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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

NGO Afterlives

David Lewis[1] | Mark Schuller[2]

[1]London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK | [2]Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, USA

Correspondence: Mark Schuller (mschuller@niu.edu)

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Abstract

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) today have an unclear, sometimes ambiguous status. How are we to make sense of all this? As panaceas for a range of problems, in both humanitarian and development fields, the NGO idea died—but it did not do so completely, and neither has it entirely faded away. Ideas and approaches that NGOs once helped to originate live on—such as participation, empowerment, and microcredit—but in new or changed forms. Paradoxically, while the term *NGO* itself may be increasingly shunned by many groups and organizations, it has gained a firmer place in the everyday vocabulary among publics in both the Global South and the Global North. In this special issue, we explore these paradoxes through a conceptual framework that we term the "NGO afterlife." Despite these various kinds of "deaths," both the NGO form and the NGO idea continue to influence social life at local, national, and international levels, and in a variety of ways. The afterlives perspective offers a distinctive view of transformation in which entanglements of past and present continue to influence how NGOs are seen within the local and international landscapes of activism, policy, and development, and shape internal organizational strategies and subjectivities of those involved.

1 | Introduction

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have a long history and have played important roles during shifts in global governance. The "NGO form" (Bernal and Grewal 2014) began during the Age of Enlightenment (Charnovitz 1997; Davies 2014). Humanitarian agencies trace their roots to Henry Dunant and the Red Cross following the Battle of Solferino. During the First World War, transnational peace-building, women's suffrage, and socialist networks attempted to influence world leaders (Rupp 1997). The NGO form took its present shape following the Second World War and the founding of the United Nations in 1945; Article 71 of the UN charter gave NGOs consultative roles. From the 1980s onward, NGOs (especially those connected with development agendas) gained visibility, status, power, and certainly funding, nestled within a range of neoliberal reforms (Edwards and Hulme 1996).

Following the end of the Cold War, there was an NGO boom, which was part of international donors' New Policy Agenda centered on their assumed developmental roles in democratization, private service provision, and "good governance." This contributed to the diminishing and sometimes dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state, what Leve and Karim (2001) called "privatization of the state." Even the World Bank—with a mandate to loan to governments—established an NGO unit. Alongside this growth of NGO roles in the realms of development and social welfare, there was a similar boom in the international humanitarian sector; however, Alan Fowler (1994) memorably noted that international NGOs (INGOs) were viewed as "ladles for the global soup kitchen." NGOs have continued to play advocacy roles envisioned in the UN charter.

This boom also inspired a sustained scholarly interest in NGOs. Initially hailed as more efficient, effective, innovative, and democratic than states—certainly by political scientists, sociologists, and development practitioners—Jessica Vivian (1994) and Edwards and Hulme (1996) analyzed how NGOs came to be seen during this period as a "magic bullet." Even at the time, it was

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clear to scholars and practitioners that NGOs rarely, if at all, lived up to these astronomically high expectations. Consequently, scholarship, particularly in the Global South, became more critical: NGOs were now viewed as products of, and even tools to promulgate and perpetuate neoliberalism (e.g., Petras 1997; Wallace 2003). NGOs' moral untouchability (Fassin 2011) was indelibly eroded following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The UN Special Envoy Bill Clinton and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton questioned donors' attachment to NGOs to the detriment of elected governments, and journalist exposés asked: "Where did the money go?"

As such scholarship became established, and as ideas about NGOs became more critical, it also became apparent that the situation of NGOs themselves was changing. Policy fashions soon shifted, and official funding to NGOs, at least in the international development field, began to decline. More money started to flow toward new policy priorities such as "shared prosperity," "green growth," "social protection," and "climate change adaptation." Some of these agendas involved NGOs, of course, but NGOs were no longer a central focus or playing key roles. Attention shifted to the private sector, both in the delivery of aid and in the implementation of projects. Development itself once again was focused on economic growth, to be facilitated by the state, but with NGOs viewed as more marginal actors. A signifier by negation—playing roles in aid and activism—the term "NGO" itself became less popular, even discredited in some circles, and organizations began rebranding themselves as "civil society organizations" or "social enterprises." In contexts where NGOs had emerged "from the bottom up" as progressive alternatives to mainstream policies around agrarian reform or human rights, as in parts of Asia and Latin America, NGOs were now associated (negatively) with the establishment. In activist and solidarity circles, the NGO form was rejected in favor of social movement approaches and informal network campaigning. Only in the humanitarian sector did NGOs continue to occupy center stage, experiencing increased levels of funding; even here, increased support to NGOs paled in comparison to expansion of official UN and EU humanitarian agencies following the international response to Haiti's devastating 2010 earthquake.

