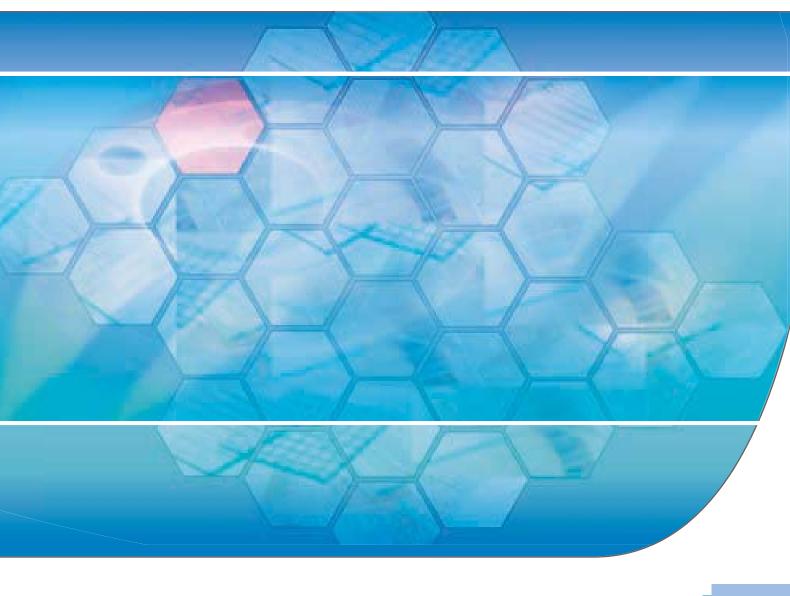# The role and impact of NGOs in capacity development

From replacing the state to reinvigorating education

Inger Ulleberg

Rethinking capacity development

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Contents

List of abbreviations

ADB	African Development Bank
ACBF	African Capacity Building Foundation
AGF	Africa Governance Forum
BEP	BRAC Education Programme
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CCNGO/EFA	Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education for All
CD	capacity development
CFIE	Centre for International Education (University of Sussex)
CEMD	Centre for Education Management and Development (India)
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CODE	Canadian Organization for Development through Education
CSO	civil society organization
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DAM	Dhaka Ahsania Mission in Bangladesh
DANIDA	Danish International Development Agency
DFID	UK Government's Department for International Development
EFA	Education for All
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalists
FTI	Fast Track Initiative (EFA)
GONGO	Governmental NGO
INTRAC	international NGO Training and Research Centre
INGO	international non-governmental organization
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MOEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Malawi)
MOEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of Cambodia
MTR	mid-term review
NGO	non-governmental organization
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NSP	non-state provider
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEDP-II	Second Primary Education Development Programme
PIE	Partnership for Innovations in Education
PTA	parent-teacher association
PLEM	Promotion of a Literate Environment in Mozambique
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RBA	rights-based approach
SDPRP	Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme (Ethiopia)
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation agency
SWAp	sector-wide approach
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPE	universal primary education
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Foreword

Capacity development is a fundamental part of the mandates of many international organizations. Much of their work aims to strengthen national capacities through training, technical advice, exchange of experiences, research, and policy advice. Yet there is considerable dissatisfaction within the international community regarding the impact of many such interventions. The activities have usually strengthened the skills of individuals, but have not always succeeded in improving the effectiveness of the ministries and other organizations where those individuals are working. These shortcomings demand investigation in order to strengthen capacity development policies and strategies.

In this context, UNESCO received funds from the Norwegian Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs to focus on 'capacity development for achieving the Education for All goals'. The objective was to identify appropriate strategies for UNESCO and others. Within UNESCO, IIEP has coordinated this work. A wide range of activities was undertaken, including detailed case studies on three countries (Benin, Ethiopia and Vietnam), a series of thematic studies and literature reviews, and consultations with experts. The focus has been on educational planning and management as stronger capacities in these areas should lead to important improvements in the education system as a whole.

IIEP's work has led to the identification of some main principles:

- The type of capacity development being considered here only works in a sustainable manner when there is national leadership and ownership, and when international efforts match national priorities and strategies.

- Strategies need attention at several levels: the capacities of the individual, the effectiveness of the organization (for example the ministry of education), the norms and practices which rule public management as a whole, and the political, social and economic contexts.

- Any intervention must recognize the intrinsic values of ownership and participation. When it aims only to identify partners' weaknesses or to strengthen the positions of those already powerful, the deepest sense of capacity development is lost.

The series *Rethinking capacity development* has been prepared within this framework.

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Summary

As development actors, NGOs have become the main service providers in countries where the government is unable to fulfill its traditional role. In the education sector, many NGOs have moved beyond 'gap-filling' initiatives into capacity building activities. This paper seeks to address the role of NGOs in development through the lens of capacity building. Through academic articles and NGO working papers, we can determine the effect of NGOs on capacity development and their role in building capacity on all levels, using a framework based on five hypotheses:

NGOs are increasingly involved in capacity development. As the development discourse leans towards developing skills and tools for strengthening society, NGOs have reacted accordingly. They wish first and foremost to remain important stakeholders in development and to impart their extensive knowledge in the education sector. This involvement changes the ways in which NGOs operate. Capacity-building activities complement traditional service provision, though this does not mean that all NGOs have good relations with government. In any case, NGO activities are increasingly diverse. They have an impact on the interpretation of capacity development. NGOs are influenced by the ideology of capacity development as defined by the hegemonic development discourse, but they also influence its meaning from the outside. This modified interpretation of capacity development can weaken central government but strengthen it in the long term. NGOs have the capacity to innovate and adapt more quickly than national governments; therefore, their actions can undermine government initiatives. But if they scale up their activities and impart their knowledge and techniques at the government level, the country as a whole can benefit. NGOs have a significant impact on the whole process but are also plagued by severe obstacles. NGOs continue to suffer from a lack of resources and from their general estrangement from the state. Unless they become partners with government, and not competitors, capacity-building initiatives will continue to be stunted.

Résumé

En tant qu'acteurs de développement, les ONG sont devenues les principaux acteurs du service public dans les pays où l'état n'est pas en fonction de fournir les services nécessaires. Dans le secteur de l'éducation, les ONG ne se contentent plus de "boucher les trous" du service public; désormais, elles se lancent dans le développement des capacités. Cette étude examine le rôle des ONG dans le développement international à travers le développement des capacités. En prenant des articles et des rapports d'ONG, on peut déduire l'effet des ONG sur le développement des capacités et leur rôle dans tous les niveaux de ce processus avec l'aide d'un cadre contenant cinq hypothèses :

Les ONG sont de plus en plus impliquées dans le développement des capacités. Puisque le discours international de développement s'oriente de plus en plus vers le développement de compétences et d'outils pour renforcer la société, les ONG s'adaptent. Elles veulent avant tout garder leur statut d'intervenant dans le développement et partager leur expérience dans le domaine de l'éducation. Cela a un impact sur le fonctionnement des ONG. Les activités de développement des capacités complémentent les fonctions traditionnelles des ONG, mais toutes n'ont pas de bonnes relations avec le gouvernement. En tous les cas, les activités des ONGs sont de plus en plus diverses. Elles ont un impact sur l'interprétation du terme « développement des capacités ». Les ONG sont influencés par l'idéologie du développement des capacités définie par les grands acteurs du développement, mais elles ont également de l'influence sur sa définition. Cette nouvelle interprétation de « développement des capacités » peut affaiblir l'état central, mais peut également le renforcer dans le long terme. Les ONG peuvent innover et s'adapter plus rapidement qu'un gouvernement national ; elles peuvent parfois nuire aux efforts de l'état. Mais si elles peuvent augmenter leurs activités à l'échelle nationale, le pays tout entier pourrait en bénéficier. Les ONG ont un impact non négligeable sur le processus de développement des capacités mais ont quelques défauts majeurs. Les ONG continuent de souffrir du manque de ressources et de l'éloignement de l'état. A moins d'entrer dans des partenariats avec le gouvernement, les activités qui visent à développer les capacités auront peu d'impact.

1   Introduction

The concept of 'capacity development' has gradually become the centre of attention in the development discourse over the past few years, and it constitutes an increasingly important strategy in development today, including within the education sector. In education planning and management, capacity development implies a focus on the existing capacities of governments and how these capacities can become strengthened on all levels – the individual, the organizational and the institutional, as well as the broader system context. Governments, donor agencies and international organizations involved in development are increasingly putting an emphasis on capacities as key to sustainable development in general and in reaching the Education for All (EFA) goals in particular. Equally, capacity development implies assisting governments in becoming responsible and legitimate actors, willing to assume ownership of their proper development processes.

In reality, this is yet to be the case, precisely because the state in many countries does not yet play its developmental role fully. In public sectors such as health and education, development non-government organizations (NGOs) have been occupying the role of main service providers over the past few years. Often replacing the role of the government on the ground, especially in remote rural areas, NGOs have traditionally assumed a gap-filling role that has sometimes created conflicting relations with governments. In this context, their strategies and activities are of interest in so far as they have an impact on governmental capacity development in the education sector. Indeed, while the continuation of their gap-filling role depends on the government's lack of capacity, NGOs increasingly demand that governmental priorities change by paying more attention to those people who have not yet been reached. They act therefore as innovators, critics, advocates and policy partners. The capacity development (CD) concept and the need to focus on strengthening government capacity provides NGOs with new challenges. The possible contradictions between capacity development as a developmental paradigm and NGOs' role as gap fillers correspond to the tensions between the new and the traditional roles of NGOs. This raises two related issues: what impact does NGO action have on governments' capacities? Also, how do NGOs interpret the capacity development concept?

Our focus in this paper will be on NGOs' action in education. Their work in this sector has occupied a more prominent place in the development discourse since the 1990s, especially as it became obvious that in many countries the provision of basic social services was not being assured by the public sector. Today, education is considered to be crucial in the process of poverty eradication and economic development. One of the reasons for this renewed interest in education is that it "straddles both equity and productivity conceptualizations of development" (Baker, 2007: 9). In other words, the importance of education is a common denominator for the various and sometimes competing approaches to development, and accordingly, gains support from most actors involved in the development enterprise – governments, aid agencies, multilateral organizations and NGOs.

The aim of the paper

The role and influence of NGOs in relation to capacity development and education is of interest because of the incontestably important role of these organisations in development in general, and in the education sector in particular. Seen from an increasingly dominating capacity development perspective, the changing roles of NGOs pose a number of questions aimed at discerning their function and impact on the education sector: how do NGOs conceive of and adapt their activities to the concept of capacity development? How do NGO strategies aim to have an impact, directly or indirectly, on governmental capacities? Do these strategies and the corresponding levels of intervention assist in reinforcing governmental capacities? These are some of the questions this study will attempt to answer, theoretically and empirically, by examining how NGOs have appropriated the capacity development paradigm.

The study is a non-exhaustive assessment based on relatively recent literature and research, such as academic studies, research commissioned by international organizations, donor agencies' reports, as well as NGOs' written statements and reports. Primarily, the focus will be on international Northern NGOs that have consolidated their role within the education sector. These NGOs have become an integral part of the international aid architecture. They constitute one of the many external actors present in the South, and contribute to the implementation of the multilateral aid agenda. Even though Northern NGOs do not always choose to work in partnership with donor

agencies or international organizations, they are nonetheless influenced by their decisions, their recommendations and their willingness to fund NGO activities. It is therefore interesting to explore whether these NGOs have willingly adopted capacity development activities as a consequence of this new 'turn' in the development discourse, and whether NGOs consider this a more reliable strategy than earlier development efforts. Southern NGOs will at times be referred to, though primarily as part of a partnership configuration involving Northern NGOs or bilateral donor agencies. Some examples will also be mentioned when referring to best practices provided by a few prominent Southern NGOs (the best known and most often referred to one is probably the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in Bangladesh). Conceptually, NGO actions in CD relate to two different domains. They strengthen the public demand for effective public services and strengthen the supply of such services. Whereas the former corresponds to building civil society through advocacy and empowerment strategies, and puts pressure on governments to improve their capacities, the latter corresponds to the traditional role of gap filling and partnership strategies aimed at developing the capacities of governments.

Methodological concerns

Some methodological considerations are in order. Firstly, the term 'non-governmental organizations', hereafter referred to as NGOs, is used strictly as an analytical category and not as a legal or normative one. As in much of the literature the term 'NGOs' is used interchangeably with the term 'civil society', though the latter primarily refers to local Southern NGOs. In the literature, Southern NGOs are implicitly linked to the term civil society because they are perceived as more representative of local civil societies, and therefore as more closely associated with the demands of downward accountability than are Northern NGOs. Two additional difficulties encountered are worth mentioning. The first one concerns the vague concept of capacity development, which sometimes makes it difficult to define NGOs' activities in relation to government capacity, making them subject to interpretation. Its weak analytical utility is one of the main critiques of capacity development. In this paper, capacity development is therefore taken as being neither 'everything' nor 'nothing', but will be discussed in relation to various NGO activities and the complex relationship of NGOs with governments. The second difficulty concerns the fact that much of the literature does not pay much attention to the relationship between NGOs and governments and does not examine the various types and the evolution of NGO activities in relation to governments. Moran (2006: 204), among others, argues that "the vast majority of studies of NSPs [non-state providers] describes the scale and features of non-state providers and the characteristics of their clientele rather than the nature of the relationship between NSPs and the state [...]. Even where they are concerned with state/non-state relations, it is not to compare alternative modes of engagement".

Indeed, much of the literature simplifies NGO action by applying a dichotomy according to which NGOs are perceived as working against or outside government in an advocacy role (in a direct confrontational manner, through outside pressure or lobbying to influence decision-making and increase the capacity of the poor to demand and influence services, or through other advocacy or watchdog activities), or in a service role on behalf of the government, by providing education and compensating for the lack of government capacity. From a capacity development perspective, however, this dichotomy is not sufficient in order to describe the emergence of a third kind of relationship, where NGOs work *with* the government. NGOs become more implicated in improving government capacity by, on the one hand, making institutions respond to the needs and rights of people and on the other, by strengthening the government's commitment to providing services and opportunities for all (MacAbbey, 2007: 3). Such consensual, joint partnerships between governments and NGOs are generally lacking in the education sector. Some authors, often practitioners, do go beyond the traditional NGO-government configurations in order to investigate the nature of this relationship in a more complex manner. One important example is the Centre for International Education's (University of Sussex) research project on non-state providers in the water, sanitation, education and health sectors, commissioned by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) (see Rose, 2006, 2007*b*). The literature that addresses the question of NGOs and capacity development is fairly recent, as pointed out by Rodriguez-Carmona (2004: 355), which might indicate that the academic literature is just beginning to 'catch up' with current changes in NGO strategies.

The study consists of four parts. The first part explains why NGOs take an interest in governmental capacity development activities in education. The explanations are brought together under two main headings, describing (a) how NGOs have consolidated their role in development aid work and are shifting from providing services to developing capacities, and (b) why the multilateral aid agenda has made more room for NGOs. The second part

of this paper constitutes a framework for analyzing non-governmental approaches to capacity development by (a) describing some of the important linkages between NGOs and capacity development, their mutual impact and relevant implications, (b) providing an inventory of NGOs' interpretations of the concept, and (c) describing the recent changes in the relationship with government. The third part describes to what extent this shift is translated by a shift in activities and level of intervention by considering (a) examples of NGO impact on capacity development and (b) how partnerships that go beyond that of government and NGOs, including other central actors such as donor agencies, multilateral organizations and local NGOs, can contribute to capacity development. The last part evokes some important obstacles for efficient capacity development, which are summarized under two main headings: (a) the fact that the actual work by NGOs remains limited in focus and (b) the fact that their own capacities are insufficient.

