



# Blurring boundaries

How is the blurring of boundaries between sectors impacting on civil society organisations in the UK and internationally?



Non-Governmental  
Public Action  
Programme



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This report is a summary of the presentations and discussion at the seminar which took place on 19 January 2009 at NCVO.

The seminar was the third in a series of seminars jointly organised by NCVO and the ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action (NGPA) research programme at the Centre for Civil Society (LSE).

The seminar series aims to:

- Promote dialogue, exchange and learning between academics and practitioners bringing the findings of the NGPA research programme closer to civil society organisations in the UK
- Promote international dialogue, exchange and learning bringing lessons from abroad closer to civil society organisations in the UK
- Promote learning drawn from examples of civil society in the Global South.

It brings together practitioners, academics and policy-makers and provides them with the opportunity to share insights and take part in a stimulating discussion.

## In a nutshell

### Key points from the first presentation

- In both domestic and international development policy, we still focus on a three-sector model. The real world is far messier than this policy model allows for.
- Working across sector boundaries is a universal activity and a feature of the new flexibility of neoliberal institutions and policies.
- Some boundary crossers move back and forth from one sector to the other; others are simultaneously active in both sectors. In both cases the role of informal links is very important.

- More formal processes such as secondments, exchanges and immersions can also help challenge caricatured sector views.
- Boundary crossing is an opportunity for both government and the third sector in terms of learning and innovation, but there is also some evidence of cooption.

### Key points from the second presentation

- There is a growing tendency towards an increased formalisation of agreements between governments and NGOs.
- These more formalised agreements generally appear to subordinate NGOs to government's priorities, but they have also given NGOs opportunities to influence government policy and practice.
- Organisations are more likely to have influence if the agreements are relational or mutual.

# Introduction

In the UK and elsewhere, many civil society organisations are increasingly delivering public services traditionally undertaken by the state. At the same time, a growing number of companies in the private sector have developed corporate social responsibility activities and new forms of civil society organisations such as social enterprises have emerged.

The strong inter-relationships and inter-dependence that exist between the state, the market and civil society mean that these sectors are mutually influencing each other. The continuously shifting nature of the boundaries between them suggests that the space available for civil society is changing.

This seminar looked at sector boundaries and more specifically at the boundaries between the governmental sector and civil society.

## This seminar aimed to:

- Explore how the blurring of boundaries manifests itself in different national contexts.
- Share insights on the implications of blurring boundaries between sectors for civil society organisations.
- Identify the key challenges of these blurred boundaries for the future of civil society.

The speakers were:

- **Dr David Lewis** from the London School of Economics, who examined the experiences of people who have in their careers crossed between the public sector and the third sector.
- **Professor Richard Batley** from the University of Birmingham, who explored inter-sectoral relationships in service delivery.
- **Andrea Westall**, consultant policy and strategy analyst, who drew out implications for policy and practice.

**Dr Karl Wilding** from NCVO chaired and facilitated the seminar.

## Key points from the policy and practice response

- They are also more likely to influence if they have in place a range of strategies to manage resource dependence.
- Some organisations are particularly successful at influencing because they exercise a form of 'soft lobbying' from the inside.
- Boundary crossing can lead to a better understanding of the constraints and rules of the different sectors.
- Part of enabling partnerships to work is making use of boundary crossers who understand the differences between sectors and can work with them.
- HR policies can promote through formal training the skills and expertise needed for working in partnership across sectors, but it is also about opening up other options (e.g. secondments) to encourage individuals to build networks.
- The risk of cooption does not concern the third sector as a whole. There are different ways of engaging with government and a spectrum of engagement.
- In terms of managing the risk of cooption and preserving independence, diversity of funding and good governance are both essential.

# Crossing the boundaries between third sector and government: evidence from Bangladesh, the Philippines and the UK

David Lewis, London School of Economics

## Introduction

The starting assumptions of this research project were that, in both domestic and international development policy, we are still very concerned with having a three-sector model. However much we might be critical of it, it is still something which informs policy all over the world. In the UK now we even have an Office of the Third Sector. The idea behind the project was that the real world is far messier than this policy model allows for. One way of getting insight into that messiness was to explore the experiences of people who had crossed boundaries.

