

NGOs IN SPAIN AND SOUTH AFRICA: IN THE LINE OF TWO FIRES

Lambert Engelbrecht, Abigail Ornellas, María-Asunción Martínez-Román, Juan Tortosa-Martínez

Changes in the social and economic landscape for NGOs are distinctly recognised in Spain and South Africa as a result of comparable formative and historical social welfare provision. NGOs in both countries are under siege, operating in the line of two fires, namely the global financial crisis, and the implementation and advancement of a neoliberal agenda. The need for a renewal of identity, activism, collaboration and partnership as well as an alignment of their roles in civil society with their visions, missions and core values is suggested towards ensuring the survival of NGOs.

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INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen a massive growth in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on a global scale (Edwards, 2004; Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007). Much has been written about the growing power and influence of larger international and transnational NGOs (see, for example, McGann & Johnstone, 2006), and the resulting changes in the social and economic landscape for local NGOs in recent years. Such changes are most distinctly recognised in Spain and South Africa, two countries where local NGOs have long played a formative and historical role in society and welfare provision (Gray, 1998; Martínez-Román, 2013; Mazibuko, McKendrick & Patel, 1992), but whose sustainability and identity are now under siege.

The changing socioeconomic realities that are threatening the survival of the Spanish and South African third sector (NGOs), leaving the sustainability and identity of NGOs in the line of two fires, will be reflected upon in this paper. First, the rise of NGOs in South Africa and Spain will be outlined as case studies, after which the nature of the “fires” (the global financial crisis and neoliberal advancements) will be elucidated. The need for a renewal of identity, activism, collaboration and partnership is suggested towards ensuring the survival of NGOs. Finally, the article concludes with the challenge to NGOs to align the global financial and neoliberal realities, their roles in civil society, and their visions, missions and core values. This discourse can be juxtaposed to that of other countries with similar NGO contexts.

THE RISE OF NGOS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND SPAIN

NGOs have always been a formative and historical part of South African and Spanish society. In South Africa the first formal welfare organisation was officially instituted in 1904 by women’s societies, initiated by the Dutch Reformed Church (Engelbrecht, 2011). In addition, the informal welfare system was born out of a resistance to apartheid, with a large and vibrant NGO sector emerging in the 1980s (Gray, 1998) to provide services for those excluded where “race was used as criterion to allocate funds to organisations, which resulted in disadvantaged communities receiving inadequate or no financing” (Department of Social Development, 2005:9). According to Mazibuko *et al.* (1992:119), such NGOs gave life to “democratic and humanitarian ideals through local development initiatives in response to inadequate social, political and economic resources”. With South Africa’s transition to democracy and the end of apartheid in 1994, the newly elected African National Congress (ANC) government swiftly adopted a transformative and developmental socioeconomic framework, in which their primary responsibility was to facilitate the process of development through various government

departments, stakeholders, partners and the participation of civil society (Department of Social Development, 2006).

With this transition came a strong commitment from the state to support and enhance the capacity of NGOs to perform their functions (Wyngaard, 2013). This materialised in the introduction of the Non-Profit Organisations Act 71 of 1997 (Republic of South Africa, 1997:4), which came into operation in 1998 and stipulated a state commitment to “encourage and support nonprofit organisations in their contribution to meeting the diverse needs of the population of the Republic by ... creating an environment in which nonprofit organisations can flourish”. Through such state support and encouragement for the third sector, the local NGO environment grew rapidly in post-apartheid South Africa. By 2013 it was estimated that the South African NGO sector consisted of 72,000 registered organisations, and almost 50,000 non-registered, contributing to at least 30% of civil services (Engelbrecht & Strydom, 2015).

In the time of Franco’s regime in Spain (1938-1975), the care of children, the elderly, and people with disabilities was considered the responsibility of each family and the state only recognised a subsidiary liability. This socio-cultural context accepted the social role of the family and promoted social care as a commitment of religious bodies rather than a state action. Therefore, the origins of Spain’s local NGO sector, although also born out of a need to fill the vacuum of services as in South Africa, were more strongly linked to the Catholic Church and the families of those in need of services, such as associations for parents of people with intellectual disabilities and the National Organisation for the Blind in Spain (ONCE, 2014). Following the death of Franco in 1975, the ushering in of the newly democratic constitution of 1978, and the political changes brought about by the socialist government under Felipe Gonzalez from 1982-1996, Spanish society witnessed the implementation of welfare reforms and expansion, in terms of pension funds, national healthcare systems and the provision of social services (Barbero, 2002; Matos-Silveria, 2013). During this time the central government recognised its public responsibility in providing basic services such as education, healthcare, social security and social welfare, and acknowledged the essential role of the third sector in such service provision.