2 Why do NGOs take an interest in capacity development activities in education?

NGOs have consolidated their role in development aid work

Preliminary definition of NGOs and civil society

Research on NGOs is vast, and NGOs have been subject to rich academic debates related to global governance, democratization and development. Diversity has become an NGO trademark and it is a nearly impossible task to enumerate the various NGO characteristics when it comes to their aims, strategies, resources, target groups, tools, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. A preliminary attempt to define NGOs would imply referring to the civil sphere of society. Nerfin's famous words "neither prince nor merchant: citizen" are often quoted in the literature in order to illustrate how we can conceive of civil society as a separate sphere, distinct from the political and economic spheres. In the non-state sphere, NGOs are characterized by their non-profit motivation and conversely, the private sector is fuelled by profit. In reality, these spheres are not always easy to distinguish. The interdependency may be even more present or at least more visible in a developmental context, where the political sphere often encounters difficulties in matching the capacities of the other two types of actors.

Development NGOs are committed to working towards economic, social or political development in developing countries. The Norwegian bilateral aid agency Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) (2004: 6) defines development-oriented NGOs as organisations that "attempt to improve social, economic and productive conditions and are found both as small community-based organisations at village and district levels, and as large professional development agencies at state or national level". One can distinguish between Northern and Southern NGOs within the diverse group of non-state actors. Additional distinctions are often made between advocacy and rights-based NGOs; relief, welfare and charity NGOs; network NGOs and professional support NGOs. However, it is important to bear in mind that in practice the boundaries between these categories rapidly become blurred. Potentially, NGOs can participate in all phases of the policy cycle and on all levels of the public sector; as contributors to policy discussion and formulation, advocates and lobbyists, service deliverers (operators), monitors (watchdogs) of rights and of particular interests, and as innovators introducing new concepts and initiatives. Some NGOs combine two or more of these activities, whereas others choose to focus on one. However, in this paper the primary focus will be the traditional NGO role of filling gaps in state-provided public education. We will trace the evolution of NGO activities on the supply side of capacity development, making occasional references to advocacy and watchdog activities on the demand side of service provision.

The characteristics of NGO interventions

Within the education sector, it is possible to sketch out some principal NGO activities. As mentioned, NGOs have traditionally taken on the role of gap filling; that is, taking on activities of basic education provision where the government lacks the capacity to do so or does not consider it a priority. Some scholars link this role to the structural adjustment programmes that were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, claiming that they lead to the "disengagement of most African governments [...] from their role as providers of social services such as education and health, termed as 'non-productive' sectors" (UNDP, 2007: 5). Disengagement and lack in capacity has been and is still the case in many countries, especially when it comes to rural areas and marginal children. The situation in Uganda is a fitting example. Education provision is primarily the task of the Ministry of Education and Sports. However, its lack of capacity and the weak nature of the state in general have opened up the education sector for NGO involvement. NGOs provide a large part of educational services and help reinforce government efforts in achieving universal primary education (UPE) objectives (Ibembe, 2007: 13).

NGO action is often described as small scale, flexible, dynamic, adaptive, local, efficient and innovative. These are abilities that make them complementary to state action. The government cannot compete with their ability and desire to innovate, since "the government's capacity and structure does not allow the flexibility required to experiment with new education approaches" (Sequeira, Modesto and Maddox, 2007: 44). NGOs are also perceived

as being more flexible and dynamic than donor agencies and international organizations, while adapting easily to the specific political, economic and social context in a given country. As a result, it may be easier for NGOs to promote a needs-based, demand-led approach rather than a donor-driven one. For example in Malawi, NGOs use needs assessment and prioritisation as an entry point into the community (Kadzamira and Kunje, 2002: 22).

The common obstacles associated with NGO interventions are linked to the difficulties in scaling-up and ensuring sustainability. This is often because NGO action is local, implemented on a small scale and project based. Many such projects have proved to be short-lived and some NGOs have chosen to undertake new activities that can be described as capacity development in their focus on sustainability. Fowler (2000: 599) suggests that these new roles include negotiation, validation of actors' compliance with rights, innovation and capacity building. In other words, the lack of government capacity and the limited impact of most NGOs demand a complementary strategy of action by NGOs, namely a capacity-developing function. Such a strategy aims at building the capacity of government in education, not by filling gaps, but by reducing them sustainably. Assuming a capacity development strategy has the potential not only to enhance the public sector's capacity and sustainability, but those of NGOs as well. It can work to eliminate the weaknesses of the state and increase the chances that its interventions will survive and be scaled up.

Normative considerations and international standing

The prevalence of NGOs is often considered a sign of a well-functioning civil society. They are expected to contribute to democracy in developing countries and build democratic aid structures. The role of civil society as a watchdog increases transparency and the participation of society in the development process. 'Civil society' is therefore an inherently normative term, which NGOs do not always live up to. NGOs are not interest free, even if they are of a non-profit nature. In fact, "many conventional NGO practices are ultimately about retaining power" (Eade, 2007: 630). Despite numerous debates in the academic literature and among practitioners, there exists no consensus as to which criteria NGOs should meet in order to be considered legitimate and efficient actors in international relations. Like governments, NGOs are a diverse group, making it difficult to generalize. Their diversity is both their strength and their Achilles' heel. In order to avoid simplifying NGOs as either instruments of donor agencies or independent forces of civil society, they must be treated "carefully, conceptually, and above all, relationally" (Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington, 2007: 1702). However, it can be useful to inquire into the consequences of those values often attributed to and claimed by NGOs. One possibility is that NGOs' generally positive reputation and the values associated with the participation of civil society in national and international relations have encouraged them to opt for more influence, not only on the implementation side of development, but also in decision-shaping and decision-making. NGO discourse on development reflects their desire to be considered as a relevant stakeholder by all actors involved, to engage with decision-makers, and to become active participants in and of development. This normative discourse helps integrate NGO action into the social and political aid system.

The desire to be recognized as an important actor partially explains the willingness of NGOs to have a wider impact through capacity development. This will be discussed in more detail throughout the paper in order to describe and explain how and why NGOs move beyond service provision into joint planning and coordination with the state, even though this risks compromising their non-governmental status (Archer, 1994: 231). Traditionally, NGOs have had a tendency to focus on their own constituency – civil society – outside of the state's domain. Over the past few years, however, "development-oriented NGOs have increasingly attempted to become involved in other areas of society [than civil society], especially in lobbying in relation to both local and central political authorities" (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 143). As a result, the NGO phenomenon is becoming more and more difficult to distinguish from the political and economic spheres in which they intervene and in which they are embedded. Mitlin (2007: 1701) proposes therefore to conceive of NGOs as both *actors in* and *objects of* development. As endogenous actors in this process, NGOs are affected by changes in their environment. In developing countries, capacity development can be considered one such 'environmental' change, reflecting recent modifications in the multilateral aid agenda.

NGOs are no longer small-scale actors, simply interested in 'filling up' the vacuum left by government. They have grown into powerful, though not disinterested, voices of civil society. They also realize that, to strengthen their role in this arena, they may need to shift their areas of interest from limited service provision to capacity development, whatever this nebulous concept may imply. At the same time, the international agenda is also allowing more space for non-governmental interventions (see the next section). From this perspective, NGOs' own motivation can be

interpreted as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition in order to become a relevant stakeholder at the national and international levels. The multilateral aid agenda promotes the capacity development paradigm and demands NGOs to focus more on having an impact at the national level.

The multilateral aid agenda has made more room for NGOs

An international mood doubtful about governmental action

Through their role in education provision in the formal and non-formal sectors, NGOs have consolidated their role in education 'governance' locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. The appearance and growing popularity of the term 'governance' (instead of 'government') is interesting in this regard because it highlights the presence of other actors such as NGOs, both internationally and nationally (Kitamura, 2007: 35). A number of actors outside of government participate in the development enterprise in general, and in the education sector in particular, by contributing to reaching the EFA goals and related international policy objectives. In developing countries where state capacity is weak, state sovereignty is weaker than in developed countries, and 'external' governance, through presence and intervention, is more visible. In addition to NGOs, bilateral aid agencies constitute an important group of actors in education governance. By choosing to fund and encourage NGO action, they have contributed widely to the proliferation of NGOs and other civil society organizations that took place in the course of the 1980s. Some authors even question the classic explanation of the rise of NGOs associated with democratic and pluralist elements, and maintain that NGO support is nothing more than a manifestation of the growing scepticism towards, and discontentment with, recipient governments, especially by the USA. As Mayhew notes, "There are claims that international support for NGOs has been fuelled, at least in part, simply by disillusionment at governments' failure to meet donor objectives" (2005: 728). This scepticism has in turn led to a preference for funding organizations and institutions in civil society (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 157). In Ethiopia, for example, USAID conditions development assistance by giving part of the aid directly to NGOs. This has led critics to accuse NGOs that accept this type of funding of compromising their autonomy. Kasturi Sen (2006) argues that "few of the major policy initiatives of recent times have allowed any sort of autonomy whilst still giving the impression of doing so". Nelson (2006: 709) equally makes the observation that "states and donors exert considerable influence on the strategic choices, programmatic practices and political orientation of NGOs".

The capacity development approach views the lack of government capacity to be more of an obstacle than the state itself. Capacity development implies placing the state in a leading role, assisting in developing its capacities, and endorsing governmental and social ownership of the development process. This provides space for NGOs, either as an actor demanding accountability, or as a development agency strengthening the state. As more and more donor agencies emphasize a state-focused development agenda, NGOs have to choose what place they will occupy in relation to the state: as an actor demanding accountability, as a gap filler, or as a partner strengthening the state's own capacities. Kasturi Sen (2006), director of research at INTRAC, warns that NGOs should be careful in engaging in the latter: "The fact that donors are suddenly keen to create effective, autonomous and magnanimous 'states' is part of the process of collective dishonesty, and as NGOs we should perhaps not be deluding ourselves". The implications of this debate are ambiguous – it raises the question of the role of the state in its own development process, and the risk that NGOs may become instrumentalized or co-opted by donors or governments. Regardless of the dubious objectives of donor agencies in supporting NGOs, a study commissioned by the World Bank reaffirms that NGO involvement has a real impact, both on the demand and supply side of development, fostering government and civil society capacity: "The evidence from a number of World Bank operations suggests that civil society participation can contribute to better targeted, more effective and sustainable projects. The involvement of civil society also favours 'social control' of government programs by communities and the development of participatory democracy. Moreover, participation in government projects can engender benefits for civil society itself by strengthening its organizational capacity" (Siri, 2002: 4).

Political will at the international level

At the international level, political rhetoric has over the past few years paved the way for NGO action in the education sector. The OECD (2006: 29) describes NGOs as "crucial sources of capacity that can be unleashed to complement and improve the effectiveness of the public sector". NGOs can further "be of use in both implementing capacity development plans and monitoring the outcomes of plans implemented by government". Favourable political will

towards increased NGO involvement in the education sector is clearly visible in international policy objectives such as Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. The importance of civil society participation is mentioned explicitly in the *Dakar Framework of Action* (as adopted at the World Education Forum on Education for All) and recommends enhanced involvement in education programmes. The framework underlines the role of the state as the core provider of basic education, but insists on the "engagement and participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development" (UNESCO, 2000: 8). The EFA agenda puts pressure on government to expand access and the quality of education. Since many Southern governments do not have the capacity necessary to reach the EFA goals in time, the policy agenda opens a window of opportunity for NGOs. One of the organizations that actively promotes the participation of civil society is UNESCO, one of the few United Nations organizations with a long tradition of cooperating with NGOs and civil society.

Two of the EFA mechanisms created by UNESCO illustrate this commitment. The first one, the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education For All (CCNGO/EFA), is a process whereby UNESCO seeks to "learn from its dialogue with civil society by promoting and furthering collaboration between governments and civil society, and encouraging the participation of civil society in joint EFA efforts" (CCNGO/EFA, 2003: 12). Civil society is also involved in the Fast Track Initiative, a global compact on education in which capacity development is an important aspect (Rose, 2007*a*: 15). Interestingly, the four NGOs that consult regularly with the EFA Fast Track Initiative (Action Aid, Education International, Oxfam and Save the Children) are often referred to in the literature in relation to capacity development activities in education. The political will of relevant international actors such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and bilateral aid organizations – together referred to as a loose international regime for educational development (Baker and Wiseman, 2007: 3) – currently provides a favourable environment for NGOs that want to get involved at the national level.

The importance of NGO action in realizing international goals

One of the key challenges is to translate these world-wide policy goals into concrete efforts at the national level, since "global-level action is no panacea for national-level action, and international conventions such as EFA need to be articulated in context by national civil society" (Commonwealth Education Fund, 2007: 14). The work of the CCNGO/EFA has for example been criticized precisely for its lack of tangible results. Not all NGOs believe that this global agenda offers a good basis on which to build local action by NGOs. In fact, "many NGO activists see the MDGs as a product of the OECD governments and the international financial institutions, a perception that compromises the MDGs' ability to mobilize social and political actors" (Nelson, 2006: 2044). This does not imply that they disagree with the EFA initiative and similar goals, but they see this struggle as part of a social and human rights approach rather than the simple expression of a global agenda. Indeed, an alternative to the focus on international targets such as the MDGs is to ground NGO action within the human rights paradigm by defending the right to education. Within the education sector this provides two different and to some extent complementary ways of reinforcing and legitimizing NGO action on the ground: by referring to the specifically formulated objectives of the MDGs and by considering education as a human right. According to Nelson (2006, p. 702), "the MDGs and RBAs (rights-based approaches) both attempt in different ways to refocus and perhaps reinvigorate the development enterprise".

Interestingly, Nelson's findings show that most NGOs dedicated to education explicitly refer to both the MDGs and a human rights approach. They have "aligned themselves with rights-based approaches, and advocate the MDGs as a step toward the broader realization of these rights" (Nelson, 2006: 2048). In the study, this finding applies to Northern/international NGOs such as Action Aid (South Africa/UK), Global Campaign for Education, Save the Children (US) and Oxfam (UK). This pattern corresponds to the perception that Northern NGOs integrate themselves into the broader development agenda in order to realize international goals nationally. Through their complementary roles of service provision and of advocacy, they can simultaneously advocate the right to education and contribute to international policy goals by providing access to education. On the other hand, the findings indicate that Southern NGOs such as BRAC (Bangladesh) do not find it necessary to make explicit reference to currents in the broader development discourse. (One can question whether BRAC, if not explicitly, then implicitly, does make reference to international policy goals through its interventions. The NGO is at least widely referred to in the literature and by Northern NGOs working in the education sector as an important and inspiring actor in relation to EFA.) This might indicate that Southern NGOs base the legitimacy of their interventions on local accountability and ownership, and do not necessarily feel the need to refer to international policy goals. Concerning Northern

NGOs, both of the competing development perspectives (the MDGs and the rights-based approach) legitimize a role for NGOs in education.

Decentralization and NGO action

One of the main policy trends being translated into concrete action at the national and local level is decentralization (of tasks, authority, policy planning and implementation) (Clayton, 1998: 21). Rose (2007*a*: 25) confirms that many education stakeholders are proponents of decentralisation as a strategy "to address institutional constraints by drawing on unexploited capacity available at local levels". However, the transfer of the necessary resources and capacities does not always accompany it, and as a result, "there is recognition that local capacity constraints can become an obstacle in the short run (particularly where skilled staff is unavailable at local levels)" (Rose, 2007*a*: 25). While making it more difficult for international agencies to control efforts in the field of education through central governments, decentralization may demand an important role of NGOs present at the local community level (Chapman, 2001: 460). One such role might involve developing local government capacities. In Malawi, for example, "donors recognize that NGOs are in a better position to articulate the needs of communities and therefore are an important element in the policy formulation process. Some donors project an expanded role of NGOs once the decentralization process is complete because of lack of capacity at district level" (Kadzamira, 2002: viii). The link between decentralization and increased NGO influence is emphasized by many relevant actors, including UNESCO, which confirms that there is a *"positive correlation between decentralization and the intensity of partnership between public authorities and civil society at sub-national levels"* (2001*b*: 20). The NGO Plan has increasingly been involved in research on decentralization in education (Lugaz and De Grauwe, 2009). The Africa Governance Forum equally recognizes the importance of forging government-NGO partnerships at the local level in order to strengthen local government through decentralization (UNDP, 2007: 16).