**The aim of the research was to analyse the implications of boundary crossing in relation to power, innovation and creativity.**

The research also aimed to examine broader institutional change in different country contexts, through the accounts of individuals crossing boundaries.

It focused on three countries (Bangladesh, the Philippines and the UK) and used a life history method. In total, twenty people in each country were interviewed and asked to reflect about their career moves.

## Boundary crossing

The interviews confirmed that boundaries are more complex and unstable than we are led to think and that individuals operate across the boundaries in different ways.

Two main forms of boundary crossing were identified:

- Consecutive shifts with people moving back and forth from one sector to the other – for example, a person who is employed by Oxfam and then is invited to work for the Department for International Development

(DFID), stays there for several years and then decides to work for CAFOD.

- Extensive (and often informal) links with people active in both sectors at once – for example, people who work for Oxfam and ring ‘ex-fams’ (former Oxfam employees) in government departments for advice or information.

## In the Philippines

Since the end of the Marcos dictatorship a number of democratically elected governments have been in power and they have all recruited people from the third sector. Because the third sector in the Philippines is highly politicised, people have moved into these different governments largely according to their affiliations and sympathies. Some have taken advantage of these new opportunities, while others have preferred to remain detached critics of the government. In the study’s life histories there are some very interesting accounts from people unwilling to work for government, but being prevailed upon, sometimes by the presidents themselves, to design new government programmes. A number of them finally accepted but have since then left. Quite a few have moved back and forth between government and the third sector.

Overall, it has been a very mixed experience, but the concept of cross-over is now something that is frequently talked about and mentioned in the press. It has become part of the discussion about the public policy landscape and in a way it is a very mature discussion, because it is one that recognises that the boundaries are blurred.

There has unavoidably been some criticism of boundary crossers, who are seen as careerists or people with political ambitions. However, there is also recognition that boundary crossers have made a difference. For example, many of the main achievements of the land reform have been driven by boundary crossers.

## In Bangladesh

The third sector in Bangladesh is very strongly shaped by international aid and post-1971 war nation-building. As for the public sector, it is very bureaucratic and has a career civil service with no lateral entry opportunities that is progressively losing its appeal as a secure base for the middle class. Civil servants are increasingly leaving government for better paid work in the third sector or in international organisations.

Some complicated leave arrangements have also developed, with people leaving the civil service for a limited period of time to work, for instance, in a UN agency or in an NGO and then going back to government. As the relationship between government and NGOs in Bangladesh is very tense, NGOs are recruiting government officials on ‘leave’ or retired government officials to mediate relations with the state. These people often do not have any other particular function in the organisation, but are there to act as ‘boundary spanners’ to oil the wheels of the system.

## In the UK

There appears to be more movement across the two sectors in both directions since New Labour came to power. There has certainly been an expansion of opportunities for work in government for both the domestic and development parts of the third sector. For example, in DFID there has been an increase in conflict and emergency work since the late 1990s and new recruits have, to a large extent, come from NGOs because of their experience and expertise in this field.

Some people have worked temporarily within government on secondment in order to gain new knowledge, insights and skills. One of the interesting findings that came out of the life histories in the UK, particularly in the NGO world, was this idea of learning. Working in government had made people look at their area of expertise from a

different perspective. They realised that some of the assumptions they had made about the policy process were incorrect. This learning has proven invaluable on their return to the third sector and is making the sector's knowledge of policy more sophisticated and arguably more relevant.

### ■ Some key 'archetypes'

The research identified eight 'archetypes' of the sorts of people who cross boundaries:

- Person who leaves government for financial or other reasons to 'escape' into other work.
- Person who seeks entry to government to gain greater power to bring about change, either staying in government, or leaving disillusioned.
- Person who intentionally or unintentionally uses civil society as a training ground for future public sector work.
- Person who begins in local government, then gravitates to the third sector.
- Person who purposefully straddles both sectors as a source of political or financial power to build their career.
- Person who boundary crosses and reevaluates their previous assumptions and world-view.
- Person who innovates by taking ideas from one context into another.
- Person who follows their job or cause anywhere, and does not really care much which 'sector' it is.

### ■ Conclusion

Boundary crossing is a fairly universal activity and a feature of the new flexibility of neoliberal institutions and policies. However, the drivers and the motives for boundary crossing vary and depend on individuals and country context.

