

**BETWEEN A ROCK
AND A HARD PLACE**

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AND A HARD PLACE**
African NGOs, Donors and the State

edited by Jim Igoe and Tim Kelsall

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PREFACE

Jim Igoe

The 1990s were the decade when African NGOs reached their zenith as the preferred institutional vehicle for development, governance, and emergency relief on the continent. During this decade, much was written about African NGOs. Theory on NGOs and civil society in Africa proliferated in the fields of political science, anthropology, and geography. Scholars working in development and conservation bureaucracies also generated NGO theory. As many observers have opined, however, much of what is known about NGOs is based more on what is believed about them than on empirical observations of what NGOs actually do in practice.

Fortunately, this situation is gradually changing as scholars who went to study African NGOs for their dissertation research in the 1990s are beginning to publish their findings. For the first time “thick description” of African NGOs is becoming available, often to the chagrin of western donors and African NGO leaders.

As far as we know, this volume represents the first survey of ethnographic NGO case studies from around the continent. All of the authors in this volume lived and worked with African NGOs for extended periods of at least a year. They shared the aspirations and frustrations of African NGO leaders. They also experienced the swings between exuberance and despair (and sometimes back again) which frequently occurred at the community level during the heady years of the NGO revolution.

Bringing these studies together was no easy task. The seeds for this volume were planted in 1999 by Tim Kelsall and Sara Rich Dorman, when they began organizing a special issue of the *Oxford Journal of Development Studies*, which unfortunately never materialized. In 2001 I suggested to Tim that we put some of the articles submitted to the special issue together in an edited collection, and we set about trying to find a suitable publisher. In 2002 Carolina Academic Press agreed to publish this volume.

Through H-Net Africa and word of mouth, we received over thirty submissions in one form or another. In addition to NGO case studies, we received technical reports and even a play about NGOs in Zimbabwe. We also received a couple of pieces that were theoretically compelling, but not ethnographic enough for this collection. Four submissions that were accepted for the volume unfortunately never materialized.

The nine case studies that ultimately appear in this volume tell a compelling story about the state of African NGOs, a story which has profound implications for governance and development on the continent in the new millennium. Ron Kassimir, our discussant for a conference panel launching this collection, noted that all of the case studies in this book betray a sense of disappointment at the shortcoming of African NGOs. This is undeniably true, but this disappointment is tempered by an equally palpable respect for African NGO leaders who struggle to foster positive changes under what are frequently near impossible circumstances. I personally have wondered how well I would do if I found myself trying to operate under the kinds of circumstances that the case studies in this volume so vividly describe.

This double perspective of admiration and disappointment parallels what Dorman (this volume) describes as the current tendency to either “romanticize” or “pathologize” African NGOs. We seek to avoid either of these myopic perspectives to the extent that we can. Rather we seek to illuminate the structural difficulties of African NGOs caught between the “rock” of western donors and the “hard place” of the African state. Tired as I am of working on this project, it has been a real pleasure to read these case studies over and over, as each new read reveals astounding parallels for African NGOs operating from Cape Verde to Zimbabwe. I believe that these studies taken together will have important implications both for academic theory and NGO practice.

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It is a decade since we began working on NGOs in Africa; in that time numerous people, in the field and in the academy, have shaped our views of the dilemmas that NGOs face. Some of them deserve special mention.

Tim Kelsall

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Jim Igoe

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