



The State and NGOs

Perspective from Asia |

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Contents

<i>About the Contributors</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 The State and NGOs: Issues and Analytical Framework <i>Shinichi Shigetomi</i>	1
2 Bangladesh: A Large NGO Sector Supported by Foreign Donors <i>Ken'ichi Nobusue</i>	34
3 India – NGOs: Intermediary Agents or Institutional Reformers? <i>Hiroshi Sato</i>	57
4 Sri Lanka: Community Consultants in an Underdeveloped Welfare State <i>Etsuyo Arai</i>	72
5 Pakistan: Regulations and Potentiality in a Fragmented Society <i>Susumu Nejima</i>	94
6 The Philippines: From Agents to Political Actors <i>Takeshi Kawanaka</i>	110
7 Thailand: A Crossing of Critical Parallel Relationships <i>Shinichi Shigetomi</i>	125
8 Vietnam: Control of NGOs by NGOs <i>Chizuko Suzuki</i>	145
9 Indonesia: Flexible NGOs vs Inconsistent State Control <i>Yumiko Sakai</i>	161
10 Malaysia: Dual Structure in the State–NGO Relationship <i>Yoshiki Kaneko</i>	178
11 Singapore: Subtle NGO Control by a Developmentalist Welfare State <i>Yayoi Tanaka</i>	200

vi CONTENTS

12	China: Social Restructuring and the Emergence of NGOs <i>Kenji Otsuka</i>	222
13	Hong Kong: Uneasiness among Administrative Agents <i>Yukari Sawada</i>	245
14	Taiwan: From Subjects of Oppression to the Instruments of "Taiwanization" <i>Tadayoshi Terao</i>	263
15	South Korea: Advocacy for Democratization <i>Noriyo Isozaki</i>	288
16	Japan: From Activist Groups to Management Organizations <i>Katsuya Mochizuki</i>	311
	<i>Index</i>	331

The State and NGOs Issues and Analytical Framework

Shinichi Shigetomi

INTRODUCTION

In many developing countries the presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can no longer be ignored. They are engaged in an extensive array of activities, including philanthropic work to people left out of the developmental process as well as efforts at addressing problems of environmental destruction and other negative consequences of economic development, and efforts to institutionalize popular political participation. There are some countries where NGOs are involved in the formulation of, or otherwise wield considerable influence on, government policies. Moreover, in several countries the incorporation of NGOs as judicial persons has given them great organizational stability, and they provide attractive career opportunities even for elite college graduates. When seen individually, the future prospects of quite a number of NGOs may be rather shaky, but there is no denying that NGOs as a group have established themselves as a recognized sector of society.

Existing discussions seem to have been preoccupied with the fact that NGOs are movement-oriented entities, led by certain ideals, and have tended to focus attention on questions involving their missions and the proper means to achieve these missions (Korten 1990). Given, however, that NGOs today form a social sector, it is imperative that we see them as constituting a social phenomenon and probe into the salient features and principles of the phenomenon.

When considering the *raison d'être* of NGOs in the social context of developing countries, one premise is the existence of people who have been left out of the market-based developmental process, and are unable to

secure the necessary resources to lead fulfilling lives. In advanced countries the state has (or is supposed to have) institutional mechanisms to take care of these people. In developing countries, in contrast, these institutional mechanisms are often poorly developed, and the state often lacks the interest or the wherewithal to improve them. Thus, the existence of people who have been left out by both the market and the state seems to be the most fundamental factor behind the establishment and continued existence of NGOs in these countries.

Despite the fact that they emerged due to the existence of similar social needs, NGO sectors in different developing countries have taken on considerably different features. In some countries they have virtually become distribution agencies of state resources, while in others they compete harshly with bureaucrats and politicians, attempting to get a larger say in the decision-making about resource allocation. In some countries the state has co-opted NGOs into the process of administration, while in others NGOs are outspoken critics of government policies. Despite sharing the dysfunction of the state as a common *raison d'être*, NGOs differ significantly from country to country in terms of the NGO-state relationship. NGOs in any single country also differ, depending on the field of activities they undertake.

What is the source of these differences among NGOs? They may be partly explained by differences in their ideals. However, NGOs in various parts of the world tend to display considerable similarities in defining ideals, identifying targets, and choosing approaches to their targets, since they have been promoted and supported to a certain extent by international NGOs and international organizations, especially in recent years through the increase in cross-border communications. One indication of the similarities is the existence of a host of keywords, such as "participation", "community development", "empowerment", "sustainable development", and "women", which seem to be emphasized, albeit to varying extents, by NGOs around the world.

The foregoing observation suggests that the differences in appearances and modes of operation of NGOs in different countries may derive from differences in the environments surrounding them. Given the assumption that the market in a specific country fails to adequately distribute resources to some segment of the population, it seems possible to pinpoint the *modus operandi* of the state, which is supposed to make up for market failures, as the major determinant for the NGO phenomenon, the way the country's NGO sector will exist and operate. If this is the case, then by looking into differing manifestations of NGO sectors in different countries, we can also