Thus, much like in South Africa, a partnership between the state and local NGOs was fostered in Spain through the delegation of the provision of many social services to the local NGOs in exchange for public funding on a contractual basis (Engelbrecht & Strydom, 2015; Martínez-Román, Mira-Perceval & Redero, 1996), resulting in a flourishing NGO sector. According to the Third Sector Platform for Social Action (2014), the social NGO sector in Spain represents some 29,000 private NGOs, employs 500,000 paid workers and has 900,000 volunteers. Partner organisations provide direct services to more than 5,000,000 people, many of whom are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. This growth in the NGO sector in Spain and South Africa, however, has been stunted by recent socioeconomic, political and global challenges.

THE FIRST FIRE: THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

The financial crisis of 2008 was an unmerciful wave that shook the economic foundations of global society, leaving countries scrambling to stay afloat in what would become a period of mass financial recession. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2009) reported that the 2008 crisis was more global in comparison with any of the financial crises experienced in the past and ushered in a surge in global poverty risk, unemployment, inequality and socioeconomic insecurity. The current economic and social landscapes in Spain and South Africa reflect these deeply marked effects of the global crisis, from which both economies have struggled to recover.

Of all the European countries, Spain was one of the most gravely affected by the global economic crisis (Lin, Edvinsson, Chen & Beding, 2013:14). Nationwide conditions have worsened greatly since the 2008 crash and austerity policies have led to mass cutbacks in social spending and welfare reforms, the consequences of which are felt by most of the population but particularly by those who were already worse off (OECD, 2010). The unemployment rate more than doubled in Spain over the six years following the financial crash, with figures hovering at a rate of 25.8% in the fourth quarter of 2013 (Lin *et al.*, 2013:8) and a youth unemployment rate of 54.9% (Eurostat, 2014a). With conditions worsening, Spain became the fourth and largest country to ask Europe to rescue its failing banks in 2012 (Lin *et al.*, 2013). However, increased austerity measures and welfare cutbacks only heightened the challenges faced by Spanish citizens, and the Living Conditions Survey of 2014 reported that the at-risk-of-poverty rate (taking into account 2013 incomes) stood at 22.2%, compared with the 20.4% registered in the previous year (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2015). Income inequality has also risen since 2008 from a Gini coefficient of 31.9 (2008) to 34.6 (2013) and 34.7 in 2014 (Eurostat, 2014b).

The context in which South Africa experienced the financial crisis of 2008 is somewhat different to that of Spain, though consequences for national inequality and poverty were much the same. As a result of South Africa's reclassification as a middle-income country, despite continued poverty and inequality, the country witnessed a swift reduction in international funding. This, coupled with existing post-apartheid challenges, saw South Africa enter the crisis with a greater degree of vulnerability than many other middle-income countries. By mid-2009 the country's GDP growth rate had plunged to -3.2%, ushering in South Africa's first national recession in 17 years in early 2009 (Steytler & Powell, 2010). In 2010 a survey of the South African economy conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded, "the change in the growth rate of real GDP between 2008 and 2009 represented the largest single-year slowdown on record for South Africa, and was larger than in most advanced and emerging economies" (OECD, 2010:22).

Given such a global economic context, it was only reasonable to fear that local NGOs would suffer, having relied heavily on private and public funding (Gebreselassie-Hagos & De V Smit, 2013). This reduction in spending greatly crippled the local Spanish and South African NGOs at a time when demand for their services had multiplied and social tensions were on the rise (Gebreselassie-Hagos & De V Smit, 2013; Pratt & Myhrman,

2009). Since 2008 Spanish public administrations have demonstrated increasing failure in their commitment of funding to NGOs for services to minor children in care, the elderly, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged social groups (Caritas Europa, 2015; Save the Children-España, 2013). In South Africa the level of support for NGOs also continued to decrease rapidly, with Rapoo (2010) reporting that South African NGOs had experienced a 30% decline in international funding during 2008. In both countries many NGOs were recorded as being forced to close their doors (Martínez-Román, 2013; Naidoo & Nkuna, 2009).