International aid structures and trends

Parallel to the increasing focus on international goals and targets, a number of changes have taken place that potentially have positive implications for NGOs in relation to aid delivery. Sector-wide approaches (SWAps) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have been introduced by aid agencies as instruments in order to promote a coherent, all-encompassing and sustainable development process, while also promoting the participation of civil society. There is a risk, however, that NGO voices will not be heard in SWAps and PRSPs where powerful donors tend to dominate. SWAps are linked to national sector plans and represent for many donors a necessary way out of what has been referred to as 'projectitis' – "the spreading of aid to countless projects" (Degnbol-Martinussen, 1999: 49). In a SWAp approach, the scope is large when it comes to the involved actors and the field of intervention. NORAD is one of several aid agencies that is currently paying attention to the possible role of civil society in the SWAp processes (NORAD, 2004). The PRSPs are a way of encouraging the recipient government to take responsibility for planning and prioritizing (Smith, 2005: 447). Kruse (2002: 18) makes a similar observation, stating that *"both SWAps and PRSPs place greater demands on country capacity with respect to policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation, implementation through multiple organizations and more participatory forms of governance"*. This implies a renewed attention to how NGOs can adapt their 'project-style' interventions and contribute to education as part of a SWAp and through the PRSPs. The education sector generally is considered an important part of national poverty reduction strategies, given the relationship between education and poverty reduction (Smith, 2005: 446). Common for these two instruments is that they recognize the importance of both capacity development and civil society, without necessarily linking the two together (Moulton, 2005: 101.)

Earlier development efforts, including structural adjustment programmes, have been criticized by some for having negative effects on education, such as reduced education expenditure. For these critics, capacity development and civil society represent the future hope of development (Archer, 1994: 223). The dominating discourse on aid today concedes an important role to all key stakeholders, including NGOs, as reflected in the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*. NGOs can play a key role in a SWAp context, and in the drafting and implementation of Poverty Reduction Strategies. Such a role represents a fundamental change compared to earlier periods where NGO involvement in education was strictly limited to service provision, an activity that sporadically has led to government resistance.

3   A framework for analyzing NGOs' approach to capacity development

We have seen that NGOs are playing an increased role in capacity development. In order to elaborate a framework for analyzing NGO approaches to the concept, it is useful to consider what impact capacity development has on NGOs and what impact NGOs have on the concept.

NGOs and capacity development – implications and mutual impact

The capacity development paradigm

Capacity development is attracting more and more attention in the context of a changing aid architecture. Having previously been the recipient of capacity development efforts, NGOs now have the possibility to have an impact themselves on the capacity development of state institutions. Kasturi Sen (2006) gives a fitting summary of the changes already mentioned: "The current donor approach (through the *Paris Declaration*) emphasizes the need to strengthen the state and institutions, following two decades of downsizing of the public sector through policies and neo-liberalism. During this period, capacity building concentrated on NGOs and civil society […] The most recent transition in donor policy [is] reverting to support for state institutions". Beyond the multilateral aid agenda and NGOs' consolidated role in development, does the concept of capacity development itself bear a promise to revitalize and diversify NGO action in education? What and where are the linkages between NGOs and capacity development? Before looking into these questions empirically, it is useful to elaborate the concept and characteristics of capacity development and its characteristics specifically in relation to NGOs, and to deduce some preliminary hypotheses.

Capacity development is considered to be a long-term, endogenous process of developing sustainable abilities on all levels: the individual, organizational, institutional and system level. This is linked to and has implications for NGO action in four different, yet interdependent ways. Firstly, the all-encompassing approach of capacity development fits well with NGO action. NGO interventions are known for involving local stakeholders, for being adapted to the local context, for providing education and for developing capacity, all of which are aimed at community empowerment. NGO interventions generally go far beyond that of simply allocating financial resources. In fact, many NGOs fear being considered 'bankers' in development, "the implication being that it is not through the transfer of money that development really takes place, but through other 'capacity building' processes" (Taylor, 1999: 1).

Secondly, capacity development is linked to governance issues in the sense that it asks the question of who should be properly involved in what (Edgar and Chandler, 2005: 6). Within the education sector, the knowledge of NGOs in the realm of education implementation and management contributes to their relevance as actors. Such knowledge might prove to be particularly valuable in order to meet some of the current challenges in the education sector. However, the recognition of NGOs' importance in this area is not always translated by increased possibilities for NGO input and influence. Razon and Persevera (2004: 12) demonstrates the difficulty of qualifying NGO input as 'governance' by asking the following question: "When, for example, Asian-Pacific education CSOs [civil society organizations] participate in country EFA processes, as they try to do, in fulfilment of their role as 'partners' in education policy development, yet, are confined to the narrow and token spaces of technical and consultative committee work, does this constitute 'governance'?"

Thirdly, given the complexity of the education sector, and the broad and somewhat vague interpretation of 'capacity development' and of 'governance', NGOs can contribute by giving the concepts real content through concrete action alongside government. In this sense, capacity development and NGOs can influence each other mutually: capacity development can open up new spaces of intervention and new activities in the education sector for NGOs. Conversely, NGOs can take part in and shape the content of capacity development efforts and education policy, as they consider capacity development a "mixture of politics and management" (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 299). NGOs are, to a certain extent, actors with political influence. Beyond the management approach advised through capacity development, NGOs can thus participate in negotiating and defining the broader understanding and policy implications of the concept.

Finally, the concept of capacity development can be a useful way for NGOs to have an impact on education governance and thus improve the primary weaknesses of their interventions, with regard to the lack of sustainability and the limited scope of their actions. Concerning the latter, Clayton, Oakley and Taylor confirm: "One of the inherent weaknesses of CSOs is that they are unable to provide an overall framework in which to operate at both national and regional levels" (2000: 11). Capacity development can provide such a framework, and contribute to improving and diversifying NGO action aimed at the public education sector. When it comes to NGOs' impact on education governance, an increasing number of NGOs are coming to the conclusion that gap filling is not the way to go, because it "frees states from responsibilities that rightly should be theirs" (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 166). Concerning the lack of sustainability associated with NGO action, capacity development constitutes a comprehensive approach to development that distinguishes itself from the earlier-mentioned 'project approach'. Schacter (2000: 4) confirms that "capacity building requires a learning-by-doing approach that cannot easily be accommodated within the formalities of a classic project style". Whereas projects serve for immediate, short-term goals, they do not always result in sustainable, long-term economic, social or institutional development.

Hypotheses

Capacity development constitutes a way for NGOs to scale up their actions, not simply by doing more of the same, but by changing functions or gradually assuming more areas of responsibility. Uvin, Jain and Brown (2000), experts on NGO action, describe this process thoroughly in his article appropriately entitled *Think large and act small: toward a new paradigm for NGO scaling up*. Without explicitly treating the subject of capacity development, they use the term *indirect impact* to describe this alternative way of scaling up NGO activities (as opposed to scaling up in terms of size): "Indirect activities are those in which NGOs seek to affect the behaviour of other actors who work with the poor or influence their lives [...] Indirect impact can occur through training, knowledge creation or advice" (2000: 1411). This qualitative process of scaling up offers a different way of influencing government, allowing new modes and levels of action to become available. Uvin interprets the meaning of 'indirect impact' in a way that is largely coherent with capacity development and that goes far beyond the rather narrow use of the term found in earlier research, namely as a type of political scaling up focused on advocacy and lobbying. Such more or less confrontational means of influence contrast with governmental capacity development, but remain nevertheless often-used tools for indirect impact by NGOs.

Their redefinition of the term opens the door for less confrontational, but possibly just as effective, ways of influencing the behaviour of government. Capacity development – interpreted as consensual indirect impact – constitutes a window of opportunity for NGOs in the sense that it provides a middle ground between pure service and pure advocacy activities. It brings service NGOs (the primary focus of this study) closer to where the decisions are made – in order to help shape decisions and strategies in ways that are coherent with, are adapted to, and impact government capacity. Compared to the traditional service delivery role, this can also be considered an instrumental role – a tool to work with and for government – but it offers a broader, more diversified and independent repertoire of strategies than traditional NGO action. Five hypotheses to guide this study can now be put forward.

H1: *NGOs are becoming more involved in capacity development for a variety of reasons.* These reasons have been elaborated above and are related to the consolidation of NGOs' role in development aid work and the multilateral aid agenda's promotion of capacity development.

H2: *This involvement changes the way in which NGOs operate.* Given that NGOs already play an important role in gap filling in education provision, traditional 'project' mode and non-formal education, we do not expect NGOs to abandon these essential activities in favour of capacity development. We do, however, expect NGOs to have taken on capacity-development activities directed towards the public education sector and governmental education planning and management. These constitute complementary activities to service delivery and as a result, diversify NGO action. This diversification can be interpreted as a strategy for 'scaling up' and corresponds to NGOs' aspiration to increase their influence in education governance.

H3: *Through their involvement, they have an impact on the interpretation (in the field) of capacity development.* By taking part in capacity development efforts, NGOs contribute to shaping the content of capacity development. By integrating capacity development into their overall strategies of intervention in a coherent manner, that is in a way that corresponds to the 'typicalities' of NGO action in the education sector, NGOs attempt to redefine capacity development in their own image. As a result, NGOs' efforts in this area will reflect traditional NGO action and values, such as a continued focus on the communities and local civil societies.

H4: *Through this new interpretation, capacity development can weaken central government, but also strengthen it in the long term.* NGOs' new activities, diversifying their action and impact in the education sector, reflect the strengthening of NGO capacities and influence on education governance. The increased involvement of NGOs in capacity development can prove to be to the detriment and to the benefit of government. The intricate question is precisely how NGO support to capacity development can contribute to strengthening government, without threatening the originality of NGO intervention.

H5: *Impact and obstacles.* Given their place in the education sector, one would expect NGOs to have a substantial impact on government capacity and strategies, but also that they tend to encounter some of the same types of obstacles as other actors involved in capacity development. While previous research suggests that it is the concept and process of capacity development that complicates the task, and not necessarily the type of actor involved (it is not a question of agency), some actor-specific obstacles can be expected. If the third hypothesis presented finds support (that NGOs shape capacity development in their own image), one would expect to meet some obstacles that, to a larger or a lesser degree, depend on the capacity-developing actor in question, and therefore, are NGO-specific.

A three-fold interpretation of capacity development

How do NGOs regard the concept of capacity development and how do they add value to the concept through their own interpretation? An initial inventory of NGO interpretations is useful in order to consider how NGOs interpret capacity development theoretically, before looking into how they have adapted empirically to this approach. This preliminary step allows us to enrich the definitions of capacity development that are traditionally given by other relevant participants (governments, academics, UN agencies and official aid agencies) in the debate on the content and usefulness of capacity development. In this respect, it is also useful to consider some of these international actors' perceptions of NGOs relating to capacity development, especially considering that many NGOs do not give a clear definition of the term capacity development. Eade's (2007: 631) critique of capacity building as a sort of aid jargon ("Often it is no more than a serious sounding alternative to 'training'") might be considered exaggerated by some, but it makes an important point: unless the term is defined clearly and its parameters clearly drawn, determining what constitutes capacity development becomes a challenging exercise. In fact, when attempting to look at capacity development in education beyond training, there are no easy answers or given definitions by NGOs to enumerate. Many NGOs use the term capacity development explicitly when describing their activities or mandate, or use the equivalent notions of 'capacity building', 'providing an enabling environment' or 'developing abilities'. Few, however, clarify what they actually mean by it or discuss its implications, as some donor agencies have tried to do recently. Nevertheless, when considering capacity issues in relation to NGOs, there are three underlying aspects that are emphasized more or less explicitly and that are worth taking note of. Capacity development is the process of bottom-up reform for organizational transformation, an engine for change in the search for sustainable development efforts, and the promotion of an approach to development based on the values of ownership and participation.

The overall goal of improving existing organizational capacities in the education sector

Development NGOs in education have a broad understanding of capacity development when it comes to the levels involved, its objectives and its tools. Such a broad scope of action is nothing new for NGOs. As mentioned, traditionally they have focused on more than one area, for example by connecting education provision to community empowerment, local participation or health issues. As a result, NGOs emphasize the interrelatedness of capacity development with other issues in the wider political, economic and social context. This interrelatedness is also linked to the relationship between actors on all levels. CODE (Sequeira, 2007: 43) is one NGO that emphasizes the relational dimension of capacity development. It acknowledges that "relationships are crucial to the success of PLEM [Programme for the Promotion of a Literate Environment in Mozambique]. They increase PLEM's capacity to implement and develop experiences that support government and donor strategies, and increase knowledge within the development community. The approach to build human and institutional capacity within PLEM rests upon a complex web of institutional relationships at the national and international level". The NGO Plan (Plan Nederland, 2005: 51) emphasizes the importance of a well-functioning education bureaucracy as this improves the chances of sustainability. The interaction between government officials and the community is therefore crucial. The emphasis on relationships reflects the interpretation of capacity development as an instrument to improve the management

and functioning of the education sector and ultimately, improve educational outcomes. According to Lusthaus, Adrien and Perstinger (1999: 5), some donors and many development NGOs tend to focus on organizational change compared to international development banks that privilege the institutional level, and UN agencies and donors that often adopt national, sector or systems approaches to capacity development. To the extent that NGOs privilege the institutional level, it is linked to efforts to change institutional culture and attitudes towards education, for example by promoting government commitment to EFA, rather than through a focus on rules and structure.

Developing organizational capacities is explained partially by the traditional and still widespread focus on civil society and the community. A survey conducted by INTRAC, the International NGO Training and Research Centre, presents some NGO definitions of capacity building as illustrative of this tendency. Capacity development is understood as a "deliberate effort aiming at strengthening an organisation and its effectiveness and sustainability in relation to its purpose and context" and "supporting partners/beneficiaries to build the knowledge, skills, attitude and experience to achieve their own goals and develop viable and vibrant organisations" (Lipson 2006: 3). The focus on the organizational level is linked to their focus on local organizations as the starting point for a bottom-up reform process. Common for many of the NGOs working in education is seeing organizational change as a 'bottom-up' process that begins with the school as the basic unit of change and then, ideally, trickles up to higher levels in the education sector. A case study of NGOs in India (Jagannathan, 1999: 29) finds that it is through innovations at the micro level that NGOs can add value to the education sector: "While macro programs of reform implemented by the Government address a large number of issues regarding educational deprivation, NGOs bring lessons of effective local action". The Indian NGO CEMD (Centre for Education Management and Development) is one such example of effective local action. In addition to concentrating its efforts on pedagogic innovation and improved teacher training, it emphasizes the importance of strong management support for innovations and experiments (Jagannathan, 1999: 26). By supporting local initiatives through management support, organizational capacities can 'trickle up'. By the same token, the bottom-up logic is reflected in the work of CODE (Canadian Organization for Development through Education), by its linking of organizational improvement to concrete learning goals on the regional level. This affirms that "its specific objective is to increase the reading and writing skills among primary school students through the strengthening of the institutional capacity to support a literate environment" (Sequeira, 2007: 37). However, more and more NGOs associate capacity development with influencing higher levels, such as in Malawi (Kadzamira, 2002: 5), where NGO activity in education is becoming more involved in the policy formulation process. This is also the case in India, where a recent study "postulates a growing and strategic role for the NGOs to support and enrich education programs of a national dimension and to collaborate with the Government in a macro setting" (Jagannathan, 1999: 4). However, INTRAC practitioners from the NGO Concern Worldwide warn against the risk of putting too much emphasis on the organizational level and too little on concrete and visible efforts (although many would argue that they are closely linked and that one does not exclude the other): "Capacity building seems to be increasingly directed in favour of 'managerialism' and Organisational Development, away from the need for a developmental approach and focus on a positive change in poor people's lives" (Foley *et al.*, 2006).

