

## **African NGOs: The New Compradors?**

**Julie Hearn**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the course of the last twenty-five years, Africa has witnessed an astounding growth in the number and influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in general, and more recently of African NGOs in particular. Initially, the literature on this was dominated by the concerns of the policy-making and NGO communities, drawing on liberal pluralist theory. Lately, an independent, critical literature has developed based on substantial empirical research. Its findings make for uncomfortable reading. They document the essential lack of autonomy of local non-state actors and their very close relationship to Northern governments. This essay argues that the position of NGOs must be theorized within the wider context of the global political economy of the continent. With this in mind, it investigates the rationale for using a comprador perspective to understand the contemporary role of African NGOs.

During the last twenty-five years, NGOs<sup>1</sup> in general, and more recently African NGOs in particular, have increased dramatically in number and in influence in Africa (Igoe and Kelsall, 2005; Michael, 2004). Although the 1980s were described as the 'NGO decade', growth continues apace: the

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1. The term non-governmental organization (NGO) has become an established part of the development lexicon. NGOs are commonly understood to be voluntary, not-for-profit organizations, independent of government and business (Michael, 2004). In reality the boundaries are blurred. Given the close working relationship with both Northern and Southern states, the extent to which NGOs are 'non-governmental' is a source of much debate. Here I am concerned with NGOs involved in development work in African countries. I will use two distinctions: the first is between Northern and African NGOs; the second is between NGOs as intermediary service provision organizations that are set up for public benefit, and membership organizations that exist for mutual benefit, often known as community-based organizations (CBOs). As NGOs and CBOs work increasingly closely together in foreign-funded programmes, the distinction between the two has become less clear. Finally, other African civil society organizations (CSOs), such as think tanks and advocacy groups, have been picked up by the donor radar to play a key role in international development policy. Although focusing on African intermediary service provision NGOs, the dynamic explored in this article applies to the increasing range of Northern-funded African non-state actors.

bubble has not yet burst. In Kenya, for example, the NGO sector experienced its biggest growth so far between 1996 and 2003, from 511 registered NGOs in 1996 to 2,511 (a fivefold increase) in 2003 (World Resources Institute, 2005).<sup>2</sup> In Tanzania the growth is even more dramatic. In 1990 there were 41 registered NGOs. By 2000 the figure was more than 10,000 (Reuben, 2002). At the end of the 1990s, NGOs in Africa managed nearly US\$ 3.5 billion in external aid, compared to less than US\$ 1 billion in 1990. This amounted to just under one fifth of total aid to the continent (Chege, 1999).

When NGOs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s to play a central role in development they were greeted as a 'magic bullet', the panacea to failed top-down development and the means to poor people's empowerment. At this point, although the discourse on NGOs was theorized, it was surprisingly uncritical. Theorization was strongly one-sided and its genesis lay in the global ascendancy of neoliberalism (Mkandawire, 2004). It was not simply a hegemonic policy project but was based on a bedrock of liberal theory. This moved from a theorization of NGOs as the 'third sector', supporting the market's leading role, to a rediscovery of de Tocquevillean civil society theory and its reformulation, in this case to African civil society (Howell and Pearce, 2001). Until the mid-1990s, the literature on NGOs was dominated by the development policy-making community, informed by (neo)liberal theory, and NGO practitioners promoting their alternative, 'bottom-up' model of development. There was very little input from independent academics. The mid-1990s were a turning-point when a critical literature began to develop, although it did not yet theorize its conclusions. Initially focusing on the more prominent Northern NGOs, it gradually turned its attention to Southern NGOs. This literature comes from three directions.

