CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THIRD SECTOR AND STATE: REFLECTIONS FROM AN ONGOING LIFE-WORK HISTORY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract: The concept of three institutional ‘sectors’ - private, public and non-governmental or ‘third’ sector - underpins much research undertaken to date on third sector issues. While it may be analytically convenient to separate the three sectors, the realities are more complex. NGOs and states are linked in potentially important (though often far from visible) ways via personal relationships, resource flows and transactions. In some countries, there have been individuals who have crossed over between the government and third sector. For example, in the Philippines, many NGO leaders joined the post-Marcos democratic government in 1986 to pursue rural development. In addition to these ‘consecutive’ forms, there are also ‘extensive’ forms of boundary crossing such as the case of an individual who simultaneously holds public office and operates within an NGO. This paper, drawing on new ‘life-work history’ data collected as part of an ongoing ESRC research project in UK, Philippines and Bangladesh, examines the reasons for these boundary shifts in relation to concepts of power and innovation, the experiences of those involved, and some of the implications for better understanding the boundaries, both conceptual and tangible, that separate and link government and third sector in different institutional contexts.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on progress with an ongoing piece of qualitative empirical research that examines the life-work histories of individuals who cross between, or operate across, the boundaries between third sector and government in Bangladesh, Philippines and the UK. The basic idea for this study has its roots in two sets of stories about the relationship between the non-governmental and public sectors that I first began encountering incidentally during research on rural development issues in Asia almost two decades ago, to which I have long wanted to return to investigate in more depth.

The first is illustrated by the life and work of A. H. Khan, the Pakistani civil servant known, among other things, for his innovative work in establishing rural cooperatives in the 1960s in Comilla and then later on in the 1980s as the founder of Karachi’s Orangi Pilot Project that developed an original and effective approach to upgrading slum dwellings. While doing doctoral fieldwork in rural Comilla – which by then had become part of Bangladesh - during the mid-1980s, it was hard to escape Khan’s...
legacy in the ways that people were still discussing rural development in the area, even though the scaling-up effort by the Bangladesh government of his ideas had by that time been accepted by many as a failure. What really interested me about Khan’s career—in addition to the originality and creativity of the projects with which he is still remembered—was the changing institutional backdrop to the narrative of his life and work that helped determine his shifting choice of ‘operating environment’. The Comilla work that Khan undertook during the 1960s and 1970s was conducted within the public sector, while the vehicle he chose in the 1980s for Orangi was instead the non-governmental organisation (NGO) form. This observation raised for me a set of important broader questions. Why, I wondered, do certain people make shifts from public to non-governmental sector—or vice versa—in their work? How do personal decisions and broader institutional factors influence such choices? Was Khan’s reputation as a creative thinker and policy maker in some way bound up with such acts of ‘boundary crossing’, acts that seemed unusual in a period in which government and NGOs were usually understood as being distinctive and separate institutional worlds?

The second issue a few years later came from the Philippines, where I was engaged in short-term fieldwork in 1990 on NGO-government relationships in rural development, collecting case studies of organisations for an Overseas Development Institute (ODI) research project. After the fall of the Marcos government in 1986, I became interested to learn that a significant number of NGO-based activists had ‘crossed over’ into some government departments within the Aquino administration, notably the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), where they were busy formulating and implementing a set of new ‘civil society inspired’ policies (see Miclat-Teves and Lewis 1993; Putzel 1992). This phenomenon struck me as interesting since it seemed to challenge, or at least complicate, the prevailing models of the institutional order—state, market and civil society—used by policy makers in relation to the new emerging frameworks of ‘good governance’. I made a mental note to find an opportunity in the future to try to find out how these people fared in their journey across the sectoral boundary.

2. The ‘third sector’ and its boundaries

Since that time, the three sector idea has become increasingly well-established both as a theoretical model used by social science researchers working on institutions and development (research on the ‘third sector’ has grown into a significant social science sub-field), and as a ‘policy model’ that helps to map institutional landscapes and structure policies among governments and donors (the idea of ‘partnership’ between government and NGOs remains central to the governance agendas of the World Bank and other donors). A key challenge for researchers is therefore to examine the relationship between such policy models and the theories that may underpin them—and the societal realities that such models seek to represent and influence.

The concept of three institutional ‘sectors’—private, public and non-governmental or ‘third’ sector—underpins much of the research undertaken to date in the field\(^1\) (Etzioni

\(^{1}\) The study began in October 2005 and will be completed by September 2007. The current phase is primary data analysis.
1972; Nerfin, 1986; Evers 1995; Lewis 2007). The language of ‘partnership’ for example, has become a common component of policy relationships between government and business, and between state and civil society across the world (Salamon 1994; Deakin 1995; Lewis 1998). While it may be analytically convenient to separate the three sectors, the realities are of course more complex. What are the types of relationships and forms of power exist that link structures and processes across the sectors? How are these constructed by broader contextual factors such as wider aspects of politics, history or culture?

At the same time, it seems likely that far more third sector research has taken place on the characteristics of the sector itself than on the nature of its boundaries with other sectors. The ‘blurring’ of sector boundaries may also be increasing (Aspen Institute 2003), such that it can be difficult to locate increasing numbers of hybrid organisational forms – such as alternative trading organisations or government-organised NGOs – clearly within the sectors, bringing frequent concerns about the relative autonomy of NGOs and of the dangers of ‘co-option’ by state or business. At the same time, there is also a growing awareness that relationships between sectors in the context of public policy may be as important as the effectiveness of any one of the sectors (Evans 1996; Tendler 1997), as is evident from continuing emphasis given to partnership ideas in many countries, and the Compact between the voluntary sector and government created by the Labour government in the UK. A second key challenge for researchers is therefore to focus more attention on the nature and extent of these sector boundaries.

Crossing over the boundaries

The boundaries are likely to be far more complex, subtle and unstable in ‘real life’ than a basic three sector policy model allows for. For example, ‘non-governmental’ actors in any setting are always linked in potentially important (though often far from visible) ways to the other sectors via people, resource flows and transactions. These may include kinship relations within (often) elite families which bridge different kinds of institutional settings (Tandon 1995), informal networks such as age-sets or alumni groups which connect NGO staff with colleagues in other spheres (Smillie and Hailey 2001), the social embeddedness of NGO staff within the wider communities in which NGOs operate (Hilhorst 2003), and the existence of funding streams from government or private sector that leads to often ambiguous roles and identities among these so-called ‘non-governmental’ actors (Tvedt 1998). These ambiguities can be widely observed. For example, it is not uncommon to hear reports of public servants, retired or working, who establish their own ‘NGOs’. NGOs may be set up by private sector companies either for philanthropic purposes, or as a front for their corporate interests, or perhaps both. There is also a growing critique of the way that some donors have been instrumental in creating third sector organisations in line with their external agendas (Mandel 2002).

