Significant emphasis in recent years has been directed at the need for building the capacity and the accountability of nongovernmental organizations or NGOs as a precursor to development in those parts of the world termed at various times and by different analysts as “third world,” “under-developed,” or “developing,” etc. The emergence and development of what is termed an NGO, nonprofit, or third sector is considered a fundamental ingredient in establishing legitimate national society and to the underlying civil society that fosters, supports and legitimates the social, economic, and political institutions of a nation (Anheier and Salamon, 1998).

In this regard, the growth and development of NGOs worldwide is viewed as “a key aspect of civil society,” and as such, a considerable amount of effort has been— and is— expended to support the development of NGOs and an NGO sector across the world. A great deal of emphasis is also placed on discovering “what kinds of organizational structures and management strategies” are best at ensuring the capacity, accountability, and legitimacy of NGOs as instruments at fostering a sufficient degree of civil society within a nation and a population (Young, Koenig, Najam, and Fisher, 2002).

A significant problem, however, may exist in efforts to link development of civil society inextricably with parallel or, as some would contend, with precursor development of NGOs. As Nelson notes, the NGO development model and the development of NGOs in developing world settings may well operate on the basis of “an agenda of societies in the global North,” raising questions about the representativeness of NGOs, to whom NGOs are accountable, and whether their work and its outcomes are actually “consistent with their global claims” and the needs of a local population or target nation (Nelson, 2001, p. 59 in Edwards and Gaventa).

This paper is based on the author’s direct experience with efforts at NGO capacity and civil society building in one small nation—the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), supplemented with less direct experience but cogent observations of NGO and civil society development in several other nations in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Over a three-year period (2004-2008), the author was engaged in NGO capacity building and in efforts at civil society formation in RMI. Ostensibly, this work involved building the organizational capacity of individual NGOs in the Marshall Islands. It also focused on further development and capacity building of the umbrella NGO established to work on behalf of and assist in the development of NGOs in the nation—an organization termed the Marshall Islands Council of Nongovernmental Organizations or MICNGOS.

Capacity building in RMI involved attempts at improving “the capability of (each) organization to achieve what it sets out to do: to realize its mission” (Fowler, 2002, p. 74). However, the conceptual models or definitions of what constitutes the key functional ingredients to organizational capacity and in how NGOs are to foster and support civil society were drawn from the author’s primarily American, i.e., “Northern,” experiential base. As a consequence, the RMI effort encountered a number of interesting dilemmas. Chief among these was the question of whether or not a model of NGO development from the developed world and especially the United States was—or is—in the best interests of people and a
nation located squarely in what Wallerstein terms the world-system and world-economy periphery or semi-periphery (2000).

Coupled with the author’s knowledge of other similar situations, the attempt to develop the capacity of NGOs in the Marshall Islands and by extension foster further development of civil society in RMI raises some interesting questions regarding what are the actual purposes and outcomes of capacity building in a nation that has been and that remains dominated by social, economic, and political forces external to that nation and its emerging NGO sector. In particular, the question the author was most left with concerns the efficacy of NGOs and the value of NGO capacity built with external models, dependent on external funding, and fostered by external forces that may actually benefit from the political and economic status quo. In situations like this one, is it possible for NGOs like MICNGOs or others in nations like RMI to develop into “formal structures through which countervailing authority might be expressed,” given support and probable agendas from outside entities and interests (Edwards and Gaventa, p. 3)? Or is the key to a “better, fairer, and more productive society” in RMI, as elsewhere, to be found not in “form or structure” defined by external models of capacity and but in what happens among Marshallese citizens and Marshallese communities to define meaning and take action in their own “third spaces” outside the formal structures of existing government and NGO mechanisms (Van Til, 2000, p. 214)?

For the author, the interesting question if one wants a good society is simple: What comes first—NGOs and an NGO sector built upon external foundations, or a civil sector built upon more purely domestic cultural, economic, and governance principles and practices? As Jordan and van Tuijl note, NGOs may achieve capacity and accountability, but they may in places like the Marshall Islands do so by “undermining national sovereignty and democracy (while having) no relationship to any public,” including the very citizens and the society they profess to serve (2006, p. 3). At issue in the end in this case study, as well as other similar situations, is to whom, to what, and why NGOs must be accountable and legitimate.

References