First, there is what Igoe and Kelsall (2005: 16) describe as the auto-critique of the NGO community, 'an internal critical discourse conducted by NGO staff themselves, aided by researchers closely linked to the NGO industry'. With publications such as Hulme and Edwards (1997) and a special issue of *Third World Quarterly* on 'NGO Futures: Beyond Aid' (see Fowler, 2000) concerns over legitimacy, accountability, co-option and identity are critically and publicly reflected upon. As Igoe and Kelsall (2005: 18) correctly point out, much of the response to these issues is of a technocratic, reformist nature, which 'very much fits the description of "normal science", or "problem-solving" within a prevailing paradigm. The development machine is perceived not to be working so attempts are made to fix it'. It is interesting that two of the most prominent 'auto-critics', Michael Edwards and Alan Fowler, have both stayed firmly embedded in the NGO community, facilitating and advising it in various institutional capacities. It is in this way that despite much hand-wringing and a barrage of searing self-criticism over

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2. The number of registered NGOs in Kenya in 1978 was just 132, with a much slower increase to 267 by 1988 (Osodo and Matsvai, 1998).

the years, the trends have intensified and NGOs are more deeply institutionalized within the aid system than ever (Wallace, 2003).

At the same time, independent academic analyses began to develop which challenged the positive, pluralist, de Tocquevillean view of African NGOs (Dicklitch, 1998). Strong empirical research debunked the myths but did not go any further in trying to develop its own theory of NGOs. A more recent example is Michael (2004). In her interviews with over sixty local NGOs in Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Senegal, Michael comes to the stark conclusion that is captured in the title of her monograph, *Undermining Development: The Absence of Power among Local NGOs*. Despite a formidable array of policy prescriptions, Michael does not address the *a priori* questions of whether their powerlessness actually performs a function in the international political economy of the continent, what that might be, for what reasons and in whose interests. In this way, damning empirical evidence continues to amass yet is not related to the wider dynamics at work in the continent's relationship to the North.

A third direction from which criticism has come is primarily African observers, who moved the analysis forward by locating NGOs within a broader historical context of power relations between Africa and the North. In 1994, *Africa World Review* published an issue on 'NGOs and the Recolonisation Process'. Their editorial pointed to a 'new strategy of global control which now places less emphasis on the state and prioritises direct influence and control over communities through funding NGOs' (*Africa World Review*, 1994: 5). In 2005, the cover-story of *New African* asked 'What are the NGOs Doing?'. It continued (*New African*, 2005: 12):

In the days of old-fashioned colonialism, the metropolitan powers sent their officials to live in Africa and directly run the colonies. Today they do so indirectly through NGOs. This month, we take an indepth look at the activities of the thousands of foreign NGOs and their local spinoffs who now hold the continent in thrall, and ask whether they are Africa's new colonisers?

By the mid-2000s a substantial critical literature had established itself, leading to a situation in which Lister (2004: 1) could comment: "NGO bashing" is in vogue as never before, with NGOs enduring criticisms from across the political and social spectrum'. However, there are two important points. First, criticism remains an outside perspective in a relatively hegemonic discourse.<sup>3</sup> Second, it is surprisingly under-theorized. Petras writes (1999: 429), at the beginning of a study which uses a comprador analytical

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3. Those 'outsiders' can find themselves subject to censure. I have experienced it in a number of situations. Kamat (2002: v) captures this well in her introduction: 'There were many occasions in which I wished I had chosen a more safe, less controversial subject to interrogate than NGOs, and particularly community-based NGOs'. Also see Mosse's recent experience (2006).

framework to understand the role of Latin American NGOs: 'there have been few systematic Left critiques of the negative impact of NGOs'.

Comprador theory first developed within international Marxist circles during the 1920s in an attempt to theorize the unfolding nature of imperialism. It was later used by radical scholars, including but not limited to dependency theorists, during the 1960s and 1970s. Its key analytical category is the comprador Southern bourgeoisie, which is dependent on the international bourgeoisie for its resources and position. The comprador acts as an agent, operating in the interests of international capitalism against the interests of the indigenous popular classes. The term comes from the Portuguese, *comprador*, meaning buyer, and was used to refer to the nineteenth century Chinese servants of foreign trading companies in the ports of Canton and Macao. From their initial roles as house-stewards, they became commercial go-betweens (Heartfield, 2005). Mao Tse Tung (1926) described the emerging Chinese merchant class as the 'comprador class'. Along with the landlord class, they were 'wholly appendages of the international bourgeoisie, depending upon imperialism for their survival and growth'. In terms of genealogy, the Chinese Marxists took an actor specific to a historical period that is recognized by historians of every ideological perspective and introduced it as an analytical concept into the body of Marxist theory. This is reflected in the fact that the term can operate at several different levels. At its analytically simplest, the comprador is an agent. At its most complex, it has been used to understand class formation in the South.<sup>4</sup>

