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The Politics of Charity

History in person

Mawuli has a slight frame and a boyish grin that seem to belie his age and authority. Now in his late 40s, he is the programme director for one of Ghana's leading advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and a public figure of considerable repute. We are talking in his air-conditioned office over the coffee and croissants that he has ordered as a late breakfast. He is dressed in a brightly coloured 'local batik' shirt that seems a deliberate understatement of status. Round gold glasses frame sparkling eyes, animated by the fervour and passion with which he speaks. Even as we are exchanging pleasantries he talks in long elegant sentences. He finishes his coffee and I ask what led him to the work he does today. His answer takes us back to his childhood, and to a set of experiences and ideas that seem oddly out of kilter with the sterile office in which we are sitting.

> Well, my parents are both dead now but they were both peasants. My father started as a peasant farmer and he became a dock worker but ended up back in the village. And my mother became a kind of trader – a food trader.

His parents were poor but managed to send him to a Catholic boarding school. There he became interested in the work of a range of French philosophers who seemed to make sense of some of the inequalities he saw between his parents' world and the world he was educated into:

> You see, if you come from a peasant community and you are confronted by peasant suffering and material depravation in peasant

society, which does not sit with the fact that that peasant society is a part of a so-called modern society and wealth, which is the world that I was growing up in and becoming part of. And yet that peasant society also has a particular world outlook – the peasant traditional outlook: faith and destiny and all those things. Your search for answers is also a part of a search in contradiction to the peasant view of things.

This search led to the work of Sartre, Gide and Kessler, and later, during his time at university, to the work of radical socialists including Karl Marx. Not by nature a rebel, Mawuli came to realize the futility of achieving his ambition of providing material support for all those who depended on him – his parents and siblings and beyond that the village he came from. He began to see that 'the solutions lay in a radical transformation of society'. At university in the late 1970s and early 1980s, much of his time was occupied in trying to pursue this vision of an 'alternative society', of equity of opportunity and wealth.

This personal crusade took place against the 'mass corruption' and 'economic stagnation' of the 1970s and the explicitly Marxist challenge of the coups that brought Jerry Rawlings to power, first in 1979 and then again in 1981. Mawuli became involved in a number of 'fronts of struggle', working for a variety of political organizations who lent ideological and practical support to the nascent 'socialist revolution'.

By 1984, however, he had become increasingly disillusioned with the revolutionary process. The socialist rhetoric of Rawlings' People's National Defence Committee was not borne out in the neo-liberal economic policies it began to pursue. The regime began to suffer from the kinds of corruption it had initially railed against. Frustrated with Ghanaian politics, Mawuli decided to continue his education, earlier curtailed by the pursuit of a political vision. A scholarship allowed him to move to the UK to undertake a Master's. In Ghana, the socialist movement continued to unravel, so that when the scholarship funding ran out, he stayed on, working in a number of menial jobs in order to make ends meet, and continuing his struggle for the socialist principles he believed in. 'I worked in a French restaurant and the chef and I spent a lot of time talking about Jean Paul Sartre as we prepared the courgette and the fois gras!' A number of those he had known through political activism in Ghana were in exile in the UK. He kept in touch socially, but disengaged from their broader political project:

My view was that you took your politics where you found it; try to see what is possible given the situation where you were. I did not

think there was any possibility of reviving the Left in Ghana. What I saw for myself was a better education for myself, not simply a career thing, a political education that tried to get as much knowledge as possible in a variety of political groups and projects. So for me it was a moment of trying to learn.

Mawuli hadn't planned on staying long but events conspired against return: in Ghana an increasingly authoritarian regime made political activism futile; in the UK he became involved in a plethora of organizations including the Conference of Socialist Economists, Socialist Worker and the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Then in 1994 the political situation in Ghana 'opened up', following the official return of multi-party democracy. Along with two other exiled political activists he returned to Ghana to set up the advocacy NGO that he now co-directs:

From our analysis what was needed then was some kind of organization, a vehicle of political organization which allowed you to engage with some of the simple but profound problems – like working to defend people's human rights, working to defend people's legal rights, which was simple but not looking very politically revolutionary like we did in the 80s.

The NGO movement provided the practical means by which to continue the pursuit of a broader set of ideological aims. Mawuli explains his own evolution from political activist to NGO pioneer as part of a wider process:

For a long time NGOs in Ghana were not into advocacy: they were charities. All the policy work, the activism, was left to so-called progressive movements. The destruction of those movements meant that NGOs were the only places that you could raise those issues of policy. So charity work was directly turned into policy work.

If the transformation of the political movements of the 1980s into the non-governmental movement of the 1990s entailed the de-politicization of their activism, it also resulted in the politicization of the NGO sector as a whole. NGOs were embraced as a vehicle to enact political change, as former socialist activists were forced to accommodate to a reconfigured institutional and ideological reality.

Mawuli's narrative highlights a distinctly personal set of ideologies, motivations and choices but is also revealing of a wider trajectory: in Ghana, a broadly socialist political movement emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s that was later transformed into the 'non-governmental' movement that began to develop in the 1990s following the return to formal multi-party democracy. Reflecting on the significance of these historical developments, Sulley (Box 5.1), another former political activist now working in the NGO sector, explains:

> You can see that those [people] that emerged out of that period and the history of the civil movement in the country are those who are at the forefront of development work or the NGO world. I mean you just go through all the NGOs – they are all products of that period in the country's history […].

Younger NGO workers are also aware of the significance of this history. Tse, now in his mid 30s, works for an international NGO having previously worked for one of the leading national NGOs. Though he did not participate in these developments, he also underscores their ongoing importance:

> You see a sort of clique, a cohort, of people spreading out to form NGOs in that period. We are talking about a political factor and then a lot of people supported the [Rawlings] regime. The leaders would have known themselves very well. You see they all happened to be in university during a particular period. And then the students supported the government. So within that period there was this sort of camaraderie created.