The research adds to our knowledge about the importance of informal links and highlights that we should be paying much

more attention to the way these informal links operate.

We need to improve our understanding of how a person is able to successfully or not transition into a new work environment and how this might impact on organisations. There are people, for example, from the third sector in the UK who have gone to work in government and who have felt disconnected from the culture and the shared histories of career civil servants and been unable to function properly. A better understanding of work-role transition could increase the effectiveness of both the government and the third sector.

We also need to further explore the value of secondments, exchanges and immersions. They are potentially useful tools for facilitating a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each sector, and for promoting innovation and creativity. They can certainly help challenge caricatured sector views.

The research highlights that boundary crossing is an opportunity for both government and the third sector. There is evidence in the study of learning but also of cooption. The dilemma remains – on the one hand, the potential for organisational learning exchange and on the other, the risk of blurred boundaries contributing to the degrading of the distinctiveness of the third sector, and the dangers of political cooption. There are still real concerns about 'revolving doors' that derive from the blurred lines of accountability and the politicisation of previously independent third sector agendas.

# Blurring boundaries: government and non-state providers of services

Richard Batley, University of Birmingham

## Introduction

A previous research project by the same research team, looked at the government's relations with non-state service providers in a number of countries in Africa and Asia, and highlighted that non-state provision was very widely spread. Often non-state providers were the preferred providers in these countries, at least for health and education. The study also showed that there is a wide formal espousal of the idea of partnership. It is accepted in principle, but in practice there is an ongoing rivalry and mistrust between governments that fear the loss of control and non-state providers that fear the loss of independence. There is quite a lot of interaction between government and non-state providers about the day-to-day business of delivering services, but very little real open dialogue with regards to policy-making.

The ESRC NGPA project looked at how these partnerships operate in three countries: Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. It focused on NGOs that had decided, in addition to running their own services, to support government in the provision of its services, and explored whether these NGOs could collaborate without losing their autonomy.

**It has long been part of the discourse of funders that if you can get government and NGOs working together, they will bring their mutual comparative advantages to the relationship.**

The other perspective, very often held by academics and many NGOs, is that as soon as you enter into a relationship with government, you get coopted or subordinated. The project aimed to question these two different assumptions.

Having looked at the history of the overall relationship between government and NGOs

post-independence, in-depth case studies were conducted in three key policy areas.

## Policy areas

**Education:** NGOs supporting government to bring 'hard to reach children' into public schools or teaching them in non-formal schools, with government support.

**Health:** Contracting out of primary healthcare units to NGOs.

**Sanitation:** Collaboration of NGOs and government in campaigns to promote community led total sanitation (i.e. communities mobilised to organise their own sanitation).

## Subordination of NGOs?

The case studies show that there is a tendency towards an increased formalisation of agreements between governments and NGOs. Most of these agreements are 'vertical' and contractual. These more formalised agreements may lead to increased subordination where government and donors are in strong partnership to coordinate policy and funding. In Bangladesh, this was, for example, the case of the NGOs involved in the Urban Primary Healthcare Programme, which is sponsored by the Asian Development Bank. The programme contracts out government primary healthcare centres to NGOs in six cities. In the past NGOs and government had worked very independently. They are now encouraged to enter into 'partnership' through competitive tendering, where government is clearly in charge, supported by coordinated flows of donor funding. NGOs can choose whether or not to engage, but those that have engaged have felt subordinated and resented the role of the contractor.

## NGOs do influence policy and practice

However, in most situations, NGOs in contractual or semi-contractual agreements with government, are able to maintain their capacity to influence policy and practice. For instance:

- The Orangi pilot project in Pakistan resisted a massive programme of water and sanitation supported by the Asian Development Bank in the 1980s, and succeeded in gaining government support for a collaborative programme that is much more sensitive and responsive to local needs.
- The Karuna Trust in Karnataka took the lead in setting up the arrangements for collaboration with government in the management of primary health centres. Their model was then extended to national level in India.
- The Door Step School had a strong influence, at a very local level, in a poor area of Mumbai, in changing the practice of schools with regard to the recruitment of 'hard to reach' children.

One way or the other, either by influencing substantive policy or by influencing the way governments relate to NGOs, these organisations have had a strong influence.

