

Abstract

Activists, Power and Sectoral Boundaries: life histories of NGO activists

Investigators

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Aims and objectives of the research

This research will examine the 'life histories' of non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders, managers and activists who have at various times in their careers crossed between the governmental and the non-governmental sectors. A group of individuals from four country contexts where this is known to have taken place - UK, Bangladesh, Philippines and Mexico - will be interviewed in detail in order to understand their motivations for such shifts, their expectations of different working environments, and their frank assessments of what they ultimately managed to achieve in their work by these changes of operating context. This interview data will be analysed against the broader social and historical contexts in which non-governmental public action takes place, such as a changes of government or regime, and the inter-personal networks within which policy making often takes place.

Key research questions/hypotheses and methods

The research will be guided by the following research question:

'What can we learn from the life histories of NGO leaders and managers about what motivates individual social actors about their choice of sector in particular historical, political and social junctures?'

Five key sub-questions follow from this:

- (i) How can we best understand the 'permeability' of the sectoral boundaries between government and NGOs?
- (ii) Does our increased understanding of the permeability of these sectoral boundaries impact upon the ultimate usefulness of the three sector concept?
- (iii) What does increased understanding of the personal career trajectories, networks and linkages of leaders and activists add to our understanding of organisations and sectors?
- (iv) Does an analysis of boundary crossing by leaders and activists contribute to our understanding of NGO-state relationships at the level of policy partnerships and/or claims of cooption?

(v) What is the relationship between cross-sectoral movements of this kind and the evolution of state and civil society relationships within broader historical, political and cultural contexts?

Each study location has been selected because (a) they build upon existing knowledge and contacts of the researcher and (b) each one illustrates a different aspect of the 'permeable boundary' issue in terms of recent histories of state and non-governmental sector.

The research project will bring a new methodology to the study of the non-governmental sector in the form of the ethnographic life history interview.

Relation to the programme

The research aims to contribute to the NGPA programme through generating new data on an important and as yet unresearched topic. Findings will contribute to improved theory building and policy making.

Relevance of this research to user groups

The research aims to challenge the often rather simplistic distinction made by researchers and policy makers about the separation and autonomy of 'government' and 'non-governmental' agencies and individuals.

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September 2005