This chapter examines this history through the narratives of those involved. It highlights how the present activities of NGOs are practically and ideologically connected to earlier forms of activism and reveals how an ostensibly 'global' set of donor policies have been configured in the context of a geographically specific set of political struggles. These are not simply struggles 'within' the public sphere but about its very nature and existence.

The rise of NGOs

The past three decades have seen the global proliferation of NGOs on an unprecedented scale. This 'global associational explosion' (Fischer

1997: 440) has been supported by different strands of thinking that have converged in their reassessment of the role of the state as the natural locus of economic growth and development. With the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, it seemed that a new ideological consensus had been reached, an idea captured in Francis Fukuyama's now infamous phrase, 'the end of history' (1992).[1] If previous political and economic problems lay in dictatorial and bureaucratic states, the solution was to be found in the rejuvenation of 'the market' and an increasing role for an autonomous 'civil society'. In the 1980s neo-liberal economic policies, pursued by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), led to dramatic state retrenchment and to the encouragement of NGOs as more 'innovative' and 'efficient' alternatives to effective service provision.[2] The expansion of the NGO sector continued into the 1990s as donors began to promote 'good governance' through the expansion of 'civil society'.[3] From a previously peripheral role, NGOs were increasingly embraced as the solution to welfare service delivery, democratization and development (Fischer 1997).

This chapter does not dispute the significance of donor policy in promoting these institutional forms, but suggests that the material and discursive resources accompanying these policies create possibilities that are not reducible to a single global logic. By focusing on NGO workers' own understandings of this history, the chapter locates the emergence of the Ghanaian NGO movement in relation to the relationships and ideological positions of earlier forms of activism (Dorman 2005, Jackson 2005, Pommerolle 2005). In particular it highlights the tensions that result from activists' attempts to exploit institutional and discursive possibilities resulting from broader donor policies against their ideological grain.

As self-professed socialists, many of the NGO 'pioneers' are highly critical of the neo-liberal agenda of donors and Western governments. In terms that echo post-development critics, they highlight the role of international aid agencies in perpetuating the interests of the powerful to the detriment of the poor. Yet these activists' recognition of the ideological limits of these institutions does not lead to the wholesale rejection of 'development'. Rather they seek to exploit the institutional spaces that emerge for their own political and ideological ends. While this is understood to produce tensions, and even compromise, they hold that compromised action is preferable to the comfort of ideologically purist inactivity.

Revolutionary beginnings

On 31 December 1981, Jerry Rawlings, a low-ranking flight lieutenant, became the president of Ghana when he overthrew the democratically elected Limann government in what he termed a 'popular revolution'.[4] Despite the use of force, this explicitly was not a 'coup' as elucidated in the first radio broadcast he made to the nation:

Fellow citizens of Ghana, as you would have noticed, we are not playing the national anthem. In other words, this is not a coup. I ask for nothing less than a revolution, something that would transform the social and economic order of this country... We are asking for nothing more than to organize the country in such a way that nothing will be done from the Council, whether by God or the devil, without the consent of the people.[5]

In the name of 'the people', the revolution aimed to unite 'workers', 'peasants' and low echelons of the military along with radical intellectuals against the 'old order' of businessmen, professionals and chiefs (Hansen 1991, Nugent 1996). The rhetoric of the 'revolution' was explicitly Marxist, deploying the notion of 'class struggle' and advocating 'mass participation' in politics. Emmanuel Hansen,[6] a Ghanaian historian and onetime minister in the Rawlings government, has remarked upon the strangeness of this situation, noting the paradox of a government announcing a 'people's revolution' to the people (quoted in Nugent 1996: 17). Despite the populist rhetoric, initial support came from a relatively small section of society. A variety of organizations, many originating in the university campuses, provided vocal support and were a significant factor in establishing the regime (Jeffries 1989, Nugent 1996).

Of the many organizations that appeared during this era, the June Fourth Movement (JFM) and the New Democratic Movement (NDM) were particularly important. The JFM was the largest[7] and initially exerted a high degree of influence on the regime.[8] Founded after the coup that brought Rawlings to power in 1979, it aimed to uphold the ideals for which the revolution was undertaken. Following Rawlings' second coup in 1981, the organization rapidly expanded. Many of the leadership were given influential positions in the Provisional National Defence Council, the Interim Coordinating Committee, Workers' Defence Committees and other organizational structures intended to consolidate the revolution. Although the NDM shared JFM's disillusionment with the political

and economic situation that developed during the 1970s, it was highly critical of the un-democratic means by which Rawlings took power.[9] Despite this initial position of 'critical support', a number of NDM leadership later became key players in various organizations closely associated with the revolution (Hansen 1987, 1991).

Tacit support for the revolution also came from a variety of Catholic organizations, including Pax Romana and the Young Christian Students (YCS). Loosely referred to as the Young Catholic Movement, members of these organizations ('Young Catholics') connected their religious orientation to a less overtly political stance. Nonetheless these drew ideological inspiration from the teachings of liberation theologists such as Bishop Romero and Paolo Freire and saw affinity between their own concern to build a more egalitarian society, and the socialist aims of the revolution.

Ideological disputes and differences of approach often led to bitter wrangling between members of these various organizations. Despite this, political activists and Young Catholics shared the sense that the predicament of the country called for radical change. Activists working for various pro-Rawlings groups located support for the revolution in the economic and political circumstances of the 1970s. During his time as a student at the University of Ghana, Legon, Samuel worked 'behind the scenes' for a range of organizations, including the then radically socialist National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) and the JFM. He suggests that among these groups, support for the revolution came from disillusionment with the corruption, brutality and economic mismanagement of earlier military dictators:

Change was necessary. Change was really needed in those days. There was a lot of trouble from the Acheampong regime. Every year campus would be closed down because of conflict between students and the military government. Soldiers would march onto campus and students would run away and the campus would be closed down. So definitely there was a need for change.