However, this was only the first fire to hit the NGO sector. Stranded in this “funding desert”, many organisations also reported reduced government support at a time when it was needed more than ever (Gebreselassie-Hagos & De V Smit, 2013; Sánchez Salgado, 2001). Even with some recovery in the global economy in recent years (though with both economies still suffering marked setbacks), the Spanish and South African citizenry and third sector have seen continued cuts to social services and an increasing change in the role of, and relationship with, the state in its support for the marginalised and the NGOs which care for such groups. But it was to be the second fire that ultimately threatened the identity and sustainability of NGOs: the implementation of welfare reform, privatisation and blurred lines through the advancement of a neoliberal agenda.

THE SECOND FIRE: NEOLIBERAL ADVANCEMENTS

Although the infiltration of neoliberal ideology in South Africa and Spain predates the global crisis of 2008, expectations and restrictions enforced through loans, austerity measures and bailouts from the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank brought with it a stronger neoliberal presence, and its consequences have perhaps only more recently been recognised and protested against by local NGO communities in these two countries. The advancement of neoliberal ideology has promoted economic liberalisation, the reduced role of the state in the economy, and the privatisation of welfare and social care (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal advancement furthermore results in “finance capital [taking] command in the process of accumulation involving economy and society, politics and culture, and deeply marking the forms of sociability and the play of social services” (Iamamoto, 2009:107). This “neoliberal globalisation”, as Harvey (2005:35) terms it, has thus fast become a blanket perspective for all economic, social, political, cultural and internationally based interactions and relations.

The implementation of austerity measures in Spain after 2008 heralded a swift neoliberal takeover. The new conservative Popular Party, which took office in Spain in 2011 under Mariano Rajoy, demonstrated the adoption of strong underlying neoliberal principles and as a result began implementing major cuts in social spending, particularly in terms of previous resources devoted to long-term care and to childcare policies (Matos-Silveria, 2013). Furthermore, the state converted an important part of the private debt from the collapsed financial system into a public deficit, having to resort to the international debt markets and accepting the financial and economic conditions imposed by creditors. Control of the public deficit became a priority for the central government

and changed the criteria and structure of social expenditure. Less funding along with simultaneous increased needs is thus the paradox that social services in Spain currently face as a consequence of austerity policies. In 2013 the Spanish government announced the further suspension of funding for the local/community-based network of public social services, which has historically been the main gateway to the welfare state. This reform has left front-line services as well as community organisations deprived of their essential resources and the support needed for the continued provision of basic social care. Hence this shift is seen as one which opens the door to further privatisation and decentralisation, neither of which seems to be adequately serving the citizenry (Mateo-Pérez, Martínez-Román & Domenech-López, 2015).

Such neoliberal-related challenges were also evident in South African society at a much earlier stage, with the ANC's replacement of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of 1994 with a more glaringly neoliberal economic model through the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy in 1996 (Bond, 2000; Habib & Taylor, 1999). This was done under the inducement of the World Bank and IMF, and represented a "neo-liberal' service delivery model where the private sector (and private sector principles) dominate ... [The] state acts as a service 'ensurer' rather than a service 'provider' ... [and] municipal services are 'run more like a business'" (Desai, 2002:19). This essentially resulted in the ANC "putting economic growth ahead of state-led redistribution" (Habib & Taylor, 1999:78). Although not necessarily as stringent as Spain's austerity measures, and its implementation predating the financial crisis of 2008, neoliberal ideals have been influential in South African socioeconomic policy decision-making in a manner that has been gradual (Bond, 2000) rather than swift and sudden as in Spain.

