
Jan Van de Poel

1Free University Brussels, Brussels, Belgium, 2Research Foundation Flanders, Brussels, Belgium

The ‘N’ in NGO has always been a bit deceptive. Research reports a clear trend towards increased interaction between NGOs and governmental entities all over the world, not seldom in co-operative ways (Salamon 1994). The rampant view of a hegemonic state unilaterally defining the space in which NGOs are allowed to operate, feeling threatened by NGO activity and trying to muzzle NGOs in the policy process, does not square with contemporary experiences. NGOs are – in spite of what their name might suggest – fundamentally concerned with influencing public policy from outside the structure of elected government. NGOs are participating in the ‘dynamic, dialectic dialogue’ between competing or converging conceptions of public interest of various societal groups (Stone 1997). The interactions between those groups determine the constantly evolving process of public policy making, in which goals, interests, resources, etc. of both NGOs and governments may converge or diverge (Najam 2000, Young 1999). Does this growing interaction between NGO’s and government erodes NGO ‘autonomy’? Most research on NGO-state relations suggests it does and speaks of processes of ‘taming’, ‘franchising’, ‘damping down’, etc. (Kaldor 2003, Edwards & Hulme 1997, Fowler 1992).

NGOs, like states, are not monolithic. NGOs can maintain different types of relationships with different governmental organisations on different issues. Therefore these relations are best understood at the micro-level of specific issues and organisations. This paper analyses the relationships between the Belgian federal government and NGOs in the field of development co-operation. NGOs for development co-operation are said to be supported by governmental institutions for the following reasons: their capability to work at smaller scales, to reach seemingly inaccessible target groups, to create participation for otherwise non-participatory groups and their flexibility and potential for innovation (Clarke 1993). In 1974 the Belgian state has created a co-financing system for NGO’s in the sphere of development co-operation. This system has lead to the current situation in which (state recognised) Belgian NGOs receive €3 government funding for every €1 they raised themselves. The question arises: What is the impact of the resource dependency of these NGOs on the institutional roles and strategic behaviour of these NGOs? One would expect this to generate a strong relationship of dependency in which NGOs transform into ‘government run or initiated’ NGOs (GRINGOs) that serve as tools for public policy. On the other hand, this abundance of available resources might enable NGOs to experiment with new roles and strategies. The fundamental question is whether government funding is synonymous with instrumentation? Does the Belgian governmental funding scheme subjugates or emancipates NGO activity in the field of development co-operation? We will argue that the dynamics of NGO-government relationships in Belgium since the seventies have created certain emancipatory effects for NGOs.

Our contribution aims to answer these questions based on a qualitative, multifaceted, in-depth analysis of data collected in archival records of a representative sample of Flemish NGOs for development co-operation. The sample represents the historical evolution of the NGO-field in Belgium, in turn representing broader mutations in Belgian society. Moreover, our sample contains NGOs showing different degrees of interaction with government institutions, bringing a comparative dimension to the paper. These records are supplemented by the records of 2 organisations established particularly to bring NGOs and governmental institutions together; the Consultative council for development co-operation and Coprogram.
Our paper contributes to the existing literature in two specific ways. First, we uncover the consequences of increasing NGO-state relationships on the organisational and strategic options of NGOs. We argue that NGOs are able to find ways to balance their representative and participatory functions in a climate of formalising and tightening state-NGO relations. Second, we introduce a long-term, historical narrative into the study of state-NGO relations.

References