#### NEO-IMPERIALISM AS INDIRECT RULE

Comprador theory was thus born at the height of imperialism in the 1920s. Its purpose was to understand the mechanisms through which imperial power was exercised in the newly emerging South. Today much of the poorer South, with the exception of 'rogue' states such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, are experiencing levels of Northern intervention not seen since colonialism. The 1980s ushered in this new era of indebtedness, poverty, aid dependency and policy conditionality, fundamentally transforming the balance of power between the North and Africa with the latter emerging at the end of the 1980s in a far weaker position. A number of writers noted this historic change. Plank (1993: 409) described it as 'a new phase in their post-colonial history'. Furedi (1994: 98) wrote: 'There has been a dramatic shift in the discussion around the theme of Third World nationalism and imperialism. The anti colonial moment has been overtaken by an era in which imperialism is no longer so

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4. I am grateful to the participants of the International Relations Seminar Series, University of Sussex, January 2007 for drawing out this distinction.

defensive'. He went on to describe it as the 'moral rehabilitation of imperialism'. Williams (1997: 227–8) concluded that 'recent changes in the aid policies of developed countries ... [are] best understood as a return to pre-World War Two patterns in the relationship between the West and others'. It is this shift, and its profound implications, that can be understood as the contemporary manifestation of 'Empire' or the resurgence of imperialism.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is a complicated form of power. The heavy-handed, unpopular 'direct rule' by the international financial institutions and international NGOs of the 1980s and 1990s has been replaced by the self-policing or 'indirect rule' of Africans. In the current aid regime of 'partnership', Africans now 'own' Northern neoliberal policies (Pender, 2007). Two writers who have tried to theorize this shift in relation to the African state are Harrison (2001) and Abrahamsen (2004). The problematic which they engage is that intervention has become so embedded, institutionalized and routinized that 'rather than conceptualizing donor power as a strong external force on the state, it would be more useful to conceive of donors as *part of the state itself*' (Harrison, 2001: 669, emphasis in original), and that 'power ... cannot be encapsulated solely in terms of domination or coercion' (Abrahamsen, 2004: 1454). Drawing on a Foucauldian analysis of advanced liberal governmentality, Abrahamsen (ibid.) argues that 'partnerships govern through the production and consent of responsible African states ... the power of partnerships is voluntary and coercive at the same time ... producing new forms of discipline'.

Likewise, within African civil society, imperial power does not need to take the form of overt, external domination when there is an array of indigenous actors arguing the same case and implementing it as well as acting as a presence to defuse any latent opposition. This can be out of conviction, as in the case of neoliberal think tanks in Ghana (Ohemeng, 2005), or through sheer necessity as in the case of many rural service delivery NGOs in Uganda (Titeca, 2005). This is what I found happening in my research on internationally supported African civil society organizations in Ghana, Uganda and South Africa (Hearn, 2001). In the case of Ghana, national think tanks were popularizing neoliberal economic restructuring amongst the public through radio phone-in programmes and amongst key policy makers through briefings to parliamentarians. As Ohemeng comments in relation to Ghanaian think tanks (2005: 458): 'Thus, through these local organisations, international institutions such as the Bretton Woods institutions have been able to push their ideas ... without suffering the legitimacy crisis and antagonism that characterised the adoption of structural adjustment in the 1980s'.

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5. For a review of the contemporary academic debate on 'Empire' and imperialism see Heartfield (2004); *Historical Materialism* (2006). For its discussion in relation to African social movements, see Premph (2006).

