs play in the international, national and local arenas” (Jordan & van Tuijl 2000:2051).

This is somewhat surprising because the issue of NGO representation is rather problematic. However, due to the contemporary hype of NGOs and NGO-networks, this tends to be seriously overlooked, not only by NGOs themselves but also (at least in official rhetoric) by those institutions that are the target of much NGO advocacy. One reason for this paradox apparently is that NGOs, and even more so NGO networking and advocacy, have been hailed as effective and progressive at the same time as both NGO advocacy and networking activities are neglected areas in NGO research (Vakil 1997). Hence, we have no empirical ground for claiming that NGOs would improve the working of, say, the UN or, for that matter, that their networking allows them to do a better job than bilateral and multilateral aid agencies. This paper offers a critical discussion of the pros and cons of NGO-networking, the issue of representation in NGO-networks, and the implications of this problematic for representing ‘the other’ outside the NGO-world itself. The discussion is limited to those NGOs that in one way or another are engaged in the fate of developing countries.

## **NGO-growth and the call for networking**

During the last twenty years or so, the importance of NGOs and, to a lesser extent, local and community based organizations (LOs/CBOs) has been dramatically enhanced in various development discourses. Much development theory and most aid-agencies put them at the forefront of contemporary development strategies. Although statistics are incomplete and definitions vary among sources, it is a fact that, since the 1980s, there has been a veritable explosion in the number of NGOs in both the north and the south. Not only have numbers mushroomed, but so have the funds they handle and the diversity of tasks engaged in (Holmén & Jirström 1996). For example, whereas only a few decades ago most NGOs were oriented more towards relief and charity work, today development is generally said to be the prioritized issue. Therefore, NGOs perform a wide

range of more or less development oriented activities in many different (social, cultural and physical) settings.

It can thus be argued that building networks and practicing networking are – or should be – ‘natural’ activities among NGOs. After all, social change is a communication-intensive process and “[t]o a large extent, information sharing is what ... NGOs do” (Meyer 1997:1127). As intermediaries in development, NGOs are often engaged in diverse activities in different localities and even in different countries. NGOs are frequently, not least in their own eyes, associated with words like: cooperation, information, conscientization, empowerment and policy negotiation. In order to fulfil these varied tasks and to improve performance, NGOs need to learn from other NGOs and to share information with others. With the emphasis on “farmer first” that is so common in NGO-rhetoric, it is also important that NGOs learn from grassroots and their organizations, especially since much advocacy is done on their behalf. Moreover, campaigning – another prioritized NGO-activity – can only be done together with others. There are thus many reasons for NGOs to network and it is believed that networking has a great potential to satisfy most, if not all, of these needs.

With such great expectations, it is no surprise that ‘network’ and ‘networking’ have become something of a ‘magic bullet’ – buzz-words to be fired in connection with almost any kind of activity or situation. However, more often than not emphasis is either *a/* on networking between NGOs and LOs/CBOs, or *b/* on the importance of building the local and community based organizations that NGOs initiate or support on existing social networks (i.e. vertical networking).<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is important but it is striking how scant attention that normally has been given to the practice of non-hierarchical networking between NGOs and between LOs respectively (i.e. horizontal networking). Most attention in the networking debate concerns how ‘higher-order’ NGOs best link-up with grassroots, either through collaborating with existing LOs or, which seems to be more common, by establishing ‘their own’ local branches (Holmén & Jirstrom 1996). Less attention is generally directed towards the issue of linking grassroots and LOs with each-other.

Networking is increasingly being suggested as an important means to further development in poor countries, to disseminate knowledge and information, to enhance empowerment, and to influence decision-makers and development agencies at various levels: locally, nationally and internationally. Networking, apparently, is expected to do many things for a great many people in many different locations and circumstances. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) stresses the importance

of networking to strengthen European member organizations (Sozansky 2002). Especially, networking is currently seen as an important avenue for development agencies and international NGOs active in Third World countries (Alders et al 1993; Nelson & Farrington 1994; Holmén & Jirström 2000). The International Labour Organization's (ILO) COOPNET-programme (Human Resources Development for Cooperative Management and Networking) has been established in order to facilitate the work of cooperative enterprises in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The FAO is organizing farmer groups for learning and exchange of knowledge on Integrated Pest Management and a report commissioned by the Norwegian aid-agency NORAD finds that networking activities between farmers' associations in developing countries as well as between them and donor agencies should be strengthened (Arnesen et al 2002). But it is not only among bilateral and multilateral development agencies that networking presently is given such prominence. Asia and Latin America have long histories of NGO-networking (Holmén & Jirstrom 2000) and in sub-Saharan Africa a great number of NGO networks and/or 'umbrella-organizations' have been created in order to share information and coordinate activities between indigenous NGOs (CBR 1994).