As a result, the destiny of NGOs remains in flux. The earlier NGO booms were followed by forms of "bust." In Bangladesh, a national development NGO sector that was vibrant and diverse in the 1990s went into gradual decline in subsequent decades. As donor fashions changed, administrative mismanagement led to corruption scandals, and political tensions arose around NGO efforts as part of civil society to strengthen democratization (see Lewis 2017). In Haiti, the failures of the "Republic of NGOs" led to the transformation of international humanitarian NGO efforts. Despite their checkered reputations, there is increasing chatter and hand-wringing about the future of NGOs. We suggest that the end of NGOs is somehow incomplete, reminiscent of the kind of "haunting" described by Sarah Surface-Evans et al. (2020) in which past elements continue to inform present conditions.

NGOs—along with the ideas, practices, and people, associated with them—continue to exert influence. For example, even while they may assume different names, NGO-like organizations continue to operate in charitable, business, and activist spaces in most societies. Policymakers continue to make assumptions about the importance of community or grassroots organizing as they seek to advance agendas around adaptation and resilience. Development donors continue to mention civil society, even though they are now vaguer about its role than before. Approaches that NGOs innovated—such as transparency or participation—have been appropriated by other actors. While scholars and activists attempt to move away from the term, journalists and policymakers increasingly target NGOs, reflecting an enduring set of moral and political assumptions about what NGOs are.

In this special issue, we explore these paradoxes through a conceptual framework that we term the *NGO afterlife*—the idea despite these various kinds of "deaths," both the NGO form and the NGO idea continue to animate and influence social life at local, national, and international scales, and in a variety of ways. As one of many possible "NGO futures" (Fowler 2000), these afterlives further blur boundaries (Bernal and Grewal 2014) between state and nonstate, for-profit and not-for-profit, social movement and social media modalities. The NGO afterlives perspective offers a distinctive view of change and transformation in which entanglements of past and present continue to exert an influence in local and international landscapes of activism, policy, and development, and on how NGO-like organizations revise their own subjectivities and the subjectivities of those working within and alongside them.

In order to comprehend NGO "afterlives," it is necessary to understand the forces that led to NGOs' undoing. We further ground the discussion in two ethnographic cases. Haiti and Bangladesh offer particularly fruitful examples of the ways in which the NGO idea is refashioned in new hybridized constellations. Haiti, called the Republic of NGOs, represents the Waterloo of NGOs' encroachment into state roles in development and humanitarian crises. While the focus of critique was on aid, this text explores parallels between aid and activist NGOs. Bangladesh has similarly seen complex entanglements between government and NGOs in service delivery and microfinance and was also an enthusiastic early adopter of hybrid for-profit and not-for-profit forms, sometimes now called "philanthrocapitalism."

2 | The End of the NGO?

The international response to Haiti's 2010 earthquake loomed large over key influencers in development and humanitarian aid. US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton questioned the prevailing orthodoxy that favored NGOs over state actors, first in the United Nations Donor conference held on March 31, 2010. Both she and former US President Bill Clinton sharpened these statements in a 2012 meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative, following a report from Bill Clinton acting as UN Special Envoy to Haiti (www.lessonsfromhaiti.org). Haiti was also an inspiration for the UN's Transformative Agenda, which diminished the role of NGOs and, in effect, stopped the "magic bullet." Scholars published pieces heralding the end of the "Golden Age of NGOs" (e.g., Chimiak 2014; Roche and Hewitt 2013). Having lost their luster, funding to NGOs decreased, both in terms of actual dollars and as a percentage of public development and humanitarian aid (Development Initiatives 2023).

A few years later, with political winds blowing decidedly rightward, NGOs were viewed with greater suspicion. NGOs came under attack with the ascendency of right-wing nationalist leaders, and progressive voices challenged NGOs' roles in maintaining the neoliberal status quo. Indian activist Arundhati Roy (2004) warned against the NGOization of resistance in a *Monde Diplomatique* essay, followed by INCITE! Women of Color against Violence's volume, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (2007). In February 2018, as Oxfam was zeroing in on wealth inequality and the global megaelite, the *Times of London* published a front-page story, "Top Oxfam Staff Paid Haiti Survivors for Sex." Commentators openly questioned whether INGOs would survive at all.

On the other side of the global pandemic, which temporarily increased international humanitarian funding (albeit with widening gaps from needs), commentators openly mused about the end of NGOs. A widely circulated report from an Oxford University research program (Aaronson and Thompson 2023, 4–5) argued: "INGOs are at a turning point in their history. Once seen as occupying the moral high ground. . . they have to fight for their future." *Prospect Magazine* cited this report in an October 2023 article titled, "The End of the NGO?" (Abrahams 2023). Veteran NGO analyst and anthropologist Jim Igoe (2024) reviewed two books that grapple with an end to INGOs, a particular world order, and their place within it; the authors center their critiques of NGOs on external forces that constrain their work (Hanchey 2023; Srinivas 2022).