## Why it sometimes works

In some cases it seems that NGOs can enter into a relationship with government, where both parties seem to be contributing and neither is left feeling that its organisational identity is lost or threatened. There are a number of explanations for this:

### Structural conditions

The level of influence of NGOs will vary according to country and policy contexts. Factors such as the degree of centralism, the extent of government support for civil

society, the role of donors and the presence of elite networks will all play a role. There is more influence where policy is less directed by donors and more locally interpreted by governments. In India, donors have relatively little influence. The broad framework of policy is established at the federal level, individual states and big city governments have a good degree of freedom, so the relationships between governments and NGOs are very much negotiated. In the case of Pakistan, only NGOs that are well connected into the country's elite networks are able to maintain influence.

The form of the contract is also important. NGOs have more influence if the agreements with government are mutual, whereby both government and the NGO fund a separate activity towards a common end. NGOs are equally more likely to have influence if the agreements have a strong relational element and if they are built on a much more flexible relationship. Situations where agreements had evolved into some sort of formal status from previous informal contacts were also better. In the study, only a very few NGOs had signed their agreements following a competitive tendering process. Most of the time they were the result of established relations; the relationship was far more equal when it had evolved out of previous practice.

#### **NGO strategies to manage resource dependence**

Where governments have policy authority and financial control, NGOs adopt a number of strategies to manage resource dependence. By choice or as a defensive strategy, they can adapt to circumstances. More interestingly perhaps, they can also shape the relationship with government and the form of their agreement. This was the case with at least two of the NGOs in the study, which were working behind the scenes, using their greater access to knowledge and stronger connections with donors to negotiate.

Some NGOs had rigorously tried to avoid any sort of dependence on government. They were prepared to work with government and

certainly wanted to influence it, but avoided accepting any sort of public funding. Many NGOs tried to avoid being dependent on a single government programme or a single donor, and to maintain multiple sources of funding.

#### **Cultivating insider influence**

Apart from structural conditions and the influence of organisations on these structural conditions, the way organisations try to build their relationship with government and cultivate insider relationship and status is also important.

Almost all of the NGOs in the study based their influence on their technical skills. For example in the field of sanitation, several of the NGOs had strong geographical information system skills they were able to sell to government. Another advantage they had over government was proximity to the community. They could also bring in funding and a greater awareness of the international policy context. These are organisations with credibility. They enter into a relationship with government but they 'avoid confrontation'. Some may seem subordinated but in reality they are cultivating relations at all levels of government following the normal channels. Organisations use their insider understanding of the rules to achieve their objectives and help government move towards new ways of working. Rather than 'selling out' these organisations are using a form of 'soft lobbying' from the inside. However, when an organisation operates on the inside, while it may achieve influence it may also get compromised in the process. What was nevertheless very striking in the project was the degree to which these organisations, the ones that were selected for this research at least, maintained influence.

# Policy and practice response

Andrea Westall, consultant policy and strategy analyst

The two presentations really resonated with some of my own experience as I have worked across the different sectors for many years, yet I do not consider myself as a boundary crosser or a boundary swapper; I see myself as operating in the spaces between the sectors.

There is a slight tendency for us to see boundary crossing as a new phenomenon, but this has always been happening. Both speakers underlined that what matters is context and who happens to be in power at a particular point in time.

Some of the literature on the blurring of boundaries talks about isomorphism, whereby the nature of the environment means organisations from different sectors that deliver the same type of services, end up increasingly working in the same ways and looking alike. However, generalisations about sectors are not very helpful. It is far more useful to look at specific areas such as health or social care, and explore the relationships that exist within these areas.

## ■ An improved understanding of differences

Both presenters mentioned how boundary crossing and cross-sectoral partnerships can improve understanding and learning, and enable better policy development and delivery. An additional positive outcome for people working across boundaries is having a better understanding of the constraints and rules that different sides have. Their experience will make them realise the importance of language and that words have different meanings in different settings. Part of enabling partnerships to work is making use of boundary crossers who understand these differences and can work with them. This can help put on the table, right at the beginning of a partnership, different understandings and motivations, issues of power, trade-offs and mutual 'wins' in order to develop a clear, open, and more effective relationship.

## ■ More formalisation?

We operate in a world where organisations increasingly have to work in partnership. It is unclear how much HR policies on continuous professional development cover this and promote these new ways of working across organisations and sectors. It would be a very useful addition to people's learning that could happen through formal training, but also by opening up other options to encourage people to build networks. Secondments could be more diverse than they currently are.