There is no doubt that networking has the potential to dramatically improve performance and impact of NGOs in their work towards development. But it is, in my experience, utilized far below its potential and there also seems to be a high degree of confusion among NGOs about what networking actually implies. A number of risks and problems involved in NGO-networking are easily overlooked, particularly when networks are used to represent the 'NGO-community' in external fora. These adversities should be avoided if the potentials of networking are to be made full us of.

### **Networks and networking**

The habit of sharing information about opportunities and constraints with one's likeminded is everywhere an essential part of social life and, despite the apparent novelty of the concept, networking is "a new name for an old practice" (Plucknett et al 1993:187). This need not be very demanding. However, when networks are created in order to cope with a fast changing environment – or when they are erected with the deliberate purpose of changing the overall environment – things become a bit more complicated, especially if there is no consensus on what the change implies. A network

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<sup>1</sup> A telling example is Vakil (1997:2063) who defines networking NGOs as "national or regional NGOs which channel information and provide technical and other assistance to *lower order* NGOs and individuals" (emphasis added).

may, however, be used as a means to arrive at such a consensus. I will return to this problematic below, but first a few ‘basics’ about (NGO) networking.

Although there are exceptions, most NGOs are small in terms of staff, economic turn-over and impact. By themselves, they are often not likely to make much of a difference. Cooperation is therefore imperative for NGOs eager to scale-up activities and enhance their impact. This, however, is easier said than done. NGOs have been found to staunchly safeguard their independence (Stremlau 1987) which is one reason why many networks tend to become short-lived and sometimes ‘explode’ (Holmén & Jirstrom 2000).

Nevertheless, networking, if properly utilized, can greatly enhance efficiency and impact of NGOs. By constituting *links between organizations*, networks can establish inter-organizational scale-economies, and significantly expand the information available to its constituent organizations. Networks tend to be created to fill gaps in available information systems and often in opposition to established interests and institutions. In essence, a network is a *communication devise* – a mechanism that links people or organizations that share some common value and/or objective (ibid.).

One fundamental advantage of networks is that they “allow organizations... to confront growing challenges without having to enlarge [their] formal structure. Individual weakness may be overcome inherent to the network’s member institutions” (Theunis 1992, quoted from Meyer 1997:1132). Networking, thus, assures us that small can still be beautiful. By working together on prioritized issues, by learning from each-other and by utilizing each-others’ skills and resources, NGOs can gain both flexibility, strength and efficiency. This, however, requires equal status among members of a network.

Disadvantages of networking are, mostly, of a practical nature. One is that networking, generally, is not the most important activity of organizations (or individuals) involved. On the contrary, these organizations have usually been created for other purposes. They are likely to prioritize other activities and networking often becomes a supplementary, if not secondary, activity. Moreover, networking, generally, tends to be rather informal. More often than not, it tends to take place between individuals in organizations rather than being a formal and institutionalized undertaking in the organizations in question. If the networking person is absent, the link is broken and information

flows come to a stand-still.<sup>2</sup> Also, in any network a certain organization will have to take on the role as ‘hub’ or ‘focal-point’ to make sure that information flows through the network. But, since networking is a rather invisible activity, and because it is often difficult to pin-point the benefits of networking, it is often difficult to set aside the financial means necessary to uphold it, especially for focal-point activities (Alders et al 1993; Holmén & Jirstrom 2000). Networking, thus, while definitely offering a range of advantages, is also hampered by a set of weaknesses, which is why networking is hardly the ‘magic bullet’ it is so often held to be. It can still be useful, though.

Networking can mean a lot of things, from the not so demanding habit of “keeping in touch” (Shepherd 1998:227), over the production of a regular newsletter and/or field visits and joint seminars, to national and even global campaigning (Holmén & Jirstrom 2000). For networking to be effective and sustainable, it generally requires active participation among all the participants of the network, *Viz.* it is important that all participants contribute – and are encouraged to contribute – to the information disseminated through the network. Networking, thus, is about *sharing information*, not merely to passively receive it. This has some implications which I want to highlight here.

One implication is that the information disseminated must be relevant to those who receive it, or else they will seize networking. This may seem too trivial to be worth mentioning but this simple fact tends to be constantly overlooked. Moreover, the expectations that different participants have on networking may differ greatly, not only between different NGOs but even more so between NGOs and local grassroots’ organizations. The latter may be more interested in a profitable agricultural project or extra-agricultural income-generating activity, whereas the former may seek visibility and a platform for influencing policy (*ibid.*). Hence, it has been underlined that “a network consisting not of protagonists solely from the same background (e.g. all farmers) but integrating different levels ... must define its aims, its methods and its language according to the needs of its weakest partners” (Tauber et al 1993:255).