Four years of white nationalist populism in the United States and rising ethno-nationalism in Europe signaled by Brexit and the closing of borders to refugees have resulted in a fragmented world economy and geopolitical instability. Waves of rising ethnonationalism have also washed over some of the world's most populous nations, the "BRICS": India's ruling Hindu nationalist party openly called for genocide of Muslims, and in Brazil, Bolsonaro's anti-Blackness and xenophobia rivaled that of Trump. While what is positioned as "centrist" elite control returned following elections, populist fearmongering and disinformation led to violent uprisings in the United States and Brazil to prevent constitutional succession. Right-wing nationalism continues to advance: for example, in Argentina, where we see the further erosion of the remaining social contract and safety net and open declaration of a new round of culture wars that target women and trans bodies in addition to Black and immigrant communities.[1]

Following Project 2025, a long-planned blueprint to amalgamate various right-wing policies, the first weeks of the second Trump administration were characterized by a fast-paced series of proclamations, executive orders, and headline-grabbing cuts to what US Americans had come to expect of the federal government. It is not a surprise that among the very first agencies targeted by Trump's financier and codirector of the Department of Government Efficiency, Elon Musk, was the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). A controversial agency, USAID was an important tool in US foreign policy, in effect "doing well by doing good." Far more than its peer agencies, USAID "tied" its aid—in FY 2024, it was around US$44 billion—with funds returning to the United States. For example, fully 93% of USAID funds went directly to US for-profit and nonprofit agencies (OECD 2006, cited in Schuller 2012, 144). Nonetheless, it did not have direct beneficiaries in US voting constituencies, aside from its tens of thousands of employees and scores of contractors, most of whom are US-based NGOs.

In this current ever-changing landscape, NGOs' traditional appeals to the "common good" and positioning as managers in UN developmentalism and humanitarianism predicated on liberal nation states appear anachronistic, while ever larger groups of people find themselves targeted by state agents and media and increasingly emboldened vigilante groups. Are we witnessing the "ungluing" of globalization?

What *now?* What comes next?

Is it the moment to be contemplating NGO afterlives?

3 | NGO Afterlives

Building on Rudnyckyj and Schwittay's (2014) discussion of "development afterlives," which identifies a range of new actors, moral projects, and forms of expertise "animated by the spirit of previous development regimes,"[2] this collection seeks to explore these post-NGO presents and futures through a set of ethnographically grounded analyses that imagine—or sometimes question—the nature of these NGO afterlives across different contexts. We hope to crystallize, sharpen, or clarify interest in what Sampson and Hemment (2001) called "NGOgraphy." We are building on a critical anthropology of NGOs that has focused on their roles in (non)*governance* since Ferguson's (1990) *Anti-Politics Machine*. For example, several studies have analyzed governmentality (e.g., Gupta and Sharma 2006; Jackson 2005; Leve and Karim 2001; Sharma 2006). While specialized advocacy NGOs attempt to intervene in human rights law, for example, the NGO form by definition opens up discussions of the state by negation. We ask to what extent an analysis of NGO afterlives might enable an understanding of new roles, practices, and knowledges around nonstate actors?

We also seek to deploy the NGO afterlives lens as engaged anthropologists with a normative agenda. Following the pandemic and its impact on public systems and economies and the rise of right-wing nationalist populism in the United States, India, Brazil, Argentina, France, and Germany, among others, many critiques levied by scholars, including anthropologists, suggest an overarching optimism that state agencies *should* be engaging in development and other efforts to improve humanity, solve global problems, and address inequality (Ajl 2023). Critiques that can be characterized as either reformist or radical in the "before" times center the moral imperative of social justice.

The world emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, at vastly different paces and with unequal consequences—for example, Russia's war against Ukraine, Israel's genocide in Gaza and increasing hostilities with neighboring countries retaliating against a surprise Hamas attack in October 2023—which renews fears of large-scale complex humanitarian crisis. What do we know and what can we say about the continuing roles and relevance of NGOs? We cannot assume a continuity of roles and relevance in the light of changing state practices in an era of revived populism, extended marketization, and a reconfiguring of the contents and the relationship between what Gillian Hart has termed “big D”—the historically specific post–World War Two assemblage of ideas and institutions focused on Western-led modernization efforts in the “Third World”—and “little d” development as the dialectically related process of unfolding capitalist change with its winners and losers (Hart 2009; Lewis 2019; Mawdsley and Taggart 2022).