At the time, a range of ideological currents seemed to converge in a sense that the future lay in the socialist transformation of society. Emmanuel (Box 1.1) now works as a development consultant but was a prominent member of the JFM. He explains how such left-wing movements drew upon a broader set of ideas:

Internationally you had the struggle for national liberation, a period of what I call African nationalism, which had an impact on those

of us that were at university at the time. There was a sense of hope: that change was possible, that life was about change that had to be brought about by active struggle.

More specifically activists drew a sense of hope from the ideological orientation that the revolution seemed to represent. Sulley (Box 5.1), who was active in the NUGS leadership and later in the JFM, explains: 'The regime at that time aimed at changing the fundamentals of society, the way people relate to each other, how the national cake is distributed, what path we should take in terms of development.' Concretely activists supported the regime through a range of activities. As a member of the central organizing committee of NUGS, Sulley describes student leaders' decision to set up a task-force:

> We thought there were urgent things to be done, you know, and therefore we did not see why we should be in school studying when there were all these urgent things that needed to be done. So we decided that the universities were going to be closed for three months. [...] It was a short-term thing to allow the regime to stabilize [and] also as part of the stabilization, to get people involved at the local level in community development and therefore to gain a better idea of the issues and the problems.

Young Catholics located their support for the revolution in a similar sense of disillusionment.

Peter now divides his time between working as an academic and setting up an NGO. During the early 1980s, he was active in various organizations in the Young Catholic Movement. He describes how his political radicalization emerged from dismay at the circumstances he saw around him growing up in the 1970s: 'By the late seventies things were really rotten in Ghana. I mean it was no more a country, it was a jungle.' In this context, the Rawlings regime seemed to resonate with the sense of many Young Catholics that the solutions to the country's problems lay in socialist revolution:

> At that time many of the things that Rawlings was talking about, about justice in society, fairness and so on, these were all ideas that we were talking about, we were discussing. So if somebody were to speak like that, would you say he was talking as a military man, that he has made a coup and so on? When we have seen all the injustices coming from our own society? No.

Box 1.1 Emmanuel

I come from the North of Ghana and my interest in development work came partly from that. Living in a place where development is lacking, where you are constantly confronted by social difficulties and inequalities, it is difficult not to develop a deep concern about social welfare. But the intellectual climate during my youth also helped shape the path I took. Particularly during my time as a student there was a lot of awareness about these sorts of issues with liberation struggles and a strong sense of African nationalism. These also helped me to develop a social consciousness – to want to bring about social change. And of course that also meant political change. During those days it wasn't like now. There was a sense of hope, that change was possible, that life was about change that had to be brought about by active struggle.

In 1978 I went to the University of Ghana. At that time there was a group of us from the North. We'd all experienced similar things and we wanted to do something about it. So we set up an organization, which was to lobby for the rights of farmers displaced by a World Bank funded dam project. I also got involved with a number of other organizations. There was the JFM, which at that time was dominated by a lot of the same people. We all supported Rawlings at that time. The ideas he was talking about resonated with the kinds of things we were also talking about – the need to stop corruption and for greater social equality.

Following the coup of 1981 I started working for the government, but over time ideological disagreements emerged. I started to speak out and then in 1982 was arrested and imprisoned for a year. After that I didn't see that much could be done working in Ghana and I also felt personally unsafe. So that was when I went to the UK. At that time there were a group of us there, who had similar ideas and had been through similar kinds of things. We didn't always see eye to eye on everything but we collaborated in opposing Rawlings and trying to bring about political change. We did things like producing anti-Rawlings propaganda, which we sent to our fellow friends and activists who had stayed in Ghana. Exile life was frustrating; it's a kind of existence that's far removed from reality. At that time I got involved in the London voluntary sector. Some of us from the Student Movement founded an NGO to help support Ghanaian refugees. That at least provided a grassroots connection.

Later I did a PhD. I was in a British university but the research was in West Africa so I began returning home periodically. By that time things had opened up a bit. Then after the doctorate I started working for a donor organization as a field officer in West Africa. People say a lot of things about donor organizations – that you're always compromised – and maybe that's true. But for me it provided a way to be more practically engaged. The kind of political rhetoric that came out of the organizations I engaged with during the 1980s has some value but if it doesn't make a difference to people's lives there's no point.

For Peter, desperate times called for radical action. Rawlings' brutal means were justified by a shared ideological end.

Now a respected 'NGO pioneer' Charles (Box 4.1) was also involved in the leadership of the Catholic Youth Movement during the 1980s. Though considerably more circumspect about the 'brutal' methods the regime employed, he similarly describes how the ideological convictions of the leadership of the Catholic Youth led to broad sympathy with the revolutionary process:

> Most of the people in the Catholic Student movement – the leadership – at that time could align themselves with the 1979 thing. Because it was a revolution that came to talk for the poor against corruption and all that. [...] Some of us, including myself, were sympathetic to the cause. Not to the judicial killing and all of that but to the whole idea of creating a power balance between the workers and the poor and the hierarchical powers and so on. [...] And some of us [in the Young Catholic Movement] were sympathetic to it, though we didn't come out openly and be a part to it, we were sympathetic to it.

These sentiments are echoed by Albert (Box 3.2), another Catholic Youth leader who now directs one of the country's largest national NGOs:

> At that time we were friends with the government. Because the government talked about revolution, we also talked about revolution. The government talked about social change, we also talked about social change. The government talked about options for the poor, and we also talked about options for the poor, because the government at that time had its roots in the poor and the marginalized in society. So we were allies with the government.

Despite organizational and ideological differences between a range of progressive organizations, in practice people frequently moved between these. Many of those active in the Young Catholic Movement during the 1980s were concurrently active in progressive movements such as the NDM and JFM. Personal relations often developed between people in these movements through involvement in student politics. Thomas, was active in the Young Catholic Movement at university and describes how differences between the aims and ideologies of these organizations were often unimportant in relation to their wider political and social

goals: 'There were plenty of clashes. But our common objective was that we wanted to bring about change.' Kwesi (Chapter 2), a prominent member of the NDM, similarly describes the personal and ideological overlap between these groups:

> We had all worked in the regime at different times and at different levels and I'm sure, you know, we even had a certain overlap of views. We were not all coming out of a Catholic humanist tradition but we actually collaborated.