The other, related, implication is that there are always costs involved in networking and more so for the hub than for other participants. Generally, it is the northern NGOs that have the (financial, managerial and technological) capacity to fulfil the role of network-hub whereas those who are

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<sup>2</sup> Some NGOs, or, should I say, NGO personnel, devote a lot of time to networking. While this can be a good thing, the circumstance that many NGOs are dominated by one individual can be an obstacle to networking. In his/her absence, no decisions will be taken and no mail will be answered, etc.. Attending a NGO-workshop in Senegal, I once had a discussion on this issue with a Kenyan NGO manager. He had just arrived from a two-weeks tour to NGO meetings abroad. This man gave me an unorthodox interpretation of the concept NGO. In his absence, he said, *Nothing Goes On* in his NGO back home (personal communication).

expected to need the information most are the comparatively resource-poor LOs in the south.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while the costs of networking disproportionately end up in the north, the benefits of networking, on the other hand, are mostly accruing to the peripheral parts of the network – or so it was hoped. In this situation, it is tempting for the hub to expect something in return for fulfilling this costly service function, for example, the right to represent and speak for the network on various occasions.

### **In who's interest are networks being built?**

Two categories are assumed to gain by networking, NGOs and grassroots/grassroots' organizations (LOs). The first category, NGOs, have come to the fore in development discourses because they are generally held to be more flexible and effective than established, multilateral and government-owned aid-agencies. Particularly, they are believed to be better in reaching the poor, to be more participatory and democratic in project formulation and in their approaches to supporting and developing local grassroots' organizations. NGOs also commonly claim to have a shared vision of development, representing the 'alternative development paradigm'. NGOs are thus believed to share a rather extensive common ground and NGO-networks, we are told, are being built to further enhance these comparative advantages as development catalysts.

A further reason for NGOs to practice networking is that most NGOs are of a fairly recent date and, due to their relative inexperience as development agents, they need to learn from each-other.<sup>4</sup> A lot can be gained by sharing information on (reasons for) successes and failures in local project experiences, at the same time as collaborative social and institutional analysis may create an enhanced understanding of the complex development process as such. Considering the fact that NGOs, whether northern or southern, are 'outsiders' in the communities where their projects are implemented, the emphasis on information-sharing and mutual learning should be a strong motivating force for intensified networking among NGOs. Hence, practically oriented networking by way of, for example, field visits and demonstrations (where possible), newsletters, seminars and workshops ought to be prominent items on NGO's agendas.

This emphasis on nearness and direct contact is in stark contrast with 'electronic networking', which is often believed to magnify the potentials and efficiency of NGO networking generally.

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<sup>3</sup> Southern NGOs – which sometimes may function as hubs in regional or national networks – often approach northern NGOs and bilateral aid-agencies for funding, not only of projects but also for networking expenses. Hence, in such cases, they become parts of supra-national networks and the real hub tends to remain in the north.

<sup>4</sup> A study of 108 NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa found that their staffs, generally, did not have the competence to scientifically analyze their problems, that they suffered from insufficient technical training and lacked skills to design and run projects (CBR 1994).

Korten (1993:26), for example, believes that “once organized [NGO networks] can, through electronic communications, rapidly mobilize significant political forces on a global scale”. This seems rather unrealistic. A few years ago it was reported that “there are still more telephones in Manhattan than in sub-Saharan Africa (van Rooy 1997:106) and there has been no dramatic change since then. Even though both the numbers and use of telephones are increasing in sub-Saharan Africa (ITU 2001), we are far from the situation where “[t]he illiterate saleswoman of West Africa relies on traditional bonds and uses here cellular telephone to ask her nephew to buy stocks in New York” (Verhelst 2001:15). Considering that the digital divide is widening rather than shrinking, it can hardly be considered fair to base calls for increased electronic networking on such assumptions.

Likewise, while it is reported that all African countries now have internet access, two-thirds of the users are in one country (South Africa) and the total band-width available in Africa (excluding South Africa) is 60 Mbit/s, which can be compared to Sweden where individual households are presently being offered access to 2 Mbit/s each (Runesson 2001). Not only is the ‘universality’ of the internet greatly exaggerated, entry costs are high and often prohibitive. For example, in Africa, the cost of an internet connection can be larger than the average monthly salary of a government employee. Hence, electronic networking is and will remain largely an option for ‘northern’ NGOs. In the Third World generally and in Africa in particular, it is not only limited, for the foreseeable future it will remain confined to a rather exclusive and internationalized NGO-elite.