Change and sustainability

Most NGOs perceive themselves as a catalyst for change and as an actor affected by external changes, such as the capacity development 'turn' in the development discourse. In other words, capacity development reorients NGO action, in terms of types of activities and concerning the recipients of NGO efforts. Whereas the recipient or object of capacity development efforts by NGOs traditionally has been civil society itself through a focus on the community, the state is increasingly becoming the focus for capacity development efforts by most relevant actors in development. For sustainable change, action and intervention need to change. According to one author, capacity development implies radical changes in NGO action, "leading to a significantly diminished role in problem identification, design and implementation of interventions and greater emphasis on facilitation, strategic inputs and supporting processes aimed at strengthening developing country capacity. Functionally, this means a move away from 'NGO projects' to investments in developing country programs and less reliance on expatriate technical assistance" (Gordijn, 2006: 14). Equally, Uvin *et al.* suggest that NGOs can reorient and expand their action by using their knowledge through activities such as training, information sharing, consultancy and advice in order to "promote changes in other institutions whose mandate (should) include(s) the provisions of such support services", that is, government (2000: 1414-1417).

Parallel to this change of actor on the receiving end, the tools for capacity development increasingly change from 'hard' to 'soft': from a focus on technical cooperation, equipment provision and constructing facilities such as

schools, the focus is increasingly turning towards less tangible, but perhaps more important, tools. Such tools include improving management knowledge and skills, communication and social capital, and correspond to basic definitions of capacity development such as the one elaborated by a study commissioned by UNESCO (IFUW, 2007: 6): "Capacity building is the process through which a society (or organization) changes its rules, institutions and standard of behaviour, increases its level of social capital and enhances its ability to respond, adapt and exert discipline on itself." The use of 'soft' tools for capacity development is shared by NGOs and donor agencies and reflects "a growing awareness that facilities, resources and inputs alone will not lead to lasting improvements in an organization's performance. Crucial capacities reside in its management practices and systems, which allow the organization to acquire resources and use them effectively" (Horton *et al.*, 2003: 41).

The question of sustainability is linked intrinsically to capacity development. According to a Sida study (Boman, Forsberg and Peck, 2005: 29), sustainability refers to "an enhanced capacity of the education sector", followed by "enhanced capacity of the partner organization to run education projects". First and foremost, however, sustainability is interpreted as "the knowledge acquired by students/participants in teaching during the projects", underlining the predominant focus of NGOs on pure education provision, such as teaching. NGOs' strategies committed to capacity development can also prove to be advantageous when considering the issue of NGOs' own sustainability. Changing and scaling up their activities towards government may enhance the sustainability of NGO action. As a result, both internally and externally, NGOs take on the role of a catalyst for change in education. Capacity development can thus be understood as provoking changes in NGO strategies that might be positive for NGOs' own sustainability (by linking up to the public sector), as well as for the impact of their efforts, namely the improvement and sustainability of educational policy, implementation and management. BRAC (Ryan, Jennings and White, 2007: 58) is one NGO that recognizes the importance of linking the two, that is, changing in order to influence change: "Without the capacity to influence change, the resource role of BEP [BRAC Education Programme] may be limited to shoring up a deficient system without being in any position to influence it significantly". Participating and undergoing change is what Eade (2007: 637) refers to as 'co-development', which can be "far more rewarding than trying to be a catalyst, which exerts an impact or change on another component within a system without itself changing".

Ownership and participation

'Co-development' also implies a participative approach to capacity development. Whereas some critics fear that having an impact on the state can turn NGOs into resource agencies for government, most NGOs link their involvement with government to ownership issues. This is especially the case with local NGOs, which can be said to represent somewhat local civil societies or communities. This perspective reflects the emphasis put on capacity development as an endogenous process, implying that capacity must be developed from within and cannot be imposed by external actors, at least not in a sustainable manner. Capacity development as a participatory learning process means that all stakeholders are, or ideally should be, involved. The definition of capacity development as a process aimed at all levels of society (the individual, organizational and administrative/institutional) underlines the importance of a plurality of actors participating at these different levels, as instruments in the all-encompassing process of capacity development.

For NGOs, the question of ownership is closely linked to their traditional focus on the community and the process of developing community capacities, often referred to as 'community empowerment'. This view is reflected in the general literature, affirming that "capacity development is consistently linked to empowerment in formal UN documents and in much NGO literature" (Lusthaus, 1999: 8), and in NGO case studies that confirm that "NGOs understand capacity development in education as parallel and complementary to community empowerment" (Kadzamira, 2002: 21). Community empowerment in relation to education might imply involving the community in school governance and encouraging it to take part in educational planning and management at the school level. This focus is still predominant, although NGOs are in the process of taking on new roles as agents in community-based governance. The UNESCO Special Session of the Involvement of Civil Society in EFA appropriately described the recent changes associated with capacity development on the community-level as follows (UNESCO, 2001*b*: 13): "The communities emerged as the most frequently cited civil society constituency in the promotion of EFA". This implies an "expansion from playing the role of resource mobilization and local education management to participation in defining education and assessing quality and processes" and "the development from loosely structured to institutionalized and systematic involvement in local education governance through PTAs, School Management Committees and School Performance Appraisal Meetings".

Approaching government: implications for developing capacities

NGOs' new roles in community-based governance are accompanied by new modes of interaction between two actors: local authorities and government at the central level. In principle, these modes of interaction have greater potential for NGO impact on local governmental capacities, since "appropriately structured partnerships between community associations and local governments can provide a basis for institutional strengthening" (Krishna, 2003: 361). In order to engage in the all-encompassing process of developing capacities in the education sector, an increasing number of NGOs are turning towards central government. Eager to have an impact on governmental capacity development and strategies in education, these NGOs wish to go beyond implementing projects that all too often remain rare "islands of excellence" (Jagannathan, 1999: 5). The described changes can be explored further in order to provide answers to the questions of whether NGOs are engaged in a parallel process of developing governmental and community capacities, and if this process primarily results in strengthening or weakening central government in the long run. The continued NGO focus on the community level and towards local civil societies can be considered a capacity development activity in the sense that it will benefit government and the education sector in the long run, since "organised and engaged community associations can significantly enhance the performance of government agencies" (Krishna, 2003: 361). On a short-term basis, however, such activities principally constitute an empowerment strategy aimed at strengthening local civil society actors, which in turn runs the risk of provoking government scepticism and conflict, and may even undermine its actions.

As one author (Jagannathan, 1999: 44) emphasizes, the fragments of NGO action must be viewed on a smaller scale than the larger educational scenario managed by government. We cannot automatically move from the micro to the macro level. We can, however, observe how (and inquire as to why) some NGOs have oriented their capacity development activities towards government. We have already observed the links between NGOs and various levels of action: from macro policies (EFA and the development agenda), to 'meso' institutions and organizations (ministry of education and schools), to micro responses (local-level, decentralized community action). Despite the widespread participation of NGOs in education, government remains in charge of educational planning and management, and government capacity and competence is therefore crucial for many NGOs involved in education.

From weakening to strengthening governmental capacities

Despite the prominence of NGOs in educational governance, there has traditionally been a minimum of engagement and contact with government. In fact, "the activities of many NGOs, while often praiseworthy in themselves, have been done independently of any reference to government policies or programmes" (Clayton, 1998: 12). The argument for this lack of contact lies, according to NGOs, with the lack of government capacity to engage properly in education provision. This results in some NGOs overtly criticizing government absence. For many governments, especially those that feel that education should be managed solely by the state, NGO work constitutes a form of competition. Having replaced the government rather than contributing to the development of its capacity in education provision, NGOs are criticized for taking part in a process that actively weakens the ability of the government to become a responsible and reliable provider of education. Although it might be too drastic to imply that the main effect of the NGO presence in education has been to weaken the capacities of government, the literature does suggest that the relationship between government and NGOs has been characterized by conflict and competition rather than by cooperation and coordination (USAID, 2002: 22; Batley, 2007: 2). The duplication of tasks has at times been a direct consequence of the lack of dialogue. In addition, many international NGOs have budgets that exceed that of government, which have permitted them to develop parallel, institutionalized structures of service provision (Miwa, 2003). Bypassing government in this way can be considered contradictory to capacity development, as it will not lead to sustainable development (Clayton, 1998: 16).

According to some critics, the fact that aid has gone directly to NGOs because they are considered more efficient, less corrupt and closer to the people than government, has actively contributed to eroding and weakening government capacity (Degnbol-Martinussen, 1999: 170). The current situation on Haiti is a case in point. Given the island's weak state capacity, NGOs have played a fundamental role in service delivery and have become more or less institutionalized as service providers in Haitian society. NGOs are responsible for a large part of the country's education provision (Wood, 2007: 2). Now that the country is no longer under a dictatorship and has a democratically elected government, there is a polarized debate on the impact this parallel service delivery has on state capacity. John Wood affirms that the cooperation of the state, civil society and the international community is

necessary if Haiti is to overcome the major weaknesses in its political and social institutions, successfully combat poverty and get onto the path towards sustainable development (2007: 2).

However, the trade-off between NGO service provision and governmental capacity development is not an easy one, and leads to what Derick W. Brinkerhoff (2007) refers to as the 'two-track' problem: In the short term, NGOs engaged in service provision are not weakening the capacities of government, but replacing them. For example, in an emergency or conflict situation, immediate service delivery activities prevail over the need to build state capacity. In the long term, however, NGOs should be engaged in building state capacities to ensure sustainability and government responsibility in the education sector. The problem is that "the two tracks have fundamentally different strategies, resource levels and timeframes" (Brinkerhoff, 2007: 3). Even though many NGOs remain sceptical, some are beginning to realize that working with government, and having an impact on education from within, is imperative. The 'two-track' problem will persist, especially in fragile or failed states, but it is possible to restore a certain balance between them.

Given NGOs' extensive knowledge of and experience in education provision, the public education sector might be a suitable place to begin strengthening governmental capacities. As Eade (1997: 43), former editor of *Development in Practice* and a long-time contributor to Oxfam's work on development, affirms, "on occasion, it may be appropriate to work predominately through the state, usually through sectors such as the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Agriculture [...] NGOs may be supported to provide training to individuals in both the public and non-governmental sectors". Working with government can improve the education sector by avoiding the duplication of activities, by mainstreaming successful NGO experiences and innovative approaches, and by finding ways to incorporate non-formal education into the formal education system (MacAbbey, 2007: 3). As mentioned, linking NGO action to government bears the promise of mutual benefits for NGOs and government, since "the anchoring of NGO interventions within government institutions while mainstreaming is critical to future sustainability of NGO activities and the development and sustainability of a coherent and functioning public educational system" (Jagannathan, 1999: 44). The earlier example from Haiti has shown some new modes of cooperation between NGOs and government. One such effort is reflected in the Poverty Reduction Strategy, which attempts to engage government and NGOs as partners sharing common goals. In this context, it is a good example of a potentially efficient strategy for capacity development because it "aims to enhance the capacity of the government while recognising the existing social functions, independence and the political role of the CSOs" (Wood, 2007: 3).

Governments' initial scepticism and growing enthusiasm

As NGOs are turning to public sector planning and management activities, governments are becoming more and more open, despite initial scepticism (on the side of government and in the NGO camp). Partnerships are being forged and as a result, different modalities and levels of capacity development emerge. Governments have largely recognized the important role of NGOs, especially concerning service provision to the socially excluded. They are slowly but surely realizing that their national and international education goals (EFA) cannot be reached without the active participation of NGOs. In addition to pure service provision, NGO participation is seen as strengthening the legitimacy of public and social policy. As a result, NGO involvement can improve both upward and downward accountability. Upward accountability is improved by augmenting the chances of reaching internationally set policy goals, while downward accountability is improved by ensuring civil society representation on a national or local level. Such involvement is made easier because of earlier experiences and contacts. In the past, in some way or another, many NGOs have had to deal with local authorities, with government officers or local institutions when engaging in activities such as project updates, informing the ministry about their activities, or participating in local meetings (Clayton, 1998). Building the capacities of government agents has perhaps even occurred to some extent as a side product (an implicit learning process) of informal collaboration with authorities about service delivery. In some countries, the process of formalization of non-formal education provided by NGOs has also drawn NGOs closer to government, since it implies "the blurring of boundaries between educational activities of the government and those of NGOs, and thus underscores the increasingly complex and important NGO-government relations" (Miwa, 2003: 247).

Capacity development nevertheless implies that cooperation between government and NGOs goes beyond informal contact, formalisation, or the 'out-sourcing' of service delivery activities to NGOs. These kinds of contacts can serve as a starting point for deeper cooperation, of which examples will be given. However, mutual resentment and lack of trust remain important obstacles to cooperation. The Mozambican NGO Progresso and its Canadian

counterpart CODE confirm, for example, that "the staff and members of Progresso have long-established personal links to the structures of the Ministry of Education and Culture and other governmental departments, but it is also a confidence that cannot be taken for granted and must be constantly nurtured and earned" (Sequeira, 2007: 38). USAID (2002: 62) has conducted research on partnerships in education between NGOs and governments and emphasizes the complexity of NGO-government relationships: "In the least collaborative cases, government reacts to NGO interventions as trespassing and an affront to government legitimacy. NGOs, on the other hand, treat government as a constraint to be ignored or avoided in order to meet their self-appointed moral mandate."

Governments generally react positively to NGO involvement in education provision, but less so when it comes to capacity development activities that might be considered too 'political' or 'extensive' and that could endanger the governmental monopoly of the education sector. For USAID (2003: 3), conflicts relating to capacity issues emerge precisely when NGOs take on activities that go beyond pure education provision, such as training, coaching teachers and developing curricula and learning materials. By the same token, the government officials they interviewed considered policy participation to be 'off limits' for NGOs. The involvement of NGOs as policy partners in Zambia is another case in point. Despite the fact that external agencies encourage deeper NGO involvement, governments remain reticent (Norad, 2004: 24). A similar case is that of Uganda, where NGOs remain marginalized in policy and technical dialogue (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DAC, 2003: 80). A case study from Malawi (Kadzamira, 2002: 16) asserts that "within MOEST (the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology) there is a general feeling that NGOs' activities should be confined to their traditional roles of service provision particularly in areas where government capacity is lacking and in implementing and testing education innovations". Sustained government control of NGOs is translated by a visible preference for NGO action at the local, decentralized level as opposed to interventions aimed at the ministry of education.

Despite government reticence, NGOs can exert a considerable influence on education policy not only through an advocacy role during policy formulation but also at the local level in the implementation phase. According to Clayton (1998: 18), the implementation process is a highly political and often contested phase, with room for external influence. It is therefore "through the engagement with the state at the level of implementation ... that NGOs can have a direct influence beyond the direct material outputs of their own projects". The implementation level is in fact where most NGOs have developed contacts with the ministry of education, especially in regions where decentralization efforts have been widespread (Razon, 2004: 21). Taking part in this phase of the policy cycle is compatible with the view of capacity development as a process of change management and a qualitative way for NGOs to scale up their activities. It can increase NGO impact in a different yet political manner. For example, the PLEM Programme (Promotion of a Literate Environment in Mozambique) is implemented in close cooperation with and within the formal education system. Through this programme, the NGOs involved contribute to and support "increased planning, implementing and monitoring capacity within the education system at the provincial and national level" (Sequeira, 2007: 43).