While ideological differences led to fierce disputes, members of these various organizations shared recognition of the need for change along broadly socialist principles. This not only led to strategic coalitions but also to close relationships that connected ostensibly discrete organizations in a complex network of overlapping ties.

Dissent goes underground

In 1984, finance minister Kwesi Botchwey devised an economic plan aimed at overcoming the problems of economic stagnation within the country, through adoption of a neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programme. Donor support in the form of the IMF's Economic Recovery Programme was contingent on the acceptance of a variety of economic 'conditionalities', including privatization of state companies, retrenchment of government agencies and various anti-protectionist measures. For many of Rawlings' previous supporters, the move represented the culmination of the regime's movement away from the socialist ideologies on which it was ostensibly founded. Lucas (Box 1.2), a JFM leader who worked as regional coordinator of the Defence Committees, describes his decision to resign:

> Whereas we were asking for the more radical more participatory, more grass-roots method [...] Rawlings aligned himself with some economists [...] who prepared a quick fix.

This sense of 'ideological betrayal' was accompanied by dismay at the increasingly brutal tactics adopted:

> The ideas for which we had supported him had been aborted; he was like any military dictator who has seized power. He was more interested in power than the development of the people.

Box 1.2   Lucas

I was a Catholic by upbringing and that's how I first came in contact with radical thinking – through the writings and teachings of Bishop Romero. His ideas struck a chord with me – in fact with a lot of us. At secondary school I got really involved in a group called the Bishop Romero Youth for Development, which undertook voluntary activities such as helping the poor and the sick and helping with the construction of schools and clinics. So that kind of social consciousness was there even before I went to university. But it was at university that I really started to get politically engaged.

I was at the University of Ghana between 1980 and 1985, when campus was quite a radical place to be. We were supporting the government in whatever way we could – taking cocoa to the ports in order to raise foreign currency through export; that kind of thing. Actually there were quite a number of us from the Young Catholic Movement. I was basically quite central to all the political developments that were taking place at that time.

But in 1982 ideological disagreements became increasingly apparent between those of us on the Left who still believed the revolution should be about the socialist ideals it started out with and some others who wanted to take it away from that. We were asking for the more radical, more participatory, more grass-roots methods, relying as much as possible on the general methods of generating wealth.

After we left, the regime became pretty brutal and oppressive. It was obvious to all of us that Rawlings was becoming a dictator. So along with a number of other former friends and colleagues, I helped set up the United Revolutionary Front. Basically we were aiming to bring about a return to democracy. Open defiance of the regime wasn't really possible so most of what we did happened underground. Actually, at that time, many of my friends and colleagues from the JFM and Student Movement had moved to the UK. We all faced a lot of persecution and understandably people didn't want to stay in Ghana. But I thought it was important to be here in order to provide the link. For example I helped distribute anti-Rawlings publications. I worked doing a menial civil service job which gave me the financial support to keep on going with my political work.

In 1991 things got particularly bad: the regime had become really brutal. I got beaten up a lot and then I got arrested and imprisoned without trial for three months. Democracy returned in 1992, which was actually when our political movement collapsed. We'd taken a gamble and it hadn't worked. I still believed in the same things, but there wasn't really an outlet for putting them into practice. But that's also when the NGO movement really started taking off and that gave a lot of us a new outlet for pursuing our ideals. In 1998 I started working for one of the country's leading NGOs. It had a lot of the same kind of people working for it that had taken part in activism on campus and through organizations like JFM. I spearheaded the organization's anti-privatization campaign, so I was very much pursuing the same kinds of ideals. But I got frustrated with being part of a well-established NGO and wanted to do my own thing. Now I'm pursuing the same kinds of things but through my own NGO.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the political culture within Ghana became increasingly authoritarian. The dangers of speaking out against the government led to the inhibition of any form of public dissent, a predicament popularly expressed as the 'culture of silence' (Nugent 1996, Yankah 1998). Sulley (Box 5.1), who actively supported the regime in its initial stages, describes how a growing sense of disillusionment coincided with a dawning of the recognition of their own short-sightedness:

> Naively, we thought that with structures from the top we could transform society. But as it turned out, and as we realized, the military as an institution has been built and developed to shape certain interests. And there's so far that you can push it and beyond that it won't go. We focused on the power structures at the top without building the base, so when that reaction set in, there was very little support from the ground, to protect us.

During this period, the different ideological orientations of the more politically oriented activists and the more religiously oriented Young Catholics led to a divergence of approach. Simon (Box 1.3) was active in both and explains: 'The Christian politics is less threatening in a direct way to state power. […] State power engagement is a lot more risky. So people went different ways: some people stayed with the Catholic process; some went into anti-state engagement and those kinds of things.'