## Cross-learning between organisations and institutions working nationally and those working internationally still does not happen very often and could be further developed.

Organisations have a role to play in promoting skills and expertise, but it is also the responsibility of the individual. As David highlighted in the first presentation many of the linkages and movements across sectors are informal. A very likely response, especially from policy-makers, would be to formalise these links but this could be counter-productive.

## ■ Creating spaces

I am not a great supporter of over-formalisation. However, creating spaces and places where people can meet and network could be extremely useful. Having personally spent a lot of time working in think-tanks that typically sit between all the different sectors, I can see real merit in having these spaces to develop relationships and generate debate. In the UK, advisory groups proliferated under New Labour but they have tended to focus on very broad issues regarding the third sector and I think this is potentially quite dangerous. There is a need

to break these general discussions down into different issues, such as health or childcare, to create real understandings and more effective partnerships where appropriate.

## ■ Partnerships can work

According to Richard's presentation, partnerships work best if they are local, relational and non-competitive. This is a particularly challenging finding for us in the UK because at the moment the focus is very much on competitive tendering and local organisations tendering together to deliver multifaceted services. In theory, competitive tendering should avoid the usual suspects getting all the contracts. However, in certain areas this process has been quite damaging, particularly for the smaller local organisations. It has sometimes broken up existing mutual relations between organisations as they are involved in different bids. This enforced division weakens any culture of trust, or mutual sharing and with that, potentially effectiveness.

## ■ Risk of cooption

What was particularly interesting in Richard's presentation is that in certain cultures there might be more of a 'let's play the quiet game, pretend that we are going along with what government says but we are actually changing it underneath' – what I call subtle subversion. As also highlighted in the first seminar of the NCVO/ESRC NGPA seminar series on collaborative working, this can be highly effective.

The risk of cooption does not concern the third sector as a whole. There are different ways of engaging and a spectrum of engagement. Some organisations will engage more than others with government institutions and agendas. Others will accept that different styles of working with different parts of government enable them to influence policy and change. I believe we

need the confrontational organisations; the 'we've got something new to say' organisations alongside the ones that are actually working very much to change things in the 'here and now'. The danger is when both strategies are happening in the one organisation simultaneously; then there is a real conflict of styles and approaches. It is also important to avoid people having a purely self-seeking behaviour, and not keeping the interests of their organisation in mind.

In terms of managing the risk of cooption and preserving independence, diversity of funding is obviously important, but so is governance. Frequently the Chief Executive Officer tends to rule. But, if an organisation really wants to preserve its independence it should be more of a collective effort. The purpose and mission of the organisation need to be embodied within governance and practice and engage a broader group of people. In the last few years in the UK, third sector organisations have rushed to engage with government. Initially this was just seen as being open to new ways of working, particularly partnership working. However, this has slightly taken the eye off what the organisations were originally set up for.



# Open discussion

DL David Lewis

RB Richard Batley

AW Andrea Westall

## Additional points from the open discussion

- The learning achieved through boundary crossing often does not go beyond the individual because of internal politics and organisational culture.
- The concept of work-role transition is interesting because it looks at how individuals deal with change and the strategies they might adopt to deal with organisational tensions.
- We need to be better at bridging this gap between the individual and the organisation in terms of learning by having an expanded HR function that is less focused on the individual.
- Spaces in organisations, in which boundary crossers can meet with others to share their experience and learning, are needed.
- It is also important to teach people to have different styles depending on what they are doing.
- The area where there has been institutional learning is advocacy; people who have been involved in looking at policy processes from both sides have learnt lessons which are benefiting organisations and their campaigns.