## NGOS AND RECOLONIZATION?

One of the first writers to draw attention to the NGO revolution on the continent and to place it within a broader historical and political context was Fowler (1991). His choice of metaphor is striking: he compared it to the first 'Scramble for Africa', in which European powers competed with each other to occupy and colonize the continent, culminating in the Berlin Conference of 1884: 'the irony is, that one hundred years on there are signs that Africa is again the subject of "scrambles"... First is the scramble of non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) to be involved in the continent's development, second is the scramble of official aid agencies to find, finance and work with and through NGDOs' (Fowler, 1991: 1).

Where Fowler merely implies, Hanlon makes explicit. Based on extensive research, Hanlon's (1991: 1) central argument is that aid is being used to recolonize Mozambique. 'This is not *neocolonialism*, it is the *recolonization* of Mozambique ... The pressure is on to roll back the independence of Mozambique and overturn the victory of the liberation war'. Hanlon shows how in the initial years of independence, Mozambique received aid below the average for low-income sub-Saharan African countries (*ibid.*: 56). He suggests that 'detailed consultation and tight control had been the hallmarks of aid in Mozambique in the 1970s' (*ibid.*: 96). However, with the devastating impact of destabilization and drought on the country, he argues, 'this carefully constructed edifice collapsed'. 'By late 1983 delegations were flooding unchecked into Maputo from international organizations, bilateral donors and NGOs ... Mozambique had at least partly lost control of the aid process' (*ibid.*: 97, 96). He cites a provincial education director: 'It's identical to what happened 100 years ago. After the Berlin conference there were wars to establish colonial control of the continent. Then in came the missionaries, and they cleared the way for the capitalists. Again we have wars, this time followed by the NGOs. They are the new missionaries clearing the way for big foreign capital' (*ibid.*: 203).

The comparison between missionaries and NGOs forms the basis for Manji and O'Coill's (2002) article, 'The Missionary Position: NGOs and Development in Africa'. They argue that the role of NGOs 'represents a continuity of the work of their precursors, the missionaries and voluntary organizations that co-operated in Europe's colonization and control of Africa' (*ibid.*: 568).<sup>6</sup>

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6. The relationship between colonialism and missionaries is complex and controversial. My starting-point is that missions were absolutely central to the project of colonialism. However, it was both a symbiotic and dialectical relationship. At the same time that missionary organizations were at the vanguard of colonialism, actively calling for greater intervention and using Western occupation for their own ends, they were used by colonialism for its own purposes (Furedi, 1994; Murray, 1980).

They conclude:

The role NGOs have played in expanding and consolidating neoliberal hegemony in the global context may have been unwitting. It may not have been as direct or as underhand as some of the activities willingly taken up by colonial missionary societies and voluntary organisations. But that is not to say it is any less significant. Indeed one could argue that it has actually been far more effective. (ibid.: 582)

## THE 'AFRICANIZATION' OF THE NGO SECTOR

By the end of the 1980s it was clear to many that such a heavy white foreign presence, with its overtones of colonialism, was politically unsustainable. One of the most significant responses by NGOs and their sponsors was to indigenize the NGO-sector. For example, in Kenya, in the period between 1978 and 1988 the number of foreign NGOs grew at nearly double the rate of local NGOs. However, in the period, 1988–96 the tide had turned and the number of local NGOs grew at nearly triple the rate of foreign NGOs (Osodo and Matsvai, 1998: 8). I would argue that this was both a conscious and a structural process. There were four key factors that contributed to the Africanization of the NGO-sector during the 1990s.

First, even at the height of the 'invasion' of international NGOs, most worked with local NGOs, either existing organizations with their own identity or, where these did not exist, newly created organizations that Hanlon (1991: 215) describes as 'subsidiaries' — 'just as some Mozambican businesses are subsidiaries of foreign firms'. Second, the important trend of direct funding of Southern NGOs emerged in the 1990s. Whereas in the past, official donors channelled their funding to international NGOs, who would act as intermediaries, they now provided direct funding to local NGOs (Bebbington and Riddell, 1995). Although this caused something of a crisis in the international NGO world, they soon found a legitimate role in the form of 'capacity building', transforming themselves into organizational consultants building up the voluntary sector and thereby 'social capital' in the global South. Third, there was the global *Zeitgeist* of democratization: civil society had reawakened from its post-colonial slumber, democratizing the political space. The definition of the third sector was broadened and politicized. NGOs were no longer solely gap-fillers in the neoliberal model of social welfare but important members of civil society. The focus on civil society shifted attention away from international NGOs to national NGOs.