The other category involved – those in whose interest so many development organizations are being established – i.e. the poor grassroots in less developed countries, it may be argued, should have an even greater stake in networking than the above mentioned intermediary organizations. “Though numerous, [LOs] are scattered over the large span of the countryside. Their contacts with each-other are limited” (CBR 1994:13). What LOs need is often of a very practical nature concerning day-to-day activities such as agricultural technology, soil-preserving techniques, information on new income generating practices, and about opportunities in a changing politico-economic landscape, etc. Since they are often unfamiliar with the post-SAP rules of the game, they also need information on legal and organizational issues and matters related to project funding and organizational management. Of particular importance to LOs is the question of how to sustain transparency and local ownership in the presence of external help and/or funding.

LOs need to share experiences on such issues with other LOs and this is most conveniently done through demonstrations, formal or informal field-visits, study groups and local or regional work-



shops. Generally, newsletters and networking via electronic media is out of reach for grassroots organizations but here NGOs could be of some assistance by in simplified ways disseminating among LOs grassroots' problem identifications, as well as locally developed solutions and best practices. It is important here to underline that "meeting is better than writing" (Graham 1993) and that "face-to-face contacts between members is essential... The geographical area covered by a network should be such that informal and/or formal meetings are possible fairly frequently" (Hiemstra & Alders 1993:267).

### **The heterogenous 'family' of NGOs**

The concept NGO is somewhat misleading. For one thing, it is a negative definition that does not reveal anything about what kind of organization we are dealing with, except for the circumstance that the State is not (openly) involved (Holmén & Jirström 1994). Moreover, the habit of lumping all kinds of NGOs together under one and the same label gives the false impression that they share a common purpose and constitute an "international movement" or community – a myth that is often supported by NGOs themselves. Under this umbrella-term, however, are found a diversity of organizations with often diverging and sometimes opposing objectives, strategies and world-views. Even if we adopt a widespread definition of NGOs, designating them as "self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations that are geared toward improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people" (Vakil 1997:2060), there is no consensus among NGOs about how to accomplish this objective. Particularly, one should be careful not to assume that northern and southern NGOs are one of a kind (Tripp 2001).

On the one hand, there are northern NGOs such as the Sasakawa Foundation, which can be called mainstream modernizers and strongly believe in technology as a means to overcome food shortages and reduce poverty in poor countries. Sasakawa generally operates in collaboration with governments in the Third World. Other northern-based NGOs, for example Technoserve, are 'market-friendly' and assist Third World producer organizations in accessing the world market in order to earn much-needed hard currency from exports.

On the other hand, many northern NGOs claim to be representing 'another development'. They tend to be politically radical anti-capitalists and/or are motivated by environmental concerns. They are sceptical if not outright hostile to modernism and often see themselves as alternatives to mainstream

development strategies.<sup>5</sup> Some of these regard themselves as reformists whereas others claim to have revolutionary potentials. The latter tend to avoid being linked to governments. For example, many northern NGOs and northern-based transnational NGOs find it extremely important to preserve their radical self-image – even at the cost of influence foregone. For example, some Swedish NGOs have refused to function as advisors on environmental issues because they fear being associated with a system that they criticize (Dekker-Linnros 1999).

NGOs in the Third World have likewise been established for a number of reasons and do not always share the same purpose – and often also not that of the supporting northern ‘sponsor’. As could be expected, there are less objections to development in the south even if social and environmental concerns are expressed also there. Some southern NGOs are genuine development organizations and do not have à-priori aversions towards technology or modernization. Others, however, are deeply concerned about the loss of culture and values that development entails. To different degrees they base their work on indigenous resources and are more or less responsive to locally expressed needs. Some of these southern NGOs, such as the Grameen bank and Proshika in Asia, and the Naam movement in Africa, have become both large and famous for their accomplishments. Their good records have been gained, not because they reject development, but because they have found efficient ways to include more people in the development process.

Some southern NGOs, perhaps more so in Latin America than elsewhere, have a history as popular, more or less radical organizations and have been created by people in opposition to authoritarian regimes. Like their radical counterparts in the north, they today tend to face difficulties in defining their role since democratic governments have replaced former military dictators and now offer them a possibility to cooperate for development. Will they lose their soul if they collaborate? (Bebbington 1997). The question here is whether it is more important to preserve the radical self-image or to be part of a development process that, for all we know, can hardly be controlled and the end-product of which can hardly be à-priori determined.

