Making civil society work: Contracting, cosmopolitanism and community development in Tanzania

Claire Mercer [a,*], Maia Green [b,c]

[a] Department of Geography and Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK
[b] Research on Poverty Alleviation, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
[c] Social Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, UK

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The work that NGOs now do has undergone significant change since they came to prominence as development actors in the 1980s. NGOs in Africa are shaped by a development donor civil society template that provides the resources and the training to produce a distinct sector made up of recognisable and formalised organisations which are to be organised in country-wide networks to play anticipated roles in pro-poor policy-making and holding government to account. Realising this template in the forms of organisations demands specific kinds of work through which civil society comes to be enabled as an actor in development. This work can be characterised as contracting, volunteering, and scalar work. Civil society work demands the performance of certain subjectivities amenable to interstitial positionality. Contracted cosmopolitanism plays an important role in the constitution of civil society working and in the differentiation of civil society actors from the communities which are the object of their endeavour. This paper examines the scope and constitution of civil society work in two rural districts in Tanzania.

Crown Copyright © 2012 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction: policy templates

The globalisation of policy models and apparent convergence between a number of first and third world policy regimes is becoming commonplace (Chalfin, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Heydemann and Hammack, 2009). While certainly accelerated by the processes of fast policy and increased mobilities between technocrats and politicians (Peck and Theodore, 2010; Peck, 2011a), antecedents to these processes have a longer history. This is particularly so in many countries in Africa that have long been recipients of international development assistance which has often been tied to the implementation of specific institutional and policy reforms. Such reform architectures display a striking similarity across countries where they are implemented. While this similarity is in part a consequence of the ideological constitution of reform agendas, which demand the existence of certain kinds of institutions to have traction, it is arguably accentuated by the ways in which models of reform are scripted and by the networks and relations of transnational development professionals tasked with their implementation (Mosse and Lewis, 2006; Townsend et al., 2002). The convergence of reform architectures is not merely a product of the networks and circulation of technocrats, programme documentation and training that seeks to mobilise uniform prac-

tices (Larner and Laurie, 2010; Peck, 2011b), but the ways in which reforming structures and those who work with them are envisioned as particular kinds of actors and organisations. This alignment between mobilisation and visioning – what Heydemann and Hammack (2009) term 'institutional logics' – enables the enactment of particular models on the ground and is effected through what can be thought of as policy templates, rationales and organisational forms together with standard practices through which such logics can be instantiated. Such templates facilitate the distribution of social orders envisioned in reform imaginaries through providing the organisational maps of institutional relations in which they are embedded and models for the performance of those relations.

Policy templates in international development have ranged from colonial welfare models to structural adjustment programmes, neoliberal reform and poverty reduction strategies (Gould, 2005; Jennings, 2009; Lewis, 2000). Since the late 1980s the good governance agenda has ushered in civil society as a favoured policy template for African development (Abrahamsen, 2000). Development policy templates not only ease the process of policy transfer. They provide a guide to actors of how to do the work that it entails. In this paper we examine some aspects of this process through an exploration of the dissemination of a model of civil society in Tanzania as an emergent form of local organisation. We show how policy templates for making a civil society sector depend on the performance of specialised types of situated work as

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: c.c.mercer@lse.ac.uk (C. Mercer).

'volunteering' through which relations between civil society and 'the grassroots' are delineated. 'The grassroots' has become a 'virtuous location' (Mindry, 2001, pp. 1189) with which volunteers in civil society claim an alliance on the basis of their commitment to improving the lives of the rural poor as well as their local cultural knowledge of the rural poor. This alliance with 'the grassroots' is contradictory, since it is also the basis on which the sector is able to sustain itself by acting as a 'local development broker' (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Mosse and Lewis, 2006) connecting donors to 'the grassroots'. What Baillie Smith and Jenkins (2011, 2012) identify as civil society cosmopolitanism captures the ambivalent, intermediate position of civil society subjectivities and strategies. They however assert a normative value associated with civil society's interstitial forms. This openness to difference has implications, they claim, for the scope of politics enacted by civil society actors and the content of interstitial social relations. In this paper we focus on the work of civil society actors in demonstrating a relation to the grassroots as a core component of realising accepted civil society forms. Cosmopolitanism in this sense as an attitude of civil society working is not so much an effect of situatedness, as a positionality that prefigures contracted civil society engagement. Certainly in Tanzania, what can be glossed as a contractual cosmopolitanism is thus a core component of this emerging field of civil society work.