Seen from this perspective, NGOs involved in implementation are not co-opted by governments or necessarily conceded a minor role in education governance: "If NGOs can act as catalysts for improved public sector management through engagement with the state at the level of implementation then they are playing an important political role" (Clayton, 1998: 19). Equally, NGOs can have an impact on the capacities of government in education planning by establishing a policy partnership with the government, and by engaging in policy capacity development. The idea is that NGOs can contribute and add value to the elaboration of education strategies to address specific goals (Edgar, 2005: 14). In addition to NGO-government partnerships in implementation and policy formulation, a third type of strategic partnership (that often overlaps) is the mainstreaming and scaling up of NGO innovations by government (examples of these three types of partnership are provided below). Even in countries where the government is essentially hostile towards NGOs, successful NGO projects have the potential to alter attitudes about their merit. In other words: "What happens within civil society therefore has the potential to reshape the political contexts that prevent governments from building on and learning from the creative energies of NGOs" (Fisher, 2003: 26).

A fragile and context-specific partnership in evolution

Concrete NGO-government partnerships in education are not yet a generalized practice, but they have become more than just an exception to the rule. The NGO BRAC in Bangladesh has established close cooperative links with the government in the implementation phase. The Early Learning Project, which provides training and support for primary and secondary school teachers, is a case in point (Ryan, Jennings and White, 2007: 38). BRAC has been

included as an official partner in the project, which aims at establishing 5,530 pre-primary early learning centres over the period 2008-2010. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, and with the support of UNICEF, initiated the project. A review of BRAC by NORAD in 2007 highlighted the good relations between local officials and BRAC staff, which forms the basis of a functioning partnership that is appreciated by the government. Ethiopia is another case in point. Its Ministry of Capacity Building has elaborated an NGO capacity-building strategy that aims to encourage civil society organizations to play a role in the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme (SDPRP) (Watson, 2005: 9). The SDPRP encourages the establishment of partnerships between government and civil society, as well as institutionalizing dialogue related to policies, planning and implementation issues. On the other hand, a case study from India underscores the fragile nature of NGO-government collaboration. According to the NGOs surveyed, they, "despite having achieved considerable national credibility, continued to be susceptible to the vagaries of governmental policies and directives. The NGOs had to often endure sudden shifts in policies, undoing several years of fruitful collaboration" (Jagannathan, 1999: 29). The actual gap between political rhetoric and reality remains considerable. According to Action Aid (2002: 3), "NGO and civil society involvement in the management and implementation of education policies is just on paper but not in practice".

There is clearly a context-specific dimension to the emergence of these relationships, and one should be careful not to generalize. Important regional differences must therefore be taken into account in order to nuance and understand the wider context influencing the potential for NGO impact. According to Fisher (2003: 22), "the only safe generalization about Africa is that by the late 1990s, most governments were more aware of NGOs than they were ten years earlier". He elaborates on three key factors that define the national political context within which policies towards NGOs develop. These are (1) type of regime, (2) political culture, and (3) degree of state capacity and stability. For the purposes of this paper, we will incorporate these categories into our argument.

(1) *Type of regime.* According to research, democratic regimes are strongly correlated with openness towards NGOs. In Nepal, for example, NGOs have been present since the 1950s, when the feudal regime was officially abolished. When the education system became more centrally controlled in 1971, the role and impact of civil society decreased. However, a new space for civil society opened up parallel to the democratization and liberalization of the country in the 1990s (UNESCO, 2001*b*: 16). In Latin America, growing cooperation between NGOs and the authorities is considered a consequence of the emergence of democratic regimes (Degnbo-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 166). Many countries in the developing world remain hostile towards NGOs, but some have become more open over time. Whereas China is a recurrent example of the former attitude, Degnbol-Martinussen (1999: 167) refers to Indonesia as an example of the latter. In Asia and the Middle East, governments have attempted to co-opt and subordinate NGOs as client organizations or have created so-called GONGOs (governmental NGOs). Within the NGO sector in some of these countries, organizations actively work against independent development-oriented NGOs. In sub-Saharan Africa, governmental control is described in more widely varying terms, ranging from repression to a milder form of control-orientation (Degnbol-Martinussen, and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 167).

(2) *Political culture.* The scope and nature of NGO work is determined largely by the political culture – whether there is a tradition of well-functioning civil society organizations or not. South Asia, for example, has a long history of indigenous NGOs working in education (Moran, 2004: 30). India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are countries that are recognized for their openness towards NGOs. According to Ahmad (2006: 631), "there are probably more and bigger NGOs in Bangladesh than in any other country of its size". Their influence has led to an increasing impact and political influence on government. As a result, in recent years, "government has been incorporating NGOs into various committees with other line ministries from unions to the national levels and sharing and learning from the experience of NGOs in different sectors" (Alam, no date: 20). Nevertheless, in some countries, NGOs are not perceived as legitimately representing national or local civil society. In some countries, faith-based organizations might be more representative of a given community and might thus be more successful in creating partnerships with the government (faith-based organizations may also constitute operating development NGOs , although this distinction is not always clear). In other countries, the legislation has established a strong regulative framework for NGOs, restricting their activities and the possibilities for scaling up (see Mayhew, 2005, for a discussion of the role of NGO regulation and legislation by governments in Asia). Such regulation may actually be to the benefit of NGOs. In countries that have had to deal with so-called 'briefcase' NGOs – NGOs created exclusively for personal profit – legislation has proved helpful for serious NGOs, such as in Pakistan (Anzar, 2002: 3). In the absence of regulation, where self-reporting is the

only way to measure accountability, governments are likely to be more reticent towards NGOs. Government regulation might therefore prove to be a source for cooperation between NGOs and governments. Egypt and Thailand are countries that originally were sceptical of NGOs, but a change in attitude has taken place as a consequence of NGOs' increasingly important role as service providers (Clayton, Oakley and Taylor, 2000: 15).

(3) *The degree of state capacity is the third element with a clear impact on NGO–government relations.* When state capacity is weak, a government rarely interferes in the work of NGOs, especially "at the micro level in remote regions or in city slums mostly because they do not have the capacity to do so" (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 167). State capacity, compared to that of NGOs, is also an important factor in this respect and is equally linked to issues of legitimacy and 'confidence'. Whereas 'confident' states may more easily accept NGO intervention, states that are considered 'threatened' or 'illegitimate' are more susceptible to the potential 'damage' NGOs can do and consider NGOs more as competitors than as potential partners.

There are some regional patterns in NGO-government relations: South Asian or Latin American NGOs are generally large and well-functioning and have greater capacity than African NGOs (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 148). In Asia, NGO success stories have spread and contributed to a more favourable NGO environment in the region. However, Fisher (2003: 20) asserts that civil society in Latin America is more autonomous than in Africa or Asia because of its links to the position of the middle class. In any case, it is difficult to generalize because various factors play a role (state capacity, legitimacy, confidence, and so on), and because there are few truly representative case studies in the literature.

4 Activities and level of intervention – towards a working definition of capacity development

After having reviewed NGOs' increasing attention to capacity development, their interpretation of this concept and the concurrent reorientation towards government, it is pertinent to explore how these changes translate into concrete NGO capacity development activities. What is their impact on government, and does this impact reflect a 'typical' NGO way of thinking, coherent with traditional NGO action and values? There are various entry points for developing capacity within the education sector, since capacity needs are widespread and affect all levels of government in many developing countries. Where NGOs choose to engage themselves is linked to the objective at hand. According to Lusthaus (1999: 14), any NGO strategy will in fact reflect a deeper perception of how development can take place. It is therefore interesting to consider the particularities of NGO action in capacity development. Materu, Land, Hauck and Knight (2001: 158) refers to this as 'strategic' entry points, where, for example, the local level is likely to be more open than the national level.

We will attempt to discern the levels preferred by NGOs and their scope of involvement. The preferred levels of NGO action are reflected in their activities on the ground, which are in turn linked to the areas that NGOs consider key to development within the education sector. After briefly reviewing (A) the scope of involvement, the levels of interventions are classified according to three distinct, yet overlapping strategies (B): (1) building schools and communities, (2) the bottom-up process of organizational change within decentralized government, and (3) the top-down process of mainstreaming and policy participation. As we move up the ladder of levels, approaching central government and the public administration through these strategies, the potential for NGOs' impact on government capacity increases, but the scope of NGO involvement decreases.

A partial shift in activities and levels: fragmented capacity development initiatives

(A) Scope of involvement – no phasing out of traditional activities

First of all, it is useful to provide a quantitative impression of how involved NGOs actually are in what they refer to as capacity development activities. INTRAC research in 1994, 1998 and 2006 suggests than more than 90 per cent of international NGOs engage in capacity building (Hailey and James, 2006: 1). The 2006 survey found that 45 per cent estimated that they spend almost one third of their overall programme funds on capacity building. However, the definition of capacity building (and the survey's methodology) is not discussed in the study, which mostly refers to capacity building of civil society. One question of interest for us regards the extent to which NGOs prioritize capacity development of civil society organizations: in 2006, over 40 per cent of NGO respondents placed a strong emphasis on this category of capacity building compared to 18 per cent in 1998. INTRAC's interpretation of this evolution corresponds to the changes described in this paper, as "one which probably quite accurately reflects the shifts within the general development sector" (Lipson, 2006: 9). These findings correspond to a study conducted by UNESCO (the CCNGO/EFA), based on 23 NGOs implicated in the CCNGO/EFA work, in which 'enhancing the competences of educational actors' and 'social mobilization' are tied (86.2 per cent) as being the most important out of 19 activities (UNESCO, 2001*a*: 7).

A third study is worth mentioning to complete the panorama on NGOs involved in capacity development. The Swedish donor agency Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) finalized in 2005 a study on Sida-financed NGOs within the education sector. The study is based on a questionnaire and data has been collected from over 300 projects in 77 countries. One indicator used to measure capacity development involves looking at the immediate target group of NGO interventions (although many NGOs have several immediate target groups). According to the NGOs covered in the Sida study, 76 per cent of the projects' target groups were students, 40 per cent teachers, 15 per cent parents and only 9 per cent government officials (23 per cent 'other'). When asked what activities had been carried out in the project, 'direct teaching' was the response in 67 per cent of the projects, 44 per cent were involved in 'teacher training', 40 per cent in 'educational material', 31 per cent in 'organisational/ institutional development', 30 per cent in 'buildings and maintenance', and 15 per cent in 'curriculum development' (15 per cent 'other'). Most of the projects included two or more of these activities (74 per cent), and almost 40 per cent of the projects were involved in three or more activities. Whereas 22 per cent of the projects aimed at

strengthening the education system inside the government education system, 35 per cent of the projects aimed at strengthening the education system outside the government education system (but with government collaboration), and 24 per cent of the projects had no or marginal government collaboration (2005: 27).

Even though one cannot generalize these findings to the total 'population' of Northern development NGOs in the education sector, they largely reflect the existing literature on this subject. It seems that while relatively few NGOs are entirely devoted to capacity development activities, it is nevertheless considered one of several important tools for improving the education system, the most important one remaining education provision. NGOs still perceive service provision as an important and necessary activity. Capacity development remains a complementary strategy that in the long run can become a main strategy for NGO action, without necessarily leading to the phasing out of direct education provision. The experience of BRAC, described in NORAD's Mid-Term Review of 2007 (Ryan, Jennings and White, 2007: 3), is a case in point:

> At the beginning of the current phase it was envisaged that BEP's [BRAC Education Programme] role as a provider of education would gradually decrease while its role in partnering government to improve the overall access to quality public education would increase. The MTR (mid-term review) team believes that in deciding its strategic direction BEP should give consideration to maintaining both roles. There remains an irrefutable need for the provision of primary education and the changes made to this current programme in 2006 indicate an acknowledgement of this reality. At the same time there has been some noteworthy progress in working with government at pre-primary and secondary levels and with a number of ministries and directorates. As relations with government allow this work should be continued or expanded.

The example of Dhaka Ahsania Mission in Bangladesh (DAM) is another case in point. The NGO considers organizational capacity development as one of three basic pillars in developing capacities in education. The other two are the professional development of educators and needs-based educational resource development.

This confirms the hypothesis about capacity development as a way of scaling up NGO action, without phasing out traditional activities. However, this is not the case for all NGOs involved in education and for those choosing to take on capacity development activities, the reasons are as diverse as there are NGOs. For some, assuming capacity development activities might be linked to their own capacities, realizing that they have "reached the limit of their managerial resources to support the implementation of their expanded activities and a further scaling up would require a different type of partnership with the larger education system" (Jagannathan, 1999: 38). According to USAID (2002: 68), the issue of funding and autonomy might constitute another decisive factor in pursuing capacity development activities or not, putting short-term, results-based demands on NGO action. Conversely, "the programs of independently financed NGOs have been free to develop more 'process'-oriented programs that aim to create a certain relationship between government and communities, rather than specific educational results" (2002: 68). One should therefore generalize with care and keep in mind the diverse nature and action of NGOs. The point is that the diversity of NGOs continues to characterize their scope of involvement, level of action, sustainability and their impact on government capacities. Clayton's study on NGOs and decentralization in Africa (1998) finds little evidence for NGOs collaborating with decentralized government in any coordinated manner. NGO initiatives remain highly fragmented. However, some of the fragmented initiatives have turned into success stories. These examples are natural focal points when attempting to discern the levels and type of activities associated with capacity development.

Levels of intervention

Building schools and communities

NGOs privilege the individual level through a sustained focus on training activities within non-formal as well as formal education. In addition to teacher training, NGOs are widely engaged in training principals, strengthening the capacities of school inspectors, and strengthening parent-teacher associations and school management committees. A special session devoted to the involvement of civil society in Education for All (during the 46th session of the International Conference on Education in 2000) (UNESCO, 2001*b*: 13-14) exemplifies the changes occurring on the local level in Ghana, which includes:

> … an expansion from playing the role of resource mobilization and local education management to participation in defining education and assessing quality and processes; the development from loosely structured to

institutionalized and systematic involvement in local education governance through Teacher-Parent Associations, School Management Committees and School Performance Appraisal Meetings.

Generally, strategies directed at the school aim to develop capacities and participatory experience in school planning, management, monitoring and evaluation. In this manner the school is regarded as an organizational unit, not simply a group of individuals, and as such is an object of capacity development.

A USAID study on partnerships in education (2002: 52) emphasizes how NGOs work to promote changes in the institutional culture at the community level by changing attitudes about education and creating expectations for education outcomes in order to invigorate local educational organizations. Save the Children US has elaborated a double capacity-building strategy that constitutes the framework for its actions in Ethiopia. This strategy consists of developing capacities at both the programmatic and institutional levels, and takes place at the community level – for example, the programme Partnership for Innovations in Education (PIE), which is an initiative aimed at marginalized and disadvantaged communities (2002: 10). It includes training activities, workshops and forums for sharing experience and experiential learning. Participants include community leaders, partner NGOs, local education officials, school administration and staff, and parents and teachers (Save the Children, 2002: 10). It is a fitting example of NGO action on the community level (the interpretation of the community has traditionally been civil societies and local NGOs), in parallel with developing capacities at the organizational level of the school. The risk, according to USAID (2003: 8), is that "NGOs generally work in communities as if they were isolated entities to be made self-sufficient".

Bottom-up: decentralized government and organizational change

In a decentralized context, however, district officials become the link between local communities and the central government. NGO action risks de-capacitating the government and its efforts in the education sector if it does not acknowledge the links between the local and central levels in assuring sustainable education outcomes. A second strategy, following a bottom-up logic of impact, focuses on decentralized government and aims for organizational change. Much of the literature recognizes the effectiveness of NGO action at the local level and its involvement in school management. Many authors, however, seem to take as a given the incapacity of NGOs to influence at the central level. "While they [NGOs] may not be able to improve government policy and practice at a national level, they may have the potential to improve local governance through working with decentralized government agencies in the management of local services" (Clayton, 1998: 20). Others are more positive and envisage the NGO impact 'trickling up', taking into consideration the fact that the "the state-community partnership reflects a microcosm of national education governance" (UNESCO, 2001b: 14). Such a process can start by widening and deepening the NGO impact at the community level, while at the same time recognizing the importance of central government. This fits within the decentralized context and is linked to, and coherent with, the perceived importance of decentralized communities in most NGO strategies. In fact, at times NGOs consider operational partnerships with local authorities as more effective than with local NGOs, reflecting the change of focus from civil society to government (Sorgenfrei, 2004: 28).