Generally, although there are exceptions, southern NGOs (like many of their northern counterparts) are neither as transparent, nor as democratic as has often been expected (Holmén & Jirström 1996; Edwards & Hulme 1996) and not so few are, in fact, one man’s enterprises (Alström 1994; Dicklich 1998). While many southern NGOs no doubt are serious about their business, quite a few have been

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<sup>5</sup> This, says Pieterse (1998), is largely self-deceptive. On the one hand, mainstream and alternative paradigms in development theory today tend to converge and, hence, there is hardly an alternative to represent. On the other hand, since this opposition tends to be content with criticising but fails to present any concrete alternative, also for this reason it can hardly be said to represent ‘alternative development’.

established with the primary – or even the sole – purpose of gaining access to the flows of foreign money that now by-pass Third World governments. It is often questionable whether these NGOs have any progressive purpose whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> In fact, while “many NGO-networks do not seem to have a clear purpose” (Holmén & Jirstrom 2000), many southern NGOs – believed to be intermediaries in development – display “no true grassroots-contact” (Arnesen et al 2002:14).

Usually, the concept NGO is reserved for those intermediary organizations that (are believed to) support grassroots and their local organizations. The latter are normally referred to under other labels. There is often good cause for making this distinction but it can also be claimed that the intermediaries have hijacked the concept “non-governmental” for egoistic reasons and that local (LO) and people’s (PO) or community based (CBO) organizations rightfully belong to the same category (c.f. Vakil 1997). After all, they are outside government too<sup>7</sup> and “[g]overnment’s inability, whether merely a perception or real, to deliver basic goods and services to the people ... is the reason these organizations have learned to rely on themselves” (Hermoso 1994:xi). Generally, however, LOs are not considered to be much to reckon with. They are mostly small and localized and tend to be considered weak, unsustainable, and without managerial capabilities. Hence, not much is expected of them from a developmental point of view (Carroll 1992; Farrington & Bebbington 1993; Aggarwal 2000; Arnesen et al 2002). Although much hailed in development literature (Esman & Uphoff 1988; IFAD 1994; Alkire et al 2001), LOs have no voice and, apparently, everyone wants to speak on their behalf.

### **Little scope for NGO-networking?**

The world of NGOs is thus much less homogenous than often assumed and there are good reasons to doubt that NGOs as a whole represent some kind of alternative development. Due to the fact that there are so many ideologies, strategies and objectives (overt and hidden) present among NGOs, one might ask whether there really is much to network about? I believe there is, but then mainly on practical issues and less so on issues like campaigning and advocacy. Also, I propose that many NGOs ought to take a step back and rethink their motives for engaging in the tricky business of networking for development promotion.

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<sup>6</sup> Not infrequently, NGOs have been found to subsidize the small-scale enterprises that they support, thereby unfairly competing with and undermining genuine, indigenous development efforts (Wilson 1995; Stiles 2002). Moreover, some NGOs – claiming that they strengthen ‘civil society’ – do, in fact, not allow their staff to join trade unions (Stiles 2002), a type organization that most people definitely see as an essential part of ‘civil society’.

<sup>7</sup> As is well known, this is not always the fact for NGOs, which sometimes rather constitute GONGOs (government organized NGOs), QUANGOs (quasi-NGOs) or in other ways maintain tight links to governments.

In the ideal situation, different participants in a network fulfil complementary tasks for the benefit of the whole network. For example, some participating NGOs provide information, others disseminate it within the network whereas some try to influence outsiders in their respective localities or countries. Ideas may also be presented and issues relevant for campaigning may be suggested and discussed. In the case of representation, once consensus is arrived at on a topic, those with the appropriate location and necessary contacts, etc. may be given the mandate to lobby for the network's standpoint. In trans-national networks and/or on 'global' issues, it is not self-evident that the same NGO should always be given the role as spokesman. On the contrary, different localities represent different cultural milieus where not only different languages are spoken but, more important, different symbols are used and different codes of conduct and ways of approaching others are deemed appropriate (or not). It is not, therefore, the same thing to lobby in Delhi or Nairobi as it is in Stockholm or Tokyo. Hence, on this level of trans-national campaigning, different NGOs have different comparative advantages which, if utilized properly, might not only strengthen the influence of the network as such, but which could also have an equalizing and democratizing effect within the network itself. Unfortunately, we do not live in the best of worlds.

Jordan and van Tuijl (2000) find that "the relationships that emerge among trans-national NGO networks are highly problematic" (p2051). They conclude that "the ideal form of cooperation and interaction in trans-national advocacy networks ... is the exception rather than the rule" (p2062) which is largely due to a lack of political responsibility in such networks. This, in turn, is due to the difficulty to uphold transparency and an absence of formal mechanisms to enforce obligations in this kind of networks. Hence, the temptation for the well-placed to use their positions to further their own interests rather than those of the network are sometimes great (Holmén & Jirström 2000).