Despite initially being equated with Southern civil society by Northern development policy makers (Howell and Pearce, 2001: 16), NGOs, defined as intermediary organizations that are set up for public benefit, are just one set of actors within civil society. Howell and Pearce (ibid.: 182) use a fitting metaphor when they talk about a 'complex archaeology of associational life' in sub-Saharan Africa. They chart the rich historical development of civil society from the impact of colonialism on pre-colonial formations to the

early years of independence and the later democratic transitions of the 1980s and 1990s. Each period adds another layer of associational life. For example, 'As structural adjustment programmes encouraged private organizations to take on the responsibility for welfare services, NGOs began to proliferate. . . adding yet another layer to the complex archaeology of associational life'.

Integral to associational life in sub-Saharan Africa are indigenous, membership-based organizations such as women's savings groups, described in the literature as community-based organizations (CBOs) or grassroots organizations (GROs). In Kenya they are known as *harambee* groups. Although indigenous, these have come into the NGO orbit and been caught up in its dynamics. As Kanyinga (1995: 74) points out: 'The NGO community in Kenya maintains close contact with *harambee* groups, which it uses as a main avenue for reaching the grass roots. In some instances *harambee* projects are initiated with financial assistance from NGOs. Thus funds from NGOs and Western donors have induced the proliferation of *harambee* groups'. Sat Obiyan (2005: 305) also notes that 'access of GROs to donor funds is making the distinction between NGOs and GROs increasingly blurred'. As Northern funding to African civil society widens, it will be interesting to see if informal, kin- or ethnic-based groups, that are currently understood as 'pre-modern' and 'illiberal' and therefore shunned, will also be drawn into the donor-African NGO nexus (Lavali, 2005; Young, 1995).

There was a final factor: just as the economic collapse of the continent opened the door to international NGOs, the ongoing socio-economic crisis created the material conditions for the growth of the African NGO sector. Average annual 'growth' for sub-Saharan Africa between 1982 and 1995 was -1.1 per cent which was, as Mkandawire points out, 'the worst of all the major regions of the developing world' (2004: 291). He continues: 'The cumulative effect of this on standards of living . . . is quite hard to imagine for those who have not lived through economic collapse' (ibid.: 321). With the onset of extensive and intensive economic, political and social conditionality from the 1980s onwards, foreign aid, in effect, became the main source of national income. Thus the combination of fewer resources and those resources increasingly taking the form of foreign aid channelled to NGOs, led to a situation where 'NGO development has served as a safety net for the African petit bourgeois to survive and maintain their livelihood in the midst of the most appalling economic conditions' (Yen, 2000: 51).

As both the state and the private sector have dried up as sites of either accumulation or 'rent-seeking', the voluntary sector, with its significant inflows of external funding, has become the place to make money. The NGO sector expanded exponentially, fuelling comments about the creation of 'bogus' NGOs that were in fact just 'husband-and-wife NGOs' or 'briefcase NGOs'. Dicklitch (1998: 8) writes about 'many entrepreneurs tapping into a growing industry', and claims that 'NGOs are increasingly headed by bureaucrats and members of the middle class, reflecting an understanding by many Ugandans that the way to make money is to set up your own NGO' (ibid.: 159). This

experience is echoed by Fowler (1995: 62) that NGOs in East Africa are created by civil servants who are 'restructured' out of a job but who still retain contacts within ministries. One respondent explains 'there are basically four ways of making money in Kenya — coffee, tea, tourism and aid — and, since the first three are spoken for, the last remains the only option'. Titeca (2005: 20), in an interview with the director of a Ugandan NGO, shows how this trend continues. 'Look, I am not going to be shy about this — this is in the first place a business. We first think of our own survival, secondly about other people's survival'.