In an era that has been called “retroliberalism” (Murray and Overton 2016), we can perhaps agree that the NGO boom of the 1990s and 2000s is now well and truly over on the global stage—but as a couple of the essays in this session argue, there are localized NGO booms accompanying and following ruptures. And “NGO effects” (Sharma 2014; following Abrams 1988) are still present and ubiquitous across different fields, areas, scales, et cetera. These effects include hybridization[3] driven by the market and business logics that increasingly dominate development, humanitarianism, and public policy, and which serve to “disappear” NGOs in favor of forms of “social enterprise”; tendencies among social justice movements to deliberately attempt to build anti-NGO structures; the incorporation of NGOs into government-business-donor structures in ways that transform their roles and purposes in ways that may increase their relevance or be disempowering; the ongoing anxieties among practitioners about the need to rethink the NGO; and finally, the changed language and discourse around NGOs, including the need to explain the persistence of “NGO” as a public/media term—witness, for example, the right wing press vilification of “NGO boats” rescuing refugees from the seas in Southern Europe —at the same time as it increasingly fades from activist and researcher vocabularies.

These approaches are increasingly seen by mainstream advocates of social change as the more viable successors to earlier social movement and civil society approaches in which business and entrepreneurship are centered as the main drivers of change (see, for example, Irani 2019; Huang 2020). This shift away from NGOs as managers is possibly a manifestation of transnational development institutions’ embrace of private sector financing (Alami et al. 2021; Hunter and Murray 2019; Mawdsley and Taggart 2022), noting that “trillions not billions” are required to meet the UN’s 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (Mawdsley 2018a).

Service-provision NGOs are the ones chiefly affected by this, but a parallel shift also affects activist NGOs as they lean toward social movement or “civil society”–type structures and focus. Following inspiration from Roy (2004), INCITE! (2007), and others, facilitated by new technologies, media, and social media, some of the most vital movements for justice in the 21st century have deliberately adopted non-NGO structures and argue for alternatives (e.g., Longa 2024). Among the most visible movements that chose not to follow the 501(c)(3) model (tax-exempt structure in the United States) or similar are the Gilets Jaunes in France, Black Lives Matter, and the Dreamers in the United States. While intentional and organized, the Indigenous water protectors and sovereignty activists at Standing Rock practiced alternatives that circumvented the NGO form, including planned communities such as Oceti Sakowin (Estes 2019).

Another scenario is one where NGOs continue to exist (and are named as such) but are incorporated into government-business-donor structures in ways that transform their roles and purposes and generate refracted representations of the NGO—that is, increasing and/or decreasing their visibility from different angles to different audiences.

In the humanitarian sector, there is some relatively explicit thinking about all this—for example, Action Against Hunger’s *The Future of Aid INGOs [International NGOs] in 2030* report (2017) was premised on the idea that international humanitarian NGOs will need to reform or die, setting out a menu of future scenarios for different NGO franchises that are linked through a global brand.[4] There is also a range of other “reflective development” practitioner initiatives afoot, such as the “Reinventing the iNGO system” process (at Rios Partners) and the RINGO project (“Re-Imagining the INGO”) hosted by Rights CoLab.[5] These initiatives reflect an anxiety about NGO futures, particularly those that are international in character, and the idea that even if not entirely dead, they are in trouble.

Finally, as we discussed in *Current Anthropology* (Lewis and Schuller 2017), there is also change at the level of language and terminologies. The term “NGO” has moved from being central to academic and policy discourse to being more prominent in press and media representations.

The articles presented here demonstrate the potential value of the lens of NGO afterlives in showing the ways that a commitment to the idea of the NGO, as well as NGO organizational and network forms, live on despite the marketization of development, declining interest in NGOs among development donors (Uddin 2023), and a widespread discrediting by activists of NGOs seen as lacking in accountability, legitimacy, political courage, and grassroots connectedness. This discussion centers on a few threads:

1. Thinking through the “afterlives” necessitates asking the question: *What died?*
2. How does the persistence or reemergence of the NGO form“ (Bernal and Grewal 2014) represent a “rebirth”?
3. How do these new assemblages constitute *imagined* or *aspirational* afterlives to the heyday of a statist, developmentalist, NGO boom?
4. How do these “shape shifters” (Sharma 2006) adapt or evolve to contemporary manifestations of neoliberalism and geopolitical shifts more generally?

Before reflecting briefly on the essays contained within, we offer two sketches of NGO contexts familiar to each of us: Haiti, where donors’ support for INGOs’ role has contributed to the catastrophic weakening of the state; and Bangladesh, where a strong indigenous, if externally funded, NGO sector has gradually been sidelined by a market-embracing and increasingly authoritarian state.[6] The two countries provide useful contrasting exemplars of the NGO phenomenon—with a long history of mainly homegrown and locally rooted development NGOs in Bangladesh, and an internationally dominated multimandate NGO sector in Haiti, albeit one that proliferates following crises, what Haitian scholars term an “invasion” (e.g., Étienne 1997).