**Question: Were the people crossing boundaries in David's study at a particular level?**

**Comment:** *The UK experience reflects upon a wider process of multi-dimensional service provision, moving away from the notion of statutory services being separate from other forms of provision. In terms of personnel, the civil service is ceasing to be quite such a monolithically structured system which you enter for a career normally after education. Drawing in people from the sector into government in Britain, I would see as part of that process, deliberately encouraged in the context of the Office of the Third Sector with government wanting to integrate people from the sector rather than having a structure of professional advisors who are kept at arm's length.*

**Question: Do people in government generally now have much more flexible careers or is it still an exception?**

**Comment:** *You talked in your presentations about the public sector and the third sector but a major area of cross-over, and maybe more controversially sometimes, is actually with the private sector. It has long been established that there are useful learning experiences between the government and private sectors with these cross-overs.*

**Question: Can you bring the public, private and third sectors into this picture?**

**Question: What needs to be put in place so that individuals get the most out of their experience of boundary crossing?**

**DL** I tried to look at a cross-section of people in each country. I was using a snowballing methodology but it would be fair to say that most of the interviewees were middle class elites and working into the higher levels of government and the third sector.

What we are looking at with boundary crossing in the UK is very much to do with the bureaucratic implications of mixed provision. However, there are some quite interesting trends of people going the other



way. I am not really in a position to quantify any of this but some third sector organisations are trying to ease the entry of people from both government and business into the sector. These are people in their late career or recently retired, who are trying to find a different meaning to their professional life and looking for new ways of working and new identities.

The research project did not look specifically at the private sector, but it is a fascinating subject. I was, for instance, reading recently an article about how one of the main UK retailers has been very good at getting some of its employees into government to smooth the planning permission process for their expansion strategy.

What could be put in place for people making the transition? Sectors tend to caricature each other a great deal and this needs to change because these caricatures are actually wrong. We know, for example, there are some incredibly bureaucratic and inflexible organisations in the third sector and there are some incredibly unbureaucratic and flexible parts in the public sector.

**RB** I previously researched relations between government and large scale companies in urban water supply, hospitals, agricultural marketing and business promotion. In this particular research we were looking at small scale providers, NGOs in the ESRC research. One point to make is that these small scale providers are often described as for-profit, but actually 'profit' is the wrong word here – what these providers are doing is covering very low level family income and in fact in terms of returns, they are often earning less than a typical NGO worker.

## Question: In the context of the different countries in Richard's research how brave do you need to be to do anything but adapt?

**RB** In none of these countries do you have to be that brave because there are still plenty of alternative sources of funding and, particularly in India, policy is relatively open and locally formed.

In Bangladesh you have a situation where there has been donor funding for NGOs running NGO services and donor funding for government running government services. The two sectors have operated rather separately but the worrying change for the NGOs is that some donors, particularly DFID, are now operating through government to build partnerships, following the OECD principles of good aid management. Paradoxically it is in Bangladesh, where donors have the most influence and are executing what are regarded as good policy principles (i.e. donor coordination, alignment with government policy and partnership working) that the NGOs, which engaged felt the most belittled, almost humiliated. Some of the Bangladeshi government officials were using this opportunity to exercise power over the NGOs and so they adopted the most rigorous application of the contractual terms as originally agreed, without any relational element. So in the context of Bangladesh, given that more donors are moving in the direction of the OECD principles, there is a feeling amongst NGOs that they had better engage with government contracts. I think perhaps you need a little bit of bravery to go against this in this particular context.

What I said about NGO strategy may sound a bit ignoble – not rocking the boat, keeping a low profile etc. – but I do not think it really is. It is about achieving influence on a day-to-day basis and building a case with government for change. The important thing is not to publicly rock the boat, so you do not shout from the outside and then claim victory when the government makes a change, but you work in a more covert way and the word spreads that you have been

effective. There is a danger in insider working nevertheless, that you do simply become a part of the apparatus. However, what we saw seemed to indicate that you can play that game and still be influential.

**Comment:** *I did some work, some years ago now, looking at the dialogue across the public and the voluntary sector boundary. What I found was that there was a lot of exchange going on, but that it did not go beyond the individuals having that exchange and the learning was not embedded in the organisations.*

## Question: To what extent does the learning achieved through boundary crossing go beyond the individual?

**DL** Some of the experiences I encountered are a little bit like the ones that you hear about when people have been on a course. When they come back to their organisations with all these new ideas, they struggle to get anybody in their organisation to pay attention or even worse than that, some of their colleagues might automatically discount their ideas. The politics of organisations is terribly important and can be very difficult. One of the individuals I interviewed was the executive director of a UK development organisation and he had spent a lifetime working for the NHS. Some people automatically wondered what this person could possibly know about anything to do with international development. I had some very interesting stories and examples about how difficult it was to get people to discuss issues that might have come from the UK context in the broader international context.