Our focus on kinds of work distinguishes the argument we present here from recent analyses that have situated global policy models such as poverty reduction strategies and social protection as part of a process of 'roll-out neoliberalism' (Peck and Tickell, 2002) associated in developing countries with the post-Washington Consensus (Sheppard and Leitner, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2011b). The tendency has been to understand the role of civil society organisations within these policy models as cogs in a neoliberal wheel, as the "little platoons' in the shape of (local) voluntary and faith-based associations in the service of neoliberal goals' (Peck and Tickell, 2002, 390; Carmody, 2007; Craig and Porter, 2006; Kamat, 2004; Shivji, 2007). Such analyses offer a compelling macro perspective but in so doing they foreclose scrutiny of the daily work that people do to enact the models proposed by policy through grounded practice (Barnett, 2005; Ferguson, 2009; Mosse, 2005). The question that we address here is, what is the work that gets done by civil society organisations given the donor resources made available to them? Our contention is that a more open-ended approach to civil society sector work will produce different insights from approaches that ask '*does* civil society work?' or, '*how* does civil society work?' The first tends to be asked from a normative standpoint and is concerned with assessing civil society's contribution to progressive politics (Holmen, 2010; Ndegwa, 1996; Van Rooy, 2000). The second has recently been addressed in analyses framed by a governmentality approach in which the disciplinary effects of responsibilisation account for civil society action (Blundo and Le Meur, 2009; Lacey and Ilcan, 2006; Walker et al., 2008). According to a neoliberal logic, civil society activity is brought into the delivery of services that have been devolved from government to communities. By asking a different question about what gets done by civil society organisations on a daily basis, we draw attention to the fact that the civil society policy template provides significant resources for action which may or may not produce intended outcomes (Baillie Smith and Jenkins, 2012; Ferguson, 2009; Heydemann and Hammack, 2009; Li, 2007). We are interested in how the model and the template dovetail with local actors' agendas, and with local histories of development interventions that provide further templates for action.

The paper begins by outlining the civil society policy template before turning to an examination of how that globalised policy template has been localised in Tanzania. There then follows a discussion of the work of the local civil society sector in the context of the changing nature of work done by NGOs in Africa since the mid-1990s, and specifically, the rise of the NGO as contractor. Contracting relations are set in motion by targeted funding streams, and in the remainder of the paper we discuss the work generated in two rural districts in Tanzania by donor funding for activities around HIV/AIDS and vulnerable children. We characterise this work in terms of contracting, volunteering, and scalar work. By 'scalar work' we mean to draw attention to the ways in which civil society work produces both the 'local civil society sector' and 'the local' as a distinct place in need of development by 'the non-local'. The discussion is based on 4 months' research in 2009 in Magu District, Mwanza Region, and Newala District, Mtwara Region, which entailed interviews with key informants in civil society, local government and donor organisations.

2. Civil society as globalised policy template

The work of the civil society sector in Africa has undergone significant change in the last decade as the good governance agenda consolidated a particular institutional constellation across central and local governments in Africa. What has come to be categorised as civil society organisations plays a strongly normative role in this endeavour as the institutional space between the family and the state and as the modality for holding government to account. Although civil society organisations have long been enrolled into specific activities via contracts with governments and transnational agencies (Duffield, 1997; Edwards and Hulme, 1997) the majority of civil society organisations contracted into development relations are no longer engaged in service provision but with the roles of accountability, public service monitoring and community engagement (Harrison, 2008; Lange, 2008; Snyder, 2008). This policy template is to be realised on the ground in Tanzania, as elsewhere, through targeted donor funding. It is a template because it provides a standard set of replicable tools for assembling a national civil society sector with a specific set of roles. It is globalised because it can, in theory, be replicated wherever donors choose to do so.

The civil society template is a vertical model consisting of tiers of recognisable organisations operating at nested scales. Starting from the top, the civil society sector is to be made up of international NGOs, national NGOs, local NGOs, CBOs, groups, and beneficiaries. It is consolidated at the national level through legal recognition and a national forum through which civil society is invited by government and donors to participate in designated policy discussions and to hold government to account on poverty reduction. The national forum also provides the civil society sector with a visible and sanctioned platform for engaging in advocacy. In addition, civil society is championed by a national 'Foundation' through which the sector can be capacitated through targeted donor funding and training. Examples of national foundations in post-transition countries include the Civil Society Development Foundation (Romania), National Foundation for Civil Society Development (Croatia), National Foundation of Civil Society (Estonia), Foundation for Culture and Civil Society (Afghanistan); in Africa there is the Ugandan Independent Development Fund, the Foundation for Community Development Mozambique, and the Zambian Governance Foundation for Civil Society, among others. All are donor-supported and fulfil a capacity-building function for national civil society sectors through competitive grant-making. As the civil society sector grows it is organised through donor-funded workshops into a hierarchy of geographically distributed 'networks' that connect civil society at the local scale to civil society at the regional, national and international scales.

We should be clear that we do not consider civil society in Tanzania and beyond to be reducible to this template. Civil society in