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2 The present study is limited to studying only the boundary between the third sector and the public sector; boundaries with the private sector, while also a potentially important subject for research, will I hope form part of a future research project.
If these boundaries are unstable, then it follows that organisers, activists, professionals and managers\(^3\) may operate across them in different ways. Motivations of those crossing between the sectoral boundaries will vary, with some individuals seeking greater room for manoeuvre for their vision of public action, or sense of serving the nation, while others may be attempting to use non-governmental forms more covertly for instrumental purposes, including the strengthening of individual or family livelihood strategies. Indeed, NGOs are sometimes seen as vehicles for opportunists of all kinds, and the label of ‘non-governmental individual’ (NGI) has become a pejorative one in many contexts (Brinkerhoff et al 2003).\(^4\)

What does it mean to cross this boundary? Boundary crossing may take place in either of two ways. The first is *consecutive*, in the sense that a person moves from a more or less full-time involvement one sector to take up another full-time position in another sector. The initial focus of the study was people crossing from civil society into government, but it soon became clear that there are people who cross in the other direction too. Both types of boundary crossing may involve a similar set of experiences: taking ideas from one sector into another by replacing one workplace with another, encountering a different set of rules and norms within a different organisational environment, and the need to engage differently with relationships of power in the implementation of ideas or the seeking of reforms. It includes shifts from civil society into administrative positions within public sector agencies, as well as strategies that facilitate a shift from civil society to ‘political society’ through gaining an elected post in local or central government.

The second is *extensive*, in the sense that a person simultaneously extends their interests and involvements in one sector laterally into organisations within other sectors, such as the government person who takes up a position of the board of an NGO (a formal strategy) or the government person who is linked with another individual - such as a relative - in the third sector that allows one or both to further their work and their interests (an informal strategy). Such people are also sometimes known as ‘boundary spanners’ since they bridge different sectoral environments and act across them, bringing power in the form of financial resources, expertise or influence to bear. The starting point of the research was on the first type of shift, but as the purposive sample of informants has widened, the second type of shift has also been highlighted within the life-work histories collected. In this way, boundary crossing can be seen as taking place in two dimensions.

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\(^3\) Informants in the study refer to themselves using a variety of terms, including these four, reflecting different identities and cultures of work and organising. These vary within and across the three country contexts, making it difficult to achieve a consistency of labels and categories. For example, an archetypal boundary crosser such as Michael Young (who established several influential public sector and non-governmental organisations in the UK between the 1950s and the 1980s) has been called a ‘social entrepreneur’ but such a term was strongly rejected during a discussion meeting in the Philippines where it was associated with corporate philanthropy rather than with social action in the public sphere.

\(^4\) There have also been attempts to reclaim the term ‘NGI’ by individuals who see the ‘one person NGO’ working with volunteers as a perfectly valid alternative to the professionalized, funder-dependent organisations (Lewis 2007).
3. The aims of the research

The changing institutional trajectories of NGO leaders and activists in boundary terms has so far received little attention from third sector researchers. This project seeks to examine the reasons for such boundary shifts and their implications in relation to concepts of power, innovation and creativity. The research is guided primarily by the following research question: ‘What can we learn from the work-life histories of boundary crossing individuals about what motivates social actors about their choice of sector in particular historical, political and social junctures?’

A central hypothesis of the study is that individual choices made about ‘operating setting’ reflect wider issues of structure and agency, and perceptions of these issues and that by studying these choices and perceptions we may better understand firstly the types of power individuals may derive (e.g. institutional innovation, political power, management effectiveness, economic benefit) and secondly, the broader historical shifts in power between different institutions and the implications of these changes for public action. The overall aim of the research is therefore three-fold: (i) to reveal more of the multiple identities of those involved in non-governmental public action through comparative research; (ii) to explore, through a set of life histories, the permeability of sectoral boundaries in different settings and at different times; and (iii) to provide a set of alternative overviews of non-governmental public action in different settings as told through the experiences and reminiscences of social actors.

Country selection

The three countries selected – Bangladesh, Philippines and UK - each contain a third sector that is shaped by a different set of political histories and relationships. The Philippines was selected because it has a long history of movement of personnel between sectors after changes in government. From the late 1980s onwards, as we have seen, there was many individuals moved into successive government administrations in search of greater influence and effectiveness, particularly in the rural development sector. In the UK, the third sector has been drawn into the New Labour government’s 1997 ‘Compact’, which has sought to institutionalise a relationship of cooperation and mutual benefit (Kendall 2003). Some claim that government policy is now more responsive to the sector’s ideas; however concerns have also been raised about co-option through inflows of staff into policy positions (e.g. housing, prisons). Finally, Bangladesh was selected primarily because of the strength and diversity of its NGO sector, and the possibility of understanding better the various synergies and tensions that have characterised its relations with government during the past decades (Sanyal 1991; Lewis 2004). Here the boundary crossing role is less visible, but still present in the form of NGO recruitment of government personnel or various types of formal and informal links between officials and NGOs. In summary, we therefore have a contrasting group of countries in terms of boundary crossing. In the Philippines, there has been significant movement from the third sector into government, while in Bangladesh, the movement is the other way,

5 A parallel study already being undertaken in Mexico by Dr Alejandro Natal of El Colegio Mexiquense on a similar topic is linked in as part of the research, and the Mexican case will form a useful additional example for comparison.
with government servants seeking to cross into the third sector. In the UK, movement has been observed in both directions.

The choice of these three fieldwork sites also draws upon my own research knowledge, background and contacts since it was felt that the identification of potential informants with such specific types of background would require prior knowledge of the setting. In terms of the extent of crossing between third sector and government – at least in the direction ‘into government’ – the three contexts of Philippines, UK and Bangladesh as the work progressed also became classifiable in general terms as ‘high’, ‘medium’ and ‘low’ cases respectively.

Methodology

Empirical data for the research was gathered using the life history research method as a way of trying to understand people’s experiences and perceptions of boundary crossing, and as means of providing a ‘keyhole view’ into wider institutional history and change. A purposive sample of individuals in each country was identified to explore motivations, experiences and meanings of ‘boundary crossing’ under different contexts. As such, the study seeks to make a contribution to what has become known as an anthropological approach to policy (cf Shore and Wright 1997) that seeks to examine critically how policy is both experienced by people and simultaneously constructed within social and economic relationships, focusing on issues of power and governance.

Life history interviewing has grown into an established research method within gender studies, education research and oral history, and forms a specialised field of research with an extensive literature and diverse range of techniques (Elliot 2005). Yet the life history method has rarely if at all been applied to third sector research field before, and it brings a number of potential strengths to our research themes. First, as Chamberlain and Leydesdorff (2004) argue, personal narratives can offer important ‘insights into unrecorded and undocumented and raw experience’ (p.228). They can bring a strong element of ‘rich description’ that may provide a more nuanced and textured view of people’s past and present experiences. These narratives, it has been claimed, can be valuable in the ways that they can, in Mumby’s terms, challenge ‘the stability of received knowledge’. Second, detailed individual interviews of this kind help address Bourdieu’s important call for a deeper level of ‘representivity’ in social research, and aims to bring an ethnographic richness which has been rare in third sector research. Third, the method allows exploration of the relationship between the individual agency of leaders and activists and their ‘relationality’ with other agents and structures.

The life history method also, of course, has its critics. Can the life history method tell us more than just the narratives of individual lives? As Mason (2004) argues, the use of personal narratives does not simply imply methodological individualism (as is sometimes claimed) but it can provide a set of detailed insights - through an examination of the social construction of self, identity and memory - into people’s inter-connectedness with others. Life histories tell us not just about one life, but also

\[ ^6 \] A ‘purposive sample’ is a non-random sample designed, in this case, to illustrate as wide a range and type of boundary-crossing activity as possible through life histories of individuals.
about how people ‘interact with the whole’ (Atkinson 1998). For instance, the method can show the ways in which individual cultural and political identities link with wider history and politics (Tilly 2002, Kothari 2003). Nevertheless, the reading and analysis of individual narratives will necessarily have to be undertaken in the context of the secondary literature on broader context and history.