4 | Reproducing Haiti as "Republic of NGOs"

Haiti illustrates the need to trace NGOs' colonial continuities. NGOs are products of the neoliberal capitalist world order, disciplined by state regulation (Alvaré 2010; INCITE! 2007).

The year 2025 is the bicentennial of France's indemnity against newly independent Haiti, which the *New York Times* belatedly called "the Ransom," initially 150 million francs ostensibly to recompensate France for their loss of "property" (enslaved human lives). Haiti could not afford this indemnity (which eventually dropped to 90 million francs), plunging the country into a debt that was to take 125 years to pay off (Dupuy 1989; Gaillard-Pourchet 1990; Hauteville 2025). The United States claimed France's financial interests during the 19-year occupation of the country by the US Marines (Plummer 1988). Analyses coming from solidarity and scholarly circles correctly point out the ongoing injustices against the heirs of the only slave revolt to succeed in not only emancipation but independence in 1804, which inspired the end of the slave trade 3 years later.

However, to jump from 1804 (or 1825) to today leaves out the ways in which foreign domination of Haiti, the world's first free Black republic, is maintained and deepened. As scholar/activists of the Popular Democratic Progressive Movement (MPDP in the original French)—a precursor to the unification expressed in the Montana Accord,[7] signed within weeks after the assassination of Haiti's president—repeated in a 2015 commemoration of the centennial of the formal US occupation, "with or without boots, the occupation remains." NGOs have played an indispensable, if at times unwitting, role in maintaining neocolonial rule following the formal transition to democracy that began with the ouster of Duvalier in 1986.

The first heady years of this transition were filled with an optimism that NGOs could play roles in constructing democracy from the bottom up (e.g., Ethéart 1991). However, scholars, activists, professionals, and ordinary citizens soured on NGOs when certain contradictions of their work were exposed: Sauveur Pierre Etienne (1997) called it an "NGO invasion." NGOs are not accountable to recipient communities but (mostly foreign) donors. And they "raided" government offices for qualified personnel (Morton 1997). This "public sector brain drain" reduced state capacity to set priorities, monitor, and govern.

These unelected NGOs represented "parallel states," transforming rights to education, health care, and housing enshrined in Haiti's 1987 constitution into gifts to worthy aid recipients, demobilizing and depoliticizing the population. Many Haitian students, community leaders, and even NGO professionals remain inspired by the radical analysis of Janil Lwijis (2009), who argued that NGOs implant foreign capital in Haiti, destroying the mutual aid vision behind the Haitian Revolution and the "well-being state."

Following the 2010 earthquake, when INGOs gained an outsized profile and foreign commentators began calling Haiti the Republic of NGOs (e.g., Klarreich and Polman 2012; Kristoff and Panarelli 2010), the critiques became louder. These critiques were not only leveled against aid agencies or against foreign institutions. Activists analyzed the commonalities between activist and aid groups, and "NGOing" became a big insult in some circles.

NGOs have not only been involved in development and humanitarian aid. Tracing the roots of the form, the first NGOs were advocacy networks (e.g., Charnovitz 1997; Rupp 1997). Conceptually, activist and aid NGOs are often theorized separately, but the context of Haiti suggests this is a flawed approach. Far from portraying Haiti as "exceptional" (Benedicty-Kokken et al. 2016; Clitandre 2011; Trouillot 1990), failures in solidarity activism vis-à-vis Haiti highlight unresolved contradictions within liberal humanism. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen valorized liberty and property. A significant portion of this "property" claimed by the revolutionary French bourgeoisie was enslaved African people in what was then called Saint-Domingue.

Gradual, moderated, incrementalism did not stem the social upheavals and evisceration of human rights and the social safety net within the "belly of the beast." Foreign donor attachment to NGOs and the resultant hollowing out of the state contributed to relying on another nonstate form of governance. Before his assassination in July 2021, facing increasing citizen protest that effectively shut down the country, President Jovenel Moïse made an alliance with armed irregular groups, called "gangs" for journalistic convenience.[8] Some of these groups were given money, power, and other resources by NGOs, as Olivier (2020) documented in his doctoral dissertation, in a process he termed "archipelization of violence." Therefore, the current state of affairs, including an estimated 5600 people killed by violence in 2024 and over one million people fleeing their homes, are both direct and indirect outcomes of what can be called "nongovernance" (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 2025; United Nations 2025).