But the area where there has been institutional learning is in relation to advocacy. I do think that when you look back in the development field of the last ten or fifteen years, there has been a massive amount of advocacy work to influence policy at the international level. A good example is Make Poverty History. People who have been involved in looking at policy processes from

# Open discussion

both sides have learnt lessons which are benefiting organisations and their campaigns. It is definitely strengthening and changing the way in which many of the large NGOs now think about what it is realistic to try and influence and what it is not.

**AW** I think this goes back to what I would call an expanded HR function that is less focused on the individual and more focused on learning for the whole organisation. This is very practical but when somebody has experienced some form of boundary crossing, there needs to be spaces in which they meet with other people to talk about what they have done and share their experience. The amount of things tacitly learned by people in organisations that disappears with them when they leave is phenomenal. We need to be able to bridge the gap between the individual and the organisation.

Going back to the importance of styles, we do have a tendency for a confrontational style of discussion. The ultimate goal is to actually change the ways in which we conduct the deliberative forums that we have and this is about encouraging people to have different styles depending on what they are doing.

**Question: How much power do individuals have to shape and change the organisations they work in?**

**DL** It is not usually the case that people do research on these issues at the level of the individual. The work-role transition idea is interesting and comes from organisational theory in other sectors; it is the idea that when you make one of these transitions, you either try and change the environment around you to fit with your particular outlook or you are faced with having to change your outlook in order to fit into this new world that you find in the organisation. I think this is where some kind of negotiation takes place.

People who stay after this transition are the ones who have had to do one or the other of those two things. The people who leave are very often the people who have tried to make changes in a new environment and have been unable to do that and have just rejected it. There was some research done a few years ago in the UK voluntary sector by Colin Rochester. The research looked at people who had been invited into government from the sector. It was a uniformly negative account; as soon as these individuals had gone into government, they were completely unable to do any of the things that they wanted to do and they all sort of left in a huff. So I thought that was very interesting. Is it about the expectations being unrealistic or is it about the environment being inflexible?

**Question: Richard mentioned that NGOs do influence policy and practice. Do you have any evidence on whether this has led to better outcomes for beneficiaries?**

**RB** We focused on process but we can demonstrate that outcomes were, in some cases, more community responsive. The NGOs we looked at were all legitimate organisations and doing probably a good job. Some organisations were very determinedly local. Even in the case of the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) which has become an international model, the organisation does not seek to expand; what it does is help others replicate its model to other towns. Some other organisations were determinedly expansionist but still claimed community roots because that is part of their credibility; however the community is something they refer back to in a rather limited way as they grow and become more influential at a policy level. Often in the process as they grow upwards and outwards, they turn themselves more into advocacy organisations. One argument I would have with those who feel that purity is with the advocates, is that very often they are totally delinked from any real contact at the grass roots level.

**Comment:** *I work in Southern Africa and one of the things that I have seen taking place very similarly here in Britain and in other countries, is the development of a third sector which is closely linked to the predominant party or the ruling party. What you see here in Britain and in Southern Africa, are NGOs and think-tanks which are headed by members of the ruling party or which have informal links with the ruling party, which means that they are non-confrontational towards government. It is interesting to watch these NGOs that are close to government stand in some cases against more independent NGOs.*

**Question: What do you think are the implications of this quasi-government NGO sector?**

**DL** I think there is evidence that some of this boundary crossing or working across sectors is tied up with these processes of politicisation and this more flexible style of governing. There is a sense, for example in the Philippines that at various points, governments were handing over, through this entryism process, areas of their work to the NGO sector or to that part of the NGO sector which was allied and instinctively linked with them. I think that is also something that you see here.

Bangladesh has the least politicised third sector out of the three countries that I looked at. In Bangladesh, NGOs try to claim their legitimacy by having nothing to do with party politics, but of course it is unrealistic in a society where patronage and politics penetrate almost every aspect of life. The two main NGOs in Bangladesh are broadly linked to the two main political parties, not in any explicit way but in the minds of people and in informal networks, in particular Prashika. This NGO has been in trouble over the last five or six years because it entered into a direct conflict with the ruling party. In the last elections the party that Prashika was criticised for having links with, won. I think the whole sector is going to change now because all of a sudden, for the first time, you have got a more explicit set of political relationships.