The idea of life-work histories

For the present research, a form of life history interviewing that makes a person’s work (whether in the form of professional activity, volunteering or activism) the central vehicle that drives the life history narrative has been developed. I have termed this narrative a ‘life-work history’, which takes the form of synthesis of a conventional life history interview and a semi-structured interview. Each interview began with an invitation to begin the narrative with the person’s first voluntary or paid work, and then followed from there with a minimum of intervention from the interviewer except to clarify or expand a point, or to keep the narrative on track when it was judged to be moving too slowly or quickly.

Twenty detailed life-work history interviews were carried out in each country with a range of individuals that together can illustrate the range and extent of boundary crossing activity in each context. Interviewees were identified using a snowballing technique that began with known individuals in the research and NGO communities in each country, and followed a trail of contacts outwards. A spread of informants was attempted that would best illustrate the main types of boundary crossing in each context, with a balance of different backgrounds, ages and genders of informants wherever possible.²

If an informant’s general history too closely corresponded with another person’s already interviewed, then that person was passed over in favour of another that could extend the overall reach of the research. Some life histories turned out to have touched only briefly on the main topic of research (such as a person who spent a few brief years in a government position during a long and varied career in business and voluntary sector work) while in others the experience of cross-over has been a ‘career defining moment’ that has opened up a new set of ideas and challenges and challenged long-held assumptions. Most people reflected positively on their experiences, but for some, boundary crossing was seen as a failed experiment, or for a few, even as a subject for regret. All such cases have been retained because they help to shed light on a wide range of perceptions and motivations.

The recorded interviews are now being analysed against an extensive literature review of institutional contexts and history. By collecting a set of comparative personal life histories, it then becomes possible to analyse the factors which have precipitated different kinds of cross-sectoral shifts, the experiences of those directly involved, and to try to examine their significance. The experience of doing the interviewing has been an extremely rewarding one, once the difficulty of identifying the informant and arranging an appointment has been overcome. Most people were found to talk for far

² Informants were interviewed in the metropolitan centres of London, Manila and Dhaka, though many had life histories that had been enacted outside these cities. The majority were middle-class or elite professionals or activists.
longer than originally agreed, and many remarked on how interesting they found the opportunity to reflect on their past work and lives.\textsuperscript{8} One difficulty that became apparent during the post-collection stage of the work was however the extremely long period required for transcription of interviews. A ninety minute interview can easily amount to 25-30 pages of transcribed single-spaced text.\textsuperscript{9}

The following sections report briefly on issues emerging from preliminary data analysis from each of the three countries. Since many of the interviews are still in the process of transcription and analysis, the paper focuses on sectoral issues arising from some of the interviews, rather than on the life histories themselves which will be analysed later.

4. Issues from the Philippines

The Philippines entered its current democratic era in 1986 after a turbulent period of repression and resistance that followed the introduction by Marcos of martial law in 1972. When activists and development professionals worldwide began paying more attention to the role of NGOs from the late 1980s onwards, the Philippines was at the forefront of NGO thinking and experiences. Resistance to the Marcos regime had created dense networks of political parties, activist groups and developmental organisations within a highly evolved civil society. With a long history of non-governmental radical activist groups with church roots such as the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) in the pre-Marcos period, and the emergence of charitable organisations in the private sector such as the Philippines Business Leaders for Social Progress (PBLSP), the non-governmental sector was well-placed to develop further when the government of Aquino took power in 1986 (Miclat-Teves and Lewis 1993).

Among NGOs, particularly those on the left, there was extensive debate and discussion about strategy in the post-Marcos era. Some took a decision to remain outside government as advocates and critics, seeing the Aquino government as still compromised by local elites and foreign interests. Others in the NGO sector held the view that new democratic spaces were opening up in which opportunities for

\textsuperscript{8} Interviews were generally between one and three hours, depending on the available time of the informant, and were recorded. People like to talk and reminisce, particularly about themselves, and it was found that in most cases the time agreed for the interview was normally exceeded! Some informants were interviewed more than once, either to continue a narrative that had to be cut short for some reason, or to update or clarify elements of the life work history. A strict ethical policy was followed to ensure the confidentiality of the interview and the anonymity of the informant, following the principles of informed consent. The funding source, assumptions and structure of the research project was made available as transparently as possible to each informant before requesting their cooperation with the project. Some interviewees requested an aural or transcript copy of their interview and where this was the case, such a copy has been provided. It was agreed with each informant that their name, or those of individuals or organisations referenced in their narrative, would not be used in an identifiable way in subsequent writings from the research without prior permission.

\textsuperscript{9} I have thought it important to engage directly with as many of the recorded narratives as possible myself during transcription, in order to begin drawing out issues and themes. In addition to transcribing many of the interviews verbatim myself, I have also resorted to a summary/selective transcription in some cases (producing about 2-3 pages of notes per interview) as an interim measure in order to begin preliminary analysis. In the case of the UK interviews, about one third have been typed up by a professional transcriber.
influence, engagement and even direct participation in government should now be explored. This split was a pervasive one at the time, with many of the NGOs that were close to the national democratic left choosing to remain critics outside of government. For social democratic NGOs, and some others on the left, however, this position was not acceptable since civil society had been working hard to create a new more responsive government in place of the Marcos dictatorship.

As one informant put it in relation to debates within the NGO sector about whether to engage with the new government immediately after the 1986 ‘people power’ revolution, the question was:

> How do we deal with the Aquino government? We put this government in power, don’t tell us that now you are going to train your guns … because they [the national democratic left] were saying soon after … “the US Aquino regime” … we were not comfortable with that, we’d worked hard for this new government.

As a result of this latter strategy, some former activists now associated with NGOs were invited by government to take up posts within certain departments, or to contribute directly to policy development through membership of agencies and committees. The reasons for this have of course varied, ranging from the need to draw specialised expertise into government by novice leaders such as Aquino, to the broader political strategy of maintaining patron-clientelistic links with sections of the community that could be delivered through civil society organisations linked with urban or rural populations. For some, there is doubtless also the idea of ‘serving the nation’, a fact brought out strongly in the autobiography of educationalist Dr Lourdes Quisumbing (1997) who entered government for the first time to serve as Secretary of Education between 1986 and 1990. This trend has continued into the subsequent Ramos government (1992-98), the Estrada government (1998-2000) and the current regime of Arroyo. Most political groupings within the NGO movement have found themselves in government at one time or another, along with many others from less politicised backgrounds, and of course people from the business sector.

It is in the Philippines that there seems to have been most fluidity between the two sectors, due to the political opportunities offered to reformers from civil society since 1986 and the relatively open civil service structure that allows lateral entry at senior levels. The highest profile example was the new DAR agency created in response to civil society pressure for the redistribution of agricultural land. DAR became the focus for many of such efforts, as a succession of former NGO leaders in the Philippines have been instrumental in developing the new agrarian reform policy and seeking its implementation both inside and outside of successive governments. The post-Marcos political settlement required concessions to be made to a wide range of stakeholders and interest groups in Philippines society, and agrarian reform was largely delegated to sections of the NGO community through their control of DAR. However, this was not true to the same extent in related departments such as Agriculture or Environment and Natural Resources, although there was some NGO increased cooperation with NGOs in these other departments.