There seems to be no difficulty in uniting NGOs on national or world-wide advocacy for a generally enhanced role of NGOs in all forms of decision-making fora. This is a shared self-interest that meets few objections. But below this level, where a general consensus is 'obvious', NGOs are often found to be fierce competitors, not only in terms of ideology but also for 'market-shares', donor funds and clients. This, I believe, explains the frequent reports that NGOs are unwilling to share information or to coordinate activities (Holmén & Jirström 1996; Kamatari 1996; Dicklich 1998). This competitive urge gives rise to, for example, diverse geographical strategies. On the one hand, there are 'attractive areas' with hecatombs of foreign NGOs "stepping on each other's toes and fighting for the few good opportunities to spend aid effectively" (Musto, quoted from Schmale 1993:32). On the other hand, in other areas NGOs practice "isolationist" geographical strategies

(Isaksson 1992; Meyer 1997). This leads to the evolution of NGO patch-works, “each patch tended to be by an agency or NGO” (Mackintosh 1992:83) and isolating the LOs and NGOs operating within these areas from the wider NGO movement (Muir 1992).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, for all the talk about NGOs contributing to partnership, empowerment, etc., “[u]nfortunately, NGOs [non-governmental Development organization] have shown little ability to form equitable relations, or true partnership, among themselves” (Fowler 1998:137). It should, therefore, not come as a surprise that ‘lower-order’ NGOs and LOs within the patches are being ‘represented’ – with or against their will – by ‘higher-order’ NGOs within the thus established NGO-hierarchies. Notions such as: “We, who have taken upon ourselves the task to speak for the grassroots” (Nigerian NGO-manager 1998, personal communication) are good illustrations of this tendency.

### **Problems with representation**

These circumstances, no doubt, raise concerns about how much NGO-networking one can actually expect. Above I have argued that horizontal and practically useful networking is important both among NGOs and among LOs respectively. However, to the extent that networking does take place, it appears to be vertically structured within the respective NGO-hierarchies – rather than horizontally as theory would make us expect. This confirms other observations that networks tend to be (come) rather exclusive and often resemble a kind of informal brotherhoods (Sörlin 1993; Bernard 1996; Törnquist 1996; Meyer 1997). The implications of this ‘state of the art’ of NGO networking and representation are highly problematic – in several ways.

First, the awareness is now spreading that NGOs are not the democratic institutions – or the democratizing alternatives to repressive governments – that they were expected to be. Instead, it has been suggested that they are better regarded as patron-client structures (Tropp 1998). This, naturally, weakens their claims for representing others or, for that matter, of representing the so-called international ‘NGO-community’. This is so, not only in institutions such as the UN or the EU, which will be forced to ask NGOs claiming to represent others for their formal mandate to do so. National governments are likely to be even more sensitive about this issue. In, for example,

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<sup>8</sup> Generally, such tendencies of NGO colonisation are reported from the Third World where northern NGOs instead of collaborating with local NGOs and CBOs often have been found to create ‘their own’ subsidiaries. However, this practice is no longer confined to the Third World. Italian NGOs, for example, today complain that Italy is being colonized by other northern (primarily British and American) NGOs who prefer to set up their own branch-offices rather than network or collaborate with indigenous organizations (Pallottini 2002, personal communication).

Kenya, president Moi has threatened to de-register NGOs since they “lack the mandate to lobby – who are they actually speaking for?” (Onyang’o 2002, personal communication).<sup>9</sup>

Second, this has a bearing on participation and empowerment – highly valued buzz-words among NGOs – and the extent to which NGOs are willing to learn from grassroots. While some NGOs undoubtedly have this aspiration, it is today common knowledge that many do not. Instead of empowering grassroots to change their faith by their own strength (Zainuddin & Sweeting 1989) and to pursue their own development agenda (Närman 1995) – which many NGOs claim that they *are* doing – NGOs, often, are weak on empowerment (Holmén & Jirstrom 1996; Michener 1998; Snell & Prasad 1999; Botchway 2001). Primarily, sensitizing and empowering activities often turn out to be efforts to make grassroots see things the outsider’s way (Holmén & Jirstrom 1996). The question therefore is whether NGOs really represent grassroots, or if it may not actually be the other way around?