During the 1980s, NGOs began to proliferate across Africa, in part as a response to changing donor policy. Against the backdrop of the economic and political crises that plagued Africa throughout the 1970s (Nugent 2004), the World Bank published 'Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa' (World Bank 1981), charting the way forward through market liberalization and a correspondingly reduced role for the state.[10] In Ghana, the first professionally staffed national NGOs were set up with the aim of providing various kinds of 'service', including the provision of water, sanitation, health and educational facilities, to impoverished communities. Many of these organizations were founded by those who had been active in the Young Catholic Movement. Charles (Box 4.1) was one of these and explains the rationale that led him and other leaders of the Young Catholic Movement to set up NGOs in this period:

> When we were youth leaders or student leaders there was a lot we said, a lot of noise we made about options for the poor. [The NGO] would provide us the vehicle to put those words into practice. So

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Box 1.3 Simon

I was born in a rural village in the Upper East Region. My parents were poor but at the time the education system was good so it was possible to do well by pure merit. As one of the few educated people in the village I was made assistant secretary of the village development association. I guess all that experience was very formative in the development of my social perspective, but it was through involvement in the Young Catholic Movement and liberation theology that I really began to think about social issues more systematically. In 1979 I went to the University of Ghana where I became very actively involved in student politics as a member of the Student Representative Council, which at the time was dominated by radical socialists – actually, lots of the people who are now at the forefront of the NGO movement. I was also involved in the JFM and it was in that general socialist atmosphere my ideas began to take political shape. At the same time I also retained my interest and faith in Catholicism. Lots of the people I knew through involvement in YCS at school were also on campus, so I also kept in touch with them. In 1984 I helped to set up the NGO CHD, where I was one of two coordinators paid to run the organization in the year after it was set up. That was an attempt by some like-minded people to try to put into practice the socialist principles we'd been talking about on campus. After that I got involved in a National Service rural development project, working alongside Charles [Box 4.1]. At National Service, I was also in charge of an urban development project, that later developed into one of the country's largest national NGOs. Shortly after I'd helped to set that up, I left the country to undertake a Master's in the Netherlands. That was followed by a period working for a number of different NGOs in Malaysia, Africa and the UK. Then in 1994 I was back in the UK, and that was when I began talking to Kwesi and Sulley about the possibility of setting up an advocacy NGO. In 1995 those discussions culminated in our return to Ghana to set up the regional office of what has become one of the country's most influential advocacy NGOs.

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that was the strong motivation around it. And then also there was this sense... like 1983 was the time that we had this severe famine in Ghana and it was very clear that most of the people coming to the assistance of Ghanaians were foreign institutions, foreign NGOs. So again we thought, why should it be? Where are the Ghanaians, you know, intellectuals and so on?

Young Catholics took advantage of new sources of funding that became available in the 1980s to set up a range of NGOs. These attempted to respond to social and economic problems that partly resulted from donor-backed state retrenchment. Beyond these immediate aims, however, these organizations also enabled the pursuit of social visions broadly derived from the teachings of liberation theologists.

During this period, many of those in the progressive movements took a more overtly political approach, attempting to destabilize the regime. Though formal dissent was impossible, activists continued to meet covertly. Sulley (Box 5.1) was an active student leader and a member of the JFM. During this period he gave up on political activism and moved back home to live with his parents in the North:

[During] the time of the falling out with Rawlings [...] it was not possible to organize at the national level. And even at the local level, you couldn't do it so openly because then you were targeted by the regime. But then you knew who shared the same ideas met in these study circles to discuss.

Members of various progressive organizations describe how they were forced to 'go underground', working illicitly within the country or going into exile. Some articulated wider dissatisfactions through speaking out publicly on issues of workers' rights; others used pseudonyms to write critical columns in newspapers and journals. Many of the JFM and NDM moved to the UK, attempting to unseat Rawlings through external lobbying and the publication and dissemination of critical literature.

Simon (Box 1.3) was active in the Young Catholic Movement and the JFM in the early 1980s but moved to the UK where he continued his education. He explains: 'Everybody got out by a certain point. You know, by 1984, 85, virtually all the left-wing student movement folks who were meddling with the Rawlings regime were out.' A number of former members of the JFM and NDM were imprisoned, while others were beaten and physically intimidated. During this period some gave up on activism altogether, seeing the pursuit of their social and political aspirations as a futile task in the political climate that prevailed.

Non-governmental politics

In 1989, the World Bank published *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (World Bank 1989), placing emphasis on the central role of 'governance' in achieving sustained development. If Africa's developmental failures lay not in the absence of raw materials, technology or infrastructure, as previously supposed, but rather in the lack of democratic and accountable institutions, then the way forward, it seemed, was to reform these institutions.

In Ghana these policies led to increased pressure on the Rawlings government. Elections were held in 1992 as an IMF and World Bank condition of ongoing donor backing. As head of the governing National Defence Committee, Rawlings was able to use access to state institutions and state media to buy votes and disseminate propaganda (Brydon and Legge 1996). Behind the veneer of multi-party democracy, patrimonialism and authoritarianism persisted (Bright and Dzorgbo 2001). Nonetheless, the formal return to multi-party democracy coincided with new sources of funding, intended to encourage NGOs and strengthen 'civil society'. Often uncritically conflated with 'civil society' (Bornstein 2005), NGOs were regarded as bulwarks against authoritarian and undemocratic regimes and as representatives of the wider 'public voice'.[11] In line with wider changes throughout Africa, NGOs emerged from a relatively marginal role to be seen as a panacea for social and economic development (Amanor et al. 1993).[12]

Despite opposition to the liberal ideologies behind these developments, NGO pioneers relate how an increasingly liberal dispensation created 'new opportunities'. As a political movement became 'non-governmental', so the non-governmental sector took on a distinctly political character. Many of those forced 'underground' and into exile during the late 1980s took strategic advantage of the new institutional spaces and resources that opened up. Activists describe how connections to various external donors made it possible to continue to pursue political visions with roots in the progressive movements of the early 1980s. Samuel works as programme director for an international NGO and participated in various progressive organizations during the early 1980s. He describes how donor resources made it possible to undermine the authoritarian political culture that developed in the late 1980s:

> Civil society can get the donors on their side to ensure that government is doing the right thing and being transparent. Because once donors are providing the money then civil society can use that to make sure that donors are making the government accountable and transparent.

Echoing these sentiments, Mawuli explains how such resources have enabled his NGO to pursue a set of socialist ideologies:

> You can get money from the government of Britain in terms that allow you to do your own work. When they begin to insist, you say fuck off! I am not going to take money from international donors

> under a programme which I think is damned negative. I will take money which allows me to say what I can say.

More generally, NGOs have used the donor resources that emerged in the 1990s to further a variety of social and political visions, sometimes at a direct tangent to donors' own ideological orientations.