Other areas of government that the NGO community has sought to influence through direct participation have been Social Welfare, Education, the National Anti-Poverty
Commission and others. With twenty years of experience of the phenomenon of ‘cross-over’ between NGOs and government, there is now a level of public discussion about how things have worked out, particularly among the wider civil society and media.

So what kinds of people have been interviewed for their ‘life-work histories’ in the Philippines? Those people most commonly encountered have crossed from the NGO sector into government during one of the four post-1986 governments, usually – though not always - in return for having provided support to an electoral campaign. Political leaders seeking to construct electoral alliances that can mobilise broad sections of the population have seen NGOs as useful intermediaries in the political process. Many left government after a year or two, either because of dissatisfaction with the reality of working ‘on the inside’, while others, being political appointees, have left when a new government has come in. Some of these NGO people joined government enthusiastically, while others did so with reluctance, fearing cooption or becoming trapped in highly-politicised structures of bureaucracy, patronage or corruption. Some were pressured by government to join, when government, seeking expertise and ideas, called the bluff of its civil society critics to ‘come and do better’ (as the quote over-page illustrates). Another informant from a left political background has pursued power more directly as an elected representative in Congress after a lifetime of political activism and NGO work.

Other people have crossed over in less politicised or grandiose circumstances as part of the search for better and more interesting work, more security and status and in the interest of building a varied career. One informant, beginning a career in a public transport authority grew tired of the frustrations of working within an agency fraught with patronage and corruption and successfully rebuilt his career within an environmental NGO, retraining himself on the job and pursuing new fields of personal interest in the field of conservation. Another informant had trained as a lawyer and worked very successfully in private practice, combining this with a high level of participation in one of the business-funded NGOs, before being drawn reluctantly into government as part of ongoing reform efforts in the internal revenue department.

One issue that emerges from the Philippines data is that of the delegation of certain areas of government to NGOs. The cause of agrarian reform in the Philippines – while still moving far too slow for most activists - has benefited from the participation of

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10 Foreign Affairs, Finance, Trade and a range of other important departments in government have not been staffed by NGO people in the same way, but have to some extent been characterised by a similar movement from people within the business community. Boundary crossing between business and government forms a related counterpart phenomenon to that between the third sector and government, but it is not examined in the present study.

11 The term ‘cross-over’ is a controversial one in the Philippines. It is associated with the recent experiences of a group of civil society persons who held positions in the Arroyo government who resigned en masse in 2005 after disagreements with government policy and became known as the ‘Hyatt Ten’ in the media. A new NGO called InciteGov has been established by this group (and now widened to include other people from business and civil society) to reflect on the experience of the cross-overs and to use the lessons to pursue governance and other reform from outside. Others in the NGO community, however, who have long criticised the slide into repression by the current Orroyo regime and indeed wondered why the Hyatt Ten stayed so long in the government in the first place, have been suspicious of their motives.
NGO activists since 1986. Indeed the whole DAR can be seen as having been virtually ‘handed over’ to sections of the NGO community to build and take forward, and there have been some important areas of progress even if most major vested interests remain in place. There have also been significant NGO people that have moved at various junctures into education, housing, social work and environment and natural resources, as well as other departments.

Another issue highlighted is the rise of ‘non-traditional politics’. A new and more pragmatic and flexible section of the activist community has learned through its experiences in government in sectors such as housing, social welfare, education, peace building etc that engagement with government through direct participation can bear results - since there are limited ‘political spaces’ that open up where differences can be made, and that this forms a more preferable position than the older position many had shared of critical non-engagement. These people speak of a new form of ‘non-traditional politics’ that the NGO sector has helped to construct in the Philippines, one that engages in struggle with the majority of traditional politicians that still remains in place, but that also leaves behind the radical view of government as the enemy still retained by the remaining ‘separatist’ civil society critics.

The practical difficulties experienced by NGO people working in government, and their complex and ambiguous motives, are highlighted in many of the life histories. Many NGO people who have crossed over have found it difficult to operate within a politicised or highly bureaucratic environment, with different cultures of work, resistance to reforms from established interests, and the difficulty of mobilising resources effectively in government offices. Some claim to have had to be ‘arm-twisted’ to move into government at all:

Cory [Aquino] said ‘Look, I didn’t want to be President, what right do you have to say you don’t want to be in government, you all [i.e. civil society] pushed me!’ Then I said ‘Oh my god, there is no way that I can answer this’. So she appointed one of the two people I had recommended and called us both together, and in slippers and blue jeans I raised my hand, and became deputy minister …

Having campaigned for government change from outside, the president then challenged NGO colleagues to ‘put their money where their mouth was’, as it were.

This reluctance was also true of those who have been invited into government without a particular political or social agenda other than that of improving governance and serving the nation. One respondent who worked in the private sector gave loss of income as a major reason for reluctance to become involved in government. On the other hand, most have at the same time welcomed the chance to learn at first hand the realities of life within government and bureaucracy, recognising the potential power of a more effective public sector to make lasting changes, and keen to break down the often caricatured view government and NGOs have of each other.

The history of cross-over is both a consequence of, and a contributor to, a set of political tensions within the NGO community. The experience of people crossing over from civil society to government has also generated tensions. One is a view of the NGO sector left behind that comes from a position in government, where suddenly the activities of NGOs can seem much less appealing. In particular, some informants have been disappointed by the tendency of some NGOs to see entrants into government as
somehow ‘their people’ and expecting preferential treatment in the allocation of resources and contracts. One informant, having moved into government, said

And so I started to see my friends … people I had looked up to, including very good friends, changing in front of my eyes. More concerned with brokering, power deals, setting up alliances here and there …

From this perspective, NGOs were found to fall short of expectations in relation to adherence to principled approaches and ethical practices in relation to earlier NGO demands for greater government accountability. For other boundary crossers, the demands of NGOs simply began to appear more utopian and less realistic from the vantage point of a post within government than they had done from outside. There can be frustration that many NGOs are unwilling, or do not have the detailed knowledge or expertise, to factor in the practical aspects in their demands for changes to policies and implementation (e.g. costings, technical information).

I entered into housing … total shock … I was building houses out of alternative materials … but realised how little NGO people knew about the extent … the technical side of things … I looked around at my NGO friends and they had this self-righteousness that they knew everything …

Some people have therefore fallen out with erstwhile colleagues in the NGO sector as a result of these differences in perspectives. For some, boundary crossing is a form of ‘transgression’ that is associated negatively with having broken the rules. This has led some to argue that the Philippines now has a more ‘mature’ NGO sector, while others speak of cooption and compromise by those who are seen as having crossed over merely for short-term gain with limited long-term benefits for either NGOs or the poor.

The civil society-government relationship: more mature or degraded?
Critics have also alleged that all this has in a sense degraded the NGO sector because NGOs have become mere ‘stepping stones’ for people with political ambition seeking entry to government and greater political power. Others counter with the view that a more mature NGO sector has emerged as a result of the crossing over, as NGOs have gained more realistic insights into the policy process. Some NGO people have therefore stayed in government, and moved into new jobs engaged in such issues as administrative reform.