Third, for many NGOs it is increasingly important to be present at national and international fora. Not only because this might provide an opportunity to influence policy but, since world-summits etc. are intensively covered by media, this gives visibility and enhances the possibilities for future participation. This strengthens the position of participating NGOs in the above mentioned NGO struggle for recognition.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, visibility and media exposure enhances the chances to obtain external financial support. Although much literature on NGOs and NGO-networks warn about the risks of NGOs being corrupted by accepting foreign (donor) funding, the temptations to channel external money through the networks are sometimes great. It is likely that a network hub – which already enjoys a certain amount of centrality and visibility – by accepting to channel donor-funds through the network, will intensify its contacts with the donor(s) and thereby increase its potential for representation, consultancy, etc. Its thus further enhanced visibility leads to further contacts and new opportunities (at the same time, its desire to criticize and to advocate alternatives may be reduced).

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<sup>9</sup> While there may be good reason to question Moi’s reason to question the mandate of Kenyan NGOs, he still has a point. Moreover, while it is certainly the case that formalization enhances transparency (Jordan & van Tuijl 2000), there are reasons to be cautious about the aspiration among many NGOs to preserve loose network structures and their tendency to avoid formalization (Holmén & Jirstrom 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Naturally, NGOs pursue different strategies and sometimes networking for a common cause is not a prioritized issue. For example, at the UN’s ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, some NGOs chose to attend the alternative international NGO forum (INGOF) and hoped to influence the official assembly by presenting a shared vision and an alternative consensus. Other, more well-connected NGOs, however, favoured the individual approach. Thus, whereas “[s]ome of the larger NGOs viewed the INGOF process as a distraction and chose to focus on direct interaction with decision-makers” (Biggs & Dodd 1997:4) ... governments “went to NGOs they already had a relationship with, which [not only] continued to reinforce a predominantly northern bias” (ibid, p5), but also reinforced the trend of establishing an NGO aristocracy.

Also, bearing in mind that NGO-representatives participating in international workshops and similar fora demand/are given the same per-diems as UN or government delegates – and that, for many Third World delegates, one day’s per-diem (in hard currency) easily equates a month’s salary – it is understandable that competition about the possibility to represent others is sometimes fierce.

But there is also another side to this problematic. The above sections have focussed on those who want to represent/be represented. What about the fora where representation is to take place? It is frequently argued that the UN would be strengthened if NGOs were given formal representation in its sessions and decision making bodies. The argument is that many participating governments are not democratic and do not represent (all) their citizens. NGOs could therefore enhance international democracy by giving ‘the other’ a voice. As shown above, it is highly questionable if that is really what NGOs do. On the contrary, NGOs tend to represent vested interests, i.e. there is often a western (or northern) bias, and (especially in the south) certain social strata – often urban and middle-class – tend to have their interpretations and interests represented more than others, etc.. It is thus neither self-evident that the Third World’s poor (predominantly rural) would gain, nor that the UN would be democratized if NGOs were given official member status.

Moreover, whereas governments need to handle many problems and situations simultaneously and take responsibility for complex totalities, many NGOs and NGO networks are single-issue entities (Dunér 1997). Hence, in this sense, they can be considered to be less responsible than the governments they criticize. While such NGOs may be valuable as consultants, this narrowness limits their scope for formal participation in decision making bodies.

This said, it is not true that NGOs are not being represented under the present system. Although not being elevated (yet) to the rank of equal partners to governments, in recent years we have seen an “increase in the number of mechanisms for NGO involvement, particularly evident within the United Nations” (van Rooy 1997:107; see also Dunér 1997; Klugman 2000). This representation tends to be indirect rather than direct but no less effective. For all that has been said above about some NGO’s fear of being co-opted into prevailing power structures, there is a clear tendency among many NGOs to try to become ‘insiders’ wherever possible and on many occasions well-connected NGOs have managed to get their members into government delegations formally partaking in UN sessions (Klugman 2000). It can be suspected that only those NGOs that are on speaking terms with their respective governments have the possibility to become insiders. If that is

so, they hardly represent an alternative voice but rather reinforce structures and opinions that are already represented. Hence, the tendency for one-sidedness and vested interests to dominate may be strengthened rather than weakened by NGO involvement.

### **Concluding Remarks**

NGOs today are numerous and, through their networks, they have acquired a sometimes impressive influence on donors, multilateral institutions and development paradigms. The question remains whether this is good or bad. The answer depends primarily upon how we answer two questions. The first concerns the empirical record of NGO activity 'on the ground'. The second has to do with who we identify as NGOs.