5 | Blurring Boundaries in Bangladesh

David Lewis's ongoing work in Bangladesh offers insights around the blurring of boundaries (Bernal and Grewal 2014) between NGO and for-profit sectors—which have been apparent for many years, for example, in the context of microfinance and entrepreneurship promotion (see Lewis et al. 2024)—as well as into the rise of new forms of state-backed market-driven development. For policy makers, there is a new centrality for the private sector as the driver of development, bringing a set of "turbulent changes" in the ways "development imaginaries and interventions" are framed (Mawdsley 2018b). A key objective of "aid" includes producing a de-risked investment environment for capitalist expansion. Although the amount of aid is in decline in Bangladesh in the light of its recent attainment of "lower-middle-income" country status, it remains significant. NGOs, which once saw one of their roles as trying to "balance" private sector activity and communities, now find themselves increasingly instrumentalized by the private sector.

These changes resonate with the related growth of financialization of development in the form of new services and new ways of developing them. As Hunter and Murray (2019, 1263) have explored more widely in relation to health care, the private sector increasingly installs itself as a central actor in the development system as the country has become more prosperous, and where the "quest to improve human well-being is now being re-framed around the notion of 'unlocking the transformative potential' of the private sector." The figure of the entrepreneur features heavily within this new vision of development and change. NGOs are now involved in both training and assisting people from low-income backgrounds to become entrepreneurs and engaging with or playing roles themselves in the field of "social entrepreneurship."

NGOs are increasingly part of "entrepreneurship ecosystems" in which finance, training, and technology services are deployed. For example, within this changing landscape, private banks such as Standard Chartered now engage NGOs to gain access to remote, low-income households in rural areas to provide business loan services. NGOs that were once funded primarily by development donors, or their own income generation initiatives, are now partnered with international private finance agencies, such as Troidos Investment Management.[9]

These new roles have shifted NGOs away from working with and organizing communities into local organizations, or building credit and savings groups, and instead are increasingly directed toward solving commercial banks' "last mile problem" of how to incorporate "hard to reach" borrowers into financial services provision in increasingly saturated credit markets. Local/national development NGOs that were previously engaged in providing microfinance services, promoting skills development, or even in grassroots empowerment and social mobilization, increasingly speak a very different language of business, entrepreneurship-building, and finance. For example, Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha (TMSS), which has a long history of credit delivery, income generating skills building, and community level group formation for so-called "beneficiaries," now sells business services to newly labeled "clients" and "customers."

Alongside these efforts, since many of the poorest households lack the documents, assets, knowledge, or skills needed to access formal loans, new digital technologies are being developed by "start-up" businesses (modelled on Silicon Valley approaches) to enable new groups of potential borrowers to produce the necessary personal documentation that can be accepted by banks. NGOs are now loan service providers: they supply checklists and tech so that potential borrowers can generate the kind of credit rating documentation needed to become creditworthy clients. These brief examples do not represent the full extent of changes to what remains a relatively diverse NGO sector in Bangladesh (including new and evolving ideas about religious charitable action). However, the growing subordination of a significant part of the sector to a business logic suggests that earlier assumptions about NGOs as "alternative" actors challenging mainstream ideas and practices have died, with only a vague notion of promoting market inclusion living on in their place.

6 | Introducing the Special Issue

Ethnographically exploring this shifting terrain and responses, NGO afterlives, this special issue of *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* includes four original essays by a diverse group of authors. These ethnographic reflections come from a range of regions, including South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Elena Lesley's contribution traces the evolution of an NGO in Cambodia engaged in the provision of community-based mental health therapies initially established in the 1990s during the country's post-conflict UN peacekeeping period and at the height of the NGO boom. The subsequent evolution of this NGO into a hybrid social enterprise reveals the multiple and sometimes contradictory values and motivations that continue to exist among its members and staff, who keep alive its original charitable principles despite being increasingly morphed into a for-profit business.

In Christopher Taylor's account of changing Islamic charitable practices in North India, we see how the NGO form has become part of efforts to transform the practice of personalized alms giving into a more business-focused mode of giving based on new management techniques and technologies. While this can be seen as part of a wider trend toward a form of marketized Islam, the essay problematizes the use of analytical categories around moralities and markets in ways that make the case for a more nuanced understanding of religion, development, and NGOs in our understanding of the ways that new Islamic charities are taking shape.

Moving the discussion to the Middle East, Yasemin Ipek provides a detailed insight into the resurgence of the NGO sector following the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Reacting to government indifference, the resurgent NGO sector provided immediate support to residents and gave voice to people's anger and frustration. The recent boom has also generated new tensions around the future of NGOs, as familiar anxieties return about the externally driven agendas of INGO donor "partners" and the long-term implications of intensive "NGOing" in the face of a weak Lebanese state.

While Ipek's ethnography speaks to the fears that Lebanon could become another NGO Republic, Mamyrah Dougé Prosper, Nixon Boumba, and Mark Schuller's essay looks forward from Haiti's experience of becoming just that. The article, taking the form of a conversation between three differently positioned actors within a solidarity movement under reconfiguration, asks whether there is an NGO afterlife in which charity is superseded by new forms of solidarity. Exploring the "multiple meanings, forms, and visions of solidarity," it highlights the international solidarity building efforts of activists, trade unionists, and academics, particularly in the period leading up to and immediately following President Moïse's assassination in July 2021.