5. Issues from Bangladesh

Bangladesh’s NGO sector has been extensively documented and many of its larger organisations such as Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) have become the subject of widespread international attention. Emerging as an independent nation after a bloody liberation war with Pakistan in 1971, the new country lacked basic infrastructure and institutions and became the focus of large quantities of international aid (Lewis 1993). The growth of its NGO sector was the result of the congruence of a weak state that was unable to single-handedly tackle massive challenges of disaster relief and national building, the influx of international aid and the existence of local social entrepreneurs in the form of politicised former student activists imbued with the energy of the national liberation struggle and other individuals with a creative developmental vision from within the private sector and
the universities (Lewis 1997; Smillie and Hailey 2001). The founder of BRAC was working in a multinational oil company and returned from overseas to join the relief effort after the liberation war, while the founder of Grameen was an academic economist working in a Bangladesh university.

Today, donors such as the World Bank – and to some extent the government – accept the role of NGOs as important partners in the development process, particularly in relation to service provision. A recent World Bank report (2006) on NGOs in Bangladesh outlines the case for a ‘pluralist service provision regime’ in which NGO experiments and innovation in the fields such as credit, non-formal education and village-based community health are scaled up into government-coordinated national programmes. In this policy vision, backed within Bangladesh’s recent Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, there is a strong role for NGOs envisaged in future service provision, combined with a recognition of their advocacy roles as well. Yet there are growing concerns among some quarters within civil society that the result of policies such as the World Bank’s and the growth of budget support by donors to government that a new wave of ‘contracting culture’ will limit the creativity of NGOs and test their transparency and accountability in new ways.

In Bangladesh there is far less movement between the sectors than in the Philippines, due to a particular rigidity of the public sector bureaucracy (in terms of hierarchical structure, declining social status and limited opportunities for lateral entry from outside), the better remuneration levels within a generally foreign-funded NGO sector, and the perception of a more open work culture and scope for job satisfaction in NGO work. In Bangladesh, there is a far less politicised NGO sector than in Philippines, where many development NGOs openly identify with political tendencies and movements and may explicitly lend their support to particular candidates at election time. Although the NGO sector in Bangladesh has part of its origins in the student politics of resistance and national identity formation, and a political sub-sector of the NGOs with social mobilisation approaches influenced by the work of Paolo Freire – as was the case in the Philippines – two factors help explain the difference in politicisation. The first is the high level of foreign funding that has helped to create the NGO sector in Bangladesh. In order to be eligible to receive foreign funds, an NGO must be registered with the government, and not surprisingly the government is particularly sensitive to the creation of an avenue through which foreign funders might influence domestic politics through NGOs. The second factor is the lack of a distinction in Bangladesh between NGOs and ‘people’s organisations’ that characterises the sector in the Philippines. NGOs in Bangladesh do not work with already existing groups of organised poor people – these on the whole do not exist due the counter-veiling force of strong patron-client and kinship ties – but instead form their own grassroots groups. While these groups in some cases can reach a measure of autonomy and independence from ‘their’ NGOs over time – and this objective remains an important one for some of the NGOs that employ this social mobilisation approach – such autonomy remains the exception rather than the rule.

So in Bangladesh it is far more difficult for NGO leaders to find themselves posts in government in exchange for political support. This is not to say that this type of strategy is unknown. In the case of the NGO Proshika, for example, the government recently took action against the NGO leadership when it appeared to become increasingly identified with the main opposition Awami League party a few years
ago, freezing its access to foreign funds and bringing trumped up charges against the NGO’s leadership, some of whom found themselves in jail. Back in the 1980s, another NGO leader was offered a post in the military government of General Ershad in order to take forward an essential drugs health policy his NGO had been advocating, causing hostility within broader civil society when he accepted what he saw as a genuine the opportunity to try to push a reformist agenda within a then non-democratic regime (Chowdhury 1995).

But generally in Bangladesh one has to dig deeper to uncover the paths of cross-over that take place and help construct the relationship between government and NGO in less visible and more subtle ways. For the brightest young people leaving university the civil service has traditionally been the place to put into practice ideas of ‘serving the nation’ and building a satisfying and rewarding career. While there are still many people for whom this remains true, informant accounts suggest that this may be changing. One reason is that the private sector is becoming a more attractive career option for the well-to-do where money can be made, as markets have been opened up and the number of both local and foreign companies working in the country have grown. Another is a sense of frustration with a public sector characterised by low incomes, a perceived high level of inefficiency and a sense of being out of touch with citizens. The ranking of Bangladesh by Transparency International in recent years as top of the world’s corruption league table, and the frustrations many people have with trying to make use of public services, may only have served to reinforce this more negative image of public sector careers.

In Bangladesh, one result of this is that one is more likely to find people crossing over from the government sector to the NGOs than the other way around. This takes two main forms. Some NGOs have benefited from the movement of young government staff who have quickly become frustrated with working in a public sector context and have sought a more interesting job, and usually a higher income, within the NGO sector.

I understood that … yes, a government job is more sort of sustainable and secure … but if you look at the system your career growth is not so regular … and it is not based your performance or even your expertise, rather it is time-bound. So … as long as you are there you will become senior, you will get a promotion, but it is not based on your performance … there no transparency… That was one thing, but another was that the [public sector] project was coming to a close so I was looking for a job. By that time I was also looking at which organisation which might be better placed for me and my career … and that might be better placed to fit with my individual thinking. Then I found that [a particular NGO] was such an organisation. There was potential to grow and to contribute…

Organisations such as CARE Bangladesh – the largest NGO with international roots in the country – have particularly gained from individuals crossing over in this way – people who recognise and identify with a more open organisational culture and a better salary.

The second main form of cross-over is the strategy many NGOs use to recruit a government retiree from the civil service. As one interviewee from this category put it:

So after the end of my government career … in Bangladesh we retire early, and we remain active. During government service we get all these experiences and training. For example, as a
government officer I visited UK, I visited India, I visited Sri Lanka, Philippines, Thailand, Japan. In some places I represented my country … I got the opportunity to see things over there and I enjoyed my service with government. With all this experience, in retirement – and with a strong physique - I could not sit idle! So I thought I should try to do something for the country also after the government job… in an NGO.

In part this provides an opportunity for a still-motivated public sector person to continue to undertake interesting and worthwhile work, but it also offers each NGO their own ‘inside person’ that can bring context and networks with government departments and perhaps most importantly a relationship that can be deployed whenever tensions break out – as they often do – with the NGO Affairs Bureau where NGO projects that involve overseas funding are approved. Sometimes such people do not play a particularly important management or operational role within an NGO aside from this one.

If one tries to ‘map’ some of the emerging issues from Philippines onto Bangladesh, the differences are quite stark. For example, in relation to delegating government to NGOs, the situation is very different. While important areas of service provision have long been occupied by some of the larger NGOs, this has been largely due to the lack of government coverage in key sectors – such as credit and rural education – rather than by any planned ceding of responsibility by government. As we have seen, there has been a rise in government/NGO contracting in Bangladesh, continuing the tradition of the strong role of the NGO sector in service delivery. This has been intensified by the recent donor shifts towards government budget support and away from fund NGOs directly. Certain key public services - such as the case of BRAC’s non-formal primary education programme - have for some years been mainly the responsibility of NGOs. However, there has not yet been any delegation of government roles to NGOs through a movement of NGO staff into particular government departments.