Given these factors in its formation, it is thus no surprise that the African NGO sector is characterized by external financial dependence and an external orientation. Fowler (1995: 61) shows that in a survey of both local and foreign NGOs from 1989/90 the 'vast majority rely on foreign aid for more than 90 per cent of their funds'. In an earlier work he concludes: '[given] the nature of the development business, and the resources imbalances on which it rests . . . looking at the nature of most development organizations in Africa cannot be done in isolation from the influence of the West' (Fowler, 1991: 17). Gariyo's 1995 survey of sixty-two NGOs and GROs in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda found that thirty-two depended on foreign funding for between 75 and 100 per cent of their income, 'depriving NGOs of a strong base in their own societies' (cited in Sat Obiyan, 2005: 314). In Ngunyi's (1996) study of eleven institutions promoting democracy and human rights in Kenya, nine were donor-created or prompted.

Accompanying external financial dependence is external orientation. Despite the contemporary rhetoric of participation, ownership and downward accountability, Wallace (2003) shows how the pressure to conform to externally set criteria has actually increased along with the mechanisms and culture to enforce that conformity. Beginning in the 1990s, the international NGO community developed a strong auto-critique, warning against a loss of autonomy and legitimacy. Yet, the irony is that in the ensuing decade, alternatives and independence have been squeezed out further. Wallace points to several recent developments within the Northern NGO sector that have directly impacted on Southern NGOs. Instead of official funding decreasing as a share of Northern NGO income, it has increased. There is a much closer alignment between Northern official and NGO priorities as well as a closer working relationship. Finally, the all-pervasive audit culture with its focus on targets, league tables and 'performance indicators' has led to a situation where relationships between Northern and Southern NGOs are 'dominated by the disbursement and accounting for aid money within tight frameworks'. Wallace concludes that Northern NGOs often appear as 'extensions of the dominant aid agenda': 'In turn the northern NGOs are increasing their hold on local organizations and NGOs in the south. . . passing on the tight conditionalities . . . forcing southern NGOs to learn and comply with northern agendas, creating a set of dependent organizations, not a vibrant and independent sector' (ibid.: 216).

The argument is not that autonomy, independence and subversion of donor agendas by African NGOs do not exist. Uganda ActionAid is an example of an African NGO that rejected the straight-jacket of donor parameters. Civil society participation in national policy discussions and implementation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) is prized by donors for its consensus-building and legitimating functions. Hundreds of African NGOs have taken part in them across the continent over the past few years. Leading UK development NGOs, such as CAFOD, Christian Aid and Oxfam, have bought into the process, providing training and financial support to their Southern partners for this activity. However, after four years of 'participation', Uganda ActionAid co-authored a damning report documenting how local NGOs had been silenced in the process. It argued that now was the time for NGOs to re-take the agenda and create their own public spaces for national debate rather than remaining powerless in invited spaces (ActionAid Uganda/ActionAid USA, 2004). Pommerolle (2005) provides a compelling study of the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) which has managed to pursue its own dissident agenda. However, I would argue that the case of the KHRC is uncommon and is the product of a long history of political activism, rooted in the radical politics of anti-colonial struggle. Thus it resembles a social movement more than an NGO.

Writing about Kenya, Ngunyi (1996: 5) comes to the following conclusion:

The formation of the democracy sector of civil society was the result of a partnership between the donors and local actors. But this partnership can be categorised as one between a senior and a junior partner with the donor as the senior and the democracy actors as the juniors . . . The result of this has been the increasing dominance of the donor in the operations of civil society and the emergence of the donor as the 'alternative state'.

The empirically-based literature that we have examined here shows the structural constraints that African NGOs face. The purpose of this to provide a sober and realistic counter to the optimistic policy-oriented discourse that ignores this, arguably in its own interests. As Dunn (1999: 6) points out: 'In asymmetric power relationships — such as those that exist between Africa and the West — the stronger power has greater authorship . . . This argument does not imply that the lesser powers (here, Africans) are without agency. Rather it recognises the hierarchies in international relations and their implications for the power of African agency'.