7 | Conclusion: Common Threads

The articles in the collection include eulogies for previous models of aid and NGOs. In India, the modernist state that upheld notions of secularity has given way to a Hindu nationalist state; minority religious traditions like the Muslim *waqf* (landed endowments) have also receded. Cambodia's "NGO boom" that accompanied the UN technical mission that installed trappings of liberal democracy following the United States' undeclared war and the rise and demise of the Khmer Rouge was constituted by pluralist, INGOs and a booming "expatria" (Hindman 2013).

These technocratic, neocolonial institutions presupposed and buttressed an emergent democratic state. Over time, however, one-party rule and clientelism resurfaced in Cambodia, transforming the NGO landscape. Haiti's Republic of NGOs—formed under a UN occupation that was at its zenith following the 2010 earthquake—contributed to undermining the state. With the removal of foreign troops—who brought cholera to the country and sexually assaulted hundreds of young Haitian women and men—the hollowed-out state was captured by a political party that increasingly relied on gang violence.

The articles also describe a rebirth of NGOing in new, creative ways. Activists in Haiti seized upon the PetroCaribe cooperation to make demands to "change the system" and seek new, non-NGO forms. In India, new social groupings adapt the traditional form of *zakat*—almsgiving, using local cosmology of *nizam-e zakat*, a moral-economic system Taylor calls the "zakat economy." In a context with recurrent massive crises, there have been many NGO booms in Lebanon. Despite criticisms, NGOs gain new roles/structures, such as private contracting, which is becoming more common. In Lesley's article on Cambodia, the NGO that began as a humanitarian-oriented offshoot of an international organization has now taken on a new form as a hybrid social enterprise, a self-proclaimed apolitical service provider that encourages entrepreneurial endeavors and even envisions a potential future as a purely private company. While funding sources are drying up and governing structures may be changing, the *actions* of NGOs are adapting to these shifting contexts.

In an effort to "reimagine" NGOs, many have either been pushed or pulled into market logics. Whether the "last mile problem" in Bangladesh or the for-profit ventures Cambodian NGO staff tend to on the side, or marketized almsgiving in Islamic NGOs in India, NGOs are increasingly displaced by, sharing space with, or becoming more like for-profit businesses. On the one hand, businesses engaging in NGOing does lead to greater aid; for example, in the United States, "B corporations" engage in philanthropy as part of their business model. Their financial success is owed, in part, to their public charitable giving. However, market logics are at times diametrically opposed to service provision. The profit motive is based on maximizing returns for investors, often by reducing costs for inputs: labor, materials, goods bought from local communities. Hard-to-reach, poor, marginalized communities are not always profitable to provide services to—for example, trash cleanup and public transportation. For this reason, public services are still provided via states. Also for this reason, services are being eroded by those within governments indebted to—or directly connected to—corporate interests.

The essays that follow also chart *imagined* or *aspirational* afterlives. Lebanese activists imagine afterlives of dominant collaborative models between actors such as NGOs, the state, international actors, and the private sector and dependency on international funding. This imagination involves more politically effective and independent ways of NGOing. Haitian and solidarity activists attempt to build emerging solidarity and envision new social groupings not dependent on NGOs or foreign intervention. These groupings hail activists in other countries in Latin America in a common struggle to push back against US hegemony. The PetroChallenge movement is not without its contradictions, but it was a historic moment of national unity and revolutionary potential.

The adaptability of these institutions to different contexts is evident throughout the collection. Loosely meaning "organization," *Angkar* was the term used to describe the enigmatic and seemingly all-knowing power structure that controlled Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge era. In the 1990s, this structure experienced a rebirth as the term used to describe the NGOs that had suddenly mushroomed in the country. The organization's shift in focus is heralded by activities of individual staff members, many of whom have taken on their own entrepreneurial endeavors in conflict with the NGO's charitable ideologies. In India, Muslim NGOs also graft neoliberal principles of entrepreneurship with charity. Taylor chronicles Muslim NGOs' contributions to aligning urban Indian Muslims' ethical subjectivities with the requirements of the supposedly secular state and market capitalism via their social entrepreneurship initiatives. As Ipek notes, Western countries see their investments in Lebanese NGOs as vital to curbing the influence of Iran and the Iran-backed local political group Hezbollah.