Bangladesh was also transformed from military rule to a democratic political system through a peaceful ‘people power’ revolution in 1990, with some parallels with the Philippines experience. The democratic political setting in Bangladesh is characterised by increasing levels of confrontation and non-cooperation between the two main political parties. There is as yet little sign of the rise of ‘non-traditional politics’ seen in the Philippines. What discourse there is of non-traditional politics in Bangladesh, but this is viewed primarily in terms a refusal by NGOs to become involved in party politics (which has only occasionally been perceived to have been infringed, as the recent Proshika case illustrated) and seeking to pursue development agendas within a non-party conception of ‘civil society’. Whether or not individuals from the NGO sector seek opportunities to move into political parties or government positions remains to be seen. Compared with the Philippines, the central role of the international donor community in funding both NGOs and government remains a strong complicating factor.

For NGO staff, there are many practical difficulties that prevent working in government, but for civil servants seeking ‘escape’ there are several routes. The civil service has a longstanding system of unpaid leave known as ‘lien’ which has also been deployed by those in government who wish to take advantage of a job offer to

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12 However, the NGOs played little role in this movement at the time.
work in a more lucrative or stimulating setting for a few years. Government will often agree to this, albeit reluctantly sometimes, to allow staff to take up offers of work within international organisations such as UN agencies or donor-funded projects. Sometimes this system is also used to take up a post within an NGO, sometimes being arranged with an NGO to provide the ‘inside person’ role above. For example, an informant working on lien in one NGO interviewed is able to use her knowledge of the government’s NGO Affairs Bureau to try to sort out problems arising not only between the NGO and the government but also between the NGO’s partners and the government

*Q. Do you sometimes use your knowledge and contacts with NGOAB to help [this NGO]? Is that part of your role here?*

Yes, and not only with [this NGO]. If a partner is getting a problem with a Ministry then I can say ok give me the name of the Ministry and the person responsible and I will talk with them. I try to find out [what’s happening] ... sometimes at the District level also. Sometimes partners say [of a government official] ‘He is not helping us, he is not very confident about us, will you please talk with them? And so I talk to them and say yes, we know this organisation.

One example that is an exception to this pattern that emerged during the course of the fieldwork is in the case of a few public sector careers – such as human rights lawyers – who may begin their post qualification work with a legal or human rights NGO or civil society network in order to gain experience and exposure before moving on to a formal career as an advocate within the public courts system. In this scenario, NGOs serve as a kind of training ground for activists and help build networks and relationships that may continue to support a career of this kind. The following exchange extracted from an interview with a woman activist lawyer who worked with a number of NGOs before becoming a judge in the public courts illustrates the importance of this cross-sector learning experience:

*Did your experience in these NGOs before the civil service help you?*

Yes of course it did. My involvement with the [NGO] law group gave me enough opportunities to think about my career … I was enlightened, I was managing, that’s true … but it gave me some different ideas …. A different perspective on many other aspects. And of course working for [another legal NGO] was also good for me … I got more confidence, that I could do it …

*Could you give me an example?*

It’s very difficult to say, it’s very difficult to say … I suppose when I was a was a family court judge in Dhaka it helped me a lot, then … I started to declare my judgements in open court … I felt that the transparency was very important. I felt that I should maintain it … Actually there are many other gaps in government [practices] too, you know, we don’t follow the correct time schedule, we say we’ll be in court at 9.30 but go there at 11.30 ... it’s the tradition, it’s the convention! If I try to break the convention, people at the bar get angry. But I have to tackle it, so I’ve started on that … and I see some people are happy. Suppose there’s a poor man … he’s happy, because he doesn’t need to walk beside the lawyer and the lawyer’s assistant for seven days just to get the result. That is just a simple example … of how I can make a small check on my staff’s corruption. I can’t control corruption, but I can check it. I can declare everything in open court…

*So that is something you’ve taken from civil society work ...?*

It’s a process … but it is part of how I got that way. Another thing is affirmative action, when I was an activist within these NGOs I came across affirmative action … Sometimes when I am doing family court judgements I ask myself whether I am doing an injustice to a man … but at the time I also know that I need to do some affirmative action… I try … I can’t say that I’m successful …
The relationship between government and NGOs in Bangladesh is a long and troubled one, in which there has been limited progress from the position that was characterised as ‘antagonistic cooperation’ by Sanyal (1991) a decade and a half ago. Unlike the Philippines, since there has been little or no cross-over, neither the government nor the NGO sector has really had to deal much with the consequences of such sectoral shifts. However, certain NGOs and NGO leaders who had worked with the military government during the 1980s (such as Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, whose essential drugs policy became an internationally documented case of successful NGO lobbying) have arguably suffered from criticisms from other sections of civil society that they had become too close to an autocratic government. This is an example of the ‘extensive’ type of shift distinguished at the start of the paper, since some NGO leaders were sometimes able to use good personal relationships with government to secure influence and policy change on land, health and education issues.

More recently, government allegations that the NGO umbrella organisation ADAB had become politicised in a partisan way and the subsequent establishment with government support of the new Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB) in 2003 perhaps illustrates the government’s interest in maintaining as far as possible a clear boundary between the two sectors that does not become blurred by party politics - yet it is a view that is increasingly out of step with the realities of NGOs and civil society groups that align themselves with opposition protest (Lewis 2005).

6. Emerging issues from UK

The voluntary sector in the UK is now more extensive and commands more attention (and expectation) from policy makers than at any period since the highpoint of Victorian philanthropy (Kendall 2003).

The UK third sector is also distinctive since, like many third sectors in the rich countries with long traditions of international action, it has become divided into two quite distinct spheres or sub-sectors – those organisations that are working domestically and those that work overseas usually in the developing or transition countries. The former are generally known as ‘voluntary organisations’ while the latter are termed ‘NGOs’ (Lewis, 1998). Both categories of organisation have been considered within the choice of informants for the study, since boundary crossing takes place between the domestic voluntary sector and government departments such as the Home Office or the Charities Commission, as well as between NGOs and the Department for International Development (DFID).

Two sets of wider policy factors have increased opportunities for exchange between the sectors in the UK. For the domestic voluntary sector, a new enhanced role in social service delivery began in the 1990s with the growth of the ‘mixed economy of welfare’ in which a combination of public, private and voluntary service providers were seen as providing the optimum framework for improving services and making them more cost-effective. After the Labour government came to power in 1997, this trend was taken further with the new ‘Compact’ arrangement between the voluntary sector and the government designed to increase mutual recognition and partnership nationally and locally. A second set of developments has contributed to boundary crossing within the field of international development as DFID has expanded its work.
One is the overall expansion of UK bilateral development assistance under the Labour government, which is now committed to reaching the UN target of 0.7% of GDP by the end of the decade (or coming close to it). This will involve a substantial increase of development assistance funding that will require an expansion of DFID’s capacity, and this has created new jobs for which people with an NGO background are well-qualified to take. A job in DFID brings a better salary than the NGO sector, as well as the opportunity to operate on a larger scale with more resources and therefore the promise of greater impact. But it also, as we shall see, brings with it a set of new challenges within an official bureaucracy for those used to more informal, value-driven working methods.  