Action Aid is one of the NGOs that is actively participating alongside local government. In Ethiopia, Action Aid has organized an education committee of NGOs to interact with district officials (USAID, 2003: 8). In 1998, Action Aid launched the campaign Elimu in several countries, which aimed to strengthen the voice of poor people in education decision-making at all levels. It encouraged community participation in school management, involvement with the district education authorities, and access to policy forums (Action Aid, 2002). The Alternative Basic Education Programme Amhara in Ethiopia, directed towards children from poor or isolated communities, has been described as a "rare example of successful cooperation between an NGO and a Regional Cooperation Bureau [regional district authorities]" (Watson and Yohannes, 2005: 7). As opposed to most other NGOs that have taken on such activities in addition to their involvement in service provision, the Indian NGO Centre for Youth and Social Development has been involved in capacity development since its creation, and is a fitting example of individual and organizational action on the local level. It defines itself as en 'enabling institution' in the health and education sector and promotes participatory governance (Uvin, Jain and Brown, 2000: 1413). Training is one of its core mandates, aimed at the government, public institutions, NGOs and community-based organizations. BRAC's strategy is a similar one: service delivery is recognized as an important instrument for leverage, while the aim remains elsewhere in the education system: "The opening that the pre-primary centres create for other forms of cooperation with government should be fully exploited" (Ryan, Jennings and White, 2007: 38-39). From a capacity development perspective, these initiatives take place primarily at the organizational level. They have the potential to influence the tasks of

regional offices of ministries of education informally by enhancing human resources and the information available, as well as increasing transparency and accountability by providing consultation and helping to shape decisions.

By focusing on innovative approaches and local district officials, NGOs are in a prime position to have a direct impact on government education strategies. However, most district officials look to the ministry for advice and direction rather than outwards to the community (USAID, 2002: 18). Interestingly, Materu *et al*. (2001: 42) consider that the capacity constraints faced by the local administration are in fact a major obstacle for NGO collaboration:

> Inadequate management capacities, fiscal constraints as well as other basic incentive factors affect the performance and motivation of local administrators. The challenge facing local governments in the wake of decentralisation cannot be underestimated. Work pressures are often such that it is difficult to find time to invest in innovative processes such as joint action.

As a result, despite increasing NGO interaction with government, this type of partnership remains limited, fragmented and often informal. There are, however, examples to the contrary. Lugaz and De Grauwe (2009) have shown through their research how such situations actually make NGO support to local offices more attractive, as is the case in Benin.

Top-down: mainstreaming and policy participation

An alternative to the bottom-up logic supported by some NGOs involved in capacity development activities is to approach central government directly. Many NGOs realize that "engagement at the field level without corresponding and focused engagement at national level may not result in policy change that will outlast good working relationships among field-level staff" (Ryan, Jennings and White, 2007: 58). NGOs are increasingly focusing their activities on government with the desire to alter practices in the mainstream system. However, the impact of their activities on the rules that govern public administration and staff management is extremely limited. Nevertheless, NGOs can have an impact on government capacities in two essential ways: by participating in policy-related issues and mainstreaming education innovations (despite the sustained resistance of some governments). In this way, NGOs can have an impact on policy and on the informal distribution of roles between the participating actors.

Equally, NGOs can have an impact on government capacities by taking on a watchdog role. They can do this through budget tracking, watching over the use of resources and monitoring government compliance with set goals or values. The distinction between being a policy partner and a watchdog corresponds largely to the distinction between being an insider or an outsider in relation to government when attempting to influence policy, norms and practices. NGOs can effectively contribute to capacity development when invited by government to offer advice and to participate in the policy dialogue and the drafting of policy plans. However, being a policy partner does not necessarily mean that they have a significant impact on government capacities. If NGO participation is marginal and mainly the result of outside pressure, the impact on government may be practically non-existent. Governments must consult with and learn from NGOs if their capacities are to be developed on policy issues. The same influence can be exerted (although probably to a lesser extent) through lobbying and traditional advocacy activities. Despite the difficulties involved in measuring such an influence, it is conceivable that NGO involvement and input in various phases of the policy cycle will benefit the recipients of education, and can trigger a mutual learning process for the actors involved. Capacity development can probably best be acquired in a consensual environment in order to change public policy or engage in public sector reform.

In Malawi, NGOs such as Save the Children, Action Aid and Care International have participated as members of technical teams in the drafting and reviewing of education policy (such as in the PRSP) (Kadzamira and Kunje, 2002: 17). In Burkina Faso, NGOs have been involved in the development of a national plan for basic education; this participation occurred primarily at the central level (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DAC, 2003: 58). In Zambia, NGOs are also increasingly involved in policy-making (however, the Joint Evaluation Report deems the presence of UNESCO in Zambia to be very low – Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DAC, 2003: 80): national partnership mechanisms for NGO involvement in the EFA process have been elaborated in order to "advise government on education policy and practice, capitalize on existing knowledge and expertise in the area of education, create consensus and a shared understanding of education" (UNESCO, 2001b: 18). Among the participants in such partnerships are ministry of education staff, development partners, NGOs, members of parliament, and so on. Such initiatives remain nevertheless a *new area with scope for further development* (2001b: 18, 12). A case study of six NGOs from India (Jagannathan, 1999) has attempted to enquire into "how NGOs can support and enrich education programs of a national dimension and cooperate with government in a

broader macro setting". Indian NGOs such as Eklavya and the Centre for Education Management and Development (CEMD) work with the government for school improvement and pedagogical renewal through management inputs, and academic and administrative restructuring. Eklavya's teaching programme incorporates models for school administration, evaluation and examination systems (Jagannathan, 1999: 24). In fact, this programme is unique in the sense that it was the first time an NGO was allowed into government schools, making it a "forerunner in establishing an effective collaboration within the government school system". CEMD is also unique in its work compared to other NGOs because it has engaged in capacity development since its creation. The NGO engages in leadership training, human resource management, institutional planning, training of administrative staff, and teaching school principals management strategies. It is currently collaborating with the government in order to apply the 'management approach' in a number of Delhi schools, and works with members of the education administrative staff in order to sensitize them to this new approach.

Plan Nederlands is another NGO that recognizes that it "needs to widen its institutional relations and its area of influence to ensure that the achieved results go beyond the classroom level and lead to policy changes in various countries. In order to achieve sustainability of the educational innovations, it is necessary to participate in educational reform initiatives" (2005: 53). As a result, the Quality Learning Program initiated by Plan aims at giving technical support to schools and improving the capacity of local and national governments (2005: 19). In Ethiopia, the government has officially recognized alternative strategies to education – that is, non-formal education – and the importance of such innovations in reaching EFA. Save the Children US is one NGO that actively encourages the government to take a step further in the direction of mainstreaming these non-formal innovations (2002: 9, 15). Another example is the NGO Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), which has developed analysis tools and courses on gender issues aimed at government. To date, "seven best practices have emerged and consultations held with ministries of education and action taken for the replication and mainstreaming of some of them" (FAWE website, retrieved 3 April 2008).

Contrary to the bottom-up logic of influencing capacity development by 'trickling up', being a policy partner means taking part in a top-down process of influence. This has the potential of translating into a capacity development activity affecting all levels, particularly if the system context is considered favourable.

The system context – the importance of moments of change and partnerships

Moments of change

The wider system context was touched on briefly when the regional differences were evoked in relation to government attitudes about NGO participation. An additional factor, more directly linked to capacity development perspectives, is the importance of moments of change in a given sector. Such moments of change may be related to the process of decentralization, public sector reform or the absence of government capacity. Generally, the change correlates with the willingness of government to cooperate and partner up with NGOs, opening a window of opportunity. This is a very different scenario compared to one in which NGOs, often unsuccessfully, have to push hard for more participation. With a reform process underway, new actors and roles emerge, and new ties and contacts have to be made.

The NGOs CODE and Progresso (Sequeira, 2007) confirm that the question of timing was essential in their efforts to have a wider impact on government – their efforts coincided and aligned with the education reform process. Fisher (2003: 32) makes the same argument: "Social or managerial innovations developed by NGOs are more likely to influence policies on redistributive social issues [...] when governments are already committed to major change". NORAD's mid-term review of BRAC in 2007 (Ryan, 2007: 59) described the current changes in the political sphere, such as the mid-term review of the Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-II), as favourable circumstances for taking on a more proactive role towards government in order to influence national initiatives to reform primary education. The participation of NGOs in planning, management and evaluation within the reform process is also encouraged by donor agencies (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs/DAC, 2003: 58). In Pakistan, the decentralization process has resulted in the revival of the local council structure (Anzar, 2002: 5). Interestingly, many of the local councillors are young people with previous experience in NGO work, and are therefore considered promising focal points and government intermediates for NGOs. Materu (2001: 46) evokes the fact that the presence of partnership proponents among government officials is often an important factor in cases where NGO participation is not institutionalized. However, dependence upon such supportive agents can result in ad hoc

initiatives, contrary to sustained processes of cooperation. Materu states that "the turnover of supportive elected Councillors and technical staff can slow emerging processes" (2001: 46). NGOs are highly aware of this risk. Plan Nederland is one of the NGOs that recognizes the need to respond to changing governance in the education sector. New government bodies may become in charge of developing and implementing education policies, and Plan therefore "*needs to develop relationships with those new bodies*" (2005: 51).

Normally, NGOs' contribution to government capacity development in education assumes the existence of a public education system, and that capacity can be developed from within with the help of NGOs. A very different scenario is when state capacity is practically non-existent, as is the case in a post-conflict country in the process of reconstruction. A similar scenario would be a country in which the government is unwilling to take on its responsibilities vis-à-vis its citizens. This is, however, rare in the case of education because it is also a force of control. The dilemma between immediate, short-term service provision and long-term capacity development is, as mentioned briefly when explaining this 'trade-off', weighed and analyzed somewhat differently in states that are characterized as 'fragile' or 'failed', and in which capacities need to be built before they can be developed.

Afghanistan is a case in point. In the aftermath of the Taliban regime, the state was too weak to assume its responsibilities in respect of its citizens. NGOs stepped in to provide immediate services. Concurrently, they acquired a decisive role in assisting the Ministry of Education in policy planning, management and monitoring, thus building capacity where little existed before. NGOs contributed in a significant way to building the capacities of the education system by developing teacher curricula, training teachers and building the capacity of programme managers, community workers and other NGO staff (USAID, 2006: 11). NGOs have further expanded their services in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, concentrating on rural areas where government schools are non-existent. It is in critical situations like these that NGOs can take the lead and shape an emerging education system. This supports the argument that NGOs have increased impact in countries undergoing essential moments of change. In addition to building sector capacity, a long-term approach to capacity development based on confidence building can provide tools for creating consensus in a country that has been subject to internal conflict, considering that "the goal of all capacity development programmes must be to strengthen the ability of those trained to contribute to the construction of democracy in the country" (Wood, 2007: 3).

The intermediary role of donor agencies

NGOs rarely act alone and by networking and allying themselves with other relevant actors in development, they can have even greater potential to make an impact on government. "Building partnerships between stakeholders to facilitate civil society's influence in social planning and decision-making at the local and regional level is essential" (IFUW, 2007: 6). This is especially true given the many cases of government resistance to NGO participation. By aligning their interests and capacities, donor agencies and NGOs (both local and international) can establish effective partnerships. As capacity development activities have grown in importance, the partnership debate has become more and more important and the 'workshop' culture has shifted in the direction of more in-depth, long-term engagement. There is a risk, however, that such partnerships could exclude governments, as donor agencies continue to build the capacities of civil society and not that of the state. As mentioned earlier, capacity development implies a change of focus from the former to the latter, but in reality this is not always the case.

In addition to improving the direct provision of education services, partnerships can encourage capacity development, knowledge sharing, and organizational learning (Uvin, 2000: 1414). The intermediary role of donor agencies is an example of a relevant partnership constellation in a capacity development context. Donor agencies can act as an intermediary between NGOs and government, and become a partnership facilitator. Many bilateral donor agencies involved in development partner up with international or local NGOs, a tendency that is linked to international scepticism of government action and the alternative role of NGOs in the education sector. There are, however, important differences between donors in relation to non-state service providers in this respect, and these are interesting to consider. Some of these have been mapped by Wakefield in a study from 2004. Her findings indicate that while the Asian Development Bank (), USAID and the World Bank are perceived as actors engaging with NGOs in all sectors, Sida is perceived as being more cautious. Donors are generally more reticent when it comes to suggesting that governments consider withdrawing from direct service provision, particularly in the education sector (Wakefield, 2004: 2). CIDA is an agency that has worked well with NGOs for many years, but it is increasingly orienting itself towards government, preferring to support government strategies through SWAps

(2004: 5). International organizations such as UNESCO have, according to Wakefield, little direct contact with local NGOs, but play an important role in influencing governments' approach towards them.

Donor agencies principally establish partnerships with international NGOs which, in turn, partner up with local Southern NGOs. In their overall strategies, however, donors emphasize the importance of supporting government policy and balancing support for NGOs and government. A good example of a partnership between an NGO and a bilateral donor is the PLEM Programme (Promotion of a Literate Environment) in Mozambique, funded by CIDA. In 2005, CIDA contributed $6 million to the project, which was being implemented by the Canadian NGO CODE in collaboration with the local NGO Progresso. CODE handled all administrative and financial matters, while Progresso concentrated on the concrete capacity development effort (Sequeira, Modesto and Maddox, 2007). In Malawi (Kadzamira and Kunje, 2002: 23), donors have influenced the development of civil society by funding NGO programmes. Some donors have even assisted in the development of NGOs themselves. USAID is a case in point: it has assisted several NGOs with strengthening their resource capacity. DANIDA is another donor that has participated actively in assisting the development of civil society and the funding of NGOs. Sometimes, however, NGOs are marginalized by donor agencies' cooperation with government, even when there is an explicit will to work with civil society. In Cambodia, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS) has organized joint consultation meetings with the Education Sector Working Group of donors and the NGO Education Partnership. However, the collaboration between the Ministry and the donor group is perceived by NGOs as being more substantial than that with the NGO Education Partnership (Kitamura, 2007: 37). In general, according to USAID, "Governments perceive international NGOs as an extension of donor programs, rather than as independent actors – if their funding comes from donors" (2002: 30).

Inter-NGO partnerships: An alternative model for capacity development

The traditional role of NGOs in the education sector has been associated with service provision. Today, this is changing as the Southern NGO sector has grown and international NGOs have undergone a process of professionalizing, moving slowly but steadily away from the 'project' approach. Increasingly, international NGOs (INGOs) no longer fulfil a direct implementing role and, much like donor agencies, they partner up with local NGOs – that is, they fund the projects they previously implemented (Harrison, 2007: 390). INGOs assume an organizational support role and engage in capacity development activities aimed at their Southern counterparts. In addition to the sustained activities of service provision (especially in emergency situations), these multifunctional INGOs engage in 'help to self help' efforts at the local level and manage to remain active, primarily through advocacy action at the macro level in national and international settings. INGOs "aim to change the structures and institutions of society that keep large groups of the population in poverty, typically combine concrete development initiatives with advocacy, and place very great emphasis on building the capacity of their partner organizations in the South so that they themselves can carry out development work and act as advocates for weak groups" (Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen, 1999: 145).