Although many of those at the forefront of the Ghanaian NGO movement remain radically opposed to economic globalization along neo-liberal lines, they recognize the possibilities that media and technological globalization enable, specifically in terms of the development of a 'global civil society'. Lucas (Box 1.2) directs a national NGO that has been at the forefront of attempts to oppose the government backed policy of water privatization. He describes the importance of global coalitions in furthering domestic advocacy on these issues:

> I can now talk to other NGOs in Holland, UK, US, Canada, who on the basis of social and economic justice are agreeing with me and are not afraid to say that. And they will go onto the streets and say yes! So the globalization of the issue of rights is one positive fallout of economic globalization. Where emails are now available we can communicate – the Internet provides us with a huge area of information and all kinds of things. So in a sense globalization has actually aided the massing together of the growing closeness of civil society globally. So that has been very useful, such that as we talk now NGOs globally now are signing a letter that they are sending to the IMF, the World Bank and the Republic of Ghana in support of a fresh struggle we have just launched.

If the emergence of new kinds of funding and support creates possibilities, Ghanaian NGO workers also point to the problems that attend these. Lucas (Box 1.2) articulates a widespread view that donor funding leads to a culture of dependency that stifles debate:

> NGOs, because they are often funder dependent, that has also created a problem. Because I now find some of my colleagues in quite a number of sectors who are outspoken and supportive, speaking less because they don't want to upset the funders.

Chris (Box 5.3) echoes these sentiments. His socialist principles led to political engagements that resulted in exile from his country, Liberia.

Today he runs an advocacy NGO but is acutely aware of the constraints that donors impose on his own activities:

> You know somebody like myself, what I am doing in my NGO. It's not an agenda of my own per se. We are working in the NGO business. You call for what is marketable. What is in there that donors are prepared to fund? So that is the reality and the donors are not going to fund what you want. We can put some nuances here and there but essentially that is what I am talking about.

Chris echoes others in denouncing a lack of 'real ideological alternatives', contrasting the period of his youth with a contemporary consensus that 'capitalism is the only way'. For Chris this relates to a wider 'identity crisis' felt by those of a similar socialist disposition:

> How do we who question the dominant development paradigm which is driving globalization, the corporate economy, the corporate interest, that is driving globalization? How do we articulate the alternative? How do we call it?. You see, we are afraid to call it socialist because we can't do that, you see, because it is not safe to call ourselves a socialist. So we call ourselves civil society, you see!

Chris articulates a wider tension expressed by a range of former activists. Confronted by a lack of ideological alternatives and by an institutional landscape configured in relation to donor interests, they nonetheless embrace these institutional spaces and seek to make them work for their own ideological ends. The 'compromise' is keenly felt but is understood to be preferable to the alternative of an ideologically purist inactivity.

Many of those prominent in the progressive movement of the early 1980s now work as senior employees of international NGOs. Others have found employment as consultants for international donors. Sulley (Box 5.1) works as a project officer for an international NGO. Although he sees continuity between the broadly progressive aims of this organization and the socialist principles that led him to political activism, he also recognizes the compromise this position entails:

> In a way [the international NGO] is part of the problem. It's part of the problem but part of the solution. Part of the problem in the sense it is genuinely, genuinely trying to grapple with the problem of how to empower people to participate in their own development [...];

part of the problem in the sense that to a large extent the agenda is still set in the West.

Others are less ambivalent, pointing to the 'ideological corruption' that has set in as a result of donor funding. In a particularly forthright attack, Mawuli contrasts his own work for the 'anti-imperialist' advocacy NGO he helped set up, with the selfishly instrumental orientation of certain Leftist activists. He illustrates his point through a hypothetical scenario:

> If I put myself in a consultant's role, they pay me money, I give them information which they process into strategies for dealing with Ghana, and I am doing that for personal gain – I am not putting it into an organization, I just get a fat fee which I put in my bank account. I have to ask the question of how me making my personal survival is contributing to the bigger processes that I am against. [...] A lot of Left people are into this kind of personal and organizational consultancies which is a grey area – a lot of them. I am not but if you go and ask [international donors] and find out how many of these Left people are there in a consultant role making thousands of pounds a month – and this is personal money ... I think it's very difficult to find out how anybody who becomes a permanent consultant for [an international donor] who is Ghanaian can say they are contributing to building a social movement and rebuilding the balance of social forces to challenge the fundamental role of the government. It would be difficult to justify that. From a left-wing radical activist perspective, you have to give an explanation.

For Mawuli, 'ideological corruption' also arises from the exploitation of the NGO movement by those on the Left:

> The involvement of the World Bank also meant that the NGO now became a vibrant sector of career opportunities – they paid fat amounts of money to do ridiculous things. [...] A lot of people are coming into the NGO movement pretending to be politically engaged but only in it for material gain. So that process means that the NGO movement has lost its charitable status [...] . So there is a large part of the NGO movement which is just opportunistic nonsense. You can look through the activists of the early 80s. You can find a lot of them involved in the NGO movement as an opportunity for career movement. People from our stage who are also being

the most corrupt. They are the smartest ones and therefore also the most corrupt

Following the return to multi-party democracy, NGOs created an institutional space in which previously covert dissent could be openly expressed. Former activists relate the comparative 'safety' of these organizations to their overtly 'non-governmental' aspirations.

Lucas (Box 1.2) explains his own movement into the NGO sphere as part of a wider movement by those who were forced into exile or 'underground' during the late 1980s:

> If you don't want to work in government but still want to have the opportunity to engage government and at the same time you are not in a position to launch an overtly political movement, the NGO world becomes very safe ground to operate from [...] . It's safe because you do not have overtly political goals. What politicians are worried about is when you are contesting for their power. But in this case we are not contesting for power, we are contesting for ideas. So though we might differ radically, you are not a movement or party that is aiming at power. So it allows you to propagate your ideas, engage government, talk freely, without being accused of having political ends.