In the Philippines, the NGO sector is highly political. It is loosely carved up into different factions and groups which go back to the whole political history of the Philippines, the underground struggles and the different factions of the Left that then turned into NGOs.

**RB** NGOs come in many forms and types. There is a lot of mistrust even within the NGO sector. The older school of NGOs in Bangladesh talk about new 'briefcase NGOs' – one of the problems arising from attempts to do things properly and put contracts out to competitive tender, is that you attract a whole range of new suspect NGOs who come, get the cash and run away. This certainly has happened; there are all sorts of scandals and stories every week in the Bangladesh press about them and the whole sector then tends to get labelled in that way.

In the case of Pakistan, President Musharraf created and supported a number of NGOs; the GONGOs as they are called – the government NGOs. There have also been real concerns in Pakistan, for example, in the health sector about the possibility that the NGOs that arise in response to new opportunities are sometimes closely linked to families with members working at senior levels in ministries.



# Biographies

## David Lewis

London School of Economics

David Lewis teaches in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics (LSE). An anthropologist by training, he has worked extensively on development issues in South Asia. He established the LSE's MSc on Non-Governmental Organisations and Development in 1995. His most recent book is *Non-Governmental Organisations and Development* (Routledge, 2009, co-written with Nazneen Kanji).

## Richard Batley

University of Birmingham

Richard Batley is Professor of Development Administration at the International Development Department, School of Government and Society, University of Birmingham. His research interests are in government, regulation, urban policy, service delivery, non-state service provision, public-private partnership, and aid management. He has experience in Britain, Latin America, Africa and South Asia. He is currently completing a research project on relations between government and non-state service providers in three South Asian countries, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. He is also director of the DFID Governance and Social Development Resource Centre – [www.gsdrcc.org](http://www.gsdrcc.org)

## Andrea Westall

Consultant Policy and Strategy Analyst

Andrea Westall is a consultant Policy and Strategy Analyst working on issues including voluntary organisations and social enterprise; new ways of measuring and negotiating complex and diverse outcomes; local assets and regeneration; as well as entrepreneurship and business policy. She used to be Deputy Director (and Acting Director) of the New Economics Foundation; Director of a Policy Unit in the Foundation for Entrepreneurial Management at the London Business School; and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research. She has also advised Government, and worked in television, journalism, and publishing. She has been widely published and holds a BA (Cantab); MSc (Economics); and is an FRSA.

## Karl Wilding

NCVO

Dr Karl Wilding is NCVO's Head of Research. His research interests include mapping the changing third sector economy and the relationship between new technologies and philanthropy. He is a trustee of the Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector (ARVAC), a trustee of St Albans CVS, and an Honorary Senior Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Charity Effectiveness, Cass Business School in London. He is also a co-investigator for the ESRC/OTS Giving and Philanthropy Research Centre.



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The **Non-Governmental Public Action Research Programme** is an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) initiative directed from the London School of Economics and Political Science which aims to better understand the impact of public action by non-governmental actors.

We fund a wide range of researchers working in the UK and internationally. The researchers are based in universities, think-tanks, civil society organisations, projects and networks around the world. The NGPA programme helps researchers gather data and build theories of social change using a range of approaches including ethnography, international comparative analysis of political and economic data and organisational sociology. It also supports them to present their ideas and information to a range of audiences.

We are actively building links and sharing learning between researchers, policy makers and practitioners in the field of non-governmental public action. We do this using a variety of methods, including organising workshops, publishing papers and presenting findings at conferences and meetings.

The director of the NGPA programme, Professor Jude Howell, is based at the Centre for Civil Society, in the department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. For more information about the Centre, go to [www.lse.ac.uk/ccs](http://www.lse.ac.uk/ccs)



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**National Council for  
Voluntary Organisations**

Regent's Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London N1 9RL

T: 020 7713 6161

F: 020 7713 6300

E: [ncvo@ncvo-vol.org.uk](mailto:ncvo@ncvo-vol.org.uk)

[www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk)

Textphone: 0800 01 88 111

**Free advice and support**

[www.askNCVO.org.uk](http://www.askNCVO.org.uk)

HelpDesk: 0800 2 798 798

or [helpdesk@askncvo.org.uk](mailto:helpdesk@askncvo.org.uk)

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