Hence, the adoption of neoliberal ideals in Spanish and South African policy developments has had a direct impact on the identity of NGOs, their relationship with the state and their sustainability. However, an understanding of these challenges is not always sympathetically reflected and debated, and in many discussions on NGOs and their relationship with neoliberalism it has often been argued that NGOs play a pivotal role in the international regulatory system of global capitalism (Wallace, 2009), and that they have actually flourished both as a consequences of, and as key participants in, the neoliberal agenda (McGann & Johnstone, 2006). This correlates with earlier discussions on the rise of the third sector in the past two decades, and the particular growing power and influence of international NGOs, as the state shifts responsibility increasingly onto private and non-profit corporations. However, such discussions cannot in fact adequately reflect the context of local and community-based NGOs. Wallace (2009:203) argues that, instead, the local NGO has become the "Trojan Horse" for neoliberal advancement and "the way NGOs are now funded and run is preventing many of them from achieving their stated aims of empowering the marginalised and combatting poverty". This is especially evident in the Spanish and South African contexts.

South Africa's "Policy on financial awards to service providers", enacted under the Department for Social Development (2005), demonstrated the beginning of the shift in relationship and support between the state and local NGOs, with a transition that is in

stark contrast to the supportive measures outlined in the previous NPO Act (71 of 1997):

Historically, social services have been a joint responsibility of government and civil society, with government providing financial support to organisations through subsidisation. The current realities of the country demand that government review the manner in which it is expending its resources ... The Department will therefore enter into contracts with service providers to ensure that expected service outcomes are achieved, that there is customer satisfaction and value for money. These contracts redefine the nature of the relationships between government and service providers. (Department of Social Development, 2005:5-6)

The use of particular terminology in the text above – with its focus on efficiency, contracts, customer satisfaction and value for money – demonstrates clear neoliberal influences. Continuing changes in the relationship between the state and the non-profit sector in South Africa were again evident in 2013, when the state implemented a mass deregistration of local NGOs undertaken by the Directorate for Non-profit Organisations, and under the authority of the Department of Social Development. From October 2012 until January 2013 more than 23,000 organisations were deregistered, and in addition over 35,000 organisations were deemed non-compliant (Wyngaard, 2013). Although inefficiency and mismanagement were cited by the state as the key causes prompting these actions, many NGOs were convinced that the predominant reason behind these moves by the state was to decrease its funding responsibilities (Scott-Muller, 2015).

Adding to the confusion of the mass deregistration of NGOs in South Africa, the funding approval requirements outlined in the Department for Social Development's (2005) "Policy on financial awards to service providers" remain vague; the unclear criteria for social services funding are regarded only as a means of disempowering and inhibiting an NGO from procuring funding from the state (Lombard, 2008; Scott-Muller, 2015). Such unclear and ambiguous regulations have also been implemented by the Spanish government. Much as in South Africa, in order to receive public funding for their activities, local Spanish NGOs must be registered, services must be provided by professionals with an employment contract, and they must meet the established requirements of the state-based agenda, yet within a context where the rules for state funding and support have not been clearly defined (Martínez-Román, 2013).

Spain's structural adjustment policies, which have been radicalised with regressive neoliberal-based social measures, have resulted in a challenging and strained environment for local NGOs with austerity in public expenditure (Legido-Quigley, Otero, Parra, Alvarez-Dardet, Martin-Moreno & McKee, 2013), and neoliberal ideological positions that redefine the role of the state and of the public sector in the social protection systems (Mateo-Pérez *et al.*, 2015).

A similar shift can be seen in South African policy, with the proposed establishment of the South African Non-profit Organisations Regulatory Authority (SANPORA) (Wyngaard, 2013), whose responsibilities include examining organisations, issuing

sanctions, promoting compliance, enforcing punitive measures and enabling blacklisting of organisations. Such tasks overshadow the previous commitment to encourage and support NGOs. According to Wyngaard (2013:7), “Focusing only on compliance and regulation without providing the required support to smaller organisations would simply result in the alienation of the largest section of South Africa’s non-profit sector.” Furthermore, blurred lines between the third sector, the state and the for-profit sector have added to this ambiguity and decreased support for local NGOs. The for-profit sector in Spain, for example, has been progressively penetrating the delivery of public services for the care of minors and residential attention for the elderly, under the scope of the so-called “welfare mix”. This only serves to further edge out NGOs, blurring the lines between state responsibility, third-sector service rendering and for-profit organisations, whose first priority is often economic gain over meeting the needs of the marginalised. This change in policy clearly represents a shirking of the responsibility of the state in the provision of service and welfare rights (Martínez-Román, 2013; Mateo-Pérez *et al.*, 2015).

