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Nothing "Colonial" About It: Service Delivery and Accountability

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Nothing "Colonial" About It: Service Delivery and Accountability

Abstract

At one level, there is little in "The New Colonialists" with which I disagree. The necessary state capacity in developing societies for basic service delivery is in many cases absent, significantly weak, or has been corrupted in ways that produce tremendous inequality of access and disproportionate social outcomes that are related to race, ethnicity, poverty, gender, and other categories of social identity. It is true that in the presence of weak state institutions, widespread corruption, and underdeveloped infrastructure, a large number of national and international non-governmental agencies and organizations have sought to redress such imbalances through their work in providing basic social services in ways that states have been unable to do.

Keywords

Human rights, Humanitarian aid, Colonialism, Development

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Nothing "Colonial" About It: Service Delivery and Accountability

by **Todd Landman**

At one level, there is little in “The New Colonialists” with which I disagree. The necessary state capacity in developing societies for basic service delivery is in many cases absent, significantly weak, or has been corrupted in ways that produce tremendous inequality of access and disproportionate social outcomes that are related to race, ethnicity, poverty, gender, and other categories of social identity. It is true that in the presence of weak state institutions, widespread corruption, and underdeveloped infrastructure, a large number of national and international non-governmental agencies and organizations have sought to redress such imbalances through their work in providing basic social services in ways that states have been unable to do.

It is true that the market for such organizations is highly competitive and their survival is dependent on recurring forms of funding within the larger world of overseas development assistance. It is also true that in certain instances, the non-governmental sector has become so dominant that it represents a set of parallel institutions that compete directly with the state. Indeed, while I was working on a project to develop human rights indicators in Bangladesh, a representative from a donor country told me that the non-governmental sector was so “overdeveloped” that the best course of action was to nationalize it, but in the absence of such an event from occurring, they had to continue to fund those groups and organizations that actually delivered the targeted development outcomes.

In this way, partner countries are dependent upon non-governmental organizations, national and international non-governmental agencies are dependent on donor countries and international donor agencies, which are in turn dependent on the non-governmental sector for service delivery and the achievement of development outcomes.

At another level, however, the argument in “The New Colonialists” is highly negative, inaccurate in its use of the term “colonial,” grossly over-simplified, and does not reflect the growing attempts to provide the kind of accountability mechanisms for which they advocate. Words such as “abyss,” “motley,” “hodgepodge,” “armada,” etc. are not particularly useful or helpful in providing a balanced assessment of the real problem of state capacity and the ways in which thousands of organisations and individuals, often working on shoe string budgets with low overheads, attempt to hold together some form of social fabric and provide social justice under exceedingly difficult conditions.

The presence and activities of these organizations are simply not equivalent to the types of colonial authority established by the great powers of Europe. Colonial expansion involved the establishment of enclave communities from which rent and natural resources were extracted for the center economy and political administration in Europe, which local governance involved a blend of military conquest, authoritarian administration, religious conversion (especially in Latin America), and imposition of foreign legal codes that undermined indigenous systems of governance, inheritance, communal property ownership and many other features of pre-colonial

society. To equate the activities of the donor agencies and the organizations on the ground with this kind of history is simply erroneous, inaccurate, and provides little by way of a solution.

While the current system is one in which development assistance continues to be inadequate (only a handful of developed countries allocate more than the [U.N. target of .7% of annual GDP](#)), state institutions in partner countries continue to be weak, and the market for non-governmental organizations competitive, there is a growing emphasis within donor agencies and their partners on the role for accountability.

My own experiences in [assessing the effectiveness of nine international human rights organizations](#) in receipt of funding from the Netherlands revealed that many organizations have strong accountability mechanisms in place that tag project and program outputs, outcomes, and impact to particular lines of funding and particular donor agencies. Donors, for their part, have increased the reporting requirements for their partner organisations in ways that enhance accountability across the sector.

While such reporting requirements have created new demand on organizations and occupy larger proportions of their annual budgets, good reporting procedures and mechanisms of accountability, impact assessment, and feedback, mean that it is now more possible than ever to assess the value of these activities and the contribution that they make in providing much needed redress in some of the world's most difficult settings. Like "The New Colonialists," I too have a certain optimism for the role that aid agencies and their partner organisations can have, but they are simply *not* colonialists and they are much further along the route to establishing systems of accountability than the article suggests.

Dr. Todd Landman is Director of the Centre for Democratic Governance, Department of Government, at University of Essex. He is author of [Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics](#), 3rd Edition (Routledge 2008), [Studying Human Rights](#) (Routledge 2006), and [Protecting Human Rights](#) (Georgetown 2005); co-author of [Governing Latin America](#) (Polity 2003) and [Citizenship Rights and Social Movements](#) (Oxford 1997); and co-editor of the [Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics](#) (Sage 2009). Dr. Landman has served as international human rights and democracy consultant for UNDP, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, CIDA, DFID, DANIDA, IDEA, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands, Foreign Ministry of Mongolia, International Centre for Human Rights Policy, and Minority Rights Group International. His personal website can be found at <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~todd>.