Another factor here is the changing nature of DFID work, which has required more expertise in the conflict and emergency field. In filling its newly expanded set of ‘conflict adviser’ posts, for example, DFID has explicitly drawn in expertise from the UK NGO community from organisations with a long history of such work. One informant who crossed from a major UK NGO to become a DFID conflict adviser commented:

… when was it, 2-3 years ago now … I actually saw jobs in The Guardian advertised by DFID for conflict advisors and … I felt I’d run my course with Christian Aid, again for a combination of push-pull factors … one of the ones was a sense that as an NGO trying to lobby government, I didn’t feel, I reached the point at which you could continue to say things to government and so on but they weren’t necessarily hearing. And I didn’t feel that I had skills or knowledge to know why that was. Having come in [to DFID], I begin to understand why that was … So this job advert actually came at the right time and these were new posts. They weren’t ‘come and manage our Sudan desk’ and so on. They were saying, we want people with experience from outside government, with some real understanding of conflict because we the government, we DFID, are in effect wanting to kind of ‘beef up’ our own expertise in this area… They went external and they brought in I think about 20 people I’d say, right now and they’re about to do that again, again going externally… It’s growing, it’s a growing sector, whereas some of the others such as social development, some of the more traditional ones, they’re actually condensing or reducing posts and so on…

The expansion of opportunities within DFID has led to accounts among UK informants of the difficult cultural transition from third sector into public sector bureaucracy. One type of boundary crosser increasingly encountered within the UK NGO sector is the person who has entered DFID from the background of working in the NGO world, but has found the experience unsatisfactory and ending returning within a few years to the third sector.

For example, for one informant there was a less analytical culture than the one he had become used to the NGO world:

… when you talk only by flows of money, you can then apply terms such as efficiency and therefore less staff… and so I didn’t fully agree with the aid philosophy either. I didn’t, it took some time to get used to the sort of lack of a questioning approach. Here [in the NGO]… your first base is to establish what is the hypothesis or at least what the options are we should be looking at. To treat something as … well, we should never stop questioning the best way to reduce poverty. Whereas, in DFID, it’s the sort of … the default is what is the most efficient

13 There is also a form of boundary crossing that occasionally takes place between the two sub-sectors of the third sector, which raises interesting questions about the choices of individuals as to why they may choose to work ‘at home’ or ‘away’. For an analysis of this data in relation to ideas of cosmopolitanism, see Lewis (2006).
Another informant, while finding a lot of potential in DFID as a place to work was disappointed by the nature of a different workplace culture and relationships with colleagues:

… there were things that were disappointing like … nobody being interested in your countries, not being interested in good quality programmes … and a sort of lack of collegiate spirit at a high level, not true at a more junior level but at that level … so everyone was out to get your job rather than kind of help you do your job well. DFID on the surface is more friendly. If you actually go into [an NGO] probably people don’t remember to welcome you properly or they just leave you to get on with things, because they’re probably so busy. And people will argue like mad in [the NGO], where as they don’t actually argue in DFID … but in [the NGO] nobody would ever stab you in the back, they would sort of help you do something, and it’s only a finer point they’re arguing on whereas in DFID they’ll just kind of find a way round things and they won’t be open about it. So there is quite a difference in the working culture. It seemed better at first … and then I realised it wasn’t … I found the working environment difficult just because of those reasons, but I actually really enjoyed what I did and the people I worked with in my own team, and some of the other people and … I think I appreciate it much more now … I mean, it enables me to do my job now much better. And I would have … had there been the right thing there to carry on and do there I would have stayed and done it, but my strong leaning after the four years - which was what the job was for - was to go back into the voluntary sector.

Such people may see the experience of a temporary sojourn within government as having been a useful one since it provides more detailed learning and experience about how governments work, but ultimately it can be one that helps reinforce the dominant identity of being an ‘NGO person’. The experience of being in government is almost always considered to be useful to carry back to the NGO sector, whether in the form of more detailed understanding of the policy process and opportunities for advocacy and influencing, or a stronger sense of what government priorities are for funding and the types of criteria for looked for in NGOs seeking closer partnerships.

Similar issues of identity are raised by informants who work in the broader voluntary sector and who moved into non-development-related areas of the UK public sector, and of adjusting to a different way or working. The following individual went into the Department of Health on secondment working in the social care reform field, and was later invited to stay on as a permanent civil servant:

… I learned very fast that that wasn’t what they meant, and that words are used completely differently. But nobody in the civil service thought to tell me, because I was reasonably senior - I was taken in as a Grade 6 equivalent, not that senior, but reasonably senior - and they just assumed that you knew all this stuff. I mean how cold you possibly be at that level and not know? Because they didn’t even know they knew it, it was just part of the way they lived. So I had to learn it, had to learn it fast… And I am … a networker, and I would bring people in to the office to talk about things, and I would go out and talk about things, and I didn’t always go with either a case to persuade others of, or a fact finding mission. I went out … much more open-ended. And this was very ‘un-civil servanty’ and people found that very difficult. Particularly as the point was then to influence and to write … legislation.

Q. Were you tempted to stay in the civil service?
Sort of, but not really. I decided it wasn’t me, I didn’t feel comfortable. I had also been very involved in legislation that was highly … some parts of it I’d found very very difficult. And
I’d thought, this isn’t the life for me, I can’t wear the clothes of this … and do ‘whatever policies come up’. I can only do it knowing that this is a particular policy that I do care about and I want to see happen… But my next bit would have been some other general … improvement in the health service or something. And I thought ‘no, that’s not me, I don’t want to go there and just to do and to make effective whatever it is that it coming out, it’s got to be something I actually want to do’. And so I wasn’t really, no. If I’d been able to do a series of special projects, all of which I’d wanted and lobbied for beforehand almost, so that it was my pet I was doing, then I might have been. But not to do that. And it really hit me that I’m not a natural-born civil servant. I couldn’t just go and … well, by then I had the skills to just go and pick up a brief ’cos I’d had to do it … But I decided that wasn’t what I wanted to do. And … what I actually decided was … again … ‘where’s the action at, at the moment, where are things happening, where’s the energy, where’s the excitement?’ And through talking to friends, though being around and being involved in staff, I decided it was back in the voluntary sector, and that’s why I decided to go [back] there.

At the same time, there are also those - as in the Philippines - who appear to have successfully made the transition from NGO to government agency, finding in DFID a satisfying role in which to pursue their development work. One interviewee who had been recruited to DFID from the NGO sector post-1997 had had previous links with the Minister through having been an activist in the Labour Party, and quickly found his feet within the new institution:

I mean it was amazing, I was probably as a young relatively junior official, mid-career point I’d come into DFID, I was seeing more of the minister, I mean on a sort of monthly basis putting up submissions to her, probably sometimes meeting 3-4 times a month … The other thing was that one of the things that, the first task I was given was to jointly organise with the Foreign Office a major conference on Africa conflict, bringing together key ministers from Africa, right across the Continent, also key policy makers in the UK and the West and so on…

The same informant’s narrative also draws attention to the increasing importance within the UK government more broadly of valuing the networks and ideas of people drawn from the third sector, since he collaborated with another NGO person seconded at the Foreign Office on this event:

I managed to do that with a lot of support from colleagues and so on, calling in favours and this and that. And I organised the document for it, was co-written, the document for that conference was co-written by somebody else who had been seconded into the Foreign Office from [a major UK NGO] … [He] was an Africa specialist. He had taken a secondment into Foreign Office and the two of us wrote this paper, a joint UK paper on conflict in Africa which was the background to this paper which actually then helped this whole new initiative on conflict get set up and so on… Anyway, I did that work, found it enormously rewarding, enjoyed my time …

In the UK, the motivation for working in the public sector tends to be a sense of wider possibility in engaging with power, and at the personal level, a better salary than that found on average in NGO work. This of course contrasts with the highly aid-dependent context of Bangladesh, where salaries in the NGO sector are likely to be many times higher than those found in the public sector (though higher job security in a government job may be seen to compensate).

