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From Demanding to Delivering Development: Challenges of NGO Led Development in Rajasthan, India

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Abstract

The NGO sector in India has seen unprecedented growth in the recent past. A whole range of NGOs are not just ‘demanding’ development from the state but also ‘delivering’ development in the Indian countryside. While popular interest in the role of the non-governmental development sector is growing, it is not complemented by empirical studies which explain how do local NGOs evolve and change over time? What happens when grassroots NGOs expand their activities, capacities, resources and power to consolidate their position in the development regime? This paper addresses these questions on the basis of organisational life history of a local NGO in the desert state of Rajasthan in India. The evidence presented in the paper derives from qualitative research undertaken during a three-month stay with the NGO, involving semi-structured interviews and open-ended discussions with a broad range of stakeholders including NGO functionaries and villagers, direct observation, participation in NGO meetings and local documentary sources. Applying the life history research to NGOs is an innovative approach used by the author for understanding why do local NGOs follow particular strategies in their field of action, and what are the repercussions of their actions in terms of developmental outcomes?

Based on new data on NGO practices in the arena of natural resources development over a span of four decades, the author argues that grassroots organisations working without the constraints of tight budgeting schedules and time-plans do alter local power relations and caste-based discriminations, and have the potential of ending exploitative relations of patronage. Furthermore, the expansion of the organisation indeed brings in more resources and funds for development in Rajasthani villages but the long and complex tasks of transforming local power relations, which created goodwill for the organisation in the initial decades, have come to be replaced by meeting the targets of land treatment and budgetary allocations. The paper concludes that in their quest of ‘delivering’ development services ‘professionally’ and fast-track, grassroots organisations face the challenge of increasing ‘bureaucratisation’ of the organisational structure and functioning, creation of new relations of patronage, and of losing touch with the grassroots.

Keywords: Grassroot organisations, natural resources management, NGOs, Rajasthan, watershed development

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