

Preface

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For many progressive NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs), social action — people’s capacity to organise together for a common, social goal — lies at the heart of their understanding of development. Popular mobilisation, whether to defend existing rights that are under threat, or to protest against the denial of these rights, is seen to be just as critical to the development process as economic growth — if not more so. Without this kind of mass engagement in promoting and then defending these demands, even concrete gains may remain very fragile. A case in point is the closing of public child-care arrangements in Britain following World War II: although they evidently benefited working women and enabled more women to earn an income, they were able to be suspended with relatively little protest, partly because they had not been fought for by the women who used them, but were viewed as a service which the state needed to provide only as part of the war effort — an effort which entailed drafting women, temporarily, into the munitions factories. With potentially high male unemployment in the post-war period, it was perceived as a more pressing political priority to get men into jobs than to keep women in them. Arguably, had public nurseries originally been established in response to a mass lobby, the political price of closing them might have been prohibitive. Had this happened, generations of working parents (and their children) in Britain would have enjoyed a higher quality of life, and many inequalities between men and women would almost certainly have diminished or even disappeared.

People organise for altruistic motives, as for example in the anti-slavery movements of the nineteenth century or the international anti-apartheid campaign of our own times. In other cases, the motivation is to further

their own perceived interests as a group — be these the rights of indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities to cultural self-expression or self-rule, or the demand for female suffrage or the rights of women to leave husbands who subject them to abuse. One might also view many of the national liberation wars of the last 50 years as a form of social action on a massive scale. While the claims of some of the armed opposition movements to represent ‘the people’ look somewhat inflated in retrospect, these movements were nevertheless often more representative than any other form of political expression available to ordinary citizens. (For instance, the fact that many peasant communities opted to remain in or return to the war zones during El Salvador’s 12-year war does not necessarily imply, as the Salvadoran military then maintained, that they were therefore all signed-up members of the armed opposition, the FMLN. Nor does it mean that the FMLN was a model of democracy, transparency, and public accountability. Of course not: it was a guerrilla army which was fighting a prolonged war against far better-resourced and often brutal government forces. What it does mean is that many of the country’s poorest people regarded the FMLN’s overall project as representing their interests more effectively than the existing political system could ever do.)

What was common to the various forms of social mobilisation in the past, however, was the fact that campaigns, whether local or international, were generally grounded in time and place, and could be focused on an identifiable target or aimed at a tangible (albeit ambitious) goal. This might be to bring down a government or to reform a state institution — such as to disband a discredited branch of the public-security forces or to enact some form of legislation. Or it might be aimed at influencing an external body, such as a foreign government, the World Bank, or a private company.

What has changed today, as Miloon Kothari argues in his introduction, is that the locus of social action has changed, and will continue to change, in the context of rapid economic globalisation. While the gulf between rich and poor grows deeper and wider, as an inevitable by-product of the form that free-market ideologies are taking, it is ever harder to pin down in any precise way the institutions and policies that are ultimately responsible. Increasingly, these are governed by forces that originate beyond and operate across territorial borders. In a broad sense, one can place responsibility at the door of the international financial institutions, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or of the World Trade Organisation (WTO); or of bodies such as the OECD, or the regional development banks such as the Inter-American Development

Bank (IDB). But these are essentially inter-government bodies, and although the individual power of, say, the G-7 nations versus the collective power of the G-77 member states is reflected in the economic policies of these institutions, there are nevertheless many international mechanisms that could be used to hold them accountable, to say nothing of the importance of lobbying one's own government. For instance, there have been increasing calls since 1995 for the Bretton Woods institutions, as part of the UN system, as well as the WTO (which is not) to be formally accountable to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), through its annual sessions. (Their refusal to be answerable to this inter-government body raises doubts, some would say, about whether their claims to transparency and openness to public scrutiny are more than rhetorical.) Miloon Kothari illustrates some of the creative ways in which existing human-rights machinery has been used by a range of CSOs to hold public institutions accountable to the values to which they are formally and legally committed. But he also illustrates that this is not the only root of the problem.

Blame is often attributed to those multinational enterprises which are most egregious in their disregard for human rights, or whose behaviour most threatens the well-being and livelihoods of millions of innocent people. Companies like Monsanto, Shell, and Nike are, at the very least, asking themselves how to avoid precipitating such public-relations disasters in the future: one hopes that this self-searching might be the beginning of a more responsible attitude towards business ethics. In a commoditised world, consumers also have an ethical responsibility to engage with the forces of economic globalisation. Consumer mobilisations such as the Clean Clothes Campaign have raised public awareness about the employment practices of companies whose workforces are mostly located in poor communities, usually in Third World countries. And fair-trade groups like the Max Havelaar Foundation have long promoted the interests of the producers of coffee and other commodities. The rights of children, and the rights of child workers, have assumed greater prominence in recent years, especially during the 1998 International March Against Child Labour. But most rights violations are of a far less spectacular nature — even banal, to quote the philosopher Hannah Arendt — and do not arouse international public indignation. More significantly, economic globalisation makes it increasingly difficult to identify and isolate 'the culprit'. Companies move their operations from one location to another, experience boardroom takeovers, undergo mergers and demergers across totally different sectors, and play the

financial speculation games more quickly than we can scrutinise their behaviour and expose shady or harmful practices.

But as the processes of deregulation, of the 'marketisation' of public services, and of the liberalisation of international trade grind inexorably on, so the forces of popular resistance must take new shapes and forms. Struggles for social and economic justice are still experienced at the local level and in people's daily lives, and it is critical to promote social action at this level. But the levers of change are seldom within reach of the average citizen; or indeed of any single pressure group acting alone even at a national level, much less internationally. Making the links goes much further than variations on the old slogan of 'think global, act local'. The ways in which the same global forces now penetrate the lives of millions of individuals around the world both compel and allow for different forms of protest, and for different forms of transnational organisation and cross-cultural communication. The forces that oppress and divide contemporary societies are stronger, more widespread, and more diverse than they have ever been; but the potential to generate international solidarity across borders and frontiers has never been greater.

In the early 1990s, NGOs dedicated major intellectual energy to the question of how to 'scale up' their impact. The problem was that to the extent that they moved far outside their own little world of development projects and aid funding, they focused on what *they* could do to influence the wider policy environment. Ten years on from such debates, it is now obvious even to the most narcissistic NGO that its own influence on the world is insignificant. However vociferous its campaigns, however subtle or high-powered its advocacy work, however strong its public appeal, no NGO can hope to achieve very much if it works alone. The challenge facing NGOs today is that of determining the values and priorities that should shape their alliances with other CSOs (such as trade unions, human-rights organisations, or church-based groups), and then being self-effacing enough to work with a range of social actors in more effectively protesting against the violations and humiliations to which the prevailing world economic order condemns millions of women, men, and children. Only on the basis of making common cause among themselves will CSOs achieve political credibility in proposing more humane, more ethical, and more sustainable alternatives to 'development' as we now know it. The experiences gathered in this volume suggest that, despite their commitment to broad-based mobilisation for change (and many NGOs worldwide have their historical roots in such forms of expression), NGOs still have a lot to learn about new forms of social action.