Being able to have influence *on* government is precisely a condition of being independent from the party-political process. The possibility of political influence is predicated on the condition of autonomy from 'politics'. NGOs are therefore seen to allow relief from the 'forced retreat' of the late 1980s. In private, if not in public, former activists regard NGOs as a strategic and short-term means to a set of longer-term ideological ends. Lucas (Box 1.2) aspires to a situation in which he and others of a similar ideological persuasion can gain political power, but acknowledges the difficulties of doing so in the institutional climate that developed following election of the economically liberal Kufour government in 2001:

> To become a member of parliament you must pay a sort of gate-fee. You see, money politics. [...] So until the rules of the game are changed to allow for less wealthy people, [...] until these rules change and the political attitude changes, you see, people like me don't stand a chance of launching a political party in this country. I simply cannot martial the kind of money that these people have. The rules of the game are not in my favour. So in this situation you have to be

realistic and recognize that you have to build your own personal profile including getting your wealth profile – getting your own house to live in so that you are free and independent, getting your kids good schools, getting the means by which you can cross the country, a good car where you can move and meet people and talk and tell people your view and why you want to be president. You must have the means to reach people. And the only way that you can do that is to build a certain layer of wealth, let me put it that way, for yourself. [...] So in that sense there are compromises, trade-offs more or less that you have to make between your personal convictions and the realities around you within which you must operate. It's more or less an adaptability issue. It's about adapting to a current political environment.

For Lucas, NGOs enable personal material accumulation that can be used to pursue a broader social vision. While they will not in themselves lead to that vision, they provide a strategic way of moving towards it. These ideas find broader resonance.

Simon (Box 1.3) was a prominent member of a number of progressive organizations during the 1980s, including the JFM and NUGS and was also active in the Young Catholic Movement. In the mid 1980s, he was the co-founder of a national development NGO that has subsequently become one of the country's largest advocacy NGOs. Although explicitly recognizing the limits of such organizations, he explains his continued involvement with this organization in terms of the current political situation:

> I think it would be clear to us that political parties as they are currently constituted are not necessarily the appropriate vehicle, for now, to articulate, you know, working people or poor people's interest. Because they don't project political agendas, they project personality and other social cleavages. So really in terms of political agenda there is no difference between the NDC [National Democratic Congress][13] and the NPP [New Patriotic Party]:[14] they are exactly the same IFI [International Financial Institutions] driven programmes. So the only difference is the dominance of the ethnic position of the individuals in those two parties, nothing else, realistically. So it is clear that anybody who is actually interested in social change does not necessarily spend their time now in political parties.

In the long-term, however, Simon (Box 1.3) describes the impossibility of achieving the kind of social change he hopes for by means of civil society

advocacy. For him, as for other former activists, this creates a pressing dilemma:

> How long you can stay disengaged from the political party mechanism? Because the reality is that you cannot really change and shape government outside of the political party system.

For Simon, the role of NGOs is to create the institutional and ideological terrain on which a new political future can be built:

> People don't elect and vote for policy; they vote for other reasons. That can only be changed through a long-term opinion perception change: awareness and so on and so forth. That's the only justification why many political activists stay outside of the political party system – hoping to play a role in influencing and shaping in a progressive way the public opinion, which would shift their role many years down the line in making choices.

Other former activists attempt to politically engage in these ideologically and institutionally hostile circumstances by combining their work in the NGO sector with more overtly political activities.

Sulley (Box 5.1) works as a programme director for one of the country's leading international NGOs. While he sees this work as an important means to tackle some of the profound inequalities the country faces, he recognizes that for 'real development' a more profound political shift has to take place:

> Politically, I am a member of [...] a small party. There are a group of us who think that there are forces to kind of shape the direction of the party that's in power. Not like one of the big ones that is controlled by the money bags but that we can really use that party to kind of influence the debate in the country. So you can see that from time to time the presidential candidate comes up with positions, you know, that kind of steer controversy or discussion or debate – I think that's what we are really looking at. Not [...] as a party that is going to win the elections but one that we can use as a forum for discussion, bringing up issues, a vehicle for projecting our views.

For Sulley, as for other former activists, NGOs present temporary and strategic possibilities that are part of a longer-term hope for a

future whose ideological origins are located in the activism of their pasts. The 'non-governmental' position of NGOs provides a position from which activists shape the political terrain, not simply to accommodate international donor aspirations for 'good governance' and stronger 'civil society', but more profoundly in the hope of sowing the seeds for a different kind of government. Activists acknowledge that the legitimacy of NGOs rests on the occupation of a political space outside of governmental politics. Although they understand that such organizations cannot themselves aspire to government, many see them as vehicles to reconfigure the terrain on which party politics are fought.

Persistent pasts

Activists' descriptions of the contemporary NGO sector highlight the continued importance of these histories of social and political activism as explanations of present ideological orientations. NGO workers invoke this past, in accounting for contemporary alliances and factions between different kinds of contemporary NGO.

This shared history of activist engagement is at times presented as a source of ideological coherence and shared identity. While many of the country's leading NGOs were set up by people who participated in this loosely defined 'progressive' movement, the contemporary NGO sector is comprised of a diverse and growing range of organizations. At a general level, NGO workers contrast those NGOs with their roots in the progressive movements of the early 1980s with a range of 'pro-liberal' organizations that have emerged more recently – particularly since 2001 under the economically liberal Kufour government.

This past is also understood to give rise to a set of personal relationships and networks that remain important. Samuel explains how friendships originating from the activism of his past can be of strategic significance in furthering the aims of contemporary NGOs:

> Those connections, those networks are very important. We identify our allies, we identify our enemies. How do you work on your enemies to turn them into your allies? You need to develop that kind of strategy.