#### **AFRICAN NGOS AS COMPRADORS?**

Comprador theory has been extremely popular among radical thinkers and activists across Latin America, Africa and Asia, particularly in its heyday of

the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> This has led to its being wrongly associated almost exclusively with dependency theory. We must remember that it was born in the 1920s as Marxists from around the world grappled with developing a theoretical understanding of imperialism and colonial nationalist movements, and thus it belongs to Marxist theory more broadly. Fanon (1961/1990) led the way in providing, arguably, the first and most comprehensive portrayal of the comprador class in Africa in his searing critique of the decolonization process, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary... Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism. The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent, and will play its part without any complexes in a most dignified manner (Fanon, 1990: 122).

In this contribution, we look at the relevance of comprador theory to the study of African NGOs within the contemporary international political economy of the continent by focusing on the key features of this analytical framework. These are financial and political dependency, in other words the lack of an independent source of funding and status, and a key intermediary role linking the North and the South, ideologically and materially, in a manner which perpetuates Northern domination.

Petras (1999) has developed the most sustained critique of Southern NGOs as compradors in his work on Latin America,<sup>8</sup> conceptualizing them as follows: 'The NGO leaders are a new class not based on property ownership or government resources but derived from imperial funding and their capacity to control significant popular groups. The NGO leaders can be conceived of as a kind of neo-compradore [sic] group' (ibid.: 430). Petras highlights the objective conditions that have created this group across the South. They are similar to those discussed in relation to sub-Saharan Africa, and include the devastating economic impact of the global recession: 'What NGOs have done, is provided a thin stratum of professionals with income in hard currency to escape the ravages of the neo-liberal economy that affects their country' (ibid.). Regarding the external orientation of NGOs, he argues that projects are designed 'based on guidelines and priorities of the imperial centers and

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7. It is still a concept that has currency in Africa among some commentators. For example, for Shivji (cited in Kimani, 2006: 3) during the 1960s and 1970s 'we swore by *wafanya kazi na wakulima* (workers and peasants); now we all aspire to become *wawekezaji na walaji* (investors and consumers). Or more correctly *wakala na wawekezaji* (investors' agents or compradors)'.

8. He has maintained this analysis, though implicitly, in his more recent work; see Petras and Veltmeyer (2005).

their institutions . . . The NGO directors . . . supervise and ensure conformity with the goals, values and ideology of the donors as well as the proper use of funds' (ibid.: 434).

Two writers who have explicitly conceptualized African NGOs as compradors are Hanlon (1991) and Tandon (1996). In his lengthy study on Mozambique, Hanlon looks at the impact of aid on class formation, particularly the bourgeoisie. He notes that, in addition to the 'state group . . . composed of directors and higher level state officials whose power comes through control of state resources' and the 'commercial group of farmers and traders. . . must be added a new comprador group which depends on foreign interests for its wealth and power' (Hanlon, 1991: 220). He includes NGOs in the latter group: 'Many people, however, are anxious to be compradors — agents for the recolonizers. They want to be managers or front men for foreign companies or officials for NGOs and other donor agencies' (ibid.: 245). He concludes that 'this new comprador group has a vested interest in the donors staying' (ibid.: 226). He pursued the same approach when he wrote, more recently: 'Aid recipient countries have developed an elite which has become well off through the administration of aid — government officials, consultants, local aid agency staff and workers in non-governmental organizations which have contracts with international agencies' (Hanlon, 2004: 382).

Similarly, Yash Tandon (1996: 3) describes 'the bulk' of African NGOs as 'appendages of Northern agencies. They are comprador NGOs or COMPRANGOs. Whilst there are minor contradictions between them and their donors, they act essentially as agents of Western parameters, to divert attention from the root causes of African poverty, to pacify and to peddle Western values and civilisation'. Ian Gary (1996: 164) is more cautious but concludes in his article on NGOs in Ghana: 'Some analysts of African political economy speak of the existence of a "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" depending on access to state resources for its existence. What we may be seeing in the 1990s is the emergence of a new "NGO bureaucratic bourgeoisie" dependent on the huge amount of money now flowing to the NGO sector in Africa'.