This brief overview of some of the issues arising in each context is summarised in Table 1 below, where the different dominant forms of boundary crossing are set out. There are also of course common themes too - for example, in all three contexts both sectors tend to operate with an over-whelmingly caricatured view of each other (though one which increased boundary-crossing will perhaps serve to break down).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Nature and extent</th>
<th>Contextual factors</th>
<th>Emerging issues</th>
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| Philippines | Large numbers of civil society activists crossing into government departments as political appointees  
Political activists from civil society seeking elected political posts  
Long tradition of corporate philanthropy and charitable work linked to political office | Relatively politicised civil society and flexible bureaucracy  
Post-authoritarian democratic ‘spaces’ opened up  
Role of third sector in supporting mainstream political or business interests | Lessons for activists – some stay to pursue change from inside, many regroup in civil society  
Non-traditional politics idea growing  
Blurred less visible boundaries between third sector and politics and business |
| UK         | Rise of secondments of third sector people in some government departments  
Expansion of DFID recruits in part from NGO sector  
Social activists and reformers in the domestic sphere increasingly care less about sector and more about nature of job and work | New government interest in the third sector post 1997 e.g. Compact  
Growing job market flexibility, growth of official aid programme, expansion of conflict work  
New opportunities for job satisfaction, security and values increasingly drive job changes. | Cooption or synergy questions (but also a recognition by government of third sector creativity?)  
Disappointment with government culture norms among some third sector people (but some stay)  
Blurring of sectoral boundaries? |
| Bangladesh | Little movement from NGOs into government, but some movement the other way  
Unpaid leave from government through ‘lien’ system  
NGO strategy to recruit retired govt employees to smooth administrative tensions | Rigid public sector structures, strong presence of international aid makes NGO salaries higher than government  
Provides opportunities for exit from govt for those dissatisfied  
Relatively high level of distrust between government and NGO sector | Little learning between NGO sector and government?  
Loss of expertise from public sector?  
NGO government relations are quietly ‘managed’ rather than systematically structured? |
7. Conclusion

This working paper has been prepared with the aim of offering some reflections on themes and ideas emerging from the ongoing process of research on boundary-crossing individuals. Its conclusions are therefore at this stage indicative, though my aim in reporting now is a hope that they are sturdy enough to at least open up some debate.

At a general level, these life-work histories are beginning to open up an understanding of the institutional geographies of power and choice among individuals whose careers have cut across the boundaries of the third sector and the public sector, and the complex and elusive nature of this boundary. The boundary is shown to be problematic and complex since it exists at different levels. And like all boundaries, it both \textit{connects} and \textit{separates}.

At one level, it is a conceptual boundary, an idea that helps to map out the complex landscape of organisational life and the shifting institutional relationships of the neo-liberal policy terrain. As such, it is highly artificial, since in the real world of organisations people constantly carry ideas, relationships and practices with them as they travel across from one side to the other, as they change job, develop alliances or operate simultaneously in both sectors. As an ‘ideal type’, the three sector model is of course in some sense at odds with the messy realities of political, personal and organisational life, where such a neat division across the boundary is impossible, and where context and history creates very different sets of structures and incentives from place to place, not just between North and South, but also within regions.

But at the same time, and at another level, the boundary is (perhaps paradoxically) experienced by certain people as a very \textit{real} one. The ‘third sector model’ operates at the level of policy locally and internationally to influence the allocation of resources and decision making within the policy process itself. Furthermore, the ‘rules of the game’ – in terms of cultures and norms - are often quite different within the third sector organisation and the public sector. For those individuals who cross between third sector and government, there is normally an expectation that life and work will be different across this borderline - in terms of access to power, to more interesting work, or to a more appropriate level of remuneration. Some may find that this is indeed the case, while others discover that the change is not to their taste - that they are overwhelmed by bureaucracy, constrained by \textit{realpolitik}, or disillusioned by short-termism or lack of impact. An ‘NGO person’ may find that they remain an NGO person ‘out of place’, or they may find that their identity becomes firmer or more fixed once they move into a different and unfamiliar context. Some people may find that they remain labelled an NGO person (or a government person) by those around them even as they themselves are seeking to leave this identity behind. For those who make the transition happily, there is also change - they may bring new and different approaches from one context to another and trigger new ideas and creativity, or they may look back on their old sectoral home differently, often more critically. It is here that forms of creativity – arising from different perspectives and positionalities, of using existing capacities and skills in new contexts – can come into play. In this way, there may be important links between creativity and the overall performance of individuals and organisations. But for a few people, the boundary does not really exist...
much at all - they claim simply to follow the job regardless of whether it is in one sector or another.

At the level of structure, the shifts in each of the three contexts reflect broader changes in resource incentives and political opportunities more widely – such as shifts in policy priorities among governments and international agencies. For example, it may be the case that more ‘flexible’ organisational structures and blurred sectoral boundaries are favoured under increasingly neo-liberal economic and social policy frameworks. The new public management which seeks to combine elements of markets, voluntarism and public administration is simply one such example, and is played out in different forms in different parts of the world. As part of this process, the third sector and its boundaries are in a constant state of being constructed and unmade, as individuals make purposive shifts as leaders, organisers, activists and managers between the different sectors. At the level of individual agency, such shifts constitute individual choices being made about moving to a more favoured operating environment, based on a calculation about political opportunity, material benefit and job satisfaction (or a combination of all three). Such choices of course reflect the linkage of individual preferences with wider contextual or historical junctures. Within the three contexts studied, there are both similarities and differences in relation to the experiences of boundary crossers and the meanings we can attribute to boundary crossing. Whatever the motivations, such shifts suggest the need to analyse the importance of the roles and experiences of these ‘sector brokers’ (cf Lewis and Mosse 2006) in relation to changing configurations of power within non-governmental public action.

At a more practical level, data on boundary crossing raises issues that perhaps call for both pessimism and optimism about the health of third sector government relationships. The pessimism is that in all three contexts it seems to be the case that both government and third sector operate with a fairly low level of knowledge and understanding of each other (sometimes verging on the caricature, which may or may not be deliberate); and it may be that an ‘othering’ process is an important part of maintaining separate identities. Another area of pessimism on the third sector side arises from the realities of policy change when seen from the government perspective, highlighting the inadequacy of some civil society advocacy models, and the realities of a policy process which is very difficult to influence from a third sector position. Grounds for optimism, however, may follow from the opportunities for creative thinking and action that may result from ‘successful’ boundary crossing, in which new ideas and fresh opportunities are sometimes created. It is possible that further policy experiments with secondment arrangements both ways across the third sector and government boundaries could help to build on this finding. Such work may also tell us more about how inter-sectoral relationships operate and are perceived in practice, and this can further inform and strengthen the complex practices of partnership that are often found to under-perform in various ways.

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14 For example, there has also been considerable concern around these themes in connection with the rise of audit culture. This has been analysed in neo-Foucauldian terms as part of a shift to neo-liberal forms of governance which depends in large part on the role of individual agency in which ‘individuals, as active agents, are co-opted into regimes of power’ (Shore and Wright, 2001: p. 760).
REFERENCES