If the past can be a source of connections and networks, it also accounts for ongoing enmities, tensions and disagreements. Mawuli relates how

the ideological disputes that took place in the 1980s continue to mani-fest themselves in the transformed context of the contemporary NGO sector:

> Unless the reasons for political differentiation were just conjunctural or contextual, if they have some deeper line in people's political for-mations and make-ups then they will continue to express themselves and until those issues have been fully expressed and challenged they will emerge and re-emerge no matter what the context. So even in the NGO movement the political fault-lines that appeared in the political fallout are still very vital.

Accordingly, while this history gives rise to a shared sense of identity, it does not produce a coherent community:

> Even though we have all built associations from our earlier political engagement which is still relevant and we still benefit from it, I don't think the mistake should be made that somehow we have got a safe community because we don't have. They were associations formed out of politics and the political fallouts are much more significant. And the differences of political approaches which informed our style are still evident in the differences of work even in the NGO movement.

Mawuli relates the explicitly 'political' orientation of the advocacy NGO he co-directs to the political activism of his youth: 'Our work is policy which is the most political end. [...] We called ourselves anti-imperialist progressive movements. Anti-imperialism is not that differ-ent from anti-globalization.' By the same token NGO workers note how a historical tension between Young Catholics and members of social-ist progressive movements re-emerges in the orientation of NGOs they have set up and worked for. While Catholics have tended to focus on the less politically sensitive area of 'service delivery', political activists have moved into advocacy.

Personal, institutional and ideological connections in the present are therefore often explained on the basis of continuity with the past. By the same token, ideological fissions in the past are seen to give rise to disagreements within and between particular contemporary NGOs. The process of fission and fusion by which NGOs have split apart and re-formed is explained as a matter of the working out of these underly-ing tensions. Understandings of the past therefore remain central to the ways in which relations are defined, understood and negotiated in the

context of the contemporary practices of NGOs (a theme developed in Chapter 3).

Conclusion

As NGOs have proliferated, so has the academic literature pertaining to them. Despite very significant ideological differences, debates about the role of NGOs have tended to assume the centrality of global processes and institutions in driving the changes that have taken place. Advocates have highlighted the capacity for NGOs to spread a more 'progressive' set of values including greater accountability and improved democ-racy through the expansion of 'civil society' (e.g. Gyimah-Boadi 1996, Harbeson 1994).[15] By contrast, detractors have highlighted the role of NGOs in consolidating Western hegemony and have pointed to their role in upholding neo-colonial forms of dependency (e.g. Manji and O'Coill 2002, Mawdsley et al. 2002).[16] Whether for good or for bad the expansion of NGOs has often been understood as part of a process of the 'globalization' of Western political and economic values.

While it is certainly true that donor policies have created new forms of institutional and discursive possibility, the foregoing account sug-gests that it is problematic to link the global expansion of the NGO sec-tor to the globalization of any given set of ideologies (see also Keck and Sikkink 1998, Appadurai 2002). For related reasons, my account also challenges the idea that NGOs can simply be understood as a mecha-nism of Western imperialism and control (con. Manji and O'Coill 2002, Mawdsley et al. 2002). In Ghana, a rapid increase in the number and size of NGOs has been partly enabled by the funding associated with a broadly neo-liberal set of donor policies. As Ghanaian activists them-selves acknowledge, this imposes certain constraints on the kinds of activities they can undertake. Yet NGOs should not be conflated with the policies that have promoted them. As subsequent chapters elabo-rate, these institutions are sustained by people with heterogeneous ide-ologies, often directly at a tangent to the people who fund them. This history therefore calls into question the attribution of an unwarranted coherence to the neo-liberal project (cf. Ong 2006). NGO workers in Ghana connect their particular ideological and political struggles to wider policies and discourses because doing so is a route to increased influence and financial support. While contemporary NGOs are there-fore often obliged to present their arguments in globally recognizable forms, this does not mean that their ideologies and practices are reduc-ible to the logic of global capitalism.

In attempting to further particular ideological and political projects, actors make strategic use of whatever institutional and discursive spaces appear. For the 'pioneers' of the Ghanaian NGO movement, NGOs are understood as one – in many ways limited – means to the ends of the kinds of social transformations that they seek. As such they distinguish the possibilities they present from the broader ideological project of the various donors that have encouraged their expansion. Although these activists express despair at the existing state of affairs, they are sustained by wider ideological vision. It is these visions that prompt them to engage NGOs as a practical means to the kinds of future they hope for; and it is this hope that prompts them to question the legitimacy of these institutional spaces, even as they depend upon them.

Focusing on the life histories of NGO activists, the following chapter elaborates on the forms this hope takes, and the 'commitments' and 'sacrifices' this gives rise to.

2
Development in Person

Lives and histories

The 2003 annual board meeting of the Centre for Human Development (CHD), one of the largest Ghanaian NGOs, is held in a newly built hotel in Kumasi, where over an elaborate buffet I sit with a number of the board members. Most have known one another for a number of decades, their friendships originating in university, and the social activism of their youth. Charles (Box 4.1) comments on the excessively lavish hotel and jokes that the air conditioning is making him cold. The group starts to reflect on the changes that have taken place in the country since the early 1980s when the organization was set up: 'We've really been through a lot in this country', one remarks, a reference to the political upheavals of the past two decades. Others in the group warm to the theme, reminiscing about the days when they started out: 'We used to travel on the back of shea nut trucks just to get around,' recalls one. 'We'd be queuing up just to catch a ride on an articulator – there weren't even *trotros* back then!'[1] Another recollects how he used to take his typewriter around with him: 'It wasn't like this,' he pronounces, casting his eyes around the grand hotel dining room. 'We've come a long way.'

Throughout the conversation, the maturity of Ghana, the nation, resonates with talk about their own coming of age. The very existence of the hotel seems to literalize the political and economic progress of the country, just as their presence there demonstrates their success as individuals. The hotel stands as a demonstration of personal and national development. Yet the progress of their lives and the progress of nation are not seen as simple synonyms. In this, as in other contexts, NGO workers explicitly imagine national development to have taken place