Ideally, the ultimate goal of this strategy would be to make their presence redundant, at least in terms of capacity building, thus allowing local NGOs to fully complement state efforts in the education sector. By helping local NGOs develop their proper capacities, international NGOs contribute to the strengthening of local civil society as well as the education system as a whole, though in a more indirect manner. Save the Children Norway (Helland, 2004) is one such example. It has chosen to withdraw from direct implementation and focus on supporting partnerships instead, with the aim of enhancing the capacity of its partners with regard to planning, impact monitoring and evaluation. It does this by engaging in training, logistics, information sharing, exchange visits and joint planning exercises. CARE International in Malawi (Kadzamira and Kunje, 2002) also supports local NGOs.

Critics describe this process as a new form of 'donorship' rather than a real partnership, endangering NGO values such as independency and ownership. As INGOs increasingly support their local partners through capacity-building programmes, the much-debated North-South issues resurge and bring back the question of the domination of Northern over Southern NGOs, and what implications this has for future development work. As Eade confirms (2007: 636), "NGOs can, and do, pick up and then abandon their Southern 'partners' without being called to account". Eade (2007: 634) equally suggests that the term 'capacity building' only applies to Southern NGOs: "How relevant are development NGOs to capacity building? Reading some of the literature, one could be forgiven for thinking both that capacity building is an exclusively Southern 'need', and that international NGOs are among those best placed to meet it".

A study conducted on French NGOs' approach to capacity building, while confirming this view, finds however that some NGOs do realize that capacity building is something that also can be applied to Northern NGOs, and that "it might be inappropriate for French NGOs to conduct capacity building in the South in areas where they themselves needed strengthening" (Sorgenfrei, 2004: 14). Mitlin, however, uses the example of Action Aid to illustrate how the distinction between a Northern and Southern NGO is not always clear. This NGO has restructured itself from being a Northern NGO with UK-based headquarters to one based in Johannesburg "with all country programmes being equally involved in determining the direction of the organization" (2007: 1703-1704). Differences in the strength of NGOs are also visible in the policy field. Richard Batley of the International Development Department at the University of Birmingham confirms that where opportunities for NGO influence have been formalized, it principally includes large NGOs with the capacity to represent themselves (2008: 2). Local NGOs often do not have the necessary capacity to engage the government effectively (Furtado, 2001: 8). On the other hand, partnerships also represent the opportunity for local NGOs to communicate their vision, and scale up or export successful innovations in the education sector on a national or international level. As Fisher (2003: 33) confirms, "technical, managerial and strategic knowledge gained through grassroots experience has influenced governments worldwide". This is the case for some prominent Southern NGOs. South-South learning and capacity development are important aspects of their work: the NGO Dhaka Ahsania Mission in Bangladesh (DAM) implements direct programmes for capacity development for local NGOs working in the education sector, and helps to develop resources in this field.

The implications of these partnerships in relation to capacity development in government are ambiguous. The evolving partnership constellations between Northern and Southern NGOs constitute a 'work in progress'. It is therefore too soon to tell whether government capacities within the education sector will primarily be strengthened or weakened as a result of this collaboration. The current scenario can be summarized as follows: donor agencies prioritize governments over NGOs, at least on the rhetorical level. Yet NGOs continue to play a vital role in the education sector and remain heavily funded by donor agencies. The previous service provision activities of donor-supported INGOs are increasingly being delegated to local NGOs. INGOs take on a managerial and capacity developing role directed towards their local partners and contact with central government is made primarily through advocacy or policy participation.

Two interpretations of this evolution can be envisaged: firstly, the diversification of the roles and affiliations of the actors surrounding the governmental education system can create a hierarchy of non-governmental impact. INGOs grow increasingly powerful at the expense of local NGOs. As INGOs focus on developing the capacities of local NGOs, and local NGOs focus on education provision, an education structure parallel to the state might evolve, bypassing and replacing government. This alternative does not diverge much from what has been the traditional NGO strategy in education and what is still the case in many countries where government capacities remain weak. The immediate effect is to maintain the fragmented and often uneven structure of education provision, where government and NGOs complement and sometimes compete with each other on the ground. In this context, the lack of cooperation and coordination leaves limited place for consensual learning and consultation, and ultimately, for capacity development.

A second alternative sees the diversification of activities and actors as multiplying the entry points for influencing government and strengthening civil society on all levels. NGOs' fragmented action and diversity can be an advantage in this respect. Their activities "range from more restricted examples of community participation in specific projects, to more ambitious processes to redefine roles and relationships in development planning and decision-making" (Materu *et al.*, 2001: 26). INGOs' continued focus on capacity development in relation to civil society can have a positive impact on government capacities in the long run if the local NGOs are allowed to work more substantially in partnership with government. In addition, strengthened local civil societies and communities can lead to enhanced education governance beyond the school level. NGO networking has led to more coherent action when it comes to advocacy and watchdog activities, which puts efficient pressure on government to assume its responsibilities in respect of its people. INGOs' increasing participation on the national level as a policy partner has the potential to evolve further into other areas of organizational and institutional capacity development. In any case, INGOs' contribution to development 'by proxy' (though local NGOs) seems to be institutionalizing itself as a major INGO strategy. An INTRAC survey confirms that INGO activities that build the capacities of their Southern counterparts are a widespread phenomenon in NGO development work. Two thirds (45) of the INGOs surveyed stated that they have a specific programme dedicated to civil society capacity building (Lipson and Warren, 2006: 5). However, the impact was most visible in traditional service delivery capacities, which may be linked to the external pressure on INGOs to fit within global agendas such as the MDGs (2006: 12).

5 Obstacles and constraints for efficient capacity development by NGOs in education

We have touched on several relevant obstacles and constraints for efficient capacity development by NGOs in education throughout this paper. It can be useful to systematize and underline some of the main issues relating directly to a capacity development approach, and discuss their implications for further development.

A limited and ineffective approach to CD

The limited impact of capacity development

A common critique of, and a significant obstacle to, capacity development strategies is that they do not lead to the proper development and absorption of capacity development. Capacity development does not consistently translate into effective learning and as a result, fails to promote sustainable change, which is the *raison d'être* of the capacity development approach. According to Berg (2000: 3), "virtually all the major instruments devised by donors over the past 20 years to strengthen state capacity have turned out to be ineffective, and creative responses to these failures have been few". The EFA Global Monitoring Report (2007: 165) confirms that this is true also when it comes to education, in that "decades of 'capacity building' have not resulted in sustained institutional development necessary for the planning and implementation of development activities" and that "efforts to build capacity within education management systems in projects had been fragmented and largely ineffective".

NGO work in this area is no exception. Research suggests that NGOs that are engaged in capacity development have been no more successful than other external actors. According to Clayton (2000: 15), "there is currently little evidence to show whether or not CSOs have been able to act as catalysts for improved public sector management through engagement with the state at the level of implementation of services". USAID underscores this perception (USAID, 2002: 71) and affirms, "one thing is clear – although NGOs have provided many discernable benefits, they have not provided the key to a more sustainable and accountable education system". One interesting example is the case of Save the Children Norway (Helland, 2004). The mid-term review of the organization's current strategic plan raises doubt as to how well the organization has succeeded in transferring knowledge and technical skills, or contributing to the organizational and human resources management skills of its local partners in Ethiopia. These local NGOs consider funding and budget grants important contributions to their work, but "have a more varied assessment of these other forms [the ones mentioned above] of value added by SC Norway to the partnerships". As a consequence, Save the Children has decided to look further into the issues raised by capacity development and conduct research in order to "get a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of partner organisations (both government and NGOs)" (2004: 51).

As the example of Save the Children illustrates, it is difficult to operationalize and to measure the impact of these capacity development efforts. The emergence of new windows of opportunity for NGOs, and how NGOs have adapted accordingly, does not mean they have used these 'spaces' effectively. Research suggests that it may be too early to conclude that NGOs are efficient capacity developers because of their relatively limited involvement in capacity developing activities (compared to service provision), and the fragmented nature of NGO initiatives. As Action Aid emphasizes, "the challenge now is how to translate credibility and capacity into real impact both nationally and internationally" (2002: 16). In order to have a positive impact on capacity development, it may be useful for NGOs to engage in the wider debate on the reasons for the general failure to develop capacities. However, the reasons for this failure in relation to NGOs are not identical to those encountered by donor agencies or other stakeholders involved in development. Three reasons that are linked directly to traditional NGO strategies and the relationship with government are worth mentioning.

Firstly, a possible reason for failure is the continued NGO focus on civil society as the main recipient of capacity development, to the detriment of government capacities (mentioned above). This focus is reinforced by the emergence of partnerships between Northern and Southern NGOs. Eade (1997: 21) criticizes this focus: "If NGOs are in competition with a diminished state – and at the same time depend on funding from the North – this will not only fuel resentment, but may ultimately create major difficulties for the NGOs and their sponsors". Indeed,

if donors continue to fund NGOs that do not contribute to the strengthening of the public education system, and at the same time support government ownership and its role in the development process, establishing a coherent and sustainable education system will remain a major challenge in the years to come. Secondly, despite the pronounced will of governments to expand NGO involvement in education, their reticence has hindered the emergence of a general partnership model. The influence of NGOs is therefore weaker than that of donor agencies and the performance of civil society is 'patchy', even at the decentralized levels (Hailey and James, 2006: 6). This perception corresponds to Clayton's assertion that "there is less evidence of NGOs engaging with decentralized government in any coordinated manner to ensure that the NGO sector as a whole is involved in district level (and below) development planning processes" (1998: 26). The "much-needed yet limited dialogue so far between governments and NGOs" is perceived by the CCNGO as a relevant obstacle (UNESCO, 2003: 11), alongside "the difficulties in forging NGO/UNESCO dialogue at a national and/or regional level". These are central issues of concern in relation to pursuing the EFA targets. Finally, another possible explication is that the traditional NGO 'project' approach has proved to be unsustainable, adding to the fragmentation of NGO activities. Even though NGOs increasingly turn to government (through, for example, participation in SWAps) the project approach remains popular. If NGOs are to be engaged in capacity development, they must take a long-term approach and elaborate a specific strategy.

Capacity development: too wide in theory, too narrow in practice

Despite differing empirical interpretations of capacity development, most NGOs generally associate it with the traditional definitions of an all-encompassing, endogenous process occurring on all levels of society with the aim of developing sustainable capacities for development. NGOs approach the concept as an extension of their traditional activities, such as the promotion of ownership and participation with a community focus, and using context-specific approaches. In reality, however, capacity development approaches often translate into short-term, visible efforts such as funding (as in the example of Save the Children) or teacher training. A study on French NGOs' understanding of capacity development (Sorgenfrei, 2004: 14) finds that they associate it with technical training and skills development in their Southern partner NGOs. However, capacity is interpreted differently depending on the strategies and structure of the NGO in question: "While informants from humanitarian organisations that depend on the competencies of expatriates and volunteers to a great extent saw capacity building primarily as skills development aiming for professionalism and high quality operations, representatives from NGOs with a focus on long-term development and social transformation emphasised organisational and relational aspects linked to partnership and empowerment" (Sorgenfrei, 2004: 16). This corresponds to the distinction between examining development "as an underlying process of social change and as a targeted intervention" (Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington, 2007: 1701). Whereas capacity development's ultimate goal corresponds to the former, many NGOs focus excessively on the latter. INTRAC (Foley *et al.*, 2006: 1) admits in this respect that "our capacity building has often been too instrumentalist in nature and has not always fostered a deeper analysis of the roles of multiple local actors and their contexts".

In other words, a major obstacle to effective NGO capacity development lies in the approach, which is too wide in theory and too narrow in practice. The challenge is to find the middle ground for effective action so that the input will correspond to the output. One way to overcome this obstacle is to better match the efforts with the objectives – that is, to extend the focus of capacity development beyond the school, local communities and local NGOs. In a decentralized context, the presence of NGOs in the localities is important, especially in situations where government capacity remains concentrated at the central level. However, NGOs could also have an impact on higher levels of education authority, such as public administration, by participating more substantially in planning and management. Examples of NGO capacity development in public administration are practically non-existent. In pursuing EFA the school is an important starting place, but change in education outcomes does not always 'trickle up', as some would like us to believe. "There have been positive micro-improvements, but not the kind of macro-impacts that build and sustain capacity development at the sector level" (JICA, 2003: 10). The education system as a whole is the key to developing education and as a result, NGOs are beginning to diversify their activities and entry points in order to maximize their impact on governmental strategies.

Continued partnership reticence

As mentioned, government scepticism of partnerships with NGOs has been pronounced, but many NGOs are equally sceptical of focusing on policy gains – they are afraid of being co-opted by government and getting "caught up

in pursuing the agenda of the state and market rather than that of the poor" (Tembo, 2003: 527). Many prefer engaging with like-minded NGOs, forming networks and thus participating in coherent initiatives organized by, and for, NGOs. According to Materu, the bureaucratic nature of government can in fact be an obstacle for efficient NGO action: "The bureaucratic tradition of local government, hierarchic and directive, rather than flexible and facilitative can undermine the commitment of other stakeholders when Council representatives are seen to drive the process" (2001: 41). Hulme and Edward conclude in their book *NGOs, states and donors – too close for comfort?* (1997) that NGOs are getting too close to the powerful and too far from the powerless. For many NGOs, their presence on the ground in communities should remain at the core of their role in development – though the current tendency of INGOs is to concede this role to their Southern non-governmental partners. All in all, "several cases suggest that local governments and community and NGO organisations remain 'unwilling partners'" (Materu *et al.*, 2001: 40)*.*

A related obstacle lies in inconsistent funding, which can lead to inconsistencies in capacity development and sustainability. Many NGOs underline that their ability to secure funds remains a key concern, even though those that work in education are generally well funded by donor agencies. In fact, some authors claim that Northern NGOs have their own agenda when it comes to sustained funding: "A survey by the British government in 1995 revealed that 80 per cent of NGOs surveyed opposed aid being channelled directly to Southern NGOs" (Degnbol-Martinussen, 1999: 149). The question of financial resources is also important in countries where agencies prefer to fund education directly through the government. This is closely linked to perceptions of NGO legitimacy and accountability. In Malawi (Kadzamira, 2002: 4), some donors are reluctant to use NGOs in the education sector because they have questionable financial management and human resource capacities. As a consequence, a number of NGOs have chosen to concentrate their efforts in other, more donor-attractive areas, such as HIV/AIDS and human rights. This example highlights how financially dependent many NGOs are on donors, and the constant risk of "losing their status as independent agents in development" (Nelson, 2006: 702). Moreover, Degnbol-Martinussen and Engberg-Pedersen (1999: 163) states: "The increasing role of NGOs in administrating funds from official aid organizations has made many ask whether these private organizations have become too financially dependent on their own states, and whether they have become too strongly integrated in official aid systems." According to Ahmad (2006: 632), "upward accountability to donors has skewed NGO activities towards donor-driven agendas for development rather than to indigenous priorities".