The answer to the first question is rather disappointing. At closer scrutiny, it turns out that the so often mentioned comparative advantages of NGOs are merely potential – seldom realized – advantages (Holmén & Jirstrom 1996). Still, NGOs appear to have a greater impact as service providers and welfare organizations than as development catalysts (Dicklich 1998; World Bank 2000). Networking, likewise, in spite of its potentials, appears to be mainly a potential resource that, perhaps, is not so much under-utilised as misused. Too much networking is done in order to impress those outside the networks and too little to improve the lives of those in whose name networks are often built. Not surprisingly, “despite [their] strategic advantage ... their contribution to date remains limited to small-scale success-stories rather than affecting large-scale development” (Mandon 1999). Hence, in order for NGOs to strengthen their claims for representation in governmental and inter-governmental fora, they should first put their own house in order and prove *a)* that they are a democratic alternative and *b)* that they actually accomplish things that grassroots and/or governments can not do better. Then, they will have reason to claim that they are a constructive and legitimate force to listen to.

As for the second question, it is difficult to give a precise definition of what the NGOs are and it is even more problematic to talk of an 'international NGO community'. Not only are NGOs extremely heterogenous in terms of objectives, structures, activities and ideologies. While many are small and obviously need networking both for learning purposes and to reach out, other are gigantic and "have programmes larger than those of the largest bilateral donor" (Domini 1995, quoted from van Rooy 1997:110).



Neither is the world of NGOs stable. For one thing, to speak of an 'NGO-community' presupposes some kind of shared vision and consensus among NGOs about what they want to accomplish. This seems largely to be absent and sometimes NGOs appear to be their own worst enemies. While networking has the potential to enhance a mutual understanding, "[i]n fact, international non-profit and for-profit NGOs vie among themselves, building alliances, undermining one another, side-stepping or working with the state in order to pursue their [own] objectives" (Puplampu & Tettey 2000:260).

Moreover, due to the growth of many NGOs and the widening range of activities they undertake, many NGOs which previously relied on voluntary work and personal acquaintance are now in need of professional management and, hence, will represent their members/volunteers to a lesser degree than previously. Although NGOs are often distinguished from private enterprise, both the lay character and the degree of voluntary engagement are, in many cases, diminishing and it becomes increasingly difficult to separate NGOs from the private sector (Stiles 2002). It has thus been found that "profit-making bodies are clamouring for NGO status while traditional NGOs are now absorbing the mode of discourse and orientation of the for-profit organizations" (Paplumpu & Tettey 2000:253). In this sense, NGOs tend to represent less of an alternative than what is often maintained. Moreover, due to the above mentioned *de-facto* influence many NGOs have had on governments and the UN, and to the above mentioned convergence of development paradigms, it is questionable also in that sense whether, or to what extent, NGOs and NGO networks actually represent an alternative to mainstream development discourse. On what grounds, then, should they claim the right to represent/be represented?

But claims that NGOs should be represented in national and international political fora nevertheless abound. Even if one supports that idea, considering the fact that NGOs are so numerous and that their numbers still increase, not all can be represented in those fora that count. Hence, a selection has to be made as to which NGO that can be allowed to participate in, for example, UN sessions (presently, NGOs are invited). On which basis should such a selection be made? Shall only those NGOs be invited that represent a certain ideology? Or only those representing the 'south'? Or sub-Saharan Africa? Or should they not be invited at all, instead being (s)elected by the NGO community? In the latter case, it must be realized that "NGO's survival strategies [often]... become more important than those of the people they are trying to help" (Roche 1994:168). There is "an obvious risk that networks aiming at representation in external fora are turned into spring-boards for personal careers and/or used to boost the image of certain organizations at the expense of other

members of the network” (Holmén & Jirström 2000:29). Consequently, those NGOs claiming to represent others will have to show their mandate to do so and also to what questions this mandate pertains. Reluctantly or not, it will be imperative for NGOs to "pay serious attention to the degree to which they can claim to be a legitimate voice of others" (Biggs & Dodd 1997:13).

It is simply not true, as the FAO Director General, Mr Jaques Diouf, flatteringly would have it at the Rome 2002 World Food Summit – Five Years Later, that, in contrast to governments, “which are implacably driven by self-interest and market considerations, the NGOs represent the force of moral rejection, the last refuge of altruism and of human solidarity” (FAO 2002). On the contrary, the above review of research on the topic gives a quite different picture.

Hence, it will not be enough to state, as is sometimes done, that it is “a myth that NGOs must be representative organizations in order to be legitimate participants [in UN sessions]” (Schweitz 1995, quoted from van Rooy 1997:110) or that "the legitimacy of NGOs does not reside in being representative organizations but is enhanced by their [good intentions]" (Klugman 2000:113). As is well known, one man's good guy is the other man's villain and, in any case, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

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