Today, with the rise of the radical right in several key countries, NGOs face existential threats. With public services being targeted by Musk's DOGE, and homologues in other countries with resurgent right-wing parties, NGOs (or nonprofits, as they are more commonly known in the United States) are faced with the challenge of meeting much greater needs with simultaneously fewer public resources through grants and contracts. Even before Trump took office in January 2025, his Republican allies took aim at nonprofits, attempting to revoke their tax-exempt status through H.R. 9495.

As engaged anthropologists, we cannot fail to notice the parallels between the fates of NGOs and universities, as both are being radically transformed and targeted for underfunding. In addition to the example set by cutting $400 million in federal funding to Columbia University for not bending to conservative Zionist interpretations of anti-Semitism, days before Immigration and Customs Enforcement's illegal disappearance of student Mahmoud Khalil, US federal funding agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Institute for Health, and the Department of Education were gutted, with only a few loyalists remaining to implement current government priorities.

All university students and employees have much to learn from NGOgraphy (Schuller 2023). As institutions both shaped by the "audit culture" (Shore and Wright 2000; Strathern 2000), erstwhile reliant on public financing but increasingly pressured to follow more entrepreneurial models and both function "like businesses," NGOs and universities could learn from one another and particularly their strategies of "rebirth" in the new global context. Both sets of institutions must confront their colonialist, extractivist legacies (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019; Jobson 2020; Smith 2013). A critical ethnography of NGOs has much in common with how we understand continuities of colonialist forms of governance (Davis 2003; Eriksson Baaz 2005; Hanchey 2023). Both anthropology as a discipline and the NGO form were given resources and legitimacy and operate within power imbalances set up by the colonial encounter (Asad 1979). In the post-2020 racial awakening, some NGOs are beginning to engage in self-critique, similar to what is happening in anthropology (Allen and Jobson 2016; Harrison [1991] 2010).

The accounts included in this special issue, while showing the ways NGOing continues to involve new visions of activism, novel forms of expertise, and diverse moral projects, also suggest important continuities with earlier regimes of knowledge and action. Attention to the afterlives of NGOs, then, enables us to focus new attention on a present that remains informed by legacies of NGOing that survive well after the earlier NGO boom three decades earlier. It may be premature to declare the end of NGOs—as some have tried to do—since they continue to evolve and change. Contested forms of "NGO-ness" continue to offer useful portals into understanding and enacting social change.

Faced with such uncertainty, NGOs' best hope may well be in the space in betwixt and between. Previous models forged in earlier crises may well be useful to understanding the unfolding dissolutions and realignments. More than "gap fillers," returning to precapitalist models of charity such as *zakat*, *tzedakah*, or the "preferential option for the poor" of the early Catholic Church and its revival in liberation theology, offers clarity of purpose and a way ahead that foregrounds humanity. Surviving the future may well require a renewed focus on mission and vision, not just of individual NGOs but the NGO idea itself, suspending the pragmatic instrumentalization of the form for modest benefits, returning to an advocacy role, what might be called an anti-antipolitics machine, mobilizing communities to defend previous gains. With the "carrot" removed and the "stick" strengthened, as Dougé-Prosper et al. conclude in their piece in this volume, formal attacks, such as H.R. 9495, on the NGO form may be a form of liberation for those who felt obligated to discipline their work within the structure.

Endnotes

[1] It is also important to recognize people of color in the far right in the United States (e.g., Allam and Nakhlawi 2021; Srivastava 2023; Yazdiha 2023).

[2] They discuss the main elements of these afterlives as a changed role for states, new expectations for citizens, hybridization of expertise, and the emergence of new knowledge assemblages.

[3] Hybridization is not a new phenomenon and has long been associated with the field of NGOs and nonprofit scholarship, linked to organizational sociological "ideal type" logics distinguishing the essential characteristics of "public," "private," and "third sector" organizations. See, for example, Billis (2010), who identifies core elements of hybridity around ownership, governance, resources, and operational priorities.

[4] This report set out a range of possible futures for the humanitarian NGO sector that envisaged different futures for a failing humanitarian NGO ecosystem seen as under challenge by changing dynamics and new humanitarian actors, including the growing role of private for-profit organizations and the growing calls for "localization."

[5] RINGO is an international civil society initiative to reflect on and transform the INGO in terms of "purposes, structures power and positioning" and is currently hosted by the West Africa Civil Society Institute. See https://rightscolab.org/ringo/; https://wacsi.org.

[6] It remains to be seen how the dramatic and unexpected student-led 2024 pro-democracy uprising—now known as the "July Revolution"—will further shape the sector.

[7] See https://haitiantimes.com/2022/10/03/haitis-montana-accord-document/.

[8] Kivland (2020) uses the term "street sovereign," for example.

[9] See, for example, "Encouraging Female Empowerment and Resilience in Bangladesh," Troidos Investment Management, February 28, 2022. https://www.triodos-im.com/articles/2022/investment-tmf-tfsf—tmss.

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