Book Reviews

Sarah Michael (2004) *Undermining Development: The Absence of Power Among Local NGOs in Africa*, Oxford and Bloomington: James Currey and Indiana University Press. ISBN 0-85255-439-7 (Oxford: James Currey) & ISBN 0-253-21772-5 (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press)

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I found this to be a highly analytical and empirical book, partly because it is based on a Ph.D. thesis received from Trinity College, University of Cambridge (2001). Her first book, it powerfully explores how the absence of power structures among local African non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has undermined development in sub-Saharan Africa. None of the local African NGOs she examined were 'powerful', in a way similar to 'powerful' local NGOs in Asia and Latin America. By 'power' she means the ability of an NGO to set its own agenda and to exert influence over others to achieve it. The central thesis is that the more powerful NGOs tend to more sustainable, the less powerful tend to be less sustainable. The book's overall objective was therefore to demonstrate exactly how local NGOs have been denied power and exactly how more balanced power relations would benefit development in the South, and in Africa specifically. My major criticism is that Michael's theorization of 'local NGO power' did not pay adequate attention to the role of the mass media. As she herself noted towards the end of the book, it is the media that in many ways control the size of the development space in a (African) country and crucially, the citizens' exposure to local NGOs' work. The media can create or destroy the power of local NGOs in Africa and that was not fully recognized in the book.

The book is divided into 8 chapters. The first Chapter, 'The Powerful & the Powerless', provides an overview of the topic, contexts, conceptual definitions and distinctions. For example, NGOs are defined as independent actors existing apart

from governments and corporations, operating on a non-profit or not-for-profit basis with an emphasis on voluntarism, and pursuing a mandate for providing development issues. However, the definition is by no means limited to NGOs as it may be used to define many other 'community-based organisations'. The book is based on three case studies, a total of 130 interviews, undertaken in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Senegal- broadly representative of three different regions within sub-Saharan Africa. However, Michael also conducted interviews with Bangladesh NGOs that are 'powerful' to demonstrate real local NGO power. The respondents were directors and other (high ranking) officials of 60 local NGOs (in Africa), and also with officials from government, international NGOs, key donor agencies, church movements, academics, beneficiary groups and media organisations.

Chapter 2 sought to define 'NGO Power'. Arguing that although international aid is a multi-billion dollar industry, with NGOs as one of its key actors, there is no agreed definition of NGO power. Michael's key point here is that in a field which has long been predicated on concepts of charity, benevolence and voluntarism, discussions of power with Machiavellian connotations, have seemed somehow out of place. The prevailing discourse of 'participation and partnership', Michael argues, masks 'plenty of power games at play in the development sector'. To illustrate what NGO power 'looks like', analyses examples of internationally powerful indigenous NGOs that exist in Latin America and Asia. The books especially refers to the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Working Women's Forum (WWF) in India, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Proshika in Bangladesh, Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Instututo Brasileiro de Analises Sociais e Economicas (IBASE) and Federacao de Orgaoes para Assistencia Social e Educational (FASE) in Brazil and the Centro de Estudios y Promocion del Desarrollo (DESCO) in Peru. These are all notable for the power they wield in both local and international development. The basis of local NGO power includes their ability to achieve large size, adequate political space, financial independence from donors, solid links to the international development community, and a willingness to engage with the political aspects of development work. Michael cautions that the Asian and Latin American examples also illustrate that while these NGOs are powerful, they are not immune to the difficulties that plague most local NGOs whether in terms of confrontational governments or struggles to achieve donor standards in administration and management. It is here, in this chapter, where Michael could have investigated and explored the role of the mass media in helping local NGOs achieve power.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 discuss local NGOs in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Senegal, respectively. In all the three countries the local African NGOs lacked 'real power'. Michael is careful not to confuse power with efficiency. Traditional explanations for the weakness of local NGOs, such as that of Richard Sambrook (1993, 4), tend

to understand the weakness of African NGOs in terms of their small size, relative isolation and poor funding, their role as representatives of the weakest and most vulnerable strata of society, and government attempts to control the NGO sector.

The last three chapters focus on 'Why Power is Crucial to NGOs', 'Powerful NGOs, Sustainable NGOs' and 'Helping Local NGOs in Africa to Power'. The author's argument recognizes that responsiveness, relevance and quality of the NGO's activities as the first factor contributing to an NGO's internal sustainability. The crucial point here is that local NGO power is relative and can be viewed differently in individual country contexts.

I found the book readable and easy to understand. The case studies of Asian and Latin American local NGOs with power, as demonstrated by their size, wealth, reputation and ability to rewrite the rules on acceptable NGO behaviour, illustrated how African NGO power can look like and what it can enable them to do.

To be fair to Michael, on page 173-4 she critically but briefly examines the role media can play to increase the power of NGOs. Was this an afterthought? By covering development issues and activities of local NGOs, the media help to increase citizens' exposure to local NGOs, helping these organisations to raise their profile locally, and gain a greater proportion of the space available for development. In Tanzania, the partnership between media and local NGOs has helped local NGOs extend their reach to communities they cannot reach in conventional ways to address developmental issues, such as women's legal rights. Northern media organisations, she crucially points out, have a similarly significant role to play in helping African NGOs to expand their development space. In Zimbabwe, the support that local NGOs and other civil society actors have received from international media has brought them support in their clashes with the government and a measure of security in these conflicts.

By way of a conclusion, Sarah Michael's book is a must read for all those interested in helping local African NGOs tackle poverty and marginalisation, to promote genuine development on the continent. I highly recommend it!

References
Sandbrook, R. (1993) 'Introduction', in R. Sandbrook and M. Halfani (eds.) *Empowering People: Building Community, Civil Associations and Legality in Africa*, Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, pp. 1-12.