THE SURVIVAL OF NGOS: THE NEED FOR RENEWED IDENTITY, ACTIVISM, COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

From this perspective, and in the line of two fires as sketched, many NGOs are in a state of crisis, with several being forced to close their doors or align themselves with state or for-profit agendas in order to procure funding. Against this backdrop, the question arises whether Spanish and South African NGOs can survive, whether we, the citizenry, want them to, and if so, what form we suggest this survival should take.

When reviewing the sustainability of NGOs in Spain and South Africa, within the context of the historical role that such NGOs have played in the development of Spanish and South African society, we believe that the loss of these organisations would have a significant impact. The Spanish and South African governments would be doing their citizenries a great disservice if they continue to remove themselves increasingly from welfare and social service responsibility, shifting the task of social provision and care largely onto individuals, families and the for-profit sector. However, we also argue that in order to survive as well as remain effective in their unique roles within society, there are four key actions that NGOs need to pursue keenly:

- renew and/or establish the identity of NGOs;
- increase activism and policy engagement as core NGO activities;
- form a united front through collaboration within the third sector; and
- form deliberate active and trustworthy partnerships with the state and the for-profit sector.

For many NGOs the procurement of funds is often done through the signing over of rights to enjoy relative impartiality in order to mirror the outcomes and expectations of the donor (Habib & Taylor, 1999). In this context Pratt and Myhrman (2009) argue that this may lead either to the NGO becoming difficult to distinguish from government,

and/or that such demands for rigorous standards of accountability, transparency and financial self-sufficiency imposed by private donors may have the unintended effect of distancing these organisations from the very poor and marginalised communities they are meant to serve. One of the greatest concerns regarding the influence of neoliberal advancements is that the critical voice as a function of NGOs is being silenced by a dedication to performance-based contracts, managerial control and a neoliberal discourse disguised as accountability (compare Engelbrecht, 2015; Lombard, 2008; Spolander, Engelbrecht & Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2015). Silliman and Noble (1998:306), when discussing the phenomenal growth and prominent political role of NGOs in the Philippines, suggest that “NGOs ... enhance democracy by expanding the number and range of voices addressing government.” Although the need to retain funding is essential for the sustainability of an NGO, it is pivotal that the core functions and identity of NGOs are not stripped or altered as a result. In much the same way, although their role as watchdog and activist is significant and necessary, we do not believe it should be enacted in such a way as to alienate NGOs from the state or private sector. Rather, a commitment to collaboration between NGOs, as well as a reinvigorated partnership with the state, in a manner not removed from the watchdog role nor altering the identity of the NGO, is a fundamental element in ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of NGOs. The NGO sector in South Africa and Spain has at times been perceived as being too heterogeneous, with many small organisations all fighting individually to defend the rights of the people they represented and thus having limited, or less than desired, impact on public policies (Martínez-Román, 2013; Spolander *et al.*, 2015). The crisis of sustainability in the local NGO sector, and the challenges being faced in the line of two fires as elucidated, have thus brought to light the need for collaboration within both the Spanish and South African contexts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The roots of the NGO sectors in Spain and South Africa run along parallel lines and are significant in the historical development of both societies' provision of social welfare to vulnerable groups. However, the current crisis of funding and the neoliberal advancements have left the future of NGOs in both countries uncertain. What is evident from the distinct contexts of both countries is that in order to remain sustainable and effective, local NGOs face the challenge of evolving with changing times. Essentially NGOs may still need to partner with businesses and the state in order to survive, but in a more innovative and different way than before, and at the same time stand their ground in an ever more assertive manner, in terms of their engagement in policy and activism, in addressing the interests of the vulnerable groups they are committed to serve. Consequently, as the roles and the relationships between the state and civil society in Spain and South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, are changing as a result of the global financial crisis and neoliberal advancements, NGOs should revisit their core roles in society. Therefore, the challenge is put to NGOs to proactively align their roles with their visions, missions and values to promote social service delivery and to ensure their survival in the line of two fires.

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