Another important challenge linked to NGO participation regards the formation of partnerships. Often, both governments and NGOs lack the necessary know-how to engage in partnerships that, in turn, could contribute to capacity development in the public sector: "While it is essential to build the capacity of the Southern NGOs to build partnerships and collaboration with the government, the opposite is also equally important. There is a need to build the capacity of the government to work with the NGOs" (International Forum on Capacity Building, 2003: 34). One possibility would be to engage an external actor as a partnership facilitator. According to Materu *et al.* (2001: 45), an agent of change can help foster partnership initiatives. The European Union acts as such an agent in its efforts to provide capacity development through a partnership development training course and foster partnerships between the Turkish government and Turkish NGOs (Forrester, 2007). The project has a target of reaching 150 representatives of NGOs and the public sector. Forrester's study underlines how little knowledge exists on how partnerships can generate policy outcomes. Both government and NGOs "tended to see partnerships purely as mechanisms to aid the delivery of services and humanitarian assistance … informants failed to link 'cooperation' with policy development" (2001: 5). A similar initiative undertaken by Canada, the Voluntary Sector Initiative, aims at fostering partnerships between governments and civil society in South-East Asia. Explicit goals include linking NGOs with a focus on the social agenda to key policy officials, learning how to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations to make an impact on government policy, and informing governments and civil society on building more effective policy partnerships on social agenda issues (Edgar and Chandler, 2005: 4). Such partnership-facilitating exercises generally take place through training, with the acknowledgement that "training in skills and techniques for participatory planning, consultation and monitoring and evaluation are required for decision-makers, planners and other technicians who, through partnership, have to work across organisational boundaries", and that "training can also help develop new organisational aptitudes and abilities for dialogue, networking, and participatory management" (Materu, 2001: 165).

Lack of reorientation and lack of NGO capacity

Continued focus on service provision and local civil society

Despite the increasing use of capacity development approaches, many NGOs prefer the more traditional role of education provision, leaving capacity development to bilateral and multilateral aid agencies. This lack of motivation or reorientation is confirmed by a number of authors and studies in the past few years. David Archer at Action Aid made the observation in 1994 that "most 'Children Learning Centres' run by NGOs [in Bangladesh] have almost no contact with the local primary schools or the Ministry of Education. There is no joint planning, no joint training, no sharing of materials, no exchange of experiences – and there has been a lack of initiative on both sides to try to improve the situation" (1994: 225). More recent work confirms his impression. INTRAC (1999*b*: 3) observes that "some NGOs operate with minimal contact with the government, have little interest in national sectoral policy objectives or district development plans, and have little local accountability". The lack of NGO interest in government and the continued focus on service provision is an important challenge in education today. NGOs continue to focus on non-government, or non-formal programmes, although the integration of such programmes in the formal sector is underway in several countries. As more and more NGOs hand over their implementation projects to local NGOs, they aim to adopt new functions related to capacity development. However, in order to succeed, authors such as Rodriguez-Carmona (2004: 363) emphasize the importance of engaging in a process of systematic rethinking of their "intervention and capacity-building strategies, their management and evaluation methodologies, and – most importantly – their role on the ground". Schacter (2000: 3) also emphasizes the need for attending to the "underlying ways in which a development agency does business" in addition to focusing on techniques. If not, the operational work will have little lasting impact.

Lack of own capacities

NGOs often lack the capacity to adapt to and elaborate new strategies and take on new functions linked to capacity development. According to Hailey and James (2006: 6), the expectations of NGO action have become too high and they "suffer from the consequences of under-investment in, or under-appreciation of, basic managerial and organisational functions". The lack of resources for NGO action and the resulting limitations to effectively fostering NGO capacities for government impact were some of the concerns emphasized by the CCNGO/EFA (UNESCO, 2003: 11). In some cases, the lack of human capacity in NGOs has even restricted the space for NGO action. This is most visible in Malawi (Kadzamira and Kunje, 2002: 25), where UNICEF has limited NGO involvement in school construction and the provision of supplies. In Asia and the South-Pacific, the limited capacity of local NGOs hinders them from engaging with government, notably because of their lack of knowledge about national budgets and the impact of donors (UNESCO, 2004b: 6). Since traditional NGO 'know-how' is linked to service provision on the ground, they do not necessarily have the capacity or the knowledge to take on new functions. Save the Children Norway, for example, states that it can only provide added value within its own areas of competence – that is, children's rights and primary education (Helland, 2004: 41). Lack of knowledge about who to approach can also prove to be an obstacle. In a decentralized context, formal and informal power structures and linkages between institutions need to be understood in order to engage with them. Clayton's example is a relevant one: "While the district development committee may on paper be the key body for district development planning and for coordinating development implementation, in practice it may be a rather ineffective institution which carries little weight with the different line ministries or local authority" (1998: 26). However, some NGOs have succeeded in making the transition. An NGO often referred to is BRAC, which has acquired a reputation for effective development work and professional management. Over the past few years, it has had a significant impact on official education policy (Fisher, 2003: 32).

If NGOs do not understand what capacity development is about, a tentative scale up in this direction might even prove to be damaging. As Eade (2007: 630) implies, "when they become fashion accessories, or mere buzzwords invoked in order to negotiate bureaucratic mazes, the use of concepts such as 'gender', or 'empowerment', or 'capacity building' is not only drained of any remaining political content, but may actually end up crushing local capacities rather than releasing their potential". Without questioning the good intentions of NGOs, she confirms that they are not "exempt from the tendency of the Development Industry to ignore, misinterpret, displace, supplant, or undermine the capacities that people already have ..." (2007: 634). The question of NGOs' own strategies for capacity development is a challenge attracting growing attention, and it is closely linked to the larger impact they

have on development, including government capacities. According to Ahmad (2006: 637), "organisational and management theories suggest that NGOs which lack the capacity to learn and iterate, or are dependent for their survival on donors who demand short-term measurable results are unlikely to be effective in supporting the longer-term social and institutional changes sustainable development demands".

The change in NGOs' role, from pure service delivery to capacity development, requires that NGOs acquire different sets of capacities. Over the course of the past decade, NGO support organizations are increasingly gaining ground and possess important knowledge about how to build and develop capacities successfully. These NGOs primarily aim at assisting NGOs and sometimes government or other relevant actors in whatever sector they are working in, through focusing on individual capacities. They also provide support at the organizational level by addressing relevant issues in management, monitoring and evaluation. An example is the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), which collaborates among others with the UNDP and the World Bank. Its primary objective is to strengthen human and institutional capacity in the public sector and to foster an inclusive and participatory approach to capacity building and management development (Blagescu and Young, 2006: 9). One of its core competencies concerns the professionalization of the voices of civil society (www.acbf-pact.org). Tool kits for developing the capacities of NGOs are being used increasingly by donor agencies for assessing NGOs' mission, organizational structure, leadership, management practices and activities (UNDP, 2006). UNESCO and the World Bank have joined the CCNGO/EFA in its call for building civil society in education in Africa, identifying four areas of capacity building: education content, pedagogy, programming and management, and policy dialogue and information exchange (UNESCO, 2001b: 17). These organizations and their initiatives constitute promising strategies to strengthen partnerships, develop NGO capacities and in turn, strengthen NGOs' impact on government capacities in the education sector.

6 Conclusion: NGOs, capacity development, government and education

"Over the last two decades, the development sciences have experienced a burgeoning of methodological and theoretical trends trying to bring the forgotten dimensions of development back to the forefront of analysis. Among others, these include: organisational learning and social capital, alongside gender, institutional capital, and governance approaches."

Rodriguez-Carmona (2004: 354)

This quotation provides a fitting illustration of the complexity of development. This is caused in part by the coming together of different, though often complementary, concepts and approaches, including capacity development. The myriad actors participating in the development enterprise add to this complexity, not to mention the relationship between concepts and these actors. An increasing number of NGOs are in the process of adapting their activities and are contributing to capacity development in education. This concept of capacity development is coherent with many existing, traditional NGO approaches to development, but also poses an important challenge: to learn to work with government and contribute to developing government capacities in education.

This literature review of the role and impact of NGOs in capacity development has been explored with one main question in mind: Has NGO action evolved from replacing the state on the ground to reinvigorating education policy and implementation? Our findings can be summarized systematically by recalling the five hypotheses presented in the beginning of the paper:

H1: *NGOs are moving towards increased involvement in capacity development.* The capacity development approach is gaining attention among NGOs working in education and many NGOs are now assuming capacity development activities. Northern NGOs, the focus of this study, are quite clearly influenced by the international development discourse and are adapting their activities accordingly. Even though capacity development has always existed, it is gaining ground on the national level as an overarching concept promoted by the multilateral aid agenda. Given their extensive knowledge and activities in the education sector, NGOs remain relevant actors alongside government. As a result, NGOs constitute important resources for capacity development, and vice versa. NGOs engaging in capacity development see the approach as a strategy to increase their impact in education governance.

H2: *This involvement changes the ways in which NGOs operate.* Whereas an increasing number of NGOs are involved in capacity development, many still remain committed to education provision and replacing the state on the ground. Capacity development activities compliment this traditional area of NGO intervention and constitute a way of scaling up in a qualitative sense by enhancing the sustainability of NGO efforts. However, many NGOs continue to have conflicting relations with government, or quite simply do not pay much attention to the state. Capacity development aimed at the public education system does take place, but often as a complementary strategy to community empowerment at the local level. As a result, NGO action is increasingly diversified.

H3: *Through their involvement, they have an impact on the interpretation (in the field) of capacity development.* NGOs do have an influence on the concept and content of capacity development. To highlight their influence, we can use the distinction highlighted by Razon (2004: 32) between "influencing within the context of a social meaning" (which is synonymous to influencing within an existing paradigm) and "influencing social meaning" (which is similar to helping to transform a paradigm). NGOs are involved in both processes. NGOs are to a large extent influenced by the hegemonic development discourse and as a result, adapt their activities and strategies to accommodate external demands concerning capacity development. However, through their actions, and by making new activities complementary to and coherent with traditional ones, they engage in a process of shaping the meaning of capacity development. As a result, they contribute to shaping the parameters for a general development framework. So, both processes are present here: NGOs are influenced by the ideology of capacity development, but they also influence its meaning to some extent from the outside. For NGOs, capacity development is linked intrinsically to community-level action, civil society and values of ownership and participation. By promoting these values, they have an impact on the interpretation of capacity development in the field. This is a process that ultimately can lead to a

more participatory approach to development (Materu, 2001: 34). According to Materu at the European Centre for Development Policy Management, such 'process' achievements are more significant in the long run than immediate 'products' such as service delivery or training (2001: 35). It remains to be seen whether a shared understanding of the concept will emerge from relevant actors' diverse use of the term and of the activities associated with it. For the time being, the available literature on capacity development is an illustrative example to the contrary. For most practitioners within the NGO sector, the term is irrevocably linked to developing the capacities of civil societies and local NGOs. For donor agencies, the 'recipient' of capacity development has changed towards governments, while scholars interested in the question appropriately underscore the diverse and sometimes confusing implications of the term, especially when it comes to who is actually affected by it.

H4: *Through this new interpretation, capacity development can weaken central government, but also strengthen it in the long term.* The question of impact is a complex one. Traditionally, through their 'gap-filling' and 'lobbying' roles, NGOs' contribution to government capacities has been controversial. The focus on service delivery has, in some cases, weakened the central government by bypassing and replacing government capacities on the ground. On the other hand, developing the capacities of local NGOs alters the power configurations in a given country and can have a positive long-term impact on education by strengthening the abilities of people to demand improved services. The impact of NGO interventions must therefore be analyzed from both a short-term and long-term perspective, and by looking at direct and indirect consequences. NGOs' increased interest in capacity development may change the interpretation of their contribution to government capacities. From this literature review, it can be deduced that the direct impact of NGOs on government capacity development within the education sector corresponds to two (sometimes overlapping) ways of 'scaling up': (1) scaling up by becoming innovators in education and (2) scaling up by taking on capacity development activities (focused directly on government or indirectly through the community or local NGOs).

(a)   The main role of NGOs has been in education provision. Their 'gap-filling' role and independence from government has allowed them to implement innovative approaches that can serve as models for government and the public education system. In this sense, NGOs should continue doing what they already do best in order to become a useful laboratory for government. Mainstreaming such successful innovations in cooperation with government thus becomes a capacity development process *par excellence*; going beyond the individual and community level, this type of scaling up can become part of education sector reform, involving all levels and actors, and incorporating NGOs as policy-partners and advisors. NGOs can become "acknowledged innovators in the public interest, with a constant eye on adoption by bigger and more powerful actors and on enhancing the capacity of claimants" (Fowler, 2000: 600). Fowler encourages this view, advising NGOs to "pursue roles of social entrepreneurs and civic innovators, rather than users and distributors of subsidy" (2000: 595).

(b)   A second way of scaling up is to take on capacity development activities at various levels. The possibilities for making an impact are numerous within a decentralized education system and do not have to be limited to a school focus. Partnerships can be developed, or formalized, with both local and central authorities. NGOs can participate as a policy partner at all levels, bringing knowledge and clarity to education policy formulation and implementation. At the community level, engaging with the authorities can strengthen local education governance as well as local civil society. The latter might be interpreted as more of an indirect than a direct role in capacity development, but is important because it can generate greater civil society input at the level of government.

H5: *Impact and obstacles*. In addition to the traditional obstacles to capacity development shared by most stakeholders, some obstacles are more or less specific to NGOs and are linked to their interpretation of developing capacities. The main obstacles are, as mentioned, the continued focus on civil society and communities, government reticence and the fact that NGOs remain largely involved in service provision. The tendency is for more and more INGOs to prioritize capacity development, leaving implementation issues to local NGOs. Their strategies for capacity development are aimed at both their Southern counterparts and at government through consultations, courses, discussions and policy dialogues. To maximize their impact, NGOs should, according to Eade (1997: 22), realize that civil society is not independent of, and much less an alternative to, the state (Eade, 1997: 22). The consequences of developing the capacities of civil society in relation to government capacities are uncertain. The lack of reliable indicators makes the real impact on government difficult to measure across time and space. More research is therefore needed on the impact of NGO action beyond that of service provision. According to Moran (2006: 204),

"there is relatively little material that describes processes of dialogue between government and representatives of NSPs [non-state providers] in the development of policy, regulatory or contractual arrangements". This is an interesting area for future research. Whereas this paper primarily illustrates how capacity development has translated into changes mostly at the local level, further research could explore how macro-level processes directly translate into participation on a national level in relation to institutions and policy (Gideon, 2005).

Throughout this paper, we have observed how NGOs have become "caught in a turbulent 'development' policy environment in which their roles are increasingly being redefined" (Ahmad, 2006: 630.) The opportunities and challenges for future development cooperation with government and donor agencies have been described, and weave a complex web of actors, activities, roles and impact. The division of roles and functions may become clearer in time, yet NGOs working in the education sector seem to become progressively more complex organizations, with a widened repertoire of capacities, objectives, activities and scope of action. NGOs are a diverse group and despite extensive NGO networking, there is seldom a coherent NGO approach to target government strategies for capacity development. NGO interventions are often fragmented and implemented on a small scale. In this context, failure would mean that NGOs' important role in education provision can prove damaging for government in the long run, hindering a fully functioning public education system to take root. Conversely, success can bring great benefits to both government and society. When they succeed in influencing, complementing and strengthening government capacities, they defy the conventional wisdom, which holds that "operational NGOs tend to replace rather than build local capacities" (Eade, 2007: 634). Even in areas where NGOs initially have a minor impact, they can use their influence to "provide an environment of greater openness of debate for a reform agenda, and they can also play a key role in monitoring educational processes and outcomes." (Rose, 2007*a*: 13).

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The book

As development actors, NGOs have become key service providers in countries where the government is unable to fulfill its traditional role. In the education sector, many NGOs have gone past 'gap-filling' initiatives into capacity development activities. Through a review of academic articles and NGO working papers, this paper examines the impact of NGOs on capacity development, their comparative advantages and the specific challenges they encounter.

NGOs are increasingly involved in capacity development. As development focuses more on reinforcing skills and tools for strengthening the public sector and civil society, NGOs have moved away from a simple focus on traditional service provision. In their capacity development work, at times, they show greater ability to innovate and they adapt more quickly than national governments; therefore, their actions may undermine government initiatives. But if they scale up their activities and impart their knowledge and techniques to the government level, the country as a whole could benefit. NGO interventions are also plagued by severe obstacles. Their impact suffers from limited outreach and from their general independence from the state. Unless they become partners with government, and not competitors, their capacity development initiatives may remain stunted.

The author

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