This should not surprise us. Coming from the opposite end of the ideological spectrum to comprador theory, namely prebendalism or neopartimonalism, Bayart's work reminds us of the long *durée* in which African elites have gained their position in society through their intermediary role with the North. Bayart's argument is that Africa's relationship with the world has been crucial to the constitution of its internal politics. He maintains that 'the people who manage this unequal relationship with the international economic system are able to derive from it the resources necessary for their domestic over-lordship' (Bayart, 2000: 231). This includes aid. Igoe (2005: 142) shows the relevance of this framework to indigenous NGOs in one locality of Tanzania: 'both African officials and NGO leaders use their

institutional position to “seek rents” from trans-national sources to build loyal client networks’.<sup>9</sup>

However, the key weakness of this perspective, which Igoe (*ibid.*) acknowledges — and indeed the fundamental difference between it and comprador theory — is that, ironically, despite the centrality of the international system to its analysis, it interprets prebendalism as an inherently African problem. It is not located, as with comprador theory, within a broader framework of imperialism that shows how Northern interests benefit from and indeed depend upon these relations. Thus, unlike pluralist liberal theory, it does describe the same political reality as comprador theory, namely the relationship between aid and class or elite formation. However, it arrives at different conclusions: it terminates its analysis firmly with African elite politics whilst the end-point for comprador theory is to understand the mechanisms in the South through which the North maintains power.

In assessing the usefulness of a comprador analysis for understanding African NGOs, two points need to be considered. First, when the comprador class became an established and much debated analytical category in radical African political science, questions included the ability of the ‘comprador state’ not only to guarantee the rule of law but also to establish hegemonic rule in the interests of the metropole. In other words, how good was the comprador class at fulfilling the mission outlined by Fanon? Second, in the era of globalization, when states are so permeated, does the use of comprador necessarily entail the concept of a ‘national bourgeoisie’ or can we draw on trans-national class analysis?

## **FUTURE PERSPECTIVES**

A substantial body of critical literature on African NGOs now exists, from the ground-breaking work of Fowler (1991) and Hanlon (1991) to ongoing studies (Titeca, 2005). This contribution has drawn on a number of sources, including the writer’s own research. The findings are uncomfortable. African NGOs are indeed ‘caught between a rock and a hard place’ (Igoe and Kelsall, 2005). This essay has attempted to understand the structural position of African NGOs; from the evidence it is difficult not to conclude with Nyang’oro (1993: 288, cited in Dicklitch, 1998: 7) that many African NGOs have actually become ‘local managers of foreign aid money, not managers of local African development processes’.

The argument of this article is that future research needs to prise itself away from the hegemonic policy-dominated discourse and face this reality. Foreign aid to Southern NGOs has created a social group that is dependent on external resources and patronage and in return is central to and popularizes

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9. Titeca (2005) uses this framework, as a counter to liberal civil society theory, for understanding local CSOs in a district in Uganda.

Northern development policy. Clearly, this is a complex, two-way process in which discourse is adapted and subverted as well as strengthened. Rather than dismiss the idea *prima facie* that such a process could be taking place, the challenge is to find and construct analytical frameworks that allow detailed research to be undertaken into the mechanisms of this process. This line of enquiry opens up a range of theoretical possibilities. It lends itself not only to comprador theory but also to Gramscian and Foucauldian perspectives and the intersections between them.<sup>10</sup> This is the kind of future critical research that needs to take place in order to understand the role of African NGOs within the continent's international political economy.

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10. See Kamat's (2002) Gramscian analysis of Indian NGOs. On intersections see Sum's (2003) work on cultural political economy.

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**Julie Hearn** is a member of the Department of Politics and International Relations, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK. Her research interests include NGOs, social movements, civil society, foreign aid and democratization in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa and Argentina. She has published in *Third World Quarterly*, *Review of African Political Economy* and *Journal of Religion in Africa*.