

Abstract

Surrogates for Government? NGOs and the State in Kenya

by

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This dissertation examines the impact on the Kenyan state of the explosive growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing social services in the country since the early 1990s. While NGOs have been present in Kenya since before independence, their numbers grew 15-fold between 1991 and 2008, from about 400 to over 6,000, and most of their funding now derives from foreign sources. What impact do these organizations have on the state? The dissertation answers this question, examining how service provision in education, healthcare, agriculture and water by internationally-funded NGOs affects the social contract between the state and its citizens, the country's governance, and its administrative capacity. In so doing, it addresses both the theoretical debate on the strength of developing states in a globalized, privatized world, and the practical debate on NGOs' role in bolstering or undermining the state.

Four crucial "elements of stateness" are examined: territoriality, capacity, governance, and legitimacy. Examining each element in turn, the dissertation finds that NGOs have helped to strengthen the Kenyan state. *Territorially*, NGOs have extended the reach of the state by providing services in places that the government has been unable to reach, particularly in arid, sparsely populated areas. NGOs have improved state *capacity* by extending services to sectors or communities for which public agencies do not have adequate resources. This extension can be quite literal, as when NGOs provide fuel or vehicles for civil servants' transportation to outlying areas. NGOs have also become increasingly active partners in *governance*, helping to formulate national social policies regarding service provision. Government actors often now mimic the tools typically employed by NGOs, calling for participatory development and civic education. This has instigated a slow turn toward more democratic governance processes. Finally, NGOs have increased the *legitimacy* of the state, as the provision of services lowers popular frustration below the point where citizens might become alienated. Survey research shows, for instance, that citizens associate NGOs' good deeds with local government administration, which often gets credit for bringing NGOs to the community.

The dissertation argues that, taken together, these changes indicate that the organizational form of the state is changing in Africa. NGOs expand the nature of service provision in such a way that we start to think of them belonging under the aegis of “the state.” In many situations pertaining to service provision, NGOs perform the functions of government, hand in hand with actual government actors. Just as Tocqueville's America was filled with non-governmental actors providing social services to strengthen a “weak” state, NGOs act in Africa. As NGO and government work hand-in-hand, the line between public agency and private NGO blurs. The larger implication is that in this era of globalization, the state remains an important actor – only its composition has changed slightly.

This dissertation employs a mixed-method approach, which weaves together statistical analysis, in-depth interviews, case studies and other information gathered during twenty-one months of field research. Quantitatively, the findings rely on over one hundred semi-structured interviews, two original surveys of 500 individuals in three districts, and analysis of the government’s registry of over 4200 NGOs spread across 72 administrative districts of the country.

Dedication

*To NGA, for getting me started;
BCM, for keeping me at it; and
CD